

MEDIA ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

TRENDS, ROLE AND IMPACT

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Trends, Role and Impact

Overview of the Issue:

Daily media coverage of violence and disruptive behaviour associated with the consumption of alcohol and drugs in and around licensed premises in the Melbourne CBD and a number of other localities, seem to have increased. Police and parliamentarians as well as a range of commentators appear to share the view that alcohol and drug related incidents are both more numerous and more violent.

Very little, of the more or less daily media coverage (TV, radio, newspapers), have included any in depth analysis of the underlying issues associated with this behaviour, and when and if, these have been addressed they are generally not the subject of the headlines, nor the focus of the leading media coverage of the day.

The position of the various Government and non-Government organisations/agencies etc. can best be described as acknowledging alcohol as an acceptable product, and a normal part of Australian life and culture. The need that they recognise and understand which is reflected in various Government documents (a number of which are included in this paper) is that efforts need to be focussed on how to reduce the harm associated with the consumption of alcohol and both licit and illicit drugs.

There is a volume of media releases, discussion papers, journal articles, and other in-depth types of documentation related to the negative and unacceptable aspects of alcohol and drug issues and the problems associated with the behaviours they spawn. These include a number of statements, which acknowledge the seriousness of the problems relating to alcohol and drug misuse.

Many of these can be accessed quite easily, but for a variety of reasons these do not appear to be widely read by everyday people. Unfortunately, very few if any of these appear to have reached ordinary citizens as they are not the subject of newspaper headlines or the leading stories on the various nightly news broadcasts.

Examples of these include:

- *“Alcohol is the most dangerous drug in our community, with ten times the impact of all illicit drugs combined”*. (Alcohol Education & Rehabilitation Foundation Ltd. News Release 27 July 2006)
- *“The facts are that patterns of alcohol use are acquired in adolescence and two out of three children in the teen years drink illegally, many of them dangerously. Binge drinking is associated with violence and suicide and it’s estimated that 50 children per year die as a consequence of alcohol misuse”*. (Daryl Smeaton, Chief Executive Officer of AER).
- *“Alcohol boosts cancer risk by 75pc: Experts”*. (www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/05/08.)
- *“----Alcohol and other drug treatment services in Australia, shows that alcohol still tops the list when it comes to the drugs for which people seek treatment”*. (Media Release: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 26 July 2007).
- *“The supposed health benefits of alcohol are under fire and should not be factored into public health policy”*. (Professor Robin Room, Inaugural Professor of Social Alcohol Research, University of Melbourne. 9 May 2006).
- *“----It has been estimated that 40% of violent crime; 78% of assaults and 88% of criminal damage cases are committed while the offender is under the influence of alcohol”*. (Relationship Between Alcohol and Crime. Crime Reduction Tool Kits, UK Home Office).

What is considered “newsworthy” is a decision made by editors and producers, and with minor exceptions these statements are not viewed or considered as being either sensational or topical enough to be made the focus of front page coverage or the leading stories of the nightly news

Australian Press Council (APC) Guidelines:

The APC has developed guidelines for the reporting of alcohol and drug related issues. However, due to the diversity of the media there are significant differences as to why or whether Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) issues are reported.

Guidelines include (inter alia):

- Responsibly report public debate about drug use and addiction;
- The harmful effects of any particular drug should not be exaggerated or minimised;
- Bear in mind the arguments of those who point out that tobacco and alcohol use and addiction are another major aspect of the drug story.

The view that the APC's guidelines are presently not particularly influential can be gauged by the quote, *"There is little recognition within the media or Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) sector of the Australian Press Council's (APC) guidelines. Promotion and extension of the guidelines to other media genres, supported by continuing personal contacts with media professionals and media industry groups, provides an opportunity to build on an already existing platform to improve reporting of AOD issues"*. (Summary Report of the Australian National Council on Drug's Media Project.)

It has been observed that from time to time in depth discussions relating to alcohol and drug issues have taken place on radio talk show between guests/hosts as well as by TV Current Affairs reporters. What is not clear is whether the target audiences of these programs are those that are able to assimilate the information being put forward, and what impact, if any, these have had or are having, on the public; the behaviour of those who misuse alcohol and drugs; and or on those responsible for policy development and implementation.

Current Trends:

It is difficult to accurately gauge trends in media coverage as there is no accurate mechanism by which this can be tracked. Anecdotally, it has been observed that there has been ever increasing media attention mostly related to the phenomenon of 'binge drinking' and the behaviours associated with this, which appear to have escalated significantly over the past 12 to 18 months.

Police statistics confirm that the number of drink/drug related incidents have, and continue, to increase, particularly in the Melbourne CBD and in several other areas.

Underlying assumptions:

Recent attempts by Government in general and police in particular, appear to have been directed at addressing this behaviour. Numerous initiatives, regulations, and pronouncements, have for the most part been directed at addressing the problem by the tightening of existing laws and regulations, increasing the number of police in targeted areas, putting pressure on establishments that serve alcohol and venues where disruptive and illegal behaviour are prevalent. All of these undoubtedly are/were introduced with the intention of reducing the undesirable behaviour associated with the over consumption of alcohol and the use of illegal drugs. What is not clear is what, if any, impact these have had on the attitudes of those who are the subject of this behaviour. In fact it has been observed that in some cases there has been

a pronounced negative reaction to some of the attempts introduced. (lock out of premises after 2 AM for instance)

For the most part these are all focused on attempts to address the symptoms (the behaviour etc) and there is very little evidence, if any, of attempts to identify and remediate the underlying causes that give rise to this behaviour.

When attempts to identify and discuss some of the underlying issues that might be associated with binge drinking and associated behaviours, there appears to be a lack of interest at many levels.

An example of the lack of interest and concern by ordinary people can be demonstrated by a media release issued by the City of Monash dated 23 June 2008, which invited parents and teenagers to attend/participate in forums to discuss the *“impact of youth and alcohol and drug misuse”*.

This media release was followed up by a further media release dated 21 July 2008 informing readers that the information sessions had been cancelled, *“because there were not enough people interested in attending the sessions”*.

The underlying assumption(s) appears to be that the undesirable, disruptive and violent behaviour can be remediated by addressing the symptoms. Whether this is due to the assumption that this is the most desirable strategy and should therefore be made the focus of attempts to solve the problems, or an acceptance of the view that it is not possible to identify and modify the underlying causes is not clear.

Scope/Costs etc:

A report prepared by the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education on Training, Young Cannabis Users' Attitudes and Beliefs About Cannabis and School Drug Education (2001) includes under the sub-section 'Other Drug Use', research findings that, *“Alcohol consumption was almost universal in this group: 97% had consumed alcohol in the last year (94.6% of males and 100% of females) 82.8% in the last month and 67% in the last week. **Binge drinking was the norm----**”*. (emphasis added) While this research was undertaken in NSW it can be concluded that similar results would be found in Victoria and other States. Other statements relating to the scope and costs include:

- *“The social cost of alcohol in Australia in 1998/99 was estimated at \$7.5 billion”*. (Counting the cost: Estimates of the social cost of drug abuse in Australia in 1998/99. Collins D., and Lapsley, H. Commonwealth of Australia, 2002.) The costs include health

and medical services; road accidents; lost productivity in the work place; and alcohol related crime. They do not include, the hard to quantify, but nevertheless real costs associated with family dysfunction which often affects not only the children, and, at times the next generation as well.

- *“Alcohol and tobacco remain the biggest source of drug related death and health problems”*. (Australian National Council on Drugs-Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Services. 2007)
- *“Alcohol abuse in Australia is a serious problem whose costs in 2004/05 have been estimated to be over \$15 billion”*. (Executive Summary—The avoidable costs of alcohol abuse in Australia and the potential benefits of effective policies to reduce the social costs of alcohol.)

Suggested initiatives and strategies to address the problem have included, but are not limited to:

- Lock outs:
 - The attempt to control undesirable and disruptive behaviour by closing venues early (earlier than previous) on the assumption that less alcohol will be consumed, that there will be less disruptive/violent behaviour and that drinkers will leave the areas and return home.
- More police:
 - This is based on the premise that additional (visible) police will modify undesirable and disruptive/violent behaviour.
- Stricter enforcement of existing laws/regulations:
 - It is contended that if existing laws/regulations etc. are enforced more strictly that this will result in a reduction in disruptive/violent behaviour as well as more charges and fines for those who disregard the law.
- Harsher immediate penalties:
 - Penalties that are levied ‘on the spot’ as opposed to having charges laid and then adjudicated later will result in, it is argued, reinforcing appropriate behaviour and deterring repeat behaviour.
- Plastic cups (versus glass):
 - This is designed to reduce physical injuries. It is argued that it is very difficult to injure a person using plastic cups as opposed to glass/bottles when scuffles and fights break out.

- Reduce the alcohol content of alcoholic drinks.
 - This, it is argued, will reduce drunkenness and the problems associated with it.
- Increase the price of alcoholic drinks.
 - It is the view that this will reduce the amount of alcohol consumed.
- Ban or restrict the advertising of alcoholic products.
 - Intended to reduce consumption.

Government (and non Government) agencies/organisations have similarly made recommendations as to how the ‘problem’ should be addressed; these include:

- Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation’s (AER) charter: States inter alia, *“to enhance the capacity of the alcohol and other drugs sector to address alcohol and other licit substance misuse and to promote responsible consumption of alcohol”*. This is based on their premise that education and rehabilitation will reduce the consumption of alcohol.
- Commonwealth Government: A \$53 million national strategy to confront what the Prime Minister called *“the culture of binge drinking”*. The proposed program includes three main parts:
 1. \$14.4 million to help sports clubs to develop codes of conduct among their members;
 2. \$19.1 million for early intervention and diversion programs for people under 18 years of age; and
 3. \$20 million over two years on a ‘shock-tactics’ advertising campaign along the lines of anti-smoking, road safety and HIV-AIDS campaigns.
- The Australian Drug Foundation (ADF); *“The ADF’s range of activities represents a focussed and integrated approach to drug use problems. Each of the four operational directorates of the ADF have distinct foci, but must be seen as, and operate as part of, a broader, integrated strategic approach”*. The strategic goals of the ADF include; *“— mobilise these communities so that the harmful cultures related to legal and illegal drug use are changed”*. (it should be noted that the ADF’s Newsletter is titled BALANCE, which appears to infer that a ‘balance’ relating to alcohol and drug use can be achieved)
- National Drug Strategy; Alcohol in Australia: Issues and Strategies. (endorsed by the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy) (Plan for action 2001-2003/4)
Chapter One—Setting the Context includes the following sub-headings:
 - Health benefits of moderate alcohol consumption.
 - The economic significance of alcohol.
 - Alcohol policy in Australia—a focus on harm reduction.

Chapter Two---A National Strategy, includes the following sub-headings;

- Prevention of alcohol-related harm in young people.
- Promoting safer drinking environments.

All of the above to a significant (and varying) degree have as their underlying premise that the consumption of alcohol is a normal (some would argue necessary) feature of Australian culture. Following on from this premise, it is argued that what is required are initiatives, strategies and if necessary legislation aimed at addressing not the consumption of alcohol and drugs but educating, controlling, limiting and regulating this so that the undesirable behaviours associated with it are minimised (harm minimisation) and ideally eliminated. The question that must be asked is---is this achievable? And if so what are the strategies required to do this?

(There are a number of others that could be included here, but most of these are similar to those listed above or variations of these)

It should be noted that main mechanism for promulgating the above strategies is by way of advertising campaigns and to a lesser degree the issuing of media releases. The effectiveness of these mean of disseminating information has been questioned. Are they the most appropriate and effective vehicles to achieve this?

“Advertising is the least effective when it sets out to change our minds. It is the most effective when it preaches to the converted”. (Softening the Hard Sell. The Age 10 January 2004.)

Media releases, while important and a good way of disseminating information, based on where they appear and how they are disseminated/promoted are not likely to be read by a large cross-section of the public; with rare exception are not covered in newspaper front page headlines; or the subject of the lead story in the nightly news. Consequently they are not likely to make an impact on those who are the subject of their content.

The underlying assumption based on these initiatives, regulations and pronouncements appears to be that these can and will reduce undesirable behaviour and the culture and values that gives rise to it. This is a simplistic and very short sighted view, as behaviour is a complex phenomenon and consequently simple solutions will not, and cannot, solve these issues. It also ignores the issue of the existing ‘culture’ and its impact on society.

This is not to condemn the attempts that have and are being made, rather to indicate that unless and until, there is an appreciation and understanding of the ‘behaviour’, and the culture that it thrives in, and the values that they are based on, as well as the underlying issues that contribute to it; changes will at best be superficial and ‘real’ progress in changing the underlying culture will be very unlikely.

Media Bias:

Much has been written as to whether or not the media is biased, and directly or indirectly influenced by the commercial interests/relationships that they rely on for advertising revenue. It is not within the scope of this paper to investigate this issue in depth. Suffice it to note that in reviewing a small sample (17 October 2006 to 20 October 2006 selected at random) of “The Age Blogs—Your Say”, it is noted that there are numerous correspondents who are of the view that commercial pressures are responsible for not only ‘what’ is covered, but more importantly ‘how’ issues are covered. It should be noted that alcohol advertising is a significant contributor to the revenues earned by newspapers in particular and the media in general.

The ABC (Public Report on Audience Comments and Complaints-October-December 2006) does not include any instances of complaints relating to, ‘Factual inaccuracy; Bias and balance; or Unfair treatment’, relating to alcohol or drugs, and how these were reported/represented.

On the surface this can be interpreted as positive and due to a balanced approach taken by the ABC. On the other hand, it may reflect the position that consumers of ABC news and programming have accepted biased views as a ‘normal’.

The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) in their report, *The Effect of Media Publicity on the Incidence and Characteristics of Drug Abuse in Melbourne*; stated, inter alia, “*The study found that electronic and print media frequently refer to drugs in their stories and magazine material and drama programs, but alcohol and tobacco are rarely referred to as ‘drugs’ and their use is generally condoned.*” (emphasis added)

Analysis of media coverage etc.

With rare exceptions, media coverage has focused on the behaviours associated with excessive consumption of alcohol and drugs (the sensational newsworthy bits) and to a significantly less extent, the long term health, economic and social problems associated with this behaviour. It might be asserted by some that the media regularly acknowledges and affirms that alcohol and drugs are dangerous, and have high economic, social and health costs. This is not however, the same as analysing the underlying causes and the culture and values that support these costs.

This might well be explained by acknowledging that in-depth analysis issues are neither popular nor of significant interest to those responsible for preparing and presenting ‘news’ to a public interested in sensational, simplistic stories. (i.e. it doesn’t sell papers or translate into good viewing ratings).

It might be that in-depth media coverage of these issues would compromise the position of those who rely on maintaining good relationships with the commercial interests on which they rely for advertising revenue.

Another reason may relate to the issue that the cultural issues which are deeply ingrained in Australian society, if criticized, would result in a questioning of the very life styles of those who hold and enjoy them. Put simply, it would result in sheeting home the blame for the problems to the people who are attempting to 'solve' the problems being addressed.

Culture and values:

A recent research report states, *"Drinking alcohol is intrinsic to Australian culture and the activity is seen as both normal, sociable and expected"* and, *"Alcohol is perceived to be liberating and empowering. **Getting drunk is a badge of being an adult and drinking is one the significant 'rites of passage' into adulthood**"* (A Study of Attitudes and Behaviours of Drinkers at Risk, National Alcohol Strategy 2001-2003. Occasional Paper, Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. September 2002.) (emphasis added)

If, the above is an accurate assessment of the values of Australians and the culture that exists, then making meaningful changes to behaviours that are now the subject of concern, including the values that have given rise to that culture, will be extremely difficult.

Culture is defined in broad terms as, *'the changing patterns of shared, learned behaviour that humans have developed as a result of their group experiences'*. It consists of patterns of learned behaviour shared by others in the group/society etc. Thus it includes; attitudes, ideas, values, knowledge, skills as well as material objects. The key concepts of any definition include the issue **of learned, shared behaviour**

Sociologists refer to the process of learning as 'socialisation', which can best be described as *'the process through which individuals learn (assimilate/internalise) his/her society's norms, mores and life-styles and become a full functioning member of the society'*. Most sociologists agree that while socialisation is a life-long process, that the family is the primary source of socialisation, and that speech, basic health and hygiene, eating habits, beliefs, and a prescribed set of values are learned at an early age.

There is now emerging evidence that experiences and the life-style of mothers who are pregnant have an impact on the children that are born to them.

Learning had been defined as, *“A process based experience that results in a relatively permanent change in behaviour or behavioural potential”*. (Gerrig & Zimbardo. Psychology and Life. Allyn and Bacon. 2002.)

It follows that once basic socialisation has taken place (in the home) then further experiences are generally those that build on and support these. With this in mind we need to examine what inputs/experiences that take place as children mature.

“Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it”.
Proverbs 22:6

“Give me a dozen healthy infants, well formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I’ll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select---doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief, and yes even beggar-man or thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors.
(John B. Watson 1930.)

“Give me a child until he is seven, and I will give you the man”. Jesuit Saying.

‘The average adolescent is exposed to approximately 84 references to explicit substance use daily in popular songs, and this exposure varies widely by musical genre. The substance use depicted in popular music is frequently motivated by peer acceptance and sex, and it has highly positive associations and consequences’. (Content Analysis of Tobacco, Alcohol, and Other Drugs in Popular Music. Arch Pediatr Adolisc Med 2008; 162(2): 169-175--American Medical Association 2008.)

The point that has to be made here is that if society, which is now concerned about the drinking culture that exists in Australia (and elsewhere) wants to make meaningful changes to these values/culture these will be most successful if they take place during the period of primary socialisation---followed by the experiences that build on these during adolescent years.

While many will quickly acknowledge and accept that the role of the family is pivotal in the formation of values and the ‘creation’ of the culture that follows; bringing about these changes will require fundamental changes to lifestyles/attitudes and parenting practices which they may not be prepared to undertake.

“There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the roots”.
David Thoreau

Recommendations:

That:

- the paper be distributed to members of the committee.
- a meeting (or meetings) be arranged to discuss the paper with the research officer.
- issues not covered in sufficient detail in the view of the committee are brought to the attention of the research officer.
- for publicity purposes that a 'name' be adopted by the committee.
- funding for a research project is sought. (see 'where to from here' below')

That further, subsequent to the discussion of the above recommendations a brief press release be prepared and distributed indicating;

- Support for the various Government and non-Government agencies/bodies who are attempting to address alcohol/drug abuse/misuse.
- Concern/alarm at the ever increasing disruptive behaviour associated with the abuse/misuse of alcohol and drugs.
- A brief statement highlighting that the social costs of this is considerable etc.
- The committee's intention to embark on research focussed on identifying values correlated with this behaviour.

Where to from here?

One of the issues raised in my 'letter of appointment' as the research officer (letter dated 11 August 2008, signed by Grant Hutchinson) indicates that the committee would like to explore the possibilities of funding in the future.

It would appear (based on the number Government and non-Government agencies/bodies/associations etc. etc. that the scope for further strategic approaches would more than likely duplicate existing programs and services. It might be argued that as these have not necessarily been effective based in the ever increasing problems related to alcohol and drug abuse/misuse and that additional (different) programs/initiatives/strategies are required due to the lack of success of these to date.

It is my opinion that this is not warranted and that what is required is a radically new and innovative approach(s). This should be focussed on identifying the underlying values that support the present culture as it pertains to alcohol and its use/abuse/misuse in Australian society.

Funding for a research project aimed at identifying the socialisation/educational and early life experiences of both those who misuse/abuse alcohol and those who do not, would be in my opinion a project that should be developed and undertaken.

When the factors associated with these targeted groups become available they should form the basis of a media campaign aimed at educating the public.

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