

DEPIS

Drug Education Prevention and Prevention Information Service

Media Messages:

A Review of Drug Related Messages
Reaching Young People

www.drugscope.org.uk

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Contents

Introduction	3
Background	3
Method	5
Themes	7
Conclusions	20
Appendix 'A' Media List	23
Appendix 'B' Quantitative Report	25
Acknowledgements	26

It should be noted that the views expressed in the report are the views of the author/of DrugScope and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Health

Media Messages for Young People – a review

Introduction

This report has been produced to complement and enhance DEPIS (Drug Education Prevention Information Service), a project designed to support practitioners delivering drug education prevention services to young people. DEPIS was managed by DrugScope and funded by the Department of Health (DH) The functions of DEPIS have been transferred to DH as of April 1st 2005 and as a result the service will be managed and updated by DH.

The aim of the media project was to review the quantity, quality and type of messages related to drugs received by young people in the run up to and over the Christmas holiday period, (traditionally a time of party-going and over-indulgence), 2004 and to develop a framework within which the wider drug-related perceptions and knowledge of young people can be placed in context.

For the purpose of this report, young people are defined as 11 – 25 year olds.

Background

Drugs

11 – 15 year olds

In 2004 18% of pupils said they had taken drugs in the last year, whilst 10% said they had taken drugs in the last month. As in previous years of the survey, cannabis was by far the most likely drug to have been taken – 11% of pupils aged 11-15 had taken cannabis in the last year. Prevalence of taking cannabis increased sharply with age: 1% of 11 year olds had taken the drug in the last year compared with 26% of 15 year olds. 4% had taken Class A drugs in the last year.¹

16 - 24 year olds

People aged between 16 and 24 years are more likely than older people to have used drugs in the last year and last month – 28% had used at least one illicit drug in the last year.²

The most commonly used illicit drug by young people is cannabis; 26% of 16-24 year olds reporting use in the last year.³

In general, young people from black and ethnic minority groups tend to drink less alcohol and have lower levels of drug use than those from white or mixed backgrounds.⁴

¹ Drug use, smoking and drinking among young people in England in 2004, Department of Health, 2005

² Findings 229, Prevalence of drug use: key findings from the 2002 / 2003 British Crime Survey, Home Office

³ Findings 229, Prevalence of drug use: key findings from the 2002 / 2003 British Crime Survey, Home Office

⁴ Ethnicity and drug use: key findings from the 2001/2002 British Crime Survey, Home Office, 2003 and Alcohol drinking among black and ethnic communities in the UK, Acquire, Alcohol Concern, 2003

Alcohol

16-24 year olds are the heaviest drinking section of the population: 42% of young men had drunk more than 21 units of alcohol a week and 32% of young women drank more than 14 units a week [recommended maximum weekly amounts]⁵.

In terms of 'binge drinking' almost half of young men (49%) aged 16 to 24 had exceeded four units on at least one day during the previous week [recommended maximum daily amount (RMDA)]. Among women, 42% of those in the youngest age group [16-24] had exceeded three units on at least one day [RMDA]. Similar patterns were evident for heavy drinking: 35% of men aged 16-24 had drunk more than eight units on at least one day during the previous week. Among young women aged 16 to 24, 28% had drunk heavily on at least one day during the preceding week.⁶

Young people are drinking more and more often. The average amount drunk by 11-15 year olds in 1990 was 0.8 units per week rising to 1.6 units per week in 1998. Amongst 11-15 year olds who drink this rose from 5.3 units per week in 1990 to 10.5 units in 2001. However, drinking amongst this age group does appear to have stabilised in the last year or two. In 2003, the proportion of pupils (aged 11-15) who drank in the last week was 25%, a 1% increase on the previous year (24% in 2002).⁷

Young people and the media

That the media plays a large and important role in young peoples' lives today is unquestionable: almost all (99%) watch television in their leisure time⁸; 51% watch a news programme on a regular basis⁹; 82% use the internet daily¹⁰; 61% read a magazine on a regular basis¹¹ and 77% of 16 –24 year olds read a newspaper during the week (45% daily).¹²

What is more ambiguous perhaps is the extent to which the media influences young peoples' behaviour, in particular health-related or risk-taking behaviour. Academics remain divided on the issue. While many claim that there is no link at all between images young people are exposed to in the media and their behaviour, the latest research from Sheffield University insists that the influence is there, albeit unconsciously:

"Researchers found that, regardless of their willingness or conscious intentions, young people were more likely to do a particular thing when they thought the image was positive and

⁵ Health Survey for England 2002, The Health of Children and Young People, Department of Health

⁶ Living in Britain: Results from the 2002 General Household Survey, Office of National Statistics 2004

⁷ Drug use, smoking and drinking among young people in England in 2003, Department of Health, 2004

⁸ Young People, New Media, Livingstone and Bovill, London School of Economics, 1999

⁹ 'Connected' survey of how teenagers use the media, Chapel, 2001

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Survey, Newspaper Marketing Agency, 2004

something they could identify with. This was true whether the activity was healthy or risky.¹³

What is clear, however, is that the media is a major source of information for young people: 54% cite the TV as their major source for news and information¹⁴ and 87% say newspapers help them understand important issues¹⁵ and they are not simply passive readers either. While 49% trust everything or most of what they read in the newspaper, 48% claim they 'take what they [the newspapers] say with a pinch of salt.'¹⁶

In a paper on the sexual language of young women's magazines, Dr David Gauntlett asks a group of young women what they think of the openness of the style often found in such magazines. Although talking specifically about sex, their comments are interesting in wider terms of how young people like to access information about 'difficult' topics and are equally relevant to discussions about drink and drugs in the media.

"I think *More* has a lot of information to offer about sex, and young people need educating about the facts, the more information you have the more you are going to know. Magazines are another source of information." (Sarah, age 16)

"I think it's good that magazines discuss sex...I'm 17, and I think it would be unrealistic to expect a magazine aimed at my age group not to discuss sex, as it's already 'part of our lives' if you know what I mean. Personally, I think that sex being discussed in magazines makes me feel more confident, as the stuff you read in magazines is probably more reliable than the stuff people tell you..." (Clare, age 17)

Again, their responses also reveal a certain critical attitude to how such issues are presented in the media:

"But sometimes it [the magazine] seems to be implying that what goes on in their stories is 'normal' and a positive thing to be encouraging, and that those of us who aren't doing it are missing out. The publishers will probably argue that it isn't aimed at our age group, it's meant for a bit older, but everyone reads it and so is influenced by it." (Helenia, age 17)¹⁷

However, it must be recognised that a young person's ability to respond critically to information about drink and drugs found in the media relies wholly upon their own prior experiences of the substances and of course, other information that they have gathered to date. When the media itself is their main source of information, this begins to become problematic...

Method

The aim of the project was to monitor messages received by young people (11-25 year olds) during the month of December 2004 and produce a report into the type, consistency and reliability of the explicit and implicit messages relating to drugs communicated through the media and accessed by this age group. Because of limited funding and resources, it was not possible to carry out blanket monitoring of all national media during December 2004. Certain decisions were therefore taken as to which media should be prioritised.

¹³ Unconscious effects of prototypes on young people's health and behaviour, Sheeran P, University of Sheffield 2004.

¹⁴ Online survey, Connexions Card, 2004

¹⁵ Survey, Newspaper Marketing Agency, 2004

¹⁶ Online survey, Connexions Card, 2004

¹⁷ All quotes from 'More about *More!*: the sexual language of young women's magazines, Gauntlett D, University of Bournemouth, 2004

According to the Newspaper Marketing Agency research, it's the tabloids that are most successful in attracting younger readers. 59% of the latter read a popular title regularly, while a quarter of all 16-24 year olds read every issue of The Sun, making it the most popular newspaper for this age group.¹⁸ On the basis of this information we decided to monitor solely The Sun and The Mirror in terms of daily press, and the News of the World and the Sunday Mirror for weekly press. This was carried out through using Lexis Nexis, a press monitoring system already subscribed to by DrugScope.

In terms of television, EastEnders is consistently named as young people's most-watched programme so this was an obvious choice for monitoring. Hollyoaks was also selected as the only soap specifically aimed at this age group. In order to gain appreciation of how young people were responding to the drug and alcohol messages communicated through these soaps, manual monitoring of the web-based message boards for both these programmes was carried out during this period.

A range of consumer magazines aimed at the specified age group was monitored manually over the period, as were general news internet sites. Efforts were also made to monitor BME media for comparative purposes and to ascertain if any different trends were observable. This included black and Asian news websites, as well as Young Voices, a magazine aimed at young black teenagers.

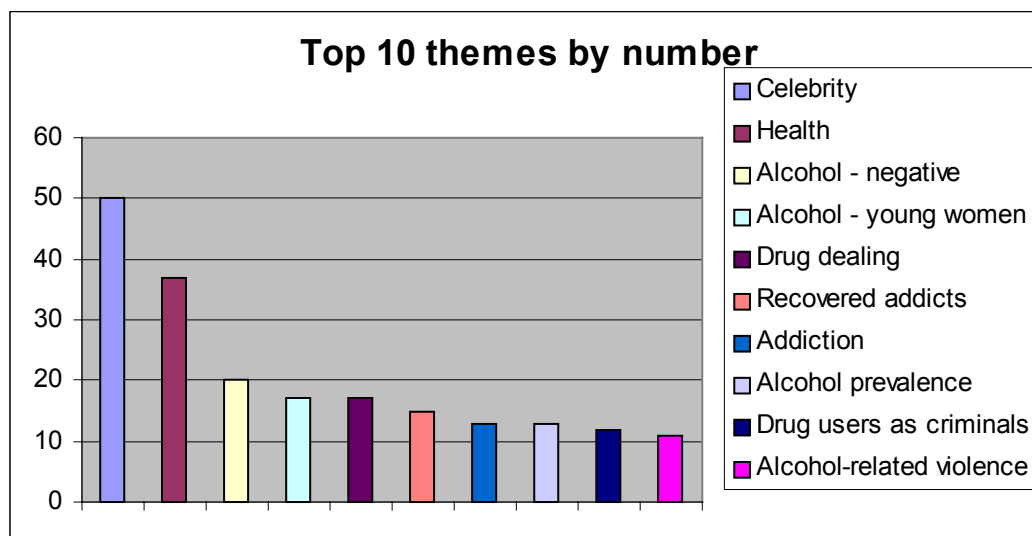
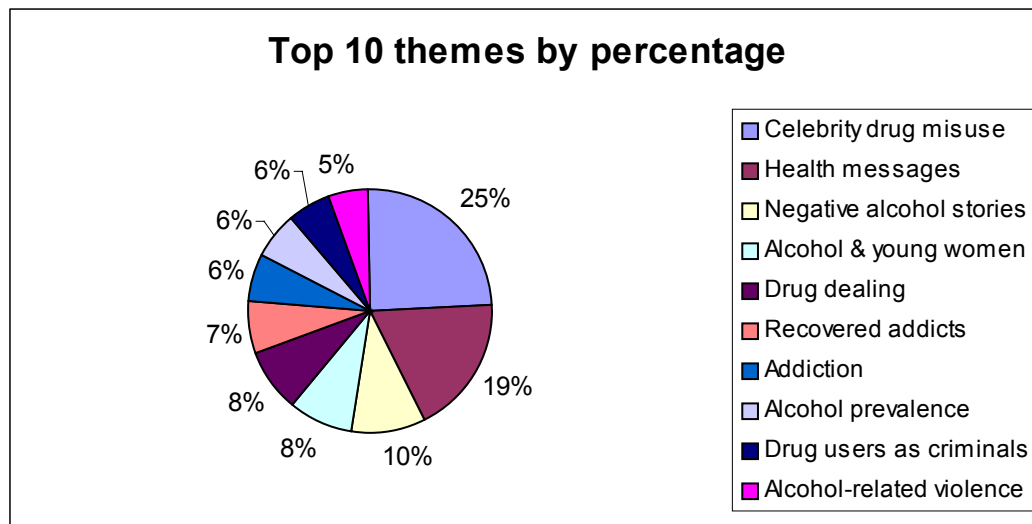
A full list of the media monitored over this period, their target audiences and circulations / audience figures can be found in Appendix A. It should of course be borne in mind that although the list specifies which age group each media outlet is aimed at, in addition to this they will be accessed routinely by younger (and older) people.

All in all, over 200 significant references made to drugs and alcohol were found in the print and online media monitored throughout December 2004 (excluding adverts), as well as key storylines which ran in the television soaps monitored over the same period.

¹⁸ Survey, Newspaper Marketing Agency, 2004

Themes

What follows is an exploration of the major themes that emerged from the monitoring process. Some may recall those found in a previous report¹⁹ (Celebrities do drugs; Everybody gets drunk / Binge drinking; A nation of clubbers [prevalence / recreational drug use], Watch out for date rape drugs) and some are new.



Portrayals of drug users: Celebrities vs criminals

Celebrity drug users

By far the largest number of articles about drug use in the media during December concerned celebrities and their drug use, due in no small part to the fact that ex-drug addict Sophie Anderton was one of the contestants on the latest series of 'I'm a Celebrity...Get me out of here!'. The sheer amount of coverage of celebrity drug misuse is in itself significant: whilst it must be noted that much of what was written concerned the damage that drugs can wreck

¹⁹ Mixed Messages: an analysis of media messages on drugs and alcohol reaching young people, Hamand J, DrugScope 2004

on individuals' lives, the overriding message does seem to be that the problems of drug addiction (beyond criminality, which I will come to later) and the process of seeking help and treatment is only of interest if the individual involved is a household name.

In the absence of more widespread health and harm reduction messages concerning drugs (see below 'Health risks and messages / harm reduction') it is through the celebs' own words that most of the information regarding the problems of drug use was to be found, given all the more potency through being personal accounts:

The latest series of 'I'm a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here' spawned a batch of articles about participant Sophie Anderton and her battle with drink and drugs. The model herself constantly referred to chaos of her former life:

'I haven't felt this tired since I was on drugs.' (The Mirror, 02/12/04)

'Drugs do funny things to people. Coke is an awful drug, it makes you very into yourself.' (The Sun, 04/12/04)

'A year ago she would fly into temper rages after snorting lines of cocaine and chasing them down with vodka and Valium...At the height of her addiction, Sophie wasted away to six stone. Reaching the depths of despair...she had even been lured into becoming a vice girl.' (Sunday Mirror, 05/12/04)

Throughout the month there was no shortage of celebs who would testify to the damage that drugs could do to you. In an interview with Heat magazine Sharon Osbourne said husband Ozzy had once put pot into a dinner he made for her: 'I turned into the fucking Hulk and went insane. It didn't agree with my body chemistry.' (Heat, 11/12/04).

In another Heat magazine interview Elton John spoke about kidnapping Robbie Williams to get him into treatment: 'He turned up at our house...and he was in a really bad way. We were so worried. I've been on drugs and I know what it's like...I hate to see anyone in that state...He came round to us and it was a cry for help. We got him into a treatment centre.' (Heat, 04/12/04)

In contrast to this, later in the month Robbie claimed that he'd had some of the best times of his life on drugs and 'I'd still be doing it if I didn't blow up to the size of an aircraft hanger.' (Real Radio, 25/12/04). Quite aside from the point that obesity is not a side effect usually associated with cocaine usage, DrugScope and other drug charities spoke out to criticise Robbie for his misleading comments. Whilst there is obviously an enjoyable side to drugs and it is pointless trying to pretend that there is not – as someone who had undergone treatment for his drug addictions, Robbie knew better than anyone the risks of drug misuse can be far greater than just weight problems. Indeed, his ex-manager later revealed that 'Drugs came very close to destroying the Robbie we all know and love. And there were three occasions when he nearly died he was so out of it.' (News of the World, 26/12/04)

Elsewhere in the media a more compromised attitude to drugs was emerging.

'Who is the model / party boy who appointed himself drug dealer at a showbiz bash earlier this week? We are surprised that any of the Z-listers present could afford the stuff.' (3AM Girls, The Mirror, 02/12/04)

The message here is loud and clear: drugs are the preserve of the glamorous A-list celebs who can afford them.

Even more blatant is the way in which lad's mags (loaded, Nuts, ZOO, FHM) hail celebrity drug takers as one of the lads who are just having a laugh. In a feature called 'Epic Rogue Binges', the opening paragraph says: 'Every now and then a rogue's life will spin so out of

control that he'll actually become newsworthy. When this happens it is easy to jump in and judge the poor chap, but while reflecting on these tales, let's not forget the colour and inspiration they bring to our lives.' (Loaded, Jan 05 [out Dec 04]) So Frank Bough (caught taking cocaine with a prostitute in 1988) is hailed as 'a loveable rogue' at whom 'most of us smiled and secretly tipped Frank the wink.'

Adrian Mutu, sacked by Chelsea FC for testing positive for cocaine is named as ZOO's REAL Sports Personality of the Year 2004: 'His night-time antics had kept ZOO readers entertained all year.' (ZOO 10/12/04)

And indeed, their take on Sophie Anderton's self-confessed drink and drugs addiction is:

'Sophie has settled down recently, but simmering just beneath the surface is a cauldron of misbehaviour. She's been behaving badly for years...we hope a little of the fire of yesterday returns to Sophie's life.' (loaded, Jan 2005)

The attitude across the media as a whole towards celebrity binge drinking is similarly mixed. Pages of drunk celebrities are common comic features in gossip and women's magazines such as the 'Sozzled Stars!' page in Sneak (14/12/04), whilst elsewhere are found stories of stars suffering shocking consequences of binge drinking: Chris Evans is treated in hospital for a five-hour nosebleed that won't stop: 'Boozy Evan bleeds 5 hrs.' (The Sun, 08/12/04); or alcoholism: 'Former Westlife star Brian McFadden had to have counselling to stop knocking back vodka every MORNING. "We talked, and it made me realise that there was a lot more going on than drinking. There was a reason for it. I wasn't drinking for the laugh."' (The Sun, 01/12/04)

Throughout the month, drug and alcohol misuse were variously held up to be either the humoured excesses of party people out to have a good time, or dangerous pursuits that led to addiction and self-destruction.

Drug users as criminals

Once out of the realm of celebrity, drug use was almost exclusively portrayed as a criminal pursuit. Drug users were alternatively described as 'drug dealing scum' (The Sun, 01/12/04); 'pumped up to kill' (The Mirror, 03/12/04); 'this evil monster' (News of the World, 19/12/04); 'A drug-crazed knifeman' (The Mirror, 08/12/04); 'barred from all shops' for 'a long history of theft' (The Mirror, 16/12/04) or 'evil yobs on a booze and drug binge' (24/12/04). Bliss magazine featured the story of two young girls who had killed their grandparents after smoking 'marijuana, possibly laced with cocaine.' (Jan 05 [out Dec 04]); a leader in The Mirror on excluded pupils concluded: 'But it doesn't need much to imagine what they are doing: drugs and crime'; and an article in The Mirror quoted a lady saying 'This area is a filthy area. There are drug addicts and alcoholics.' (23/12/04)

Clearly some of these stories concerned individuals convicted of horrible crimes. But for large sections of the media this is the main image of drug use (outside of celebrity drug use) that they offer. The message is clear: the link between drugs and crime is irrevocable and drug users are dirty, violent and evil criminals.

This theme is continued in the papers as their pages are peppered with tales of drug dealing, trafficking and smuggling: 'Search on for dealer's assets' (The Voice, 06/12/04); 'A drug dealer caught cooking up crack cocaine on his kitchen stove has been jailed for 10 years.' (News of the World, 05/12/04); 'Cocaine worth nearly £100m was found stashed inside coconuts delivered to a market.' (The Mirror, 11/12/05); 'Hairdresser led gang of gay crack cocaine dealers.' (The Mirror 11/12/04); 'Britain's evil crack dealers are offering supermarket-style discounts to lure in Christmas revellers.' (26/12/04).

Most of these stories are so far removed from the majority of those young people who do use drugs' experience of drug taking as to be unlikely to form any useful context for education and prevention purposes. However, there was one story from December concerning drug dealing which could strike more of a chord. A music teacher who 'admitted selling the drug [cocaine] to friends for £40 a gram "to make a few quid' (The Sun, 11/12/04) was jailed for three years for supplying drugs and possessing cocaine. This kind of low-level dealing is far more likely to be recognisable to young people who use drugs, as often drugs will be bought and then shared out between friends. This story is important in that it highlights that even this kind of activity, which many of them would not consider 'drug dealing', is also an arrestable offence that could lead to imprisonment.

BME representations

In an article in black newspaper The Voice Marcia Dixon complains of the prevailing representations of black men in the media. 'These perceptions have a very negative impact. Some young men live out the stereotypes, exemplified in those who pursue the guns, drugs and criminal lifestyle.' (07/12/04).

Looking at the wider media, it is clear to see what Ms Dixon is talking about. An interview with ex-Wu Tan Clan rapper Tony Starks focuses on the artist's drug dealing past: 'I didn't feel bad about dealing drugs because when you're young you don't feel bad, especially back then when crack was new. I was one of the first people in the Stapleton projects to start dealing that stuff.' (Dec 2004)

A ZOO magazine review of album of reggae covers constantly makes references to cannabis-smoking in the piece – simply because it is a black reggae band? From the 'Reefer Madness' title, to the track described as 'a perfect skunked-out antidote'; to the rating of 'Sun 'n' smoke-inspired winners' (10/12/04)

The only picture found in magazines from December of someone actually in the act of using drugs was the image in January's 'loaded' of black rapper Xzibit smoking a joint. The message is clear – black men are big drug users. This is despite the actual statistics on young black people's drug use (see 'Background' above)

Perhaps most blatant of all was the EastEnders drugs storyline (see EastEnders textbox) which was assigned to one of the few black characters in the square. Even the actor playing Paul Trueman was outraged: 'I hate the storyline. It's so unimaginative, full of stereotypes – black people and drugs, blah, blah, blah.' (The Mirror, 21/12/04)

But even in black media, stories focus on criminal element of black people's drug use. The Voice ran four drugs stories during December, three of which portrayed black men as drug dealers. 'Simon Medley...was stabbed...after an altercation with two Jamaican drug dealers' (06/12/04); 'Anti-drugs activist gets two years for laundering friends' proceeds of crime' (13/12/04); 'Search on for dealer's assets' (08/12/04).

Too often when black men feature in the media, it is only to appear as drug dealers, often linked to violence.

In contrast, the Asian media were strangely silent on the topic of drug use. After a month of monitoring the online editions of Asian Times, Eastern Eye and India Weekly, not one article appeared on the topic of alcohol or drugs. In a world in which drug misuse is such a major issue, this silence in itself seemed significant, as if the topics were deliberately ignored for some reason.

Health risks and messages / Harm reduction

Health messages – drugs: Cannabis and mental illness

The main health messages about drugs this Christmas were concerned with mental health. A report which came out at the end of November and which followed a group of 14 to 24 year olds over four years found that the mental health risks of smoking cannabis were most acute for those who started smoking at an early age, those who were heavy smokers and those who had a family history of or predisposition towards mental illness. In general, the key messages from the research were understood by the media and responsibly reported:

'Frequent cannabis use during adolescence and young adulthood raises the risk of psychotic symptoms later in life, research suggests. The risk was much higher in young people who were already genetically vulnerable to developing psychosis.' (BBC News Online, 01/12/04)

'Smoking cannabis up to twice a week almost doubles the risk of psychotic symptoms in later life, a study showed yesterday. Heavier use increases the danger of paranoia and hallucinations, especially in those predisposed to psychosis or with a family history of mental illness.' (The Mirror, 02/12/04).

As cannabis is the illegal drug of choice for 11 to 25 year olds, if illegal drugs are used at all, it was heartening to see the media communicating accurate, evidence-based information that could form the basis of some really effective harm reduction messages. The only other health message regarding drugs from this period concerned the dangers of sharing needles: so much a minority behaviour amongst this age group that it was unlikely to have much resonance for them.

Health messages - alcohol

Mentions of the long-term health risks of heavy alcohol use were, as you might expect, plentiful over Christmas:

'Alcohol is responsible for 70% of cirrhosis death, which have increased nine-fold since the 1970s.' (The Sun, 15/12/04)

'Binge drinkers are twice as likely to suffer a stroke as non-drinkers' (The Mirror, 03/12/04)

'Heavy boozing increases the risk of many cancers.' (The Sun, 30/12/04)

However, it is notoriously difficult to turn health messages about the long-term damage of drug and alcohol misuse into effective education and prevention strategies given young peoples' feeling of immortality and invincibility, and their conviction that precisely because of their youth they need not worry about such risks now.

Nonetheless, there was also no shortage of health messages regarding the immediate impact of misusing alcohol, which could prove much more effective in education and prevention work. The messages mainly fell into two categories: those focussing on vanity; and those focussing on sexual prowess – two areas close to young people's hearts.

Alcohol makes you fat

By far the most frequently communicated health message about alcohol during December was that it makes you put on weight:

'Too much alcohol is fattening' (News of the World, 19/12/04); 'Nadia even gave up alcohol [in order to loose weight]' (Sunday Mirror, 05/12/04); 'Avoid alcohol as it's full of sugar'

(Sunday Mirror, Diet & Slimming, 12/12/04); 'Try to limit your intake of alcohol – it makes you eat more and you'll find yourself picking.' (Sunday Mirror, 26/12/04); 'I'm aware that alcohol is bad when watching your weight so I'm limiting myself to one glass of wine a day at Christmas dos.' (Sunday Mirror, 26/12/04)

And finally, as Dr Hilary Jones put it in the News of the World:

'Perhaps Britain's growing barmy army of young binge boozers would be more likely to heed health warnings if they realised that hitting the bottle makes you fat as well as stupid.' (NOW, 19/12/04)

Alongside this were other messages about the impact of drinking on your looks, with Jerry Hall stating in an interview that 'Alcohol ruins a woman's appearance' (The Mirror, 02/12/04) and The Voice warning that 'Apparently...a spotty cheek means too much alcohol...' (The Voice, 06/12/04)

Alcohol ruins your sex life

If these facts were more likely to be picked up by girls, there were also salutary warnings for the boys:

'I couldn't get it up...We'd been drinking – enough to eradicate any inhibitions...Problem is, I was hammered...Lisa tried really hard but my machinery was in the "off" position.' (Glamour, Dec 04)

'Alcohol has been blamed for falling sperm counts.' (Sunday Mirror, 19/12/04)

Harm reduction - alcohol

The message wasn't to stop drinking though, just to drink sensibly. Myriad advice was given on how to avoid overdoing it, such as:

'To avoid getting more squiddly than you'd intended, don't mix spirits with fizzy drinks as the bubbles speed up alcohol absorption. Fruit juice is a safer bet.' (Sunday Mirror, 05/12/04)

'Always check labels so you know how much alcohol you're drinking, especially bottled lagers and ciders. To keep yourself hydrated and provide extra water to cleanse your system, alternate alcoholic drinks with soft drinks.' (The Mirror 15/12/04)

Health benefits of moderate drinking

In fact, many articles pointed out the positive health impacts of drinking little and often:

'You can actually benefit from a moderate tipple because new research shows it can help you live longer and be 30% more likely than a teetotaler to survive a heart attack. You can also expect to enjoy better health too.' (The Mirror, 01/12/04)

'So the key message is this: a sensible alcohol intake isn't a problem.' (The Sun, 30/12/04)

'Alcohol can protect against heart disease, diabetes, Alzheimer' and strokes...The usual guide is no more than three to four glasses of wine a day for a man or one or two for a woman.' (The Sun, 16/12/04)

Advertising

As might be expected, promotion of alcoholic drinks was high profile over the Christmas period, with tailored adverts appearing throughout the consumer magazines aimed at older young people. The difference between those aimed at men and women was striking.

Alcohol advertising aimed at women focussed on connotations of glamour and sensuality: a clear bottle of vodka stands in the spotlight on a chrome surface, draped in a feather boa (Absolut Vodka, Glamour, Dec 2004); a man licks a woman's chin, her face ecstatic with the caption "Over ice. Over ice cream. Over you." (Dooley's, Heat, 4 Dec 04); an exotic dark woman's face peers predatorily out of the night with the warning "Until your eyes get used to the darkness...LOOKOUT!" (Tia Maria, Now, 22 Dec 04).

The approach in men's magazines was different: in this vodka ad two lads are pictured in a strobe-lit club, hugging each other and grinning from ear-to-ear in a clearly 'up-for-it' pose (VK, ZOO, 17 Dec 04). Perhaps most striking is the regular 'The Rogue's guide to getting away with it' promotion for Base clothing in 'loaded' subtitled 'unmodel behaviour'. 'Drinking: a progress chart' claims "it is a happy fact – and no small coincidence – that most of the greatest of times are fuelled by alcohol. Being teetotal isn't going to make you have more fun. Fact. To this end we strongly advise that you get stuck right into booze early, and develop your style." (loaded, Jan 05). From a baby with the textbox 'milk with a rum nip' through to champagne, eleven drinks and drinking styles are recommended along the way. There is however a tongue-in-cheek note of warning...No 12 shows a homeless man asleep on the floor, a bottle next to him with the tag: "Meths: you've gone too far on your journey. Go back now, or walk with the knights of the road forever."

Throughout the advertising was found a similar tone to that taken in the editorial: in young women's magazines alcohol was enjoyable but to be enjoyed in a more sophisticated manner; whereas the young men's magazines repeatedly promoted full on excessive drinking almost as a badge of being 'a real man'. Although almost always light-hearted in their approach, in time it became quite oppressive.

Perhaps most surprising was the role that drugs played in advertising. Not explicitly of course, but both NME and Loaded carried adverts for super-sized Rizla papers (more often used for rolling joints than oversized hand-made cigarettes); whilst an ad for Base clothing showing a man being searched for drugs by two customs officials being found to have a huge stash of cocaine down his trouser leg...

Advertising is a closely researched art, and advertisers know their market intimately. They know that drugs and alcohol are an integral part of 16-24 year olds' lives in particular, and market their wares accordingly. In their way, these adverts say as much about 16-24 year olds drinking and drug habits as do official statistics.

Young women and alcohol

Boys continue to be more likely than girls to have drunk alcohol in the last week in 2003 (26% compared with 24%). Among those who drank, boys drank an average of 10.5 units in the previous 7 days in 2003 compared with 8.5 units drunk by girls.²⁰

Despite the fact that young men continue to drink more, and more often than young women, there is a continued obsession in the media with women binge drinking – refuelled this December by research from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs

²⁰ Drug use, smoking and drinking among young people in England in 2003, Department of Health, 2004

(ESPAD) that whilst binge drinking amongst 15 and 16 year old boys had fallen 7%, amongst girls of the same age it had increased 2%.

Rather than investigating what had caused this drop in young male binge drinking, the media seemed once again to delight in finding examples of young women drinking excessively and acting irresponsibly, and holding them up for moral disapprobation.

'More and more teenage girls in Britain are turning to drink. New figures show that the number of young women binge drinking in this country has reached epidemic proportions.'(The Mirror, 18/12/04). Bearing in mind that the ESPAD figures do not even represent a third of 15-16 year old girls, this is something of an over-statement.

Whilst clearly binge drinking is not healthy for anyone and can lead to violence and accidents, it does seem the largest share of disapproval is reserved for young women who do so:

'Sentencing an 18-year-old girl involved in a brawl, Judge Andres Hamilton said: "Who would have believed it five years ago? Women fighting in the street, acting like animals – or should I say young men." (The Mirror, 18/12/04)

The question surely would have been 'who would have believed it' if a comparable story involving two young men being sentenced for alcohol-related violence had made it into the pages of a national newspaper...

From the story of the 20 year old girl who needs a liver transplant (Sunday Mirror 19/12/04), to a female flasher being given an ASBO (The Sun 21/12/04), to Charlotte Church's misdemeanours (The Mirror 22/12/04) the newspapers constantly present us with images of young women's drinking being out of control. The general tone of moral outrage reveals an almost Victorian-like fear of women losing control and overstepping tight, socially defined boundaries of what is acceptably 'feminine'. Of course there are very real health and safety risks associated with young men and women heavy drinking (quite apart from the fact that large numbers of them are doing so illegally), but the media's representation of the problem is too often completely gender biased.

In a stunning piece of tabloid hypocrisy, during December The Mirror ran two articles written by women in which their binge drinking is presented as acceptable and comic. The first was a review of a six-day Caribbean holiday (Annie Roth's all-inclusive Caribbean resort diary... The Mirror, 04/12/04) in which the journalist demands immediately upon arrival at Heathrow airport at 11.30 am 'where's the bar?'. Written in the style of 'Bridget Jones Diary' and clearly aimed at young women, Ms Roth reports that once on holiday 'the done thing is to hit the bar – pronto! Though 10 wines later I doubt the wisdom of this move.' After dinner one day you are invited to 'Wash it down at one of the five bars...Purely for professional purposes, of course, they all need investigating'; another meal is 'washed down by copious amounts of alcohol, of course.' Moving on, Ms Roth discovers the new hotel has nine bars 'Hmm, I suspect there is a vv serious risk of another hangover.' Four days into the holiday her drink quota is assessed as 'Wine might as well be plumbed into room.'

Later in the month The Mirror again takes a puzzling stance on women's binge drinking, this time in the Health section of all places. In a piece entitled 'What's the best hangover cure?', six female writers from the paper try out hangover cures 'on your behalf'.

Both light-hearted articles to be sure, but what is the effect of this type of writing next to the pieces described earlier in this section? One of a dangerous blend of normalisation: whether comic or outraged, the articles present a unified image of a world in which it is completely normal for young British women to be consuming vast amounts of alcohol in the name of a good night out.

It is interesting at this point to contrast the tabloid gendering of binge drinking to the way in consumer magazines aimed at young men and women address the topic.

Binge drinking is unsurprisingly an integral part of the subject matter for 'lads' mags' (Nuts, Loaded, Zoo, FHM) with interviewees regularly posing looking drunk and dishevelled clutching cans of lager – proving that they are 'one of the lads' (see also 'Advertising' textbox).

'We're releasing it [the single] because it's the time of year when it's traditional to get drunk and have a dodgy shag' (Goldie Lookin' Chain interviewed in Zoo, Dec 17/12/04)

The contrast to the attitude towards alcohol found in magazines aimed at young women couldn't be greater. In Sugar the editor responds to a reader's letter about binge drinking 'We all want to enjoy ourselves, but we can go too far. It's vital to be aware of the dangers and stay in control'. (Sugar, Feb 2005 [out Dec 2004]) and Bliss warns 'stay in control – watch your booze intake and always tell mates where you are going.' (Bliss, Feb 2005 [out Dec 2004])

ElleGirl ran a feature on one girl's drink problem entitled 'Binge drinking nearly killed me', as well as a piece on surviving the party season which gave advice such as 'At parties, limit the amount of alcohol you drink' followed by recommended drinking levels, and 'Drink water throughout the evening.' (ElleGirl, Dec 2004)

Contrary to the tabloid presentation of binge drinking as a female activity, consumer magazines aimed at young men positively encourage the consumption of excessive amounts of alcohol as 'manly', whereas those aimed at young women are much more responsible in their representation of the health dangers and safety risks associated with drinking too much.

Prevalence (drugs and alcohol)

'British teenagers are among the heaviest drinkers and drug-users in Europe, research has found.' (BBC News Online, 15/12/04)

A report launched in the second week of December from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Drugs found a 2% increase in girls aged 15/16s' binge drinking and a 7% drop in boys' binge drinking in the same age group. Journalists focussed on the 'alarming rise in drinking amongst British girls' (Sunday Mirror, 19/12/04) girls 'having no shame in getting smashed on booze' (The Sun, 15/12/04) when the year on year increase had not been significant, rather than focussing on the much more significant drop in boys' under-age binge drinking and asking what had been successful in prompting this 7% drop and how this could be translated into similar results for girls in the same age group.

Articles also reported that Britain was in the top three European countries in terms of illegal drug use, but no one mentioned the finding that there had been a big drop in Class A drug use amongst this age group since the mid-1990s.

Studies have shown that school-aged pupils consistently over-estimate the number of their peers who are using drugs, and such media reporting is not helpful in rectifying this. It is vital to get the message through to them that most young people do not take drugs at all, and that if you choose not to take drugs you are with the majority. Journalists could play a key role in communicating these facts, but choose not to, preferring the more sensational angles instead.

Soaps: EastEnders

EastEnders is probably the form of media monitored that most cuts across the whole age group. During December it ran a storyline in which Paul Trueman becomes involved in dealing drugs, eventually coming to a very sticky end. Early on in the month we became aware that the police had found out about his activities when he was photographed dealing drugs. They later stop and search him, and having found an amount of cocaine on him, arrest him for suspicion of supplying Class A drugs. Paul is then pressurised by the Drugs Squad (threatened by 5 years in prison if he doesn't comply) into becoming an informer on the dealers higher up the food chain. After a botched surveillance job by the Squad, Paul's last scene in EastEnders is of him being driven away by gangsters, the implication being that they will murder him for having turned informant.

In general the portrayal of the crimes and possible punishments involved in possessing and supplying Class A drugs were realistic. EastEnders storylines are usually minutely researched and the DrugScope press office is called upon to advise on accuracy and realism. What was disappointing to see, as referred to in the BME textbox, was that the programme chose to use a drug dealing story as an exit line for one of their few black characters, reinforcing tired stereotypes about black people and drugs.

Looking at the EastEnders online message boards for the period of this story, it becomes clear how young people both use television as a source of information, and how they use their existing knowledge and experience to critique that same information.

- "I don't get all this business about Andy's drug deal. Why I this deal so important...?"
- "They did say something the other night about 'getting banged up for 15 years' if they got discovered, so I suspect it's for rather a large amount"
(www.bbc.co.uk/eastenders 22/12/04)
- "1/16th of Cocaine?! [amount in script misheard] that ain't much to get done for supplying.
- "it is still enuf [sic] to get hil into trouble...of course unless he cud convinse [sic] the policz [sic] it was for personal use. Otherwise he cud b in tons of trouble. cocaine is a class A drug and t carries the heaviest penalty." (EE message board, 21/12/04)
- "The police are so dumb!! Why do they arrest the small criminals like Paul instead of arresting the major criminals like Andy?" (EE message board, 21/12/04)

Here we can see the interplay of existing knowledge and that gleaned from the programme on a number of themes: penalties for dealing Class A drugs; distinction between being charged with personal possession and supply (and blurred lines on proving either) and the relative threats of high- versus low-level dealing – all of which incidentally are issues currently being debated in the political and criminal justice arenas. It is also interesting to see how storylines from soaps can make their way into the national newspapers and spark general debate:

- "I'm sure you've all heard garry bedle's comments today [in The Mirror, see BME textbox]. In regards to that. I do agree with him to some extent. We don't know why Paul got involved with Andy Hunter in the first place. I mean, I was under the impression that Paul stayed to make good and help lil kids. He was devastated when he was accused of dealing drugs in the Communittee [sic] room, n nobody believed him then that he was innocent, so why prove everyone right, give them reason to doubt him...I just don't get it...I don't quite get what he means about black people. Black and white people are drug dealers."
- "black people are stereotyped [sic] in society as drug dealers it's a fact" (EE message board 21/12/04)

Whilst EastEnders' main remit is entertainment, as these responses from young people highlight, its treatment of social issues is equally a source of information and analysis – watching the soap is more than simply passive viewing – they are actively engaging with it on many levels.

Sex

Young people say they are more likely to have had sex with someone they regret when they have been drinking. A third of 15-19 year old girls and over a quarter of boys regretted having sex that happened when they had been drinking.²¹

Young people aged between 18 to 24 who binge drink (reported 'being drunk either on a weekly basis or at least once a month) reported a range of risk-taking behaviours including walking home alone, getting into cars or going home with strangers, going in unlicensed minicabs and having unprotected sex.²²

Studies suggest that young people combine alcohol and sex, especially prior to their first sexual experience and that there is a link between drinking before sexual activity and unsafe sex.²³

Aside from the purely physical (and sometimes comic!) effect of drink and drugs on sexual performance, impotence, fertility etc, there is also a darker side to the relationship between drink and drugs and sex. Tony Kerridge from Marie Stopes International says 'there is no doubt that unsafe sexual practices leading to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections go up in direct proportion to alcohol intake.' (The Sun, 08/12/04) and Graham Rhodes of the Roofie Foundation (for victims of drug rape) says: 'Christmas is always our busiest time. The number of calls we receive can double over the festive period.' (The Sun, 08/12/04). As the above statistics reveal, for young people there is already a strong link between intoxication and sex, and this is borne out in a number of media articles from the period involving often quite horrific tales of gang rape, infidelity, attempted drug rape and sessions of group sex bitterly regretted the morning after.

'The next thing I knew in my semi-drunken state I was ushered into the coat room by three of my co-workers and a few guys I'd never seen before and they gave me another drink and started to take turns with me whilst the others watched.' (The Voice, 13/12/04)

'I slept with my cousin after a boozy evening because she was looking gorgeous. Now she's telling everyone she's pregnant.' (The Sun, 21/12/04)

'I was feeling flirty, still drunk and things seemed to move really quickly. Within ten minutes we were having sex. Suddenly his mate stripped off and started joining in. Then the third lad pulled his trousers down...By then I was naked and frightened...I ended up having unprotected sex with all three of them.' (Bliss, Feb 2005 [out Dec 2004])

'He offered me a cigarette....Moments later I started to feel funny and my vision became blurry. When I stumbled out Steve was there. He tried to coax me into a cab. Then he grabbed my arm and started pushing me towards the exit.' (Bliss, Feb 2005)

We know from experience that young people don't respond well to simple moralistic reasons why they shouldn't drink or take drugs. What gives these articles their potency is that they

²¹ Ingham 2001, cited in Alcohol and Teenage Pregnancy, Alcohol Concern 2002

²² Drunk and disorderly: a qualitative study of binge drinking among 18-24 year olds, Home Office Research Study 262, 2003

²³ Young people's drinking: factsheet 1, Alcohol Concern, 2004

are all written in first person narrative, without any kind of exterior moralistic interventions. Given the statistics, these articles will undoubtedly resonate with many young people's own experience of becoming involved in sexual acts when intoxicated. No doubt they will recognise the regret also:

'I should have reported it as rape but [in my drunken state] I did not resist.' (The Voice, 13/12/04)

'I'm 22 and have a lovely girlfriend of 23 and regret my drunken one-night stand.' (The Sun, 21/12/04)

'When I woke up the next morning, I was devastated. I felt disgusting and used...Please don't let this happen to you.' (Bliss, Feb 2005)

'I haven't smoked since and it scares me to know it could have been much worse.' (Bliss, Feb 2005)

Even when advice is given in such articles, it tends to be non-judgemental and practical:

'Mixing sex with alcohol or other drugs increases the chances of getting pregnant or STDs because you're less likely to use condoms. So if you've put yourself at risk get yourself checked out.' (Dr Miriam, The Mirror, 10/12/04)

'If you think you've been a victim of drug rape call the Roofie Foundation 080 783 2980. Drink testing kits are available from www.drinksafetech.com.' (MixMag Dec 2004)

and early in December Sun Woman produced an extended guide 'How to survive the festive parties' focussing on ways in which women could stay safe during December, offering advice on sensible drinking, personal safety and drink spiking.

The message in all these articles is clear and effective: becoming intoxicated (whether with alcohol or other drugs) can cloud your judgement, leave you vulnerable and often render you unable to protect yourself.

Soaps: Hollyoaks

The UK's leading 'teen soap', the main Hollyoaks audience demographic is defined by Channel 4 as '16-24 year olds' – although the actual age of viewers ranges from young people in their early teens to their late twenties. During December viewers saw Justin Burton, a fifteen year old pupil at Hollyoaks Comprehensive begin smoking cannabis following some traumatic family revelations. A fairly rapid degeneration into extremely anti-social behaviour followed, culminating in a violent attack on his stepsister. Thoroughly demonized and with the threat of exclusion from school looming, the storyline ended as Justin was sent off to a 'boot-camp' by his despairing family (from which he returned a reformed-character).

As well as demonstrating the extremely negative impact the use of cannabis had on Justin's behaviour and personality, the controversial storyline also covered the reaction of his family (a combination of fear and fury), friends (shock and disgust) and teacher (concern and confusion).

Any harm reduction messages about cannabis use, or discussion of drug use within the context of other personal problems (as occasionally highlighted by Justin's teacher) were obscured by the focus on the view that cannabis use was the first step on a destructive route that would lead inexorably to the use of harder drugs – a view that was voiced repeatedly and emotionally by Justin's family.

The storyline provoked a strong response from viewers, many of whom reacted with derision to the depiction of the impact of cannabis use on behaviour, contrasting it with their own experiences or those of their friends. The character traits exhibited by Justin once he began

smoking cannabis – extreme aggression, violence and a predilection towards petty crime – were rejected as implausible, rendering the storyline ineffective in communicating any serious messages about cannabis-related harm.

“Having been a fan of Hollyoaks for a long time (sad I know) I am really shocked about the way they are dealing with the issue of cannabis. The guy who’s meant to be on weed is being made out to be this total twat, because of the drugs. He’s selling his clothes, being aggressive, stealing, acting like he’s on crack as well.

They have even done the make up in such a way that he looks like he’s on heroin. I’m so pissed off!

It’s taken me years to try and convince my parents that cannabis is a harmless drug and not everyone that becomes affected like that. I knew one guy who did spaz out when he was high, but then I knew a hundred others who didn’t.”

Posted on **thesite.org**.

“..... Most of the topics dealt with on [Hollyoaks] have been done in a realistic and accurate manner, but I find myself increasingly perplexed by the portrayal of the problems Justin is going through.

The account of Justin getting in with the ‘wrong crowd’, turning abusive, his character changing, turning to harder drugs then stealing to fund his habit is worryingly reminiscent of the 1930s American ‘Reefer Madness’ campaign. I think this lays the programme open to charges of hypocrisy, when Hollyoaks makes very light-hearted humour of binge drinking (which statistics show kills far more teenagers in the UK than cannabis ever could), and suggests that it is acceptable for teenagers to drink all day or to drink to forget about your problems.”

Hollyoaks.com mailbag

I’m not sure how you can expect this type of storyline to deter teenagers from the use of cannabis and help young viewers make an informed decision, when it’s become such a comical and unrealistic reflection that it’s in danger of losing all credibility. This immature take on an extremely concerning issue among teenagers has wasted the opportunity to give a more serious account of this topic..... ”

Hollyoaks.com mailbag

Recreational Drug Use

If the mainstream media is to be believed, all drug use and experimentation unavoidably leads onto hard or problematic drug use with its attendant criminality. However, this is not the experience of the majority of young people by any means. The majority of young people who have tried drugs will not go on to develop problematic usage, or turn to crime to fund their drug usage.

To find any kind of acknowledgement of the reality of their own drug use – or indeed any acknowledgement that there is a pleasurable side to drug-taking - and measured information about the risks, they must turn to consumer magazines aimed at their age group.

In the tongue-in-cheek MixMag article entitled the ‘Ten Clubbing Commandments’ (Dec 04), half of the commandments related to drug use and included such advice as: ‘Thou shalt not...have a fire-up on Sunday nights’; ‘Thou shalt never...let your mangled mate drive back from the club’ and ‘Thou shalt never...snort ket instead of coke’. As evidenced in these headings, whilst the article took a humorous and knowing approach to drug use, it actually

imparted practical health and harm reduction messages that were much more likely to resonate with a younger audience than a more po-faced, moralistic piece might do.

In an NME interview with U2, the topic of magic mushrooms arose:

'Adam Clayton: "They used to grow in the fields out near me, so I did like a magic mushroom in my day! However, I overdosed on them in Jamaica once and it was very unpleasant. As long as you don't eat too many of them they're a very interesting little psychedelic."

The Edge: "Personally I think you've got to be a bit careful with all that stuff because all drugs end up taking the piss out of you if you're not careful.'" (25/12/04)

The moderate usage being advocated here is something most drug agencies and organisations would be comfortable with endorsing, whilst the band's honesty about their own drug use gives their comments weight and authority for the younger audience. Research shows that young people do not respond well to the '*Just say no*' type of campaign that was popular in the 1980s. They prefer factual information which is relevant to their drug use given in a non-moralistic way – exactly the kind of approach we see here taken by both music magazines. It seems that across the media as a whole the music press are the only ones who consistently dare to reflect the reality of young people's drug use (yes, young people do experiment with drugs, and no, the vast majority of them are not drug addicts) and respond to that in a way that gives those young people the information that they need.

However, it is a fine line between accurately representing young people's drug use, and actively promoting positive images of drug use. The music media are also guilty at times of promulgating the stereotype that drug misuse and rock music are natural partners that go hand in hand together.

'This tour's crack-free. All that's left is the brown [heroin].' (Gemma Clarke, Babyshambles, NME, 25/12/04)

'So Pete and Carl [of band The Libertines] are the coolest people in the indie scene. What a bloody surprise. Proof that great music and hard drugs make a good combination.' (The Letters Page, NME, 25/12/04)

'Maybe it was the 'shrooms, maybe it was the crack, but somewhere over the last 12 months ridiculously bombastic, retro psychedelia suddenly started to sound very, very good again.' (NME, 25/12/04)

Conclusions

Where have we come since the 'Mixed Messages' report?

Not much has changed since last year's 'Mixed Messages' report carried out at the time of cannabis reclassification.²⁴ The mainstream media are still publishing surveys showing that drink and drug use among young people is worryingly high whilst simultaneously depicting drug and alcohol misuse in a casual way. It is interesting however that eleven months after the reclassification took place, there were only a couple of fleeting references made to the drug's legal position, whilst there were signs (however small!) as found in the reporting of the cannabis study that the debate was inching on from the 'cannabis makes you mad' quagmire.

Now as then, this report focuses on a very wide age group. As Hamand pointed out in last year's report: "a boy of 14 is a very different person from a young woman of 25. Some are

²⁴ Mixed Messages: an analysis of media messages on drugs and alcohol reaching young people, Hamand J, DrugScope 2004

at school, some are in jobs, and they are from many different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. The media reaching a 15-year-old schoolboy fond of pop music are going to be very different from those reaching a 24-year-old woman working in a bank.²⁵

It is worth noting the extent to which television scheduling actually impacts on the drugs and alcohol messages received by young people. As mentioned earlier, the very fact that the then current series of 'I'm a celebrity...Get me out of here!' included an ex-drug user amongst the contestants meant that there was a proliferation of 'my drugs hell' type stories with a very strong emphasis on how much better life is without drugs. A similar report carried out in January could have revealed a very different picture, as self-confessed drug user Bez won the Celebrity Big Brother, was repeatedly portrayed in the media as a 'lovable rogue' character.

This also raises the question of how truly representative a one-month survey can be, when television schedules or one-off stories can so completely skew the results of any attempt to monitor messages found in the media.

Media as informer

Apart from the odd exception, media aimed at younger teens has very little to say about drug and alcohol misuse, perhaps reflecting statistics which show that it is not until mid- to late teens and early twenties that young people really begin experimenting with both. There is an obviously a trick being missed here though. Just because younger teens are not yet in general misusing drugs or alcohol in large numbers, does not mean that they are not interesting in finding out the facts about drugs and alcohol or discussing the issues surrounding their use and misuse, or that to do so is not valid. Information, message and ideas discussed at this age may well influence future decisions whether or not to use drugs and alcohol, and if so how they will use th

Aside from media aimed at them, younger teens still have open access to media aimed at much older audiences, and indeed, as mentioned previously, research suggests that they often prefer these kinds of outlets over those aimed specifically at their age group.

Polarised portrayals of drug users

For mainstream media (tabloids etc) discussions of drug use are too often typified by either celebrities stereotypes: The Survivor – Sophie Anderton; The Loveable Rogue – Bez; The Demon Junkie – Pete Doherty to give but a few current examples. During December the main celebrity portrayal was Sophie Anderton talking about her 'drugs hell'; with the majority of the remainder of the coverage involving problematic drug users and attendant criminality dominating the remainder of the articles.

The first category raises a number of issues. Whilst these stories can impart useful information and often focus on the negative side effects of drug taking, the very fact that drugs are used by so many celebrities endows them with an almost glamorous cachet, and young people are not stupid: there must have been *something* enjoyable about these drugs or celebrities wouldn't take them in such numbers!

The second, quite simply for the majority of young people, is a million miles from their own experience of drug use, which is far more likely to be echoed in the consumer media's representation of recreational drug use. As such, important opportunities for health and harm reduction messages are lost as such information is dismissed as irrelevant, less sensational etc. It would be refreshing to see more recognition in the national tabloids and other such media that the vast majority of young people who use drugs do so recreationally and will not go on to develop problematic drug use, and that the majority of young people do not resort to crime to fund their drug use. Any such concessions towards the realities of young people's drug use are almost universally absent (outside of certain consumer press as

²⁵ ibid

mentioned above). Maybe if portrayals of drug use were more realistic, then there would be more opportunities for discussing the issues the young people really relate to and want to find information about.

Representation of alcohol

The representation of alcohol throws up other conundrums. On the one hand the media is keen to shock with stories of young people's (especially girls') out of control binge drinking, whilst adopting simultaneously a knowing, humorous approach to heavy drinking, hangovers etc. What are young people to make of these messages? That it is okay to binge drink if you are an adult? We know that young people consistently aspire towards acting older than they are and towards perceivably adult activities. Clearly heavy drinking is more dangerous at a younger age, but it is still a damaging activity in adulthood – something which is too rarely acknowledged much of the mainstream media.

BME groups

It was disappointing to note that whilst levels of drug and alcohol misuse in general are lower among young people from black and ethnic minority groups, stereotypical references to black men in particular as drug users and drug dealers still abound in the media. Almost as striking is the complete absence of any discussion of drug or alcohol misuse in the Asian press.

Negative portrayals of young people

"One significant piece of feedback in the NCB consultation was that young people wanted to see more positive news about young people. It is common for news items about young people to be about antisocial behaviour or teenage pregnancy rates." (Young People Now, 24 November 2004 [referring to National Children's Bureau consultation carried out in 2004])

One thing that was almost entirely absent from the December coverage was any kind of celebration of young people who chose not to misuse drugs and alcohol – and why they may choose to do so. As the Sheffield University research referred to in Background states out, positive images of prototypes abstaining from risk behaviours are as powerful as negative images of prototypes indulging in risk behaviours. Media seemed fixated on the negative implications of misusing drugs or alcohol rather than promoting the benefits of not misusing them.

It is clear from this report that young people do regard the media as a source of information, and consciously and subconsciously turn to its various forms to seek out information; but what is equally clear from the vast number of articles reviewed for the report is the variation in quality and reliability of the information they find there. That there is an arena available which can be used for communicating accurate and effective education and prevention messages to young people about drugs and alcohol in a way they will respond to is tantalising, but too often media makers are convinced that to do so is boring and worthy. The challenge is to persuade journalists, editors, programme makers etc that this is an interesting, exciting – and wholly relevant – way in which to use their media.

Appendix A – Media List

Media Name	Media Type	Audience Age / Sex	Circulation*
BBC News Online	Online	-	6.7 million
BBC Radio 1 'Newsbeat'	Radio (twice-daily news show)	Aimed at 16 – 24 yr olds	12.23 million
Bliss	Magazine (monthly)	Aimed at 11-19 year old young women, median age 15	241,664
Cosmo Girl	Magazine (monthly)	Aimed at 11-19 year old young women, median age 15	200,168
Dazed & Confused	Magazine (monthly)	18 – 20 yr olds	110,000
EastEnders	TV Soap (four times a week)	-	12 million
EastEnders website	Website for soap	Average user aged 15 - 24	1 million
Elle Girl	Magazine (monthly)	Aimed at 11-19 year old young women, median age 15	500,000
Glamour	Magazine (monthly)	Median aged 24 and female	604,208
Heat	Magazine (weekly)	Median aged 28 and female	540,556
Hollyoaks	TV Soap (weekdays)	16-24 yr olds	2.32m viewers per episode
Hollyoaks website	Website for soap	-	-
It's Hot	Magazine Monthly	Aimed at 9-13 yr old girls, median age 11	91,495
Loaded	Magazine (monthly)	Median aged 27, male	224,854
The Mirror	Newspaper (daily)	-	1,816,908
MixMag	Magazine (monthly)	Median age 25	349,000 (readership)
New!	Magazine (weekly)	-	347,816
New Nation	Newspaper / Online (BME)	-	25,000
Newsround (URL)	Online	-	N/A
News of the World	Newspaper (weekly)	-	3,706,972
Now	Magazine (weekly)	Median aged 30, female	600,000
NME	Magazine (fortnightly)	48% 15-24 yr old males	70,014
Nuts	Magazine (weekly)	-	290,323
Reveal	Magazine (fortnightly)	-	600,000
Shout	Magazine (weekly)	Aimed at 7–19 yr olds, median 13 yrs, female	68,257
Sky News	Online	-	2 million
Smash Hits	Magazine (fortnightly)	Aimed at 7-19 yr olds, median aged 13	114,383
Sneak	Magazine (weekly)	Median aged 13	104,174

		years	
Star	Magazine (weekly)	-	151,371
Sugar	Magazine (weekly)	Aimed at 11-19 year olds, median aged 15, female	294,972
The Sun	Newspaper (daily)	-	3,378,306
Sunday Mirror	Newspaper (weekly)	-	1,569,781
Top of the Pops		Aimed at 7-19 yr olds, median aged 12 years	216,954
The Voice	Newspaper / Online (BME)	-	34,254
Young Voices	Magazine (monthly)	Aimed at 11-16 yr old young black people	80,000 (readership)
Zoo	Magazine (weekly)	-	200,125

*Actual readership for all magazines is always many times higher as often 3/4 people at least will read one magazine.

Appendix B - Quantitative Report

Themes by subject area, excluding adverts (206 articles with major mentions of drugs and alcohol during Dec 2004 in press monitored). Obviously some articles will contain references to more than one theme.

Theme / message	Number of representations
Celebrity drug / alcohol misuse	50
Health risks / messages	37
Alcohol negative stories	20
Alcohol and young women	17
Drug dealing / smuggling / trafficking	17
Recovered addicts	15
Addiction	13
Prevalence of alcohol use	13
Drug users as criminals	12
Alcohol related violence	11
Glamorous / positive representation	9
Harm reduction – alcohol	8
Recreational drug use	8
BME issues / media	7
Sexual risks when drunk / on drugs	7
Prevalence of drug use	7
Drink spiking / drug rape	7
Alcohol laws	6
Treatment	5
Mental health issues	5
Drug laws	2
Drug testing in schools	2
Ecstasy risks	2
Harm reduction – drugs	1
Prescription drugs	1
Legalisation	1
HIV	1
Reclassification	1
Peer pressure	1
Overdose	1
'Super coke plants'	1

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