

Tabloid journalist **Lorraine Fisher**, former health correspondent of the *Daily Mirror*, defends the

IT'S true – 'junkies' aren't very popular with Fleet Street. They get a very bad press, but often with good reason. National newspapers only cover the very biggest stories, whether it's politics, health or crime. With the latter, there is so much to choose from, the ones covered are normally utterly horrific. It's awful to say but a typical murder – such as a man being stabbed to death outside a nightclub – will only make headlines on a very slow news day. To get mass coverage there has to be a twist to the story – such as an unusual murder weapon – or a more sympathetic victim such as a child or woman.

So when only the most horrific crimes are making the news, it stands to reason that if the perpetrator is revealed to have been on drugs when the act was committed, or if they use them, they will not receive a sympathetic press. How can you ask your readers who are reviled by the senseless murder of an innocent victim to feel sympathy for the killer because they take drugs? Or to ignore the fact illegal substances may have played a part what happened?

Newspapers like to think they lead public opinion. But in reality, they also have to reflect the views of their readers for the fear that the people who pay their wages will defect to another paper. And they do – for years the *Daily Mirror* has been anti-racist, but whenever we ran a positive story we'd be inundated with calls the next day from readers vowing never to buy the paper again.

Moss: "She hadn't told the truth about her habit"

# Hack attack

## Why drug users are fair game

### NO SYMPATHY

It's generally believed that most people deplore drug use, particularly if it leads to crime. For this reason, editors are loathe to be sympathetic. Even if they were and even if the 'villain' had suffered badly themselves, they are unlikely to get a good press. Witness the harsh coverage given to Jamie Bulger's killer Robert Thompson who, although he hadn't turned to drugs, had a dreadful upbringing and was just 10 at the time of the murder. Despite this, editors feel many of our readers will think they also had tough childhoods and setbacks but still managed not to succumb to the lure of drugs.

With newspapers losing sales, journalists simply can't afford to take a chance – there's not a lot of sympathy for drug addicts out there. Many critics of newspapers point to the different way alcoholics are treated to drug users – and they do get a far more sympathetic hearing.

However, it is changing because of readers' reactions to the George Best story. We were inundated with letters from people angry at his transplant. But with alcohol there are some crucial differences – it's legal and no journalist has ever written about an old lady being mugged and killed to help an alcoholic buy booze.

Tabloids also like to keep things simple. Villains are villains, heroes are heroes. If I'd been interviewing someone in the latter category and they mentioned a drug habit, I'd ignore it. If I didn't, either the story wouldn't go in the paper because of it or the drug reference would be taken out by a sub-editor.



## red tops' record on drug reporting

There's little room for flawed heroes on Fleet Street.

### MISSED CHANCES

That's not to say newspapers would never publish a positive story about a drug addict. They would – but we don't get them. Tales such as 'I used to take crack but now I'm a respectable bank manager' would not only sell newspapers but also help change people's attitudes. But, understandably, if a drug user cleans up their act and gets a good job, they're not exactly willing to come forward and talk about their past.

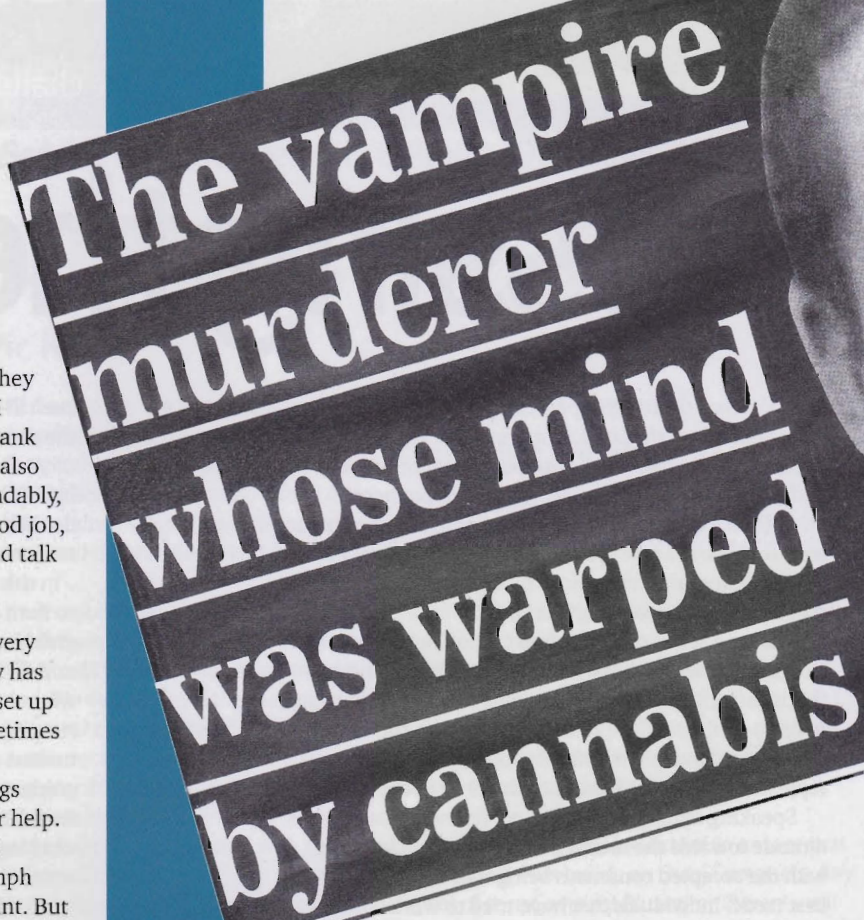
If you don't believe me, look at the acres of coverage given to the Prince's Trust. Almost every year Prince Charles meets someone his charity has helped who had a drug problem but has now set up in business. It always makes a big story – sometimes the front page. But in my two years as health correspondent at the *Mirror*, I often asked drugs charities for such stories but no one could ever help. With the explosion of 'real life' magazines and sections of papers nowadays looking for 'triumph over adversity' stories, they would sail into print. But we never get told them.

Many think a mainstay of tabloid journalism is revealing stars to be drug users. In reality the interest is less than you'd think. We know a huge amount of celebrities with a habit – some incredibly famous names that would shock readers – but they're not exposed for several reasons. First, it's incredibly difficult to get the evidence – it has to be photographic. Libel juries are notoriously harsh on tabloids so we have to have rock solid evidence. With cocaine abuse less shocking than it used to be, many a news editor is forced to ask if a costly investigation is worth it. Second, these stars often help journalists by giving us stories and quotes. It's not in a hack's interest to expose them – the exclusives will dry up.

Some of the stars that have been named and shamed were simply unlucky. One just happened to be taking coke at the wrong time, in the wrong place. The newspaper that exposed him was actually after one of his friends at the time and couldn't believe their luck. The main rule in Fleet Street seems to be 'don't get caught'. And if a celebrity drug user is making bad headlines for other reasons – such as John Leslie over the Ulrika 'rape' fiasco – then they'd better watch out, all bets are off.

### STAR TREATMENT

I was at the *Mirror* for both the Naomi Campbell 'Narcotics Anonymous' outing and the recent Kate Moss furore. In the former case, there is a general feeling in newspapers that people should be allowed to seek treatment in private – the PCC is incredibly strict when it comes to health. Again, like many journalists, I know of many stars' little problems – including a household name's herpes – but we cannot print. It's just not in the public interest. But in both



The vampire  
murderer  
whose mind  
was warped  
by cannabis

Who's doing  
the warping?  
*Daily Mail*,  
2002

these cases the models hadn't told the truth about their habit – Moss even suing the *Sunday Mirror*. That made it in the public interest. Newspapers are against hypocrisy. And it says a lot that neither story seems to have done either model much damage.

Journalists often get slammed as being hypocrites themselves because they take drugs while condemning others for it. Witness Robbie Williams' attack on the hacks who laid into Moss when he claimed he'd taken drugs with many of them. Obviously some journalists do – just like some bankers, charity workers and politicians.

But I spent eight years at the *Mirror* and I was only offered drugs once – and that was on a story in New York. Alcohol is still the Fleet Street drug of choice. Obviously taking drugs while criticising others for doing the same is hypocritical. But journalists would argue they are not role models for children – unlike the TV presenters, pop singers and sports stars who find themselves all over the pages of the tabloids for the wrong reasons. ■

“ Junkies get a very  
bad press, but often  
with good reason ”