DETERMINING THE EFFECTS OF MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF ALCOHOL: GOING BEYOND SHORT TERM INFLUENCE

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(Received 10 March 1995; in revised form 16 November 1995; accepted 20 February 1996)

Abstract — The presentation of alcohol by the mass media has been a rich source of research into the potential influence of media messages upon their audience. This paper reviews the existing literature in this field. It is noted that research has concentrated on attempts to measure the strength of media ‘effects’, employing techniques which have so far produced few fruitful results. The impact of media output on alcohol also has implications for the evaluation of alcohol-related health education campaigns, which utilize newspapers and television as an information source for members of the public. The role of the media in setting the public and policy agenda is examined as a potentially more fertile source in evaluating media influence. A number of policy and research implications are highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

The role of the mass communications media as a potential source of influence on alcohol-related knowledge, attitudes and behaviour has been left relatively unexamined in the United Kingdom. This area has been more extensively covered in the United States of America, Canada and in particular Finland. Those studies which have been conducted have followed the tradition of focusing upon the alcohol-related content of television programmes (Hansen, 1986; Pendleton et al., 1991). The impact that the printed press may wield in determining knowledge and attitudes towards alcohol has been largely neglected. This is surprising, given that 80% of British adults read at least one national newspaper (McNair, 1994) and that newspapers appear to have a greater impact than television in terms of transmitting news information (Gunter, 1987).

The salient themes that emerge from previous studies appear to offer a number of roles which mass communications media perform when they tackle a variety of alcohol-related issues. Firstly, they may, along with other primary sources of socialization, shape attitudes and beliefs relating to alcohol. Secondly, the media may act as agents of public education regarding alcohol consumption and its associated consequences. Thirdly, it has been proposed that the mass media have a role to play in setting both the public agenda and legislative priorities concerning specific alcohol-related topics. What has not been considered extensively is the role newspaper journalism might have in shaping and forming beliefs about alcohol.

THE POTENTIAL EFFECTS OF MASS MEDIA ALCOHOL-RELATED OUTPUT

From the evolution of mass communication, an ongoing debate has ensued which has called into question the nature and extent of the influence that a variety of communication methods, for example film, newspapers or video, have upon their respective audiences. This discussion excites attention throughout society: from the public, through to media professionals and on to policy makers. It is important to explore the issue from several angles in an attempt to consider: (1) the relationship between the output of the mass media and individuals, or the society in which they are located, in an attempt to determine the viability of mass media influence; (2) if the mass media do
mould the opinions of their audience and what is the strength of this influence?; (3) what can this debate tell us about the representation of alcohol by the mass media?

Output of mass media

Conventional wisdom suggests that the output of the mass media are representations and signs; they present us with a manufactured reality, rather than real life itself. It is the interaction between this substitute reality and society which is at question here. The first major concerns about the influence of mass communication emerged from two sources; the cinematic form and wartime propaganda (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989). Out of these concerns emerged the first theory relating to mass communications, the ‘hypodermic syringe’ model (Glover, 1985). This postulated that media messages had a direct and powerful influence on their audience, so in a very simplistic sense any stimulus from the mass media would encourage a uniform response from their audience. For instance, a show of violence appearing on film may lead to violent behaviour amongst the viewers, although possibly only upon ‘vulnerable’ sections of the audience. This theory that views audiences as easily influenced by media uses an elementary model of social learning. It is Glover’s belief that this perspective on mass communications is current in the minds of the public, politicians and moral entrepreneurs. Modern lay accounts of the impact on individuals, especially on children, of television and cinema especially, echo this model. Recent legislative attempts in Britain to control the content of, and access to materials, particularly video, which are likely to ‘corrupt’ those exposed to them, have conceptualized the impact of the media in a similar fashion to the ‘hypodermic syringe’ model.

DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) described how, as research into mass communications developed, it became apparent that the ‘hypodermic syringe’ paradigm was inconsistent with available evidence. For instance, the 1920 Payne Foundation studies at first found their theories to hold true, but only for a small section of the audience, mainly children. They also point out that further developments within the fields of psychology and sociology have rendered this model redundant.

Influence of mass media

Modern theories on the influence of the mass media revolve around their effect upon the socialization process of individuals. Socialization is the process whereby people learn how to act and interact successfully on a daily basis with others in their environment. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) have stated that the mass media in modern society inform people on all aspects of life and that their role in the socialization process is far from being properly understood. The vast majority of media output is concerned with representations of everyday life and as such this output is uniquely suited to studies grounded in Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). In fact, the majority of studies relating to the role of the media in the presentation of alcohol utilize the modelling concept of this theory (Hansen, 1986).

The increasing relationship between the nature of modern society and the developing forms of electronic mass communications is becoming apparent through the commonality of experience offered to audiences the world over through a globalized media network. Beck (1992, p. 133) described this experience as people from diverse cultures who meet ‘around the world at the village green of television and consume the news’. The impact of the global mass media on everyday life has been explored further by Giddens (1991), whereby an individual’s reality in connection with events may have been organized in relation to exposure to a similar occurrence through mediated experience. Giddens (1991) argued that modern mass communication does not merely reflect reality, but in some way helps to shape it. This has specific implications in terms of the presentation of alcohol. Modern mass communication systems allow the transfer of a local alcohol-related story, or alcoholic drink, from one culture to another, so in effect the media have the potential to shape global perceptions of alcohol and world-wide consumption patterns.

Representation of alcohol by mass media

The investigation of the relationship between mass media and alcohol-related attitudes and behaviour in society at large has operated on different but interconnected areas. The main areas of research so far have included an examination of
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the alcohol-related content of the media, mainly television. Attempts have also been made to determine the ‘effects’ of this content amongst certain audiences.

Breed and DeFoe (1979) have been involved in several analyses of mass media alcohol-related content, particularly advertisements in magazines. They conducted a comprehensive content analysis of alcohol advertisements which appeared in 156 issues of 13 national magazines in 1976. These authors noted that the most common themes were the association of alcohol with desired lifestyles, social approval, exotic locations and sex. Strickland et al. (1982) have argued that many content analyses have foundered due to a lack of methodological thoroughness and because of analytical shortcomings. Their study of 3131 alcohol advertisements appearing in 494 issues of 42 separate magazines during 1978 indicated that almost half of all advertisements centred around the quality and the tradition of the product. This finding contrasted with other studies, which showed desired lifestyles and sex to be prominent.

Attempts have been made to analyse mass media content paying close attention to the values imparted. This line of research has been pursued in relation to the print media by Lemmens and Vaeth (1993) whose study of the coverage of alcohol-related news stories in US newspapers and magazines over a 6 year period revealed that on the whole alcohol was generally portrayed in a ‘neutral’ fashion. Even so, they highlighted the findings of Ford (1992), who detailed a decline in negative reporting of alcohol-related issues.

An earlier investigation by Linsky (1970) examined the portrayal of alcohol and alcohol-related problems in popular magazines from 1900 to 1966. The breadth of his study allowed him to examine the radical changes in opinion relating to the causation of ‘alcoholism’. He found that the portrayal of alcoholism evolved from notions of individual blame early in the twentieth century to psychological or sociological causative factors. Linsky (1970) contends that ‘the mass media have undoubtedly played a part in changing public opinion on alcoholism’ (p. 580).

Perhaps a more important factor than either positive or negative portrayals is media presentation of alcohol as an everyday part of life. Cafiso et al. (1982) argued that ‘alcohol is presented in a non troublesome context and as an integral part of normative behaviour’ (p. 1241). The content analysis by Cafiso et al. (1982) of television portrayals of alcohol, in the USA, showed that even though alcohol advertising is a small proportion of advertisements as a whole, alcohol was still the most prominent drink appearing on prime time television programmes, especially dramas. They proposed that research should attempt to go beyond mere content analysis and focus upon long-term impact as opposed to short-term effects.

This echoes Gerbener et al. (1981), who described a study that examined televised messages about health. This indicated that drinking, including heavy drinking, was portrayed as being unproblematic. On the basis of further work, Gerbener et al. (1986) proposed that research should focus on the cumulative effects of exposure to the mass media, and employ a ‘cultivation’ approach to examine the effects of long-term exposure. Breed and DeFoe (1979) have also argued that: ‘At the socio-cultural level, it seems likely that alcohol adverts tend to strengthen a normative climate that legitimizes drinking and the role of the drinker, while weakening the position of the non drinker.’ (p. 513).

Wallack et al. (1990) have noted a recent decline in the frequency of alcohol portrayals on fictional television programmes in the USA, although they argued that the way in which it is portrayed has remained static. They recognize that television may not alter, either positively or negatively, individuals’ drinking behaviour but they concluded that: ‘However, the sheer frequency of alcohol on television and the manner in which drinking is portrayed raise serious questions as to the role that television may play in the development or reinforcement of beliefs and behaviours regarding alcohol and its appropriate use.’ (p. 436).

An examination of the alcohol-related content (advertisements, editorial and pictorial) occurring in youth-oriented style magazines produced interesting results. Here, Amos (1992) postulated that many of the causal factors which lead to heavy drinking amongst young people were mirrored in these magazines. She contrasted the glamorous portrayal of alcohol in advertisements and magazine pictorials against the dearth of editorial coverage focusing on health problems relating to alcohol. She also noted that alcohol advertise-
ments were particularly concentrated in magazines aimed at young people.

The majority of research which has examined television's portrayal of alcohol has been limited to content analysis and short term measurements of a narrow conceptualization of 'effects'. The underlying assumptions about human attitude formation and its approach to the influence of the media closely resemble the 'hypodermic syringe' paradigm in mass communications research and as such are oversimplified versions of reality. These studies attempt to apply an empirical scientific approach, utilizing laboratory style methodologies, in which the audience is subjected to a uniform stimulus and attempts are then made to estimate whether the audience has been affected in any way.

This approach has led to criticism of solely quantitative studies and has led several commentators, notably Hansen (1986) and Partanen and Montonen (1988), to propose that research should collect more qualitative data, particularly on audience response to the portrayal of alcohol on television. McDonald (1983), in his study of television 'soap operas', utilized qualitative techniques to uncover the extent of drug use including alcohol consumption, the social context of its use, character motivation and the consequences of use. When interviews were conducted with 165 respondents, who were regular soap opera viewers, the audience were able to recall a high level of alcohol-related scenes. McDonald (1983) was more concerned with asking the audience what they viewed, rather than what researcher perceives the effects on the audience to be.

**Conclusions concerning mass media influence**

It would therefore seem necessary, that, in order to enhance media and alcohol studies, a more naturalistic and qualitative approach needs to be employed. Partanen and Montonen (1988) suggested the need to examine 'the relationship between on the one hand, media representations of alcohol and; on the other, the actual drinking culture and climate of opinion on alcohol issues in the social environment' (p. 56).

To uncover the strength of 'media effects' on alcohol-related knowledge and behaviour, it is insufficient solely to examine media-produced alcohol-related content in isolation. Such content has to be viewed as part of the social milieu, just as the consumption of alcohol is a part of it. Only then will it be possible to make an attempt to untangle the role the media might have to play in alcohol consumption against the aggregate of social processes.

**MASS COMMUNICATIONS AS A VEHICLE FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION**

With increasing regularity, the mass media have been utilized as a primary source for providing the population at large with health-related messages. These programmes have at their core the assumption that fundamental behaviour change is possible if individuals are given specific information relating to improving their health and lifestyle. Employing the mass media allows these messages to be potentially available to a large audience.

Health education, in relation to alcohol consumption, has as its primary target audience young people (Partanen and Montonen, 1988; May, 1993). Many educational initiatives, especially mass media campaigns, have attempted to provide the general public with information regarding the effects of alcohol and have often aimed to promote 'sensible’ drinking. These campaigns are mediated through newspapers, television and magazines (Wallack, 1980). Recently, there has been a shift away from information-based programmes to more skills-based initiatives (May, 1993). The latter are more direct and by-pass mass media techniques.

Health education derives its method from a variety of psychological theories. Plant and Plant (1992) have discussed several of these theories, which include the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) and the Health Belief Model (Janz and Becker, 1984). The Theory of Reasoned Action suggests that individuals rationally balance the merits or disadvantages of a particular behaviour before engaging in it. The Health Belief Model works on the assumption that individuals will tailor their behaviour in order to gain approval and comply to the wishes of 'significant others'. On the basis of these models, more and more elaborate interventions have been developed, which aim to be effective in preventing or curbing alcohol problems (May, 1991). The main variables which health education initiatives attempt to alter are: knowledge, attitudes and
behaviour. This approach has many similarities to the ‘hypodermic syringe’ paradigm of communications research and has a number of methodological problems, as noted earlier.

The design, implementation, and evaluation of education campaigns which concern themselves with the consumption of alcohol, as well as other lifestyle behaviours, are widely renowned as particularly difficult activities. McGuire (1972) has called into doubt the causal chain (increased knowledge changes attitudes which in turn invokes positive changes in lifestyle patterns) at the core of most health education programmes. He postulated that behaviour change may pre-empt attitude change, or that there may even be no connection between these two variables.

Educational initiatives even fall down within their own framework of reference. As Bagnall (1991) has noted, many campaigns have failed to measure the levels of knowledge pre-intervention. As a corollary to this, campaigns have generally also failed to determine what types of information individuals wish to receive about alcohol. Partanen and Montonen (1988) cited a review by Hewitt and Blane (1984), in which the latter authors examined evaluations of alcohol education campaigns which have shown that they did not appear to be particularly successful at imparting knowledge to the general public. Some evaluations appeared to be unable to measure any change in knowledge amongst the target audience. One of the major problems with assessments of the effect of media educational campaigns again appears to be that their impact is difficult to measure, especially in the short-term (Edwards et al., 1994). Available evidence weighs strongly on the side of scepticism regarding behaviour change through media interventions. If Wallack’s (1980) caveat is considered, educational campaigns could be regarded as counterproductive since ‘these efforts may have unintended negative consequences or side effects if they are used instead of rather than in addition to other alternative strategies’ (p. 50).

Despite the widespread criticisms of media educational campaigns, at the same time those related to drinking and driving have been hailed as reasonably successful in reducing deaths caused by intoxicated drivers (Hewitt and Blane, 1984). In the UK, deaths caused by driving under the influence of alcohol fell by 50% amongst 16–19-year-olds (Department of Transport, 1990). Although undoubtedly welcome, this change cannot solely be credited to mass media campaigns (Vingilis and Coultes, 1988). The latter argue that other forces have had an impact which may have been more significant than media communications initiatives, such as legislation along with other socio-cultural factors, for instance the gradual evolution of the drunken driver as a modern folk devil.

It would thus appear that to rely on educational initiatives alone to counter alcohol-related problems is highly problematical. As Plant and Plant (1992) in their analysis of education campaigns conclude, ‘Available evidence supports the simple conclusion that providing young people or others, with information on alcohol, drugs or other health-related issues does not necessarily (or even probably) lead to behaviour change’ (p. 125).

THE ROLE OF AGENDA-SETTING

Since no direct effects could be found from the literature in the previous two sections, it is plausible to conclude that media influences are difficult to untangle, especially when they are examined in social isolation. It is therefore probable that, if the media have an influence, it is likely to be more indirect or subtle than some previous studies suggest.

Social Learning Theory has been dominant in assessing alcohol in relation to television. Studies of other media have been concerned about how they portray ideas about alcohol-related behaviour, or analysing the media as a debating arena for alcohol control policies (Partanen and Montonen, 1988). This research approach concerns itself with the media’s role in setting the agenda on specific policy issues in so far as they are able to prioritize certain issues and as such could have a bearing on public opinion and policy making (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Pritchard and Berkowitz, 1993). The news media act as a vessel of information which is exchanged between the political elite and the public. Beck (1992) has described this relationship as an area where the public have the potential to monitor the activity of political decision making. The potential influence of agenda setting may be extensive. As Pritchard and Berkowitz (1993) pointed out, newspapers and television act as a substitute for a direct link
between the government and public opinion. Their study in particular notes that the media have a strong influence on what they term the 'symbolic agenda' of policy makers.

The relationship between public opinion, media content, and policy initiatives is a complex one and the potential for influence may operate between all three elements and in a variety of directions. Edwards et al. (1994) examined two case studies in which public concern gained media attention which in turn facilitated changes in the climate around alcohol-related issues and policies. A high profile campaign around alcohol advertising in Switzerland, which although did not lead to legislative changes, did raise recognition of the role alcohol advertising may have on alcohol-related problems. In California, a pressure-group-influenced campaign concerning excise duty on alcohol was promoted by the mass media. This was generally recognized to have led to the initiation of tax changes by the legislature. Moskowitz (1989) has suggested that alcohol-related public information campaigns may aid support for the implementation of prevention-oriented policies.

Agenda-setting research has provided evidence, in certain circumstances, that the media have an influence in shaping the debate in specific policy-related instances and in determining the outlook of political elites. Unfortunately the benefits to be gained from this theoretical approach have yet to be rigorously applied to the alcohol field.

CONCLUSIONS AND GENERAL DISCUSSION

As this century draws to a close, it is becoming more apparent that the media, in their many forms, have become woven into the fabric of daily life, especially in advanced industrial countries. The impact on society brought about by modern mass communications media has revolutionized the way people live to such an extent that it would be virtually impossible to integrate and participate fully without taking recourse to the myriad of information and messages that individuals receive from the media.

Emerging out of this backdrop is the proposition that the output of mass communications has some, although as yet elusive, degree of influence upon individuals, as members of demographic subgroups, or upon society as a whole. Given the pervasive nature of the media in society, it would seem untenable to hold the position that they have no effect upon their audience. It is the extent and nature of this supposed influence which is at question.

Available evidence on the effects of alcohol-related images and messages from the mass media appears to be unclear. It may very well be argued that such findings are an artefact of the methodological instruments employed. One major flaw of past research could be that these studies have approached the problem of influence from a narrow pre-defined perspective. The influence of the media has been examined in isolation without taking into consideration other variables which contribute to changes in levels of alcohol consumption/alcohol-related problems. A potential research strategy which could circumvent these problems would be to analyse available data on alcohol-related media content alongside levels of consumption and data on other relative social processes. The latter include the relationship between the mass communications media and social change. Such an approach might provide a foundation for extrapolating the strength of effects of mass media output.

The role of mass communications in providing their audience with information, news and ideas on a whole variety of topics is amplified when the media act as sole providers of knowledge on subjects beyond the everyday experience of their audiences. Furthermore, for the mass media to exert an influence on public opinion, they have to be perceived as a credible source of information. Wanta and Hu (1994) place credibility as the first factor in determining an audience’s susceptibility to media effects.

Central to the concept of credibility is whether the mass media are seen to be unbiased in their presentation of issues. There are several aspects worth exploring that could call into question the neutrality of mass media when reporting alcohol-related issues. These are the following: (1) acceptance of alcohol advertising, which is a source of considerable income for newspapers and television, may have a profound influence on the portrayal of alcohol-related stories; (2) the possibility that media conglomerates have a financial stake in companies operating in the beverage
alcohol industry or vice versa; (3) the drinking patterns of journalists. As Plant (1986) has noted, British journalists had a liver cirrhosis mortality ratio 2.6 times that of the average occupational group. Due to the nature of journalists’ work, drink plays an important role. It would be surprising if the attitudes and behaviour of journalists did not have a bearing on how they present alcohol-related issues.

Taking these points into consideration, it would seem possible that the mass media might play an important role in portraying alcohol in a biased fashion. Although alcohol advertisements in the UK are bound by a voluntary code of practice, other commonplace types of alcohol representation have been largely unchallenged. If alcohol-related images in the mass media contribute to a climate in which alcohol use is normalized, this in turn may have an effect on patterns of consumption.

In conclusion, the mass media appear to be at their most effective when they are attuned to prevailing social attitudes. Just as drinking is, for the majority of adults in most industrialized countries, an accepted behaviour, this is in turn reflected by the media. Therefore it would appear to be a highly problematic exercise to introduce effective ‘moderation’ messages aimed at the general public using the mass media alone as its primary resource. One of the most important lessons to be learnt from past research appears to be that it is not enough to examine mass media effects on alcohol consumption in isolation. The media should be viewed as a potentially powerful influence in societal perception of alcohol-related issues. Even so, their role should not be considered in isolation, but needs to be viewed in the light of other social processes. It is crucial to appreciate that the radical changes which have taken place within media systems mean that the networks of global influence are becoming more important.

Acknowledgements — This review was funded by the Alcohol Education and Research Council, with additional support from the Portman Group. The author wishes to thank Professor Martin Plant, Alcohol and Health Research Group, University of Edinburgh; Dr Carl May, Department of General Practice, University of Manchester; Dr Bruce Ritson, Alcohol Problems Clinic, Royal Edinburgh Hospital; and Mr Anders Hansen, Centre for Mass Communications Research, University of Leicester for advice and comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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