

## **BASES PARA EL TRATAMIENTO INFORMATIVO DE LAS DROGAS EN LOS MEDIOS DE COMUNICACIÓN**

### ***Basis for the informative treatment of drugs in mass media***

**Carlos A. Ballesteros Herencia<sup>1</sup>**  
Universidad de Valladolid. España.  
[cballesteros@hmca.uva.es](mailto:cballesteros@hmca.uva.es)

#### **Resumen**

La responsabilidad social de los medios de comunicación se extiende a todas las materias de que informa, siendo el consumo de drogas un extendido fenómeno social de habitual presencia en la prensa. Por lo que esta investigación se propuso, en primer lugar, describir la representación mediática de las drogas y, en segundo, exponer cómo deberían tratarse informativamente las drogas de un modo responsable desde el doble punto de vista deontológico y preventivo. Para tal fin se analizó la literatura científica y divulgativa sobre este tema hallándose que el tratamiento informativo de las drogas ha sido mayoritariamente criticado por cuantos lo han estudiado en las últimas cinco décadas. Los medios de comunicación ofrecerían una información en ocasiones sensacionalista y habitualmente no contrastada, ya que tiende a utilizarse una única fuente, mayoritariamente institucional, que resulta de fácil acceso para el periodista. Además se ha acusado a los medios de propagar estereotipos, difundir una imagen imprecisa, cuando no errónea, de este fenómeno y hasta de desempeñar un papel contrapreventivo. Pese a ello, se ha destacado la importancia para la prevención de contar con la colaboración de los periodistas y los medios de comunicación, en tanto éstos son la principal fuente de información sobre drogas para la población general. La aparición de Internet ha sumado un nuevo campo de investigación sobre comunicación y drogas de múltiples formatos, canales y contenidos, donde coexisten población general, jóvenes, instituciones y profesionales de los medios.

**Palabras clave:** medios de comunicación, periodismo, ética, deontología profesional, drogas, prevención.

#### **Abstract**

The social responsibility of the media extends to all matters it reports on, such as drug use, a widespread social phenomenon with a regular presence in the press. Therefore,

<sup>1</sup> Autor para correspondencia: Carlos A. Ballesteros Herencia [cballesteros@hmca.uva.es](mailto:cballesteros@hmca.uva.es)

this research tried, firstly, to describe the media representation of drugs and, secondly, to expose how drugs should be informatively treated in a responsible manner from a double deontological and preventive point of view. For this purpose, the scientific and informative literature on this topic was analyzed, finding that the informative treatment of drugs has been mostly criticized by those who have studied it in the last five decades. The media offers information that is sometimes sensationalist and usually not verified, since a single source, mostly institutional, tends to be used, which is easily accessible to the journalist. In addition, mass media have been accused of spreading stereotypes, an imprecise, if not mistaken, image of this phenomenon and even playing a counter-preventive role. Despite this, the important collaboration of journalists and the media has been highlighted, as these are the main source of information on drugs for the general population. The emergence of the Internet has added a new field of research on communication and drugs of multiple formats, channels and content, where the general population, youth, institutions and media professionals coexist.

**Keywords:** mass media, journalism, professional ethics, deontology, drugs, prevention.

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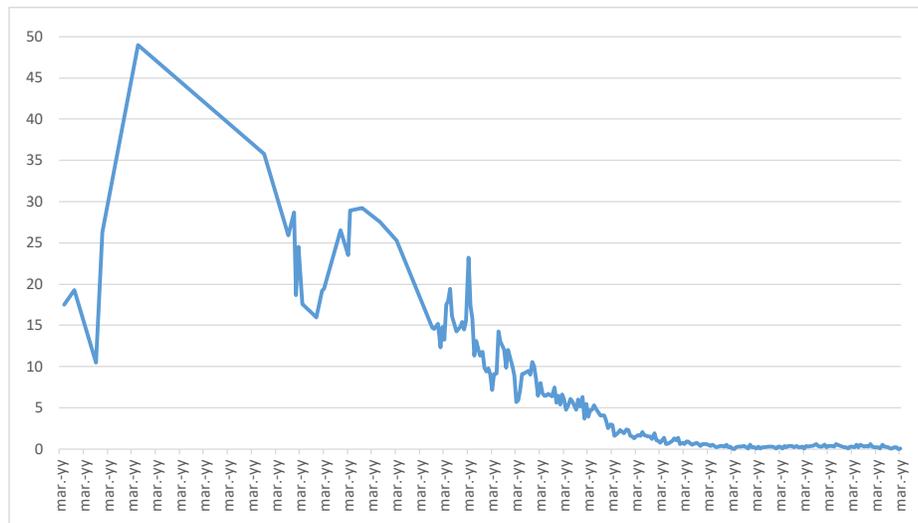
## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1. The social relevance of drugs**

The term "drugs" has multiple uses, as recognised by the World Health Organisation (World Health Organisation, 2003). While in medicine it refers to "any substance with the potential to prevent or cure disease, or to enhance physical or mental well-being, in pharmacology it is applied to any chemical agent that alters physiological processes" (WHO, 1994). Popularly, the use of the term "drugs" tends to be restricted to those substances of illegal trade and recreational use with psychoactive effects. However, the World Health Organisation has pointed out that tobacco, alcohol and caffeine are also drugs, and that the greatest burden on global health is produced precisely by legal substances, since 43% of the world's adult population (2,348 million people) consume alcohol (World Health Organisation, 2018) and 25% use tobacco (1,337 million) (World Health Organisation, 2019).

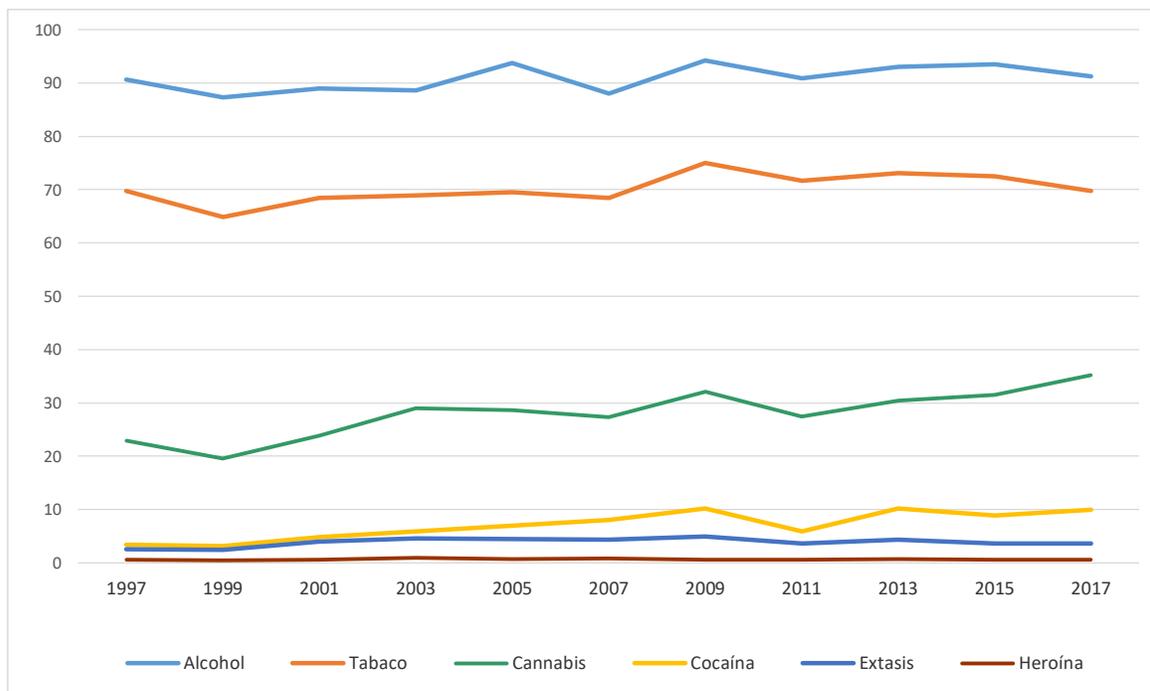
In Spain, one third of the adult population admits to having consumed an illicit substance at some point in their lives, while 91.2% have consumed alcohol, 69.7% tobacco and 20.8% hypnotosedatives. The most commonly used illicit drugs are cannabis (35.2%) and cocaine (10.2%) (PND, 2019).

The Spanish population's concern about drugs has declined sharply over the last four decades (see data in graph 1), from being considered the second biggest problem in 1988, when it was cited by almost half of Spaniards, to practically disappearing in the 2010s, with less than 1% citing it (CIS, 2020).



**Graph 1.** *Percentage of Spaniards citing drugs as a major problem.*  
**Source:** CIS (2020), own elaboration.

This downward trend in Spaniards' concern about drugs does not correspond to the evolution of drug use. Over the last 20 years, the consumption of alcohol and tobacco has remained stable (see data in Graph 2), while the consumption of the most widely used illegal drugs, such as cannabis, has increased from 22% to 30%, and cocaine from 3.4% to 10%. Heroin use, the most alarming drug in the 1980s, has remained stable at around 0.6% (PND, 2019).



**Graph 2.** *Ever use of drugs in lifetime (1997-2017).*  
**Source:** *PND (2019), own elaboration.*

## 2. OBJECTIVES

Given the importance of the social phenomenon of drugs, the main objective of this research was to determine the characteristics of a responsible informative treatment of drugs in the media. In order to achieve this aim, we first set out to explore and analyse the scientific and informative literature on the media representation of drugs. To do so, we tried to describe the formal and content characteristics of the information on drugs in the Spanish press, as well as to delve into the impact of new technologies on the relationship with drugs. Finally, we set out to synthesise the recommendations proposed in academic and preventive publications in order to transmit an accurate image of drugs.

## 3. THE PORTRAYAL OF DRUGS IN THE MEDIA

The responsibility of the media with regard to drugs is a common issue in the scientific and informative literature on this subject (e.g. Del Olmo, 1997; Becoña, 2002; Junta de Castilla y León, 2008). Already in 1995, the United Nations considered the collaboration of the media to be "of paramount importance" for demand reduction, urging governments and the media to adopt campaigns and policies "to prevent the encouragement of non-medical use of drugs" (International Narcotics Control Board, 1995, p.6).

This recommendation has been transposed at national level, so that in Spain communication has been considered as one of the six cross-cutting areas of action that

made up the National Strategy on Addictions 2009-2016 (PND, 2017). This strategy recognised the "leading role of the media" in prevention, together with the health and social systems (PND, 2009, p. 66), so that the National Plan on Drugs (PND, 2017) described how important informative and awareness-raising work was being carried out by administrations and non-governmental organisations in different contexts, citing among them the media, social networks and websites.

Not surprisingly, the main source of information on drugs for the general population is the media (56.9%), far ahead of acquaintances (26.1%) or health professionals (8.7%) (PND, 2017). This is why Becoña (2002) in his "Bases científicas de la prevención de drogodependencias", calls for "developing community and mass media awareness in relation to drugs".

Authors such as González (1992) or Vega (1996) agree that drugs are a frequent topic in the media, with the former speaking of "recurrent information bombardment of events" (p. 33), while the latter qualifies it as "information inflation about drugs" (p.117).

Since Unesco stated in 1973 that "the effects produced by the media have been more negative than positive" (p. 2), there has been a steady stream of criticism of the media's portrayal of drugs, which has been described as "sensationalist" on numerous occasions (Del Olmo, 1997; PND, 2000; Rekalde and Romaní, 2002; Perales and Del Pueyo, 2019; Zaragoza and Elgueta, 2019). This is an accusation that has been maintained in the almost half century that has passed since the classic UNESCO report of 1973, where it was considered that there is a tendency "to surround the subject with an undesirable aura and undue sensationalism whose effects, in some cases, are almost equivalent to those of an instruction manual for administering drugs" (p. 2), to the present day, when Perales and Del Pueyo (2019) continue to argue that sensationalism "negatively distorts the prevention of drug use".

Authors such as Berjano et al. (1990), Usó (1995), Del Olmo (1997), Martín (2010) or Perales and Del Pueyo (2019) agree that media information on drugs would produce counter-preventive effects. Thus, Berjano et al. (1990) state that information about drugs "sometimes constitutes an inciting mechanism" for drug use (p. 189). In addition, the media have been accused of providing a distorted image, of contributing to misinformation or of incorrect treatment (e.g. Berjano et al., 1990; Vega, 1996; Del Olmo, 1997; García et al., 2011).

Several factors have been identified as the cause of this situation. On the one hand, the classic criteria of newsworthiness (topicality, proximity, consequences, rarity, conflict, suspense, emotion, among others according to Carl Warren, 1979), which would prioritise dramatic, criminal and conflict aspects (González, 1992, p.91), and on the other hand, the characteristics of the medium itself. This coincides with the classification into journalistic and extra-journalistic factors that guide the process of choosing news content by Ortells-Badenes (2014). Among the latter criteria, González

(1992) states that the very "mercantilist logic that inspires the work of news companies means that professionals tend to spectacularise and dramatise the news" (p. 79).

The same nature of the media is also referred to in the manual "Media and drug addiction" published by the National Plan on Drugs when it points out that "the limitations of time in the audiovisual media, or of space in the written media, predispose to generalisation" (PND, 2000).

In this sense, repressive actions would be in line with the immediacy and impact "required by the chronicles of events. However, acts related to drug prevention and assistance are by their nature slow and lacking the apparent gloss that drug news stories focusing on stashes or deaths have" (PND, 2000, p. 20).

But it has also been pointed out that the inadequate treatment of drugs in the media has been due to the lack of specialisation and training of journalists (Junta de Castilla y León, 2008; Martín, 2010; Gayo, 2013; PND, 2015). In this sense, the National Plan on Drugs (2015) detected a "lack of specialisation and knowledge of the subject" in the field of journalism and recommended "undertaking specialisation and training in the knowledge of the problem of addictions".

The Ibero-American Network of NGOs working on drug addiction (Martín, 2010) also pointed out that the academic training of journalists does not include any section on health education "much less on drug addiction, so it is necessary to make an effort to make up for this deficiency" (p.14). Similarly, from the institutional sphere, the Junta de Castilla y León (2008) described how the majority of information professionals "do not know the subject of drug dependence in depth, their sources are scarce and partial, they work against the clock and do not have the possibility of specialising", which would lead to the media favouring a criminalised image of drugs and consumerist attitudes towards substances (p.21).

Finally, Gayo (2013) understands that the lack of specialisation contributes to disinformation, since "very few, if any, graduates in Information Sciences are interested today in training in drug information. At most, they will approach the subject from the point of view of events, which is widespread in the media" (p. 246). González (1992) also argued the need for this specialisation in drugs, regardless of whether it is acquired through a Master's or expert degree "or simply through professional practice".

### **3.1. Formal aspects and thematic areas**

On the formal side, two studies on the image of drugs in the written press during the 1980s and 1990s, by García et al. (1987) and Martínez (2000) coincided in their results. Information on drugs in the press was mainly presented through the news genre, tended to be brief, did not occupy prominent places, lacked graphic support and did not contrast the information.

A decade later, the results of the study by Núñez, Paricio and Rodríguez (2012) continue to confirm that the current news model on drugs does not differ from that of decades ago in Spain "as it gives priority to shallow information, drug trafficking issues, the location of texts in sections related to events and the use of police sources to prepare the information" (p.30).

In the specific case of cannabis, Ballesteros (2014) also finds that it is represented in the written press with little importance, the information is not contrasted and the news is usually framed by means of the conflict frame. These results are corroborated by Santos and Camacho (2017) who detect that the treatment of this substance is characterised by an eminently informative style, "which indicates that there is no concern for writing elaborated texts that go into depth and offer explanations and opinions" (p. 165).

Furthermore, there is consensus in publications spanning almost five decades that the preferred thematic field for reporting on drugs is crime (Unesco, 1973; García et al., 1987; González-Zorrilla, 1987; González, 1992; Rekalde and Romaní, 2002; Pantoja and Abeijón, 2004; Martín, 2010; Serena, 2010; Paricio, Núñez and Rodríguez, 2011; Núñez et al., 2012; Ballesteros, 2012; Santos and Camacho, 2017; Zaragoza and Elgueta, 2019). It has been considered that this informative orientation towards drug trafficking has forgotten "the reality of the people affected" (Rekalde and Romaní, 2002, p.25), leaving aside community programmes and consumers (VVAA, 1991, p. 165), and reaching the conclusion already stated by Unesco in 1973 that the media's emphasis on the punitive aspect was counterproductive in terms of prevention (p.2).

Thus, more than half of the times that the media deal with drugs they do so to report on criminal aspects (e.g. García et al., 1987; Núñez et al., 2012; Ballesteros, Muñiz and Dader, 2015; Santos and Camacho, 2017), with the political and legislative spheres (below 30%), and the scientific-medium and social spheres (always below 10%) remaining in second place. According to Paricio et al. (2011) this thematic orientation towards crime and repression occurs "despite institutional and political efforts to position drugs as a social and health problem" (p. 71). According to Martín (2010), the socio-health dimension of drug use still does not have a significant presence in the media, with the exception of tobacco and the therapeutic use of cannabis.

In line with this criminal framing, there is a negative orientation of these reports (Froján et al., 1993; PND, 2000; Rekalde and Romaní, 2002; Zaragoza and Elgueta, 2019; Perales and Del Pueyo, 2019).

Despite this scarce thematic variation over time, the Ibero-American Network of NGOs working on drug addiction states that there are fewer and fewer references associating drug addiction and marginality (2010), while Perales and Del Pueyo (2019), state that there is a greater media presence of the social and health point of view.

### **3.2. Sources of information and information providers**

There is widespread agreement (Oliva, 1986; García et al, 1987; González, 1992; Froján et al, 1993; PND, 2000; Martínez, 2000; Rekalde and Romani, 2002; Markez, 2003; Núñez et al., 2012; Perales and Del Pueyo, 2019; Zaragoza and Elgueta, 2019) on the prominence that institutional actors and sources, especially law enforcement agencies, play in information on drugs. In contrast, health and social sources and actors are secondary or do not appear (Zaragoza and Elgueta, 2019).

In this sense, the National Plan on Drugs warns that using a single source to report on drugs limits the understanding of this phenomenon (PND, 2000), and that the journalist, emulating the multidisciplinary nature of the teams that deal with drug addictions, should turn to a wider variety of experts, such as pharmacologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, or pedagogues.

This single source tends to be institutional according to most research (Oliva, 1986; García et al, 1987; Rekalde and Romani, 2002; Márkez, 2003; Paricio et al, 2011; Ballesteros, 2012, 2014; Perales and Del Pueyo, 2019), and more specifically police or judicial sources, which have come to be described as "single journalistic sources" on the subject of drugs. Journalists, instead of checking the information or looking for original news, would limit themselves to "collecting press releases, statements by personalities and authorities, official versions, interviews, reports, documentation dossiers and those types of communication products prepared by institutional press offices" (Rekalde, 2002, p.32). With an intermediate relevance, health and scientific sources oscillate between 15 and 30% according to the different studies.

Finally, on the other side of the scale, the protagonists affected by drugs, consumers and social collectives barely achieve the status of information sources (Rekalde, 2002; Ballesteros, Dader and Muñiz, 2015; Perales and Del Pueyo, 2019). Interestingly, the few times that drug users have been used as sources have been in such a way that a publication of the NDP (2000) warned that collecting the testimony of a drug addict can be "dangerous if it is not nuanced, either because it conveys that if you can go out why not try, or because it reflects the image of a passive subject, without responsibility for their addiction" (p.23), so it is advisable to carefully select the testimonies of users, since "the opinions of these people in no case constitute scientific evidence. It is not because you are or have been a drug user or drug dependent that you are right in your approach or solution to the problem" (NDP, 2008).

Alongside this police source, institutions working on drugs seem to have been making inroads, as reported by both Paricio et al. (2011) and Perales and Del Pueyo (2019). The latter highlight the relevance achieved by the National Plan on Drugs, as well as specialised organisations such as the Asociación Proyecto Hombre, the FAD, Energy Control, UNAD or PDS.

In parallel with these sources, the protagonists of the media narrative on drugs are also the institutions, including the State security forces and the judiciary, "who talk about what they themselves do, and to whom they do it" (Perales and Del Pueyo, 2019).

Finally, it is worth highlighting the convenience of citing the source whenever possible, as sources allow the reliability of the messages to be guaranteed, avoiding expressions such as "neighbourhood criticism of the new health care centre" or "specialists are concerned about the increase in marijuana consumption", as these phrases can lead to interpreting as scientific evidence what are merely subjective appraisals (PND, 2008). Journalists should also verify the reliability of information sources, seeking the opinion of experts from different fields and being extremely rigorous in the language and treatment of data (JCYL, 2008). It should be noted that studies such as that of García et al. (2011) point out that the most credible sources for young university students on drugs are science magazines and popular science books, while among the media, the written press stands out, with the Internet in last place.

### 3.3. Stereotyping

The poor journalistic reworking of information from institutional sources has led to a series of frequent stereotypes about drugs (González, 1992; González-Zorrilla, 1987; Berjano et al., 1990; Usó, 1995; PND, 2000; Rekalde and Romani, 2002; JCYL, 2008; PND, 2008; Serena, 2010).

Firstly, the framing of drugs as a crime has produced an equating of drug users with offenders. In part, this may have been due to the absence of non-problematic users as a source of information, replaced by police sources, ignoring the fact that a majority of users are integrated into society, family and work (PND, 2000). This stereotype of the offender-user has evolved into one of the sick-user in need of health care (Rekalde and Romani, 2002).

This identification of the drug user as "drug addict" and "delinquent" is only produced to refer to the user of illegal drugs. In contrast, the media image of legal drug users is that of a normalised, integrated individual who only causes conflict when driving a car under the influence of alcohol (Martínez, 2000).

A second stereotype would be to use the singular 'drug' or to talk about 'drugs' in general (NDP, 2015) instead of referring to different substances with different effects. In contrast to the warning that each substance 'requires a specific treatment' (PND, 2008), 'in the informative treatment of drugs, everything is one and the same thing' (González-Zorrilla, 1987). The origin of this reductionism dates back to the 1980s and the social alarm created around heroin.

As described by the National Plan on Drugs (2000) when talking about drugs, in the singular, "we are sending a coded message that the reader or listener interprets as "heroin" and all that it entails: marginality, delinquency, citizen insecurity, etc." (p. 22). (p. 22). However, this interpretation seems to have been transmitted to new contexts, so that Santos and Camacho (2017) detect in the current media representation of cannabis

"a monolithic conception of all types of drugs, according to which the drug is only one and its effects are the same".

This stereotype has led to the common use of the expression "drugs, tobacco and alcohol", which the manual "Medios de comunicación y drogodependencias" edited by Plan Nacional de Drogas (2000) considers "particularly inappropriate" (p.22), as it would contribute to spread the idea that alcohol and tobacco are not drugs. Instead, "tobacco, alcohol and other drugs" should be referred to.

Other stereotypes that have been detected identify and associate in a reductionist way young people with drugs, heroin with marginality, cannabis with progressivism, ecstasy with fun and discotheques, or cocaine with social success (PND, 2008, 2015), which would lead to an unfocused and simplistic view of each of these complex realities.

### **3.4. Some common misunderstandings**

In addition to what has already been described, the academic and informative literature coincides in warning of a series of frequent mistakes made by the media in reporting on drugs (Santacreu et al., 1992; Froján et al., 1993; Usó, 1995; Vega, 1996; PND, 2000, 2008, 2009, 2015; Markez, 2003; JCYL, 2008), which can be summarised under four main headings.

#### **3.4.1. Youth and drugs**

An image has been conveyed that identifies alcohol with partying and partying with drugs, through scenes of youth parties where alcoholic beverages are served and consumed. The idea of drug consumption is transmitted as something consubstantial with young people, as if they were a homogeneous group.

Sometimes institutional language is used that does not resonate with young people because it does not use the same codes of communication as they do. Using a paternalistic, infantilising or merely prohibitionist tone that limits itself to telling young people what they should not do ends up causing rejection of preventive messages. Moreover, using the generation of fear of drugs as a strategy can convey a message that contradicts the personal experience of the subjects, who will end up distrusting these sources.

#### **3.4.2. The nature of drugs**

Firstly, when reporting on drug use, it is more accurate to talk about drug use in the plural, since what is known as poly-drug use, i.e. taking several psychoactive substances at the same time, has become widespread. Moreover, drug use can be different depending on the time and the person:

- Sporadic use is common among the general population and may be devoid of significant health consequences. However, downplaying any form of drug use contributes to normalising and trivialising it. In the case of young people, this sporadic use has an experimental, discovery character.
- Problem drug use is characterised by an intensity, environment or age of users, which can lead to a significant health problem.
- In the case of drug dependence, addiction causes users to focus part of their daily activity on the consumption of one or more drugs, and to ensure that their use becomes repetitive and necessary.

Secondly, the message has been conveyed that drugs produce dependence and addiction almost instantaneously and equally in all users.

On the other hand, overdoses have been widely blamed for the deaths of drug users, forgetting that the most common causes are often adulteration and "opportunistic" diseases.

At the other extreme, the therapeutic potential of certain drugs is sometimes magnified as if they were panaceas, forgetting the limitations, contraindications and side effects they may have, and that certain therapeutic uses do not mean that recreational use is harmless.

### **3.4.3. Drug trafficking**

The image of drug trafficking and its repression that has been conveyed on many occasions has also been questionable. In the first place, the continuous and repeated reports of a "crackdown on drug trafficking" have ended up surprising that drug trafficking is still occurring, which leads to only two logical explanations: either the use of these terms is exaggerated, or the idea that criminal groups are growing out of control is being generated.

Insisting on the value of seized goods on the black market could lead to further crime among certain underprivileged and under-resourced sectors.

At the same time, there is a tendency to quantify the seized substance in a way that is appealing to the public, so that heterogeneous units of measurement are used: tonnes in the case of hashish, kilos of cocaine or thousands of doses in the case of heroin. Related to the spread of marijuana cultivation in recent years, the term 'plantations' has become popular in the media, sometimes referring to a small number of plants grown in a garden or pot.

### **3.4.4. Journalistic language and format**

The use of language leads to the transmission of automatic associations that the information professional has to control. For example, the expression "designer drugs" has been used repeatedly, which could convey an attractive connotation, being more accurate to refer to synthetic or laboratory drugs.

On the other hand, the use of derogatory terms such as "drug addicts", "junkies", "hooked", etc. or successful expressions such as "the scourge of drugs" or "falling into the drug pit", tend to convey moralistic and catastrophic messages that do little to form a realistic image.

As for the visual content of the news, it is common to use archive images that are relatively related to the message being conveyed. We should try to ensure that the image corroborates the verbal message, avoiding, on the contrary, contributing to fix stereotypes such as those described. In contrast to the use of criminalising, degrading or morbid images of drug users, it is possible to select images of professionals and prevention initiatives.

### **3.5. Internet and social media**

Concern about information on drugs that could be disseminated via the Internet was expressed as early as 1998 by the United Nations General Assembly, which recommended that the traditional media and the telecommunications and software production industries promote self-control in order to eliminate illegal information on drugs (UN, 1998).

A few years later, in 2002, we find this concern expressed in Spain by Becoña, who calls for attention to "the relationship that vulnerable individuals may have with drugs, the increase of information through the network, the obtaining of drugs on it, etc." (p.110). (p.110). Thus, the National Plan on Drugs (2015) considers social networks and new information technologies as "the best vehicles for providing information on drugs to the population, not only because of their reach but also because of their lower costs" (p. 18) and therefore recommends that the entire sector working on prevention develop communication strategies on the Internet to counteract the counter-preventive messages that appear on the Internet. New technologies provide new challenges as well as "advances in communication and health strategies" that have to count on "the active participation of the receiver himself" (Cuesta and Menéndez, 2011). As an example of the attempt to update and keep pace with technological change from the institutional spheres, we can cite the objective of the NDP in its Action Plan on Addictions 2018-2020 to launch a PPP aimed primarily at informing the general public about drugs and addictions (Ministry of Health, 2018).

The systematic review by Mukherjee et al. (2019) stated that there is still very little information on the uses, benefits and limitations of social media for health communication. This is a crucial issue because, as Taffe (2015) asserts, internet searching for health-related information has become the default behaviour of people,

including recreational use and abuse of psychotropic substances. Al Khaja, Al Khaja and Sequeira (2018) found in their analysis of messages distributed via Whatsapp that the majority of drug-related messages on social media were potentially misleading or false claims that lacked credible evidence to back them up.

On the preventive side, Gountas et al. (2014) found that videos uploaded on social media could contribute positively to changing attitudes and reducing excessive alcohol consumption.

Mackey, Liang and Strathdee (2013) also refer to "these unregulated technologies" as a potential risk with regard to youth experimentation with medicines not prescribed by medical personnel. According to these authors, the Internet and social media such as Facebook or Twitter are a critical point of access for young people to these drugs. This is because social networks are used by many adolescents as a predominant or exclusive means of information, which can lead to false expectations about the effects of alcohol and other drugs (Stankova, 2020).

### **3.6. The anti-prohibitionist press**

Beyond the general media, there is a type of specialised press, which could be defined as "anti-prohibitionist" or more specifically "cannabis", as it focuses on everything related to cannabis consumption and cultivation.

In Spain there have been several "cannabis" magazines with national distribution, from the dean El Cogollo (1997), to others such as Cádiz, Cannabis Magazine, Yerba (Spanish edition of the American High Times) or Soft Secrets (from the Dutch publisher Discover Publisher). Cádiz is the reference magazine in this market, whose OJD circulation control in 2002 (the only one available) showed a circulation of 48,750 copies. Bobes and Calafat (2000) described it as "modern, well edited and with various contributions from enthusiastic professionals linked to different facets of the broad youth culture, such as music, cinema, shows, etc." (p. 246). (p. 246).

The 'Cannabis Report' (GEC, 2004) considered these publications and the proliferation of websites as one of the causes of the increase in cannabis use. More constructively, some authors highlight the ability of these publications to reach consumers. Thus, Romaní (cited in Markez, 2003, p.107) points out that "there are people who are interested in what is said there, because they know that it is a type of information based on premises that are much closer to reality (...). And I am sure that the contraindications in relation to certain uses of cannabis that have sometimes been published there reach the interested parties much better (than those of the official discourse)".

Bobes and Calafat (2000) also stress that these magazines and associations could make "a great social contribution if they helped to create the prevention criteria that our society needs, in order to prevent the increase in cannabis use among individuals who are still in the process of training". In this sense, the editorial of the first issue of La María de Soft Secrets (2002) committed itself to "inform truthfully, assuming the

responsibility of disseminating harm reduction strategies and maximum caution for the integral protection of minors" (p. 271).

#### **4. The media's responsibility towards drugs**

The media play an important role in dealing with all kinds of social problems, including the phenomenon of drug use. According to the "Theory of the social responsibility of the press", elaborated by the Commission on Freedom of the Press or Hutchins Commission (1947), it would be up to the media "to provide a true, comprehensive and intelligent explanation of daily events within a context in which they acquire meaning" (Commission, 1947, p. 20).

In particular, codes of ethics, as indebted to this theory, provide widely accepted guidance on how journalists should go about their reporting task. Although Unesco (1973) early on encouraged professional news organisations "to include rules on the use of data on drug abuse in their respective codes of ethics" (p. 5), according to Gayo (2013), few media outlets include in their codes or stylebooks any reference to how to deal with drug reporting. In this regard, the RTVE Style Manual (2011) makes two brief notes. On the one hand, the generic indication that "information on the consumption of harmful substances, whether permitted or not by law, should not encourage their consumption". With regard to children's programmes, it is stated that "such content is only justified when the aim is to warn them about the risks of these substances".

The Federation of Associations of Journalists of Spain (FAPE, 2017) defines the professional practice of journalism as an important social commitment, as it allows the development of fundamental rights to free information and expression of ideas.

According to FAPE, respect for the truth is an ethical commitment of the journalist. The freedom to investigate and to disseminate information honestly are two essential duties. In addition, special care must be taken when reporting on minors.

Finally, the FAPE Code establishes that the journalist must assume the principle that everyone is innocent until proven guilty, and avoid as much as possible the possible harmful consequences derived from the fulfilment of his or her informative duties. Such criteria are especially required when the information deals with subjects subject to the knowledge of the Courts of Justice. The following points can be highlighted in the FAPE Journalist Statute:

- The right and duty to up-to-date and complete professional training (8.c).
- It is the journalist's responsibility to scrupulously monitor the compliance of public administrations with their obligation of information transparency (11).

- He/she must substantiate the information he/she disseminates, which includes the duty to verify sources and to give the person concerned the opportunity to offer his/her version of the facts (13.a).

The Code of Ethics of the Association of Journalists of Catalonia (Col.legi, 1992) agrees, stating that only well-founded information should be disseminated, avoiding inaccurate information that could undermine the dignity of individuals and cause unjustified damage or discredit to institutions and public and private entities.

## 5. Conclusions

The consumption of all types of drugs, whether legal such as alcohol, tobacco or pharmaceuticals, or illegal such as cannabis, cocaine and synthetic products, is a socially generalised phenomenon, which has aroused concern in official, academic and social spheres. However, the literature review agrees that the media do not observe professional criteria in their information on drugs (Unesco, 1973; Vega, 1996; Del Olmo, 1997; PND, 2000; Rekalde and Romaní, 2002; Perales and Del Pueyo, 2019; Zaragoza and Elgueta, 2019), but have created a misleading image that could contribute to counter-preventive situations and encourage substance abuse (Berjano et al., 1990; Usó, 1995; Del Olmo, 1997; Martín, 2010). We could summarise the current journalistic treatment of drugs in two main characteristics.

On the one hand, information on drugs is not checked, but rather institutional press releases, mainly police (García et al., 1987; Rekalde and Romaní, 2002), are usually published with little journalistic reworking. Paradoxically, this unaltered reproduction of the point of view of a single source gives an appearance of objectivity to what is in reality unverified information. The incorporation in recent years of health and preventive sources has added to the classic stereotype of the user-delinquent, the image of the drug user as a sick person, obviating the vast social majority of legal and illegal drug users who lead a normalised life.

Secondly, the nature of drugs and the social phenomenon that their use has generated is described in a confusing way. For example, no differentiation is made between the different types of drugs, with both the singular "the drug" being used generically, identifying it with heroin, and transmitting all the symbolic charge of this drug to the other substances (PND, 2000) and the plural "drugs", transmitting a similar image of all of them. In addition to this, legal trade substances are sometimes not considered as drugs (PND, 2001; Megías et al., 2001).

To complete this image, the media have added a symbolic value to drugs, giving them the meaning of belonging to a group (García et al., 1987), by relating their consumption to lifestyles, identity, etc. (Basque Government, 1994). (Basque Government, 1994). In addition, it has sometimes been possible to arouse the curiosity of young people and even discover new ways of administration (VVAA, 1991; Usó,

1995). Highlighting the profits of drug trafficking may have encouraged certain disadvantaged social sectors to commit crimes (PND, 2000; Usó, 1995).

In the face of such dubious informative treatment, the responsibility of the media with regard to drugs has been repeatedly demanded by institutions and researchers, and is clearly established both in general rules, such as codes of ethics, and in specific guides, manuals and research that have been carried out on this issue. Furthermore, several studies agree on the capacity of the media to disseminate prevention campaigns and raise awareness of drug abuse (García et al., 1987; Costa and Pérez, 1989; Vega, 1996; Berrio, 2000; PND, 2000; Rekalde and Romani, 2002; Pantoja and Abeijón, 2004; Paricio, Núñez and Rodríguez, 2012).

To achieve this, greater collaboration between journalists and prevention professionals has been proposed, for example in the form of workshops and the joint development of preventive campaigns (González, 1992; PND, 2009). The need to provide journalists with greater specialisation in this area has also been highlighted (González, 1992; PND, 2009; Junta de Castilla y León, 2008; Martín, 2010; Gayo, 2013; PND, 2015).

Independently and in addition to this increased training, journalists have an important instrument for improving information on drugs, namely codes of ethics. Firstly, by applying themselves with total diligence, and overcoming the obstacles of job insecurity and staff cuts, to the duty of truthfully reproducing the facts and exercising the profession critically. And above all by checking sources, one of the most widespread criticisms and at the same time one of the best-known principles of the profession, present in all codes of ethics and style books.

In this sense, the "single police source" dominant in Spain in the 80s and 90s seems to have been moderated, and the demand for greater attention to be paid to the health and social dimensions in order to better describe the context of the facts seems to have been partly met. Thus, it has been detected that there has been an evolution towards a progressive and growing consideration of institutional preventive sources (Paricio et al., 2011; Perales and Del Pueyo, 2019). Taking into account, in a balanced and contrasted way, also social groups and consumers could end up showing the whole picture of this complex social phenomenon.

This broadening of the context also involves paying attention to all substances, regardless of their legal status, as it is precisely legal drugs that are the most widely consumed and cause the greatest harm to society (World Health Organization, 2018, 2019). Balancing attention between legal and illegal drugs must start from the consideration that the consumption of any substance with addictive potential is not harmless (PND, 2009).

A very specific case is that of the anti-prohibitionist or cannabis press, publications that in the terminology of the MacBride report (1988, p. 296) could be called "substitution and counter-information communications", since they reinterpret official information

coming from institutions. As this classic report points out, they "re-evaluate and extend communications according to a new conception of their importance in society". Its initial printed format soon multiplied into countless Internet sites dealing with drugs from the point of view of the recreational user. Social networks have attracted the interest of researchers on the role of communication in drug use, generating in a short time significant research with very different perspectives (e.g. Al Khaja, Al Khaja and Sequeira, 2018; Mackey, Liang and Strathdee, 2013; Gountas et al., 2014; Taffe, 2015; Mukherjee et al., 2019).

Such a profusion of information on drugs through all kinds of channels promoted by all kinds of authors has only accentuated the information inflation that was talked about even before the digital explosion. Abraham Moles already noted that "people have many more communication tools and content at their disposal than they will ever be able to use" (Moles 1986, p. 151). It is worrying that this overabundance of information may contribute to a further distortion of the image of the social phenomenon of drugs. In order for citizens to be socially and individually responsible, they need adequate information. Therefore, the classic accusations against the media image of drugs do not seem to have been corrected, while the new technological landscape requires renewed and updated research attention capable of the complicated task of monitoring its evolution in real time.

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## AUTHOR

### **Carlos A. Ballesteros Herencia**

Carlos A. Ballesteros Herencia holds a PhD in Information Sciences (2012), a degree in Journalism (1995) and a degree in Sports Sciences (2011). He is a lecturer in the

Journalism degree at the University of Valladolid. He enjoys statistically analysing news frames, digital engagement, the application of technologies to electoral campaigns and the responsibility of the media in the face of drugs. He has been head of Communications at UPA-Castilla-La Mancha and director of La Voz de Albacete and El Espectador Crítico. **Orcid ID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8990-7949>

**Google Scholar:** <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=ntT2zslAAAAJ&hl=en>

**ResearchID:** D-9772-2016

**Research Gate:** Carlos\_Ballesteros9

**Academia.edu:** [uva-es.academia.edu/Carlos\\_Ballesteros](http://uva-es.academia.edu/Carlos_Ballesteros)