MARIJUANA, PRINT-JOURNALISM, AND PUBLIC OPINION, 1980-2007

THESIS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The United States, along with the rest of the world, faces a seemingly unshakable social problem: illegal drugs. Although most countries discourage illegal drug use through penalties and punishments, the United States employs some of the harshest regulatory practices, most notably lengthy prison sentences. The current tactics used by the United States do effectively remove drug users and abusers from society, if only temporarily, but neither address the root causes of drug use nor successfully remedy the undesired behavior (Mosher and Akins 2007; Bullington, Bollinger, and Shelly 2004; Gray 2001). The impressive record of accomplishment, not the failure of law enforcement agencies, confirms the pointlessness of existing marijuana regulations (Wilkinson 1994).

The continued failure of current U.S. drug policies calls for the immediate and urgent need to reform drug laws. The United States cannot police illegal drugs out society (Wilkinson 1994). Vago (2003) says changes in social conditions, technology, knowledge, values, and attitudes potentially induce legal change. Advances in modern technology improve the ability to test the safety and efficacy of new synthetic drugs. Those same technologies could be utilized to explore the potential benefits of illegal drugs. Such an exploration would provide valuable information as to the potential benefits of illegal drugs, or resolve any questions as to their harms, consequently

affecting public attitudes. These factors, combined with a more secular society should ultimately induce legal change (Buchanan et al. 2003). Therefore, as the mechanisms used to measure the costs, as well as the benefits, of continued drug prohibition in the United States reveal more evidence of our failure to reduce drug use, the general public should advocate for, and demand, a change in policy.

Furthermore, the mass media play a pivotal role in shaping and influencing public opinion (Misra, Moller, and Karides 2003; Jacobson, Monroe, and Marynowski 2001). In most cases, society learns about particular issues through the mass media instead of through direct contact and firsthand experience (Johnson, Wanta, and Boudreau 2004; Hurst 2000; Umberson and Henderson 1992). Many Americans have never used illegal drugs, but nearly all Americans have an opinion as to whether currently illegal drugs should remain as such, or made legally available for consumption. Many of these opinions form as a result of the image a particular drug receives from the mass media. Due to the mass media's significance in shaping public opinion, in-depth examination of media messages concerning controversial social issues, such as illegal drugs becomes ever more important.

Currently, the most debated illegal drug in the United States is marijuana (Joffe and Yancy 2004; White 2001; MacCoun et al. 1993). The controversy surrounding marijuana stems from its illegality, and current status as a Schedule I drug, which bans any research except in rare circumstances (Buchanan et al. 2003; Clark 2000). Despite scientific evidence showing its therapeutic benefits and relative harmlessness in relation to alcohol or other drugs (Mosher and Akins 2007), federal policies prohibiting marijuana persist. Current drug initiatives are fraught with political dangers whereby politicians

who advocate a different approach to regulating illegal drug use are marked as "soft" on drugs (Bullington et al. 2004). Receiving such a negative label on a highly controversial issue could ruin one's career, and politicians rarely embrace risk-taking behaviors (Bullington et al. 2004; Wilkinson 1994). Some state and local jurisdictions, however, find current marijuana prohibition unacceptable, and have thus modified their regulatory practices, primarily by decriminalizing nonviolent offenses involving possession of small amounts (Bullington et al. 2004). To date 12 states have legalized marijuana for medical use and/or decriminalized possession of small quantities for personal use. These states include: Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington (National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws). Despite widespread public dissatisfaction about current marijuana policies, and many state and local jurisdictions enacting marijuana regulations counter to federal legislation, federal decriminalization and/or legalization policies for marijuana have yet even to appear on the political agenda.

With the harms of illegal drugs affecting society as a whole, and the millions of individual users and their families, it is important to establish effective drug policies that maximize the benefits and minimize the costs to society (Gray 2001). Strict marijuana prohibition not only adds to prison overcrowding, but wastes billions of tax dollars that could prove beneficial to alternative approaches to illegal drug use (Bullington et al. 2004; Gray 2001). With public opinion swinging more in favor of marijuana legalization and/or decriminalization, and the costs of continued prohibition increasing, why have lawmakers failed to revise America's marijuana policies? An examination of where the

media fit into this relationship reveals the paradoxical association between public opinion and marijuana regulations.

CHAPTER 2

MASS MEDIA

From shaping public opinion to influencing policy decisions, the mass media play

a key role in society (Misra et al. 2003). The advent, and subsequent popularity, of the

printing press opened the door for the broad circulation of news stories and other

information throughout society, which created and ultimately established the media's

niche in people's lives. The mass media's significance in daily life only intensified as

technological advances led to the widespread ownership of televisions, and eventually

fast and easy access to the Internet. Since the advent of the mass media and free press,

the media have played a pivotal role when new developments or ideas emerge and

threaten established norms and values (Auerhaun 1999; Barcus and Jankowski 1975).

Shaping Public Opinion

The social significance of the media is not unique to modern times. Over thirty

years ago Barcus and Jankowski (1975) discussed the fundamental role of the mass

media in shaping society—a power that continues today. The mass media not only

reflect the values of society but they construct them as well. Through commentary, slant,

and attention to and interpretation of particular issues, the mass media prevail as another

system that conveys and dictates acceptable social behavior and thought (Barcus and

Jankowski 1975). The media also accelerate social change (Vago 2003) through the

selection and amount of attention devoted to social issues, which establishes priorities for

social action (Barcus and Jankowski 1975) regardless of the subject (Noto, Pinsky, and Mastroianni 2006). The media direct public attention to particular issues by choosing the subjects to concentrate on, which, in turn, generates concern and eventual action among the general public. The media's impact on public opinion and social change exists in all social issues. Previous research, for example, found the media's influence in forming public perceptions of the 1998 wildland fires in Florida (Jacobson et al. 2001). This study found that the majority of the surveyed Floridians held the same view of wildland fires, either natural or prescribed, as that depicted in the media, which also affected the public's pressure on lawmakers when new policies on wildland fire management were discussed (Jacobson et al. 2001).

The media's influence on public opinion is not limited to social or political issues, but also extends into the medical realm as well. News media are the primary source of health information for the general public (Stryker 2003). Previous research suggests that media attention to particular issues invokes behavioral changes among individuals. The agenda-setting process refers to the idea that the media select issues and focus attention on different social aspects which, therefore, establish priorities for social action (Meier and Geis 2006; Stryker 2003; Barcus and Jankowski 1975). Meier and Geis (2006) and Stryker (2003) say the quantity of news coverage about a particular issue produces change in population-level behavior. Through the agenda-setting process, the mass media influence not just the opinions of individuals but possibly their actions as well (Atkin and DeJong 2000; Barcus and Jankowski 1975). The media inform the general public about social issues and provide alternative evaluations and advice (Barcus and

Jankowski 1975); therefore, media communication plays a key role in behavior change (Stryker 2003).

Still further evidence illustrates the magnitude of the mass media's capacity to shape public opinion. The general public relies heavily on the media for cues about which issues are important (Johnson et al. 2004; Misra et al. 2003). In their study of the relationship between the president, the media, and the general public, Johnson et al. (2004) found that the relationship between them is reciprocal; each influences the other, but the degree of influence differed by the nature of the issue. Surprisingly, they found that in some cases the media have more of an effect on public opinion than the president. The media's influence has the greatest impact on public opinion with regard to unobtrusive issues (i.e. social problems such as illegal drug use) due to the fact that the majority of the general public only learns about such issues through media reports (Johnson et al. 2004; Misra et al. 2003; Umberson and Henderson 1992). In these instances the media's obligation to objective journalism becomes even more crucial because of its impact on public opinion.

Portrayal of Illegal Drugs

Some research provides even more evidence of the media's influence on public opinion with regard to illegal drug use. Media attention toward particular issues tends to emerge during a specific time frame, dominates the next time period and then eventually loses significance in the next (Misra et al. 2003). Johnson et al. (2004) found that "real-world events," or actual conditions, covered extensively by the mass media reduce the coverage of illegal drugs, which in turn reduces the general public's concern over it. During the Watergate scandal in the 1970s and the Gulf War in the 1990s public

attention to and media coverage of the illegal drug issue plummeted (Johnson et al. 2004). Conversely, between these two events media attention to illegal drug use reached an all time high. Public concern over illegal drug use followed the same trend exhibited by the media (Johnson et al. 2004). As coverage of what the media deemed America's "drug problem" intensified from 1981 to 1986, public concern over illegal drug use increased (Johnson et al. 2004; Orcutt and Turner 1993). As society's fears about the harmful effects of drugs grew, so too did the public's pressure on lawmakers to proactively stop the spread of drug use. Rising fears during this time resulted in then President Ronald Reagan's declaration of war against drugs. While intense media coverage is to be expected during periods of peak use, oftentimes, however, the media's coverage does not always correlate with actual drug prevalence rates. Previous research, for example, found that media coverage of illegal drug use in America fell quickly between 1988 and 1989, and then steadily receded through 1992, despite a drastic increase in drug-related crime and hospital emergency room admissions of drug overdoses during this time (White 2001). Public concern over drug use also fell during this time, which leads one to conclude that the media's attention to and portrayal of illegal drug use significantly influences the public's perception of the harms caused by drugs.

Regardless of actual drug use rates, the amount of media attention influences public perception of illegal drugs, especially with negative coverage. Illegal drugs satisfy the media's need to sell more newspapers and timeslots for advertisements by creating moral panics in society (Mosher and Akins 2007). In their research on illegal drugs in print media, Noto et al. (2006) found that the more the media linked the words "drugs"

and "crisis" the more the general population regarded drugs as that society's major problem. Still other research finds that more media attention to drugs caused the public to view drugs as a serious problem (White 2001), but cautions that too much attention could divert attention from other causes of, and solutions to, illegal drug use (Mosher and Akins 2007; Barcus and Jankowski 1975). Similarly, other researchers say the popularity of illegal drugs in the United States fluctuates—a particular drug gains popularity, which increases rates of use, and then it fades into the background as another drug takes its place (Meier and Geis 2006; Joffe and Yancy 2004). Despite these faddish trends in illegal drug use, public concern shifts from one drug to another depending on the media, not on actual trends (Meier and Geis 2006; Joffe and Yancy 2004). This media-induced shift in public concern also exists in other countries. Research on Brazilian newspapers found that more media attention to illegal drugs tended to create panic within the general population (Noto et al. 2006).

Such media-induced panics are not unique to Brazil; the mass media sparked similar fears throughout the American public. In an attempt to convince the general public of the severity of America's drug problem, the media will often manipulate or cite dubious statistics, or allow personal emotions and biases to cloud objectivity (Mosher and Akins 2007; Gray 2001; Jacobson et al. 2001; White 2001; Auerhaun 1999). By analyzing media coverage, Orcutt and Turner (1993) found that in 1986 the media used drug data, often to their own advantage, to construct the social reality of a national crack epidemic. Midway into America's "crack epidemic" the media switched from using Monitoring the Future data (a national survey of high school students) to Drug Abuse

Warning Network data (a compilation of drug-related emergency room visits and overdose deaths) for more shocking numbers (Orcutt and Turner 1993).

Orcutt and Turner (1993) say that by distorting reality, the media hype the dangers of illegal drugs into a myth of instant and total addiction. While this may effectively deter some potential users, such scare tactics potentially have no bearing on potential use (Joffe and Yancy 2004; Stryker 2003), or may actually have the opposite effect and encourage use (MacCoun et al. 1996). Scare tactics may fail to deter drug use because peer influence more strongly affects the likelihood of drug use, especially for adolescents (Joffe and Yancy 2004; Stryker 2003). Media hype may also fail to discourage drug use, or inadvertently encourage harder drug use, in that, users try marijuana without developing an instant and total addiction, and eventually graduate to harder drugs assuming the media were wrong about marijuana, and therefore, must also be wrong about cocaine or heroin (MacCoun et al. 1996).

The media not only create mass hysteria by *what* they say about illegal drugs but by *how* they discuss illegal and legal drugs. Oftentimes, the media portray only the negative aspects of illegal drugs but will report on both the positive and negative characteristics of legal drugs (e.g. prescription medication, alcohol, and tobacco). Legal drugs are discussed on a substance-specific basis whereas discourse about illegal drugs lumps all illegal drugs together to determine whether prohibition policies should be maintained rather than administering formal controls on a substance-specific basis (MacCoun, Reuter, and Schelling 1996). In their study of college newspapers, Atkin and DeJong (2000) found that negative portrayals of underage drinking (alcohol) and illegal drug use outnumbered positive or neutral portrayals by a ratio of almost 10 to 1. By

focusing primarily on the negative aspects of drugs, news media outlets missed opportunities to inform readers on possible alternatives to drug and alcohol use and abuse, and educate the audience about the health risks associated with drugs and alcohol (Atkin and DeJong 2000).

Stryker (2003) also found that from 1977 to 1999 the majority of media coverage referred to the negative consequences of illegal drugs and the unfavorable characteristics of drug users. The media portray crime and deviance as a problem created and perpetuated by poor non-elites, and deviant behavior as violent actions committed by poor minorities (Mosher and Akins 2007; Simon 2006). Moreover, the media portray illegal drugs as powerful substances that compel users to commit bizarre, often sexual, acts (Mosher and Akins 2007), and depict users as failures at exercising self-restraint or making responsible decisions (Meier and Geis 2006; Gray 2001; Atkin and DeJong 2000). Print media coverage of illegal drugs is largely defined by circumstances involving their criminal standing (Noto et al. 2006). Noto et al. (2006) found that the majority of marijuana-related articles focused on its illegality, and specifically on police seizures and smuggling rings. Likewise, Stryker (2003) found that very little media coverage directs attention to the normative aspects (i.e. peer pressure) of illegal drug use. More attention to the social influences contributing to illegal drug use would provide society, especially parents, with more useful information to better protect against illegal drug use.

CHAPTER 3

MARIJUANA TODAY

An Analysis of the Current Legalization Debate

Although the media tend to present a biased portrayal of illegal drugs, they do serve as an outlet for the general public to engage in the drug legalization debate. Many people write letters to the editor or use the opinion-editorial pages of American newspapers to present a view or voice an opinion about sensitive social issues (Hoffman and Slater 2007; Misra et al. 2003). While information presented in these sections only illustrates the contributors' personal views, many people may still perceive this information as fact. This, however, raises some concern about the quality of information the general public receives from these sections because those involved in the drug debate are selective in highlighting the harms to serve their purpose (MacCoun et al. 1996).

Drug legalization debates involve more than empirical disputes regarding the costs and benefits to society; debates also revolve around core ideological and/or moral issues (Meier and Geis 2006; Buchanan et al. 2003; White 2001; Clark 2000; MacCoun et al. 1996). Some believe debates over the morals and values of public controversies are pointless because little rational headway can be gained (Buchanan et al. 2003). To ensure progress is made in public controversies, the law must use only objective, value-neutral scientific data (Buchanan et al. 2003; Vago 2003). Disputants also vary in their interpretation of the symbolism of either drug legalization or prohibition. In many cases,

disputants argue over the civil rights of individuals versus the state, and the rights of users versus nonusers (Buchanan et al. 2003; Gray 2001; MacCoun et al. 1996; MacCoun et al. 1993). Both sides of the legalization debate differ in their interpretation of the facts, and the normative aspects of the morality of drug use (Buchanan et al. 2003; MacCoun et al. 1996). Debaters differ in how they predict future alternatives to marijuana use, by the kinds of harm provided to support their position, and who will suffer if the opposing view prevails (MacCoun et al. 1996). Proponents of continued marijuana prohibition argue that legalization will increase prevalence rates, and send the wrong message to the general public, especially children (Mosher and Akins 2007; Stryker 2003; Gray 2001; Clark 2000). Noto et al. (2006) found that drug legalization discourse in the media varied more for marijuana than any other illegal drug—swinging from severe repression to absolute legalization. This change in discourse indicates a departure from past practices of unquestioned acceptance of prohibition, and may signify a change in public perception of marijuana (Noto et al. 2006; Bullington et al. 2004).

CHAPTER 4

SOCIAL CHANGE

Influence of Mass Media

Besides keeping the public informed about newsworthy happenings, the media also serve two other functions in society: shaping public opinion and influencing policy decisions. The media function as conduits for others who shape policy (Misra et al. 2003; Vago 2003; Auerhaun 1999). While the media have no legislative authority, they do play a vital role in political affairs by acting as somewhat of a "middleman" between the government and the public. On the one hand, the media adopt an agenda from governmental agencies, or establish one based on their preferences, and then persuade the general public to support their endeavor. On the other hand, the media are at the mercy of society, where the general public pressures the media to use their power to campaign for political change. In both cases, the media play an important role in provoking legal change by generating widespread public concern over and awareness about social events and conditions (Vago 2003).

Vago (2003: 182-183) describes six functions the mass media perform with respect to shaping public opinion and influencing policy decisions. The media (1) authenticate the factual nature of social events, (2) validate public opinions, sentiments, and preferences, (3) legitimize certain taboo behaviors and viewpoints, (4) symbolize the diffuse anxieties, preferences, discontents, and prejudices that members of society

experience, (5) focus public experiences into lines of action, and (6) classify into hierarchies persons, objects, activities, and issues (Vago 2003:182-183).

Law and the General Public

Many scholars, including sociologists, attempt to explain the exact nature of the relationship between social and legal change, but Vago (2003:302) says determining cause and effect between social change and the creation of new laws, or modification of existing laws, proves nearly impossible because "law is both an effect and a cause of social change." To better understand this relationship research should, instead, focus on the specific circumstances in which law changes society, or social change alters law, and at what level and to what extent these changes occur.

Two conflicting views of the relationship between law and social change represent the extremes of a continuum and help to explain this relationship. At one extreme (A), law is held to be determined by a sense of justice and the moral sentiments of the population (Vago 2003). Legislation at this end only achieves results by staying close to the prevailing social norms (Vago 2003). At the other extreme (B), social controls, particularly legislation, are seen as a vehicle through which a deliberate social evolution can be brought about (Vago 2003). At the former extreme (A), changes in laws would only occur if preceded by social change, whereas law at the latter extreme (B) becomes a mechanism of social engineering by which law establishes social norms and beliefs (Vago 2003). While very few societies exist at either extreme, law, at any point along the continuum, represents one of the most effective forms of social control (Auerhaun 1999).

The most noteworthy determinants of the efficacy of law in times of change are the prevailing morality and values of a society's dominant group (Vago 2003; Auerhaun 1999). At extreme A, the values of the upper classes are used to determine social law, whereas at extreme B, the beliefs of the ruling class (e.g. government leaders) dictate acceptable social behavior. Although law effectively maintains social control, some problems arise when new laws attempt to control moral issues (Donabedian 2003; Vago 2003; Auerhaun 1999). Vago (2003) says the implications of formally regulating "private" behavior are twofold. First, difficulties arise merely by attempting to enforce such laws. Enforcement with respect to illegal drug use proves nearly impossible if drug use occurs in private. Second, the general public grows concerned if they perceive legal change as intrusive. The general public may view certain legal changes as a governmental intrusion into their private life, or "Big Brother" dictating what they do. This holds especially true in drug legalization discourse. Legalization advocates often argue this position, regardless of their actual beliefs about illegal drug use.

Resistance among the General Public

Numerous factors contribute to society's resistance to change. This study, however, only focuses on the three most relevant aspects: habit, ideological resistance, and ignorance. Social habits serve as a barrier to change (Vago 2003). The relevance of habit as an obstructing force with regard to marijuana, the media, and public opinion may not, at first glace, seem obvious. Habits, however, prevent lawmakers from considering possible alternatives to existing marijuana regulations, and prevent public opinion of marijuana from changing. To a lesser degree, habits also affect the media's coverage of marijuana—partly due to personal biases, but also in response to the public's perception.

However, even if the media began to portray marijuana in a positive light, these news messages would be partially mediated by personal disapproval of marijuana (Stryker 2003).

Ideological resistance represents another barrier to social change, and refers to basic intellectual and religious assumptions and interpretations of society's existing public welfare, security, and morality, which tend to remain stable over time (Vago 2003). The general public's deep-rooted condemnation of marijuana, or any illegal drug, limits the ability to perceive marijuana and its users in a different, more positive light. Sudden marijuana legalization would transform conventional thinking so that it would instantly conflict with government policy. Finally, ignorance delays social change through simple fear (Vago 2003). Society fears the "newness" that social change would create. Fear of the unknown, of what may or may not occur, also adds to society's reluctance to change.

CHAPTER 5

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Social Constructionism

The theoretical frameworks that form the basis of the present research rest on the relationship between law and social change, the media's role in social change, and society's resistance to change. These relationships will be explored by evaluating marijuana-related newspaper articles from a social constructionist perspective and using the propaganda model of media discourse. The social construction of reality proposes that all social phenomena are defined in a political and social context and contain several possible definitions (Esterberg 2002; Auerhaun 1999; Umberson and Henderson 1992). Reality, from a social constructionist standpoint, does not emerge automatically in a society but instead originates from the members of a particular society, eventually developing into custom. Reality, or the definition of particular social phenomena, depends on the distinct social, political, and historical context in which it is defined (Donabedian 2003; Esterberg 2002; Auerhaun 1999; Umberson and Henderson 1992).

The definitions of social phenomena do not, however, rely solely on the current social climate. Instead those individuals or groups within a society with authority to define the situation influence the reality of the vulnerable majority (Donabedian 2003; Esterberg 2002; Auerhaun 1999). In society "some groups have more power and authority than others to construct reality—to determine how a particular social

phenomenon will be defined" (Umberson and Henderson 1992:2). This power usually results from political or financial control, but may also stem from specialized expertise or knowledge (Umberson and Henderson 1992).

The Propaganda Model

In line with the ideas of social constructionism, the propaganda model provides another framework for examining how the media operate and why they behave as they do. In 1988, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky developed the propaganda model in an attempt to explain why the media regularly "operate on the basis of a set of ideological premises, depend heavily and uncritically on elite information sources, and participate in propaganda campaigns helpful to elite interests" (Herman 2000:101). In discovering the driving force behind media performance, the propaganda model turns to structural factors as the only possible source of the media's behavioral tendencies.

The propaganda model contends that media discourse is shaped by money and power because the media are heavily invested in the market system (Klaehn 2003; Herman 2000). The media are bound by ownership, profit-seeking advertisers, and the dominant ideology, all of which possess the power to control the flow of information through threats and pressure (Klaehn 2003; Herman 2000). The propaganda model does not attempt to illustrate the effects of the media in society; rather, it describes media behavior and performance (Klaehn 2003; Herman 2000). The propaganda model provides another framework for examining the media's motivation for portraying marijuana one way or another.

CHAPTER 6

CURRENT STUDY

This study explores the relationship between public opinion of, and mass media reports on, illegal drugs, specifically marijuana, and how this relationship correlates with marijuana legislation. Marijuana, instead of all illegal drugs, or specifically another illegal drug, is the sole focus of this research for three reasons. First, marijuana currently holds the most promise for potential legalization; some states have already legalized marijuana for medicinal use, while others have decriminalized the possession of small quantities of marijuana (Bullington et al. 2004; Joffe and Yancy 2004; Clark 2000; MacCoun et al. 1993). Second, the effects from marijuana use are widely believed to be the least harmful of all currently illegal drugs, and are often compared to those of alcohol. Finally, marijuana is widely used in the United States and likely across the world (Gray 2001; White 2001).

Research Questions

I examined the coverage of marijuana in print media from 1980 to 2007, and whether public opinion on, and media attention toward, marijuana followed similar or disparate trends. I examined how the *New York Times* portrayed marijuana by analyzing the tone and subject of all marijuana-related articles on the front page of Section A. I used data from the General Social Surveys (GSS) to establish a baseline

measure of public opinion toward marijuana legalization. I addressed the following questions:

1. Did the tone toward marijuana in the *New York Times* change from 1980 to 2007? Did the number of positive/negative articles increase/decrease? What real-world events (e.g. war, presidential elections, etc.) might have contributed to an increase/decrease in the number of marijuana-related articles?

2. Did the subject of marijuana-related articles change over time? Did the number of pro-legalization (or positive) articles change since 1980? What was the primary topic of pro-legalization articles?

3. Using data from the GSS as a measure of public opinion, did marijuana-related articles in the *New York Times* reflect a similar attitude toward marijuana and/or change accordingly with public opinion?

The rationale for addressing these questions stems from the potential significance of the results. A strong positive correlation between the media's portrayal of, and the general public's opinion on, marijuana would reinforce the mass media's obligation to maintain reliability and veracity in their news coverage, especially with regard to complex social issues. Conversely, a weak relationship would suggest the media's insignificance in pressing social matters, or society's indifference to media messages. Moreover, very little research exists which examines the opinions expressed in newspapers about public health issues (Hoffman and Slater 2007). The current study, therefore, adds to the limited amount of available research in this field, and serves as a valuable resource for future research.

Methods

To explore the questions central to this research, I conducted a content analysis of newspaper articles in the *New York Times* from January 1, 1980 to December 31, 2007. I chose the *New York Times* for a number of reasons, most notably for its exceptional reputation as a newspaper of fact (Althaus, Edy, and Phalen 2001; MacCoun et al. 1993; Umberson and Henderson 1992). National circulation and vast readership also validate using the *New York Times* for the current study (Umberson and Henderson 1992). While some biases will likely exist in the majority of American newspapers, the *New York Times* is also recognized as an evenhanded news source—neither too liberal nor too conservative in its political orientation (Day and Golan 2005; Umberson and Henderson 1992).

Content analysis is a widely used and well respected research method in sociology, as well as other academic fields (Singleton and Straits 2005), and is used in research to describe communication content in an objective, systematic, and quantitative manner (Noto et al. 2006; Singleton and Straits 2005; Esterberg 2002). The four most common methods of quantification in content analysis include: (1) time and space—assessing of the physical space and length of time devoted to certain topics, (2) appearance—recording the presence of a particular topic or category, (3) frequency—determining the occurrence of the research category of interest, and (4) intensity—assessing attitudes and values of research topics (Singleton and Straits 2005:373-374; Esterberg 2002:171-172). This study uses the appearance, frequency, and intensity methods of quantification to analyze media portrayals of, and public opinion about, marijuana.

Content analysis performs many functions in social research. In research, content analysis (1) transforms written text into highly reliable quantitative data (Singleton and Straits 2005), (2) provides insight to macro-level media effects on micro-level behavioral trends (Stryker 2003), (3) proves useful to understand how particular groups are represented in public discourse, and (4) allows for the examination of accepted behaviors in a particular time and place (Esterberg 2002). Analyzing existing data through content analysis is a major research method used to study social change (Singleton and Straits 2005; Esterberg 2002). Therefore, content analysis is an appropriate method for the current study that seeks to uncover changes in society's behavioral and/or political trends, which result from news media messages.

Furthermore, this research focuses only on print-journalism media, specifically newspapers, which when compared with magazines, provide a more factual approach to social research because of the volume of valuable information provided, regularity of reporting (Noto et al. 2006), and potential to raise public awareness of, increase knowledge about certain issues, and ability to stimulate debate, and shape public opinion (Atkin and DeJong 2000). Measuring media attention to drugs serves as one method of measuring drug prevalence in society (Althaus et al. 2001; White 2001). I, therefore, used the front page articles in Section A to assess marijuana salience in the media and the media's attitude toward marijuana.

Measures

The articles analyzed in this study came from two online databases. Articles from January 1, 1980 to December 31, 2002 came from the *New York Times* Historical Archive available through ProQuest, and the articles for the remaining time period

(January 1, 2003 to December 31, 2007) came from the Factiva database. Two databases were necessary because no database had comprehensive coverage of articles for the entire time period central to this research. I checked the reliability of these online databases against the *New York Times* periodicals and found that all articles included in this study from the two online databases also appeared in the periodical archive; all articles appearing in the periodical archive were included in either of the two online databases. I searched for articles using the keyword *marijuana* and used all articles fitting the desired selection criteria.

To assess the tone toward marijuana in the *New York Times* and determine media coverage, I examined all news stories on the front page of Section A. I counted the number of marijuana-related articles on the front page, and for each article I recorded the subject and tone toward marijuana. I analyzed every article on the front page instead of focusing on news stories concentrating only on marijuana for two reasons. Firstly, I sought a comprehensive exploration into the various issues the media relate to marijuana. Since this research analyzed marijuana articles only on the front page, I believed limiting the pool of articles by the degree of attention devoted to marijuana would potentially produce a biased sample. Secondly, I discovered very few articles that discussed only marijuana without also discussing other illegal drugs. Only examining these articles would result in an analysis of marijuana but with regard to other drugs.

Multiple coders were not used in this analysis, but steps were taken to ensure consistency in measuring each article's tone and subject. While I did not conduct formal tests of coder reliability, I did consult other individuals to check the accuracy of my coding. I would have each person read two or three news stories, and then ask them to

determine each article's tone using the options used in this study (positive, neutral, and negative). I did not provide them with a list of possible topics to determine the subject to prevent the possibility of influencing their decision. In addition to informal reliability checks, I also recoded all articles to verify that I coded all articles using the same criteria. Nearly all articles were coded the same in the recode as they were in the initial coding.

The tone was recorded as either *positive, neutral,* or *negative* based the perceived attitude toward marijuana. I determined the tone based on the context with which marijuana is discussed, not on the tone of the article in general. In some cases, an article's overall tone was, or could be considered, positive but the implied message was negative toward marijuana in which case the tone was recorded as negative. For example, on February 16, 1982 one article reported on then President Ronald Reagan's visit to discuss drug use with children in Florida and that the children opposed legalizing marijuana because of its harms. This article has an overall positive tone (children not liking marijuana) but a negative tone toward marijuana (the children did not like marijuana); therefore, this article was coded as negative.

To better illustrate the coding process I will describe articles based on its tone and also provide examples taken directly from the *New York Times.* An example of a positive article comes from June 29, 1984 and discussed a proposed bill that would eliminate trials by jury in misdemeanor cases in order to unclog backed up court systems. Minor marijuana offenses (i.e. possession and/or distribution of small quantities of marijuana) were included in these cases because marijuana was not viewed as enough of a serious offense to warrant increasing the case load of the court systems. An article from June 27, 2007 provides another example of an article with a positive tone toward marijuana. This

article discussed the current trend of young Americans to lean more toward the left in

their political affiliation and adopt more liberal views on controversial social issues.

Advocating marijuana legalization and/or decriminalization was specifically mentioned

as one example of the tendency of younger generations to embrace a more liberal outlook

on society. On November 10, 1987, the following article illustrated a news story with a

positive tone toward marijuana:

> *...Several other Presidential contenders have said they believed past marijuana use to be irrelevant to a candidate's qualifications so long as a candidate was not using the drug now.*
>
> *...Most Americans seem to agree. Fifty-eight percent of those polled said they did not think having 'ever smoked marijuana' should disqualify someone from serving on the Supreme Court.*
>
> *...More than a third of all those survey—and more than half of those under the age of 45—admitted having tried marijuana themselves, and they did not seem surprised that public officials now in their 30's and 40's would have.*

On July 21, 1988, the following article discussed adolescent marijuana
use:

> *...the vast majority of teen-agers who occasionally drink or use drugs at social gatherings are not fated to suffer any lasting negative effects and cannot be distinguished in later years from teen-agers who abstained from drugs.*
>
> *...But Dr. Newcomb said some drugs were a far more serious problem than others. For example, he said, weekly use of cocaine would be far more serious than smoking a joint once a week.*
>
> *...But experts agreed that, in the absence of other problems, occasional drug use, such as smoking a joint, is no cause for parents to panic.*

Conversely, articles with a negative tone toward marijuana generally focused on

the harm that marijuana creates for the general public, especially younger generations.

For example, an article from April 25, 1985 argued that naïve parents, peer pressure,

widespread availability, and rock music that glamorizes marijuana all contribute

significantly to marijuana use. Another example of a negative article from March 25,

2007 focused on the violent nature of today's marijuana trade by comparing current

marijuana-related violence with the much more peaceful marijuana trade of the 1960s. In

discussing the present-day marijuana-caused violence, this article also discussed the

efforts of law enforcement to crack down on marijuana by implementing a zero-tolerance

policy for marijuana offenders. The following are examples taken directly from negative

articles. On November 9, 1987 the following article discussed a community's changing

mentality toward marijuana:

> *...Greenwich Village has been an oasis to the avant-garde, a neighborhood that has embraced creativity and dissent. As drugs became an emblem of the counterculture in the 1960's and early 70's, the open smoking and selling of marijuana became and accepted part of life in the park. To many young visitors and residents it was more a symbol of healthy rebellion than a symptom of sickness and urban decay.*
> *...Yet many residents, particularly those who began raising families in the area, say that over the last decade they have changed their view of blatant drug selling.*

On September 14, 1984 the following article discussed adolescent
marijuana use:

> *...young people are also using drugs longer now than in the past. With marijuana, for example, 'it used to be that kids smoked it while they were in college, and then use trailed off,' he said. 'Now, kids start smoking at age 13 and don't trail off until they're 25 or 26 years old. And the marijuana they're smoking today is several times more powerful than in the 70's.*

Articles with a neutral tone toward marijuana primarily just briefly mentioned

marijuana in regards to another issue, topic, or story. Articles of this nature focused

mainly on other news stories and mentioned marijuana in passing (e.g. an article about

Woodstock mentioned the smell of marijuana). Although most neutral articles were mere

marijuana mentions, some articles that predominately discussed marijuana did have neutral tones toward marijuana. For example, an article on June 4, 2004 addressed the communication gap between parents and teenagers by highlighting the difficulty a federal judge had in discussing marijuana with his daughter after she was caught with the drug. The father in this article claimed some responsibility for the breakdown in communication because of his lack of knowledge about marijuana but neither openly applauds marijuana use, nor blatantly condemns its existence. The following article, from May 15, 1997, is an example of an article with a neutral tone toward marijuana:

> *...Some of the fraternity members found it irksome that stricter rules were being imposed by baby boomers who are now college administrators and national fraternity association leaders.*
> *... 'There's a little hypocrisy here,' said Mr. Pechan, the advertising major, who has heard stories from a generation or more ago, when fraternity house parties rolled through the nights, with keg after keg of beer, and marijuana smoke wafted down dormitory hallways.*

Evaluating each article's subject revealed 12 general topics used to discuss marijuana. They included: (1) *policy/civil rights* if the article focused on legislation or individuals' rights; (2) *arrest/bust/seizure* if articles discussed marijuana with respect to a police arrest or seizure; (3) *crime* if the article discussed marijuana-related crime (e.g. marijuana trafficking or manufacture) or corruption within enforcement agencies (e.g. police officers or federal agents); (4) *political* if the article centered on efforts to reduce marijuana production outside the United States, or smuggling marijuana into the United States from other countries, or if marijuana was discussed in regards to American politics; (5) *prevalence* if the article discussed the pervasiveness of marijuana use at a certain time; (6) *prevention/education* if the article was about efforts to deter marijuana

use; (7) *user/health* if the article attributed a crime to someone under the influence of marijuana, or mentioned a person's marijuana use, whether current or previous, if he or she committed a crime, or referred to the physical effects of marijuana on the user; (8) *adolescent* if the article discussed marijuana with regard to children; (9) *control/enforcement* if the article focused on police efforts to combat marijuana use (e.g. raiding areas known for marijuana use); (10) *social* if an article discussed society's attitudes regarding marijuana and/or the efforts of the general public to advocate a position on marijuana legalization; (11) *mention* if marijuana was only briefly discussed in the article; or (12) *political user* if the article was about a political figure's current or previous marijuana use.

Some examples of the articles used in this research may help to clarify how an article's subject was determined. An article on June 12, 2001 provides an example of a typical *policy/civil rights* article. This article addressed the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that prohibited law enforcement from using thermal imaging devices to search for marijuana growers without obtaining a search warrant. An article on August 5, 1983 provides an example of *arrest/bust/seizure* articles, which reported that two men were arrested after the U.S. Coast Guard seized 3,500 pounds of marijuana from their boat. An article falling into the *crime* category on December 23, 1980 blamed Miami's substantial increase in crime and violence on the spread of the marijuana trade. On September 11, 1984 an article that describes a typical *political* article, announced Colombia's preparedness to join the United States in fighting marijuana by cracking down on marijuana trafficking and by allowing the United States to spray marijuana fields in Colombia with chemicals designed to destroy marijuana plants. An example of an article

in the *prevalence* category from October 11, 1993 discussed the effects of a policy

change to unclog the court system on the rate of marijuana use. This article revealed that

while marijuana arrests had dropped, marijuana confiscations had skyrocketed, which

implied that marijuana use was also increasing. An article from October 30, 1989

provides an example of a typical *prevention/education* article. This article focused on a

new drug education program that teaches children how to refuse a friend's offer to use

marijuana, instead of trying to just scare children away from marijuana.

An article on June 2, 2003 provides an example of a *user/health* article. This

article revealed that the suspect in the 1996 Olympic bombing grew marijuana and used it

on a regular basis when he was a kid. An article from February 26, 1992 serves as an

example of an *adolescent* article. This article addressed the vulnerability of children to

being lured into peddling marijuana by big-time drug dealers because children are less

likely to face prosecution when caught. On August 22, 1983 an article that illustrates a

typical *control/enforcement* article described the efforts of New York City police officers

to clean up Times Square by cracking down on marijuana users and dealers. An example

of a typical *social* article from February 16, 2003 discussed an anti-war demonstration

that doubled as a marijuana legalization rally when legal marijuana advocates also began

protesting. An article on June 5, 1992 provides an example of a typical *political user*

article. This article primarily focused on Bill Clinton's political views, but devoted some

attention to his past experience with marijuana.

For articles with two or more possible subjects, I determined the subject based on

the primary topic of the news story. If, for example, an article discussed adolescent crime

I determined the subject by the most prevalent topic. If the news story described an

adolescent who committed murder and the media mentioned his or her previous experience with marijuana the subject was "crime" because the story mainly focused on a murder committed by an adolescent, but if the article attributed rising school violence to marijuana (e.g. students under the influence of marijuana, marijuana distribution in schools, etc.) the subject was "adolescent" because the focus is on adolescents.

To assess public opinion, I used data from the GSS. These surveys were designed to facilitate time-trend studies and, therefore, ask the same questions using the same wording from year to year (Davis, Smith, and Marsden 2007). I used the GSS question that measures respondents' attitudes toward marijuana legalization, which were measured in almost every year the GSS was conducted. The marijuana question was not included in the 1982 and 1985 surveys, but was included in all other years since 1980. Between 1980 and 1993 the GSS was conducted on an annual basis except for 1981 and 1992, and every even year from 1994 until the present. Thus, there is no data for the nine years the GSS was not conducted, and the two years the marijuana question was not included. Since this research examines public opinion toward marijuana legalization from 1980 to 2007, the GSS serve as a reliable measure due to the standardization of the marijuana question and wording and availability of data for the entire time period.

The GSS question asked respondents: *Do you think the use of marijuana should be made legal or not*, with the possible responses of *should, should not, don't know*, and *no answer*. For this question, the GSS codes the responses "don't know" and "no answer" as missing cases to allow for an analysis of only public opinion on marijuana legislation. Therefore, these answer choices were not used in this analysis. The percentage of the total sample these responses accounted for was less than 5 percent in

each year—most years were less than 1 percent—and should not significantly impact the results. To establish the public opinion measure for this research, I calculated percent and frequency distributions for each year with available data.

Analyses

After coding each article and entering these results into a data analysis program, I ran frequency and percent distributions of all variables for the entire sample. I also calculated the percent and frequency distributions separately by tone (positive, neutral, or negative) for all articles. The overall tones of the front page articles were examined by year to determine how the media portray marijuana. I then examined how media coverage, as determined through the front page articles, and public opinion, determined from the GSS survey data, changed between 1980 and 2007, and compared the frequency, tone, and subject of front page articles with the data from the GSS questions about marijuana to assess whether public opinion toward marijuana legalization and media coverage of marijuana follow similar or disparate trends.

This research uses basic analyses to examine media coverage of marijuana and public opinion on marijuana legalization. The lack of statistical analyses limits the ability to make claims about these relationships, but the data used in this research provide a sound basis for further explorations in the future. Despite lacking a more sophisticated investigation, this research serves as an adequate initial examination of marijuana in the media.

CHAPTER 7

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

In the *New York Times* 515 marijuana-related articles appeared on the front page of Section A from January 1, 1980 to December 31, 2007. (See Figure 1 for the total number of articles per year.) Almost half (48%) of the total sample of articles had a negative tone toward marijuana (N=250), while 34 percent of articles were neutral toward marijuana (N=173), and 18 percent had a positive tone toward marijuana (N=92). Table 1 presents the percent and frequency distributions of the article subject and article tone for all articles used in this research. The highest number of articles appeared in 1986 (N=33), and 1993 had the lowest number of articles (N=8). Thirteen percent of positive articles toward marijuana (N=12) appeared in 1992, the most in one year, while 9 percent of negative articles occurred in 1986 (N=23). The most neutral articles occurred in 1985 (N=13) with 8 percent of all neutral articles.

Articles falling into the *policy/civil rights* (N=72) and *user/health* (N=71) subject categories each accounted for 14 percent of all articles. Articles in the *political* (N=62) category comprised 12 percent of the sample, *political user* articles (N=54) comprised 11 percent of the sample, and *crime* articles (N=49) accounted for 10 percent of the total sample. Articles in the *adolescent* (N=44) category made up 8 percent of the sample,

arrest/bust/seizure articles (N=38) comprised 7 percent, and *control/enforcement* articles (N=31) made up 6 percent of the sample. Articles falling into the *social* (N=28) category accounted for 5 percent of the sample, with *prevention/education* (N=12) and *prevalence* (N=6) articles together accounting for only 3 percent of the total sample (2 % and 1 %, respectively). Ten percent of the total sample of articles only briefly mentioned marijuana while discussing another topic/issue (N=48 for *mention* articles). Articles falling into the *political user* category had the highest proportion of positive articles with 37 percent of all articles with a positive tone (N=34), whereas *user/health* articles had the highest proportion of negative articles accounting for 19 percent of all negative articles (N=48).
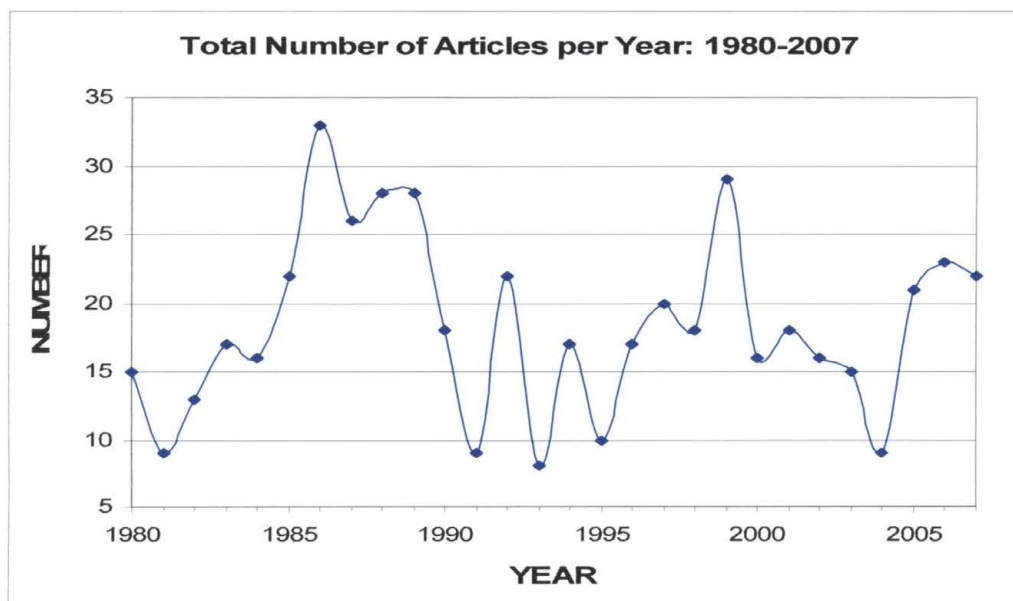
Figure 1: Total Number of Articles per Year: 1980-2007

Tone Toward Marijuana: 1980-2007

Overall, the tone toward marijuana in the front page articles of Section A remained relatively consistent from 1980 until 2007. (See Figure 2 for the total number of articles by tone per year.) There were, however, some noticeable increases and/or

Table 1: Percent and Frequency Distributions for Article Subject and Tone: 1980-2007

	Percent	Frequency
Tone		
Positive	18	92
Neutral	34	173
Negative	48	250
Subject		
Policy/Civil Rights	14	72
Arrest/Bust/Seizure	7	38
Crime	10	49
Political	12	62
Prevalence	1	6
Prevention/Education	2	12
User/Health	14	71
Adolescent	8	44
Control/Enforcement	6	31
Social	5	28
Mention	10	48
Political User	11	54
Total		N=515

decreases from one year to the next. Articles with a positive tone experienced minor changes except for sharp increases in 1987 and 1992. In 1986 positive articles accounted for 6 percent of all articles (N=2), whereas in 1987 articles with a positive tone accounted for 23 percent of the sample (N=6), and in 1991 positive articles accounted for only 33 percent of the sample (N=3), but increased to 55 percent in 1992 (N=12). The number of positive articles did fluctuate in other years, but only by one or two articles per year.

Articles with a negative tone toward marijuana increased slightly from 1980 until 1989, with a sharp increase in 1986, and then decreased to 1991. After 1991 negative articles steadily increased to 2007, peaking in 1999 at 15, and dipping in 2004 to just three. In 1986 the number of negative articles grew to 23 from just eight in 1985, skyrocketing to 70 percent of the total sample in 1986 from just 36 percent the year before. Articles with a neutral tone toward marijuana increased and decreased from 1980

until 1988, and then decreased to 1993. From 1993 until 2007 neutral articles toward

marijuana remained fairly steady, experiencing only slight increases and decreases.
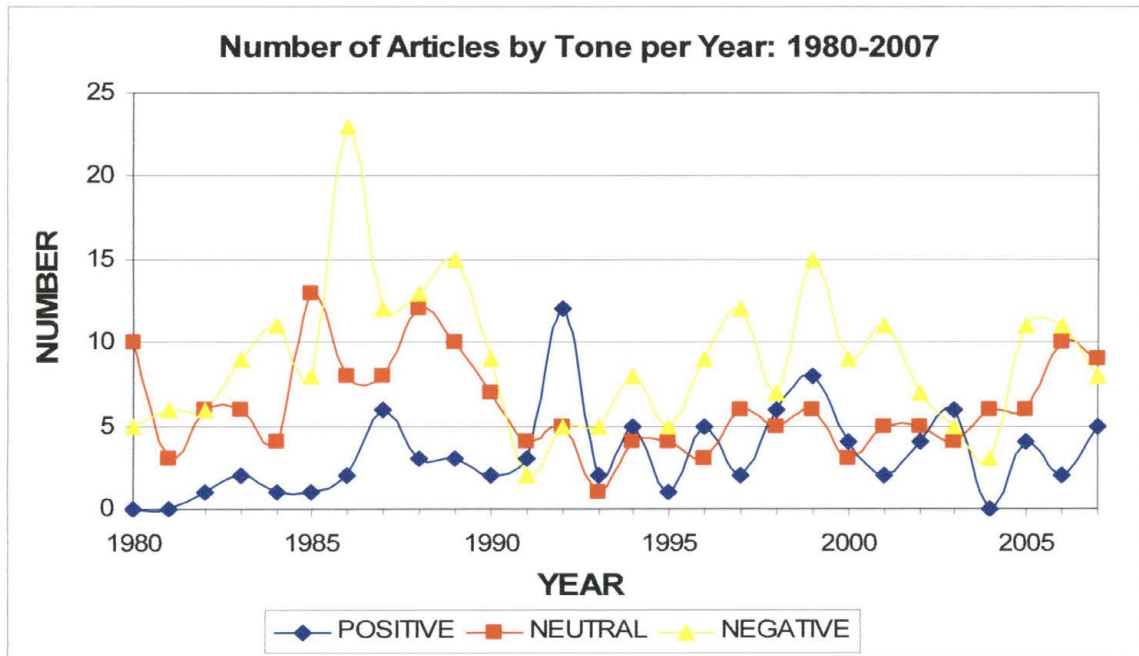
Figure 2: Number of Articles by Tone per Year: 1980-2007

Examining negative articles across the entire time period shows that the highest

proportion occurred in 1986 as 70 percent of articles were negative toward marijuana

(N=23), and the lowest proportion occurred in 1991 where 23 percent of the sample was

negative (N=2). Positive articles were most prevalent in 1992 when 55 percent of the

sample discussed marijuana in a favorable tone (N=12), and least prevalent in 1980,

1981, and 2004 where no article discussed marijuana in a positive tone. For all years

combined the highest percentage of neutral articles appeared in 1980 when 67 percent of

the sample had neutral tones (N=10), and the lowest percentage appeared in 1993 when

12 percent of articles were neutral toward marijuana (N=1).

Article Subject per Year

In general, the most prominent subject of marijuana-related articles did not exhibit

distinct shifts from one year to another. Nearly all 12 subjects received the majority of

attention with regard to marijuana-related media coverage in at least one year from 1980

to 2007. (See Table 2 for a complete list of the years each subject was the most covered,

and the percent of each subject's total sample size.) In some cases, two or more subjects

**Table 2: Highest Subject Occurrence per Year—Percent and Frequency of
All Articles Appearing in the Years Indicated**

Subject	Year(s) with Highest Occurrence	Percent	Frequency for all Years
Policy/Civil Rights	1982, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2005	40 %	29
Arrest/Bust/Seizure	1981, 1982, 1995	18 %	7
Crime	1980, 1985, 1989, 1991, 1995	43 %	21
Political	1986, 1988, 1997, 2006	44 %	27
Prevalence	1981	33 %	2
Prevention/Education	None	N/A	0
User/Health	1991, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2007	38 %	27
Adolescent	1984, 1991, 1993, 1998	30 %	13
Control/Enforcement	2004	13 %	4
Social	2003	11 %	3
Mention	1983, 1997	19 %	9
Political User	1987, 1990, 1992, 1994, 2000	65 %	35

received the same amount of attention, and were, therefore, simultaneously the leading

focus of the marijuana-related articles for a specific year. The only subject that did not

receive the majority of attention in a given year was *prevention/education*—all other

subjects were the primary focus of articles in at least one year. The number of separate

years a subject received the highest amount of coverage in the *New York Times* ranged

from zero to six years. Articles falling into the *policy/civil rights* category, and those in

the *user/health* category were the primary focus of marijuana coverage in six separate

years. In these six years the number of *policy/civil rights* articles totaled 29, which

accounts for 40 percent of all *policy/civil rights* articles. Similarly, the number of

user/health articles equaled 27 for the six years that *user/health* articles received the most attention, and accounts for 38 percent of the total number of *user/health* articles.

Other subjects also received more coverage in some years compared to other subjects. Three other subjects received a large portion of their total coverage in a few number of years—two subjects were the most covered in five years, and one subject was highest in four years. Articles in the *crime* category were the most covered in five years with a total of 27 articles. This accounted for 43 percent of all crime-related articles from 1980 to 2007. Somewhat more astonishing is the proportion of *political user* articles that were also highest covered in five years. In the years as the most frequently discussed subject, *political user* articles totaled 35, making up for 65 percent of all *political users* articles since 1980. Articles falling into the *political* category were the most covered during four years. In just four years 27 articles fit into the *political* category, which accounts for 44 percent of the total number of *political* articles.

Still other subjects received a sizeable proportion of its total amount of media coverage in just a few years of media attention, but the total sample sizes for these categories were significantly smaller than the five subject categories discussed above, and, therefore, would not provide an accurate representation of high coverage frequency in a short length of time. For example, the *prevalence* category was most covered in one year with two articles, but the total sample consisted of only six prevalence articles. While in some cases getting 33 percent of the total coverage in one year would be a significant finding, a very small sample size, like the *prevalence* articles, could lead to specious conclusions.

Article Subject by Tone

Table 3 presents the percent and frequency distributions for all 12 subject

categories by the tone toward marijuana. Examining the subject of marijuana-related

articles based on the overall tone toward marijuana shows that only one category

consistently portrayed marijuana in a positive light (as determined by the proportion of

positive articles compared to negative or neutral articles), and only one other category

with a relatively similar proportion of positive and negative articles. For most subjects,

the dominant tone consistently portrayed marijuana negatively with the exception of three

subjects that had more articles with a neutral tone. The only subject with a higher

Table 3: Percent and Frequency Distributions for Article Subject by Tone

	Tone						Total
	Positive		Neutral		Negative		N
	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Frequency
Subject							
Policy/Civil Rights	22	16	40	29	38	27	72
Arrest/Bust/Seizure	0	0	21	8	79	30	38
Crime	6	3	47	23	47	23	49
Political	7	4	35	22	58	36	62
Prevalence	33	2	17	1	50	3	6
Prevention/Education	33	4	8	1	58	7	12
User/Health	7	5	25	18	68	48	71
Adolescent	11	5	14	6	75	33	44
Control/Enforcement	13	4	29	9	58	18	31
Social	40	11	14	4	46	13	28
Mention	8	4	79	38	13	6	48
Political User	63	34	26	14	11	6	54
Total		92		173		250	515

proportion of positive articles than either negative or neutral articles was the *political*

user category. The *political user* articles are discussed in detail below. Articles falling

into the *political user* category discussed the former marijuana use of political figures,

and, in all, accounted for 11 percent of the total sample (N=54). Positive articles

accounted for 63 percent of all *political user* articles, with negative articles accounting

for only 11 percent of the sample. Approximately one-quarter of *political user* articles had a neutral tone toward marijuana. (See "Marijuana User Comparisons" below for further discussion of *political user* articles.)

Another subject with comparatively equal proportions of positive and negative articles was the *social* category. Although negative *social* articles outweighed positive articles, the difference is small. Negative articles accounted for 46 percent of all *social* articles (N=13), and positive articles comprised 40 percent of the total (N=11). The remaining 14 percent of articles had a neutral tone toward marijuana (N=4). (See Table 3 for a complete list of the subjects divided by tone.)

Public Opinion from the General Social Surveys Data

Table 4 presents the sample size and percent and frequency distributions per year for the GSS data used in this analysis. (See Figure 3 for a graphic representation of public opinion on marijuana legalization.) Between 1980 and 2007 the GSS measured public opinion about marijuana legalization in 17 of the 19 years the survey was conducted. The sample sizes varied from year to year, ranging from 851 cases to 1907 cases. Public opinion also varied from year to year with pro-legalization answers accounting for between approximately 15 percent and 35 percent of responses, and anti-legalization answers accounting for between roughly 60 percent and 80 percent of responses. Figure 4 shows pro-legalization responses along with the proportion of positive and negative marijuana-related articles, which is discussed below.

Table 4: Percent and Frequency Distributions for Public Opinion by Year: 1980-2006 (General Social Surveys Data)

| | Response to Marijuana Legalization Question | | | | |
| | Legal | | Not Legal | | Total |
Year	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Frequency
1980	26	364	74	1056	1420
1983	21	324	79	1222	1546
1984	24	332	76	1074	1406
1986	18	263	82	1174	1437
1987	17	300	83	1461	1761
1988	18	171	82	784	955
1989	17	169	83	829	998
1990	17	146	83	721	867
1991	19	182	81	790	972
1993	23	234	77	770	1004
1994	24	457	76	1450	1907
1996	27	492	73	1332	1824
1998	29	525	71	1263	1788
2000	34	597	66	1183	1780
2002	36	306	64	545	851
2004	36	292	64	510	802
2006	37	672	63	1156	1828
Total		5826		17320	23146
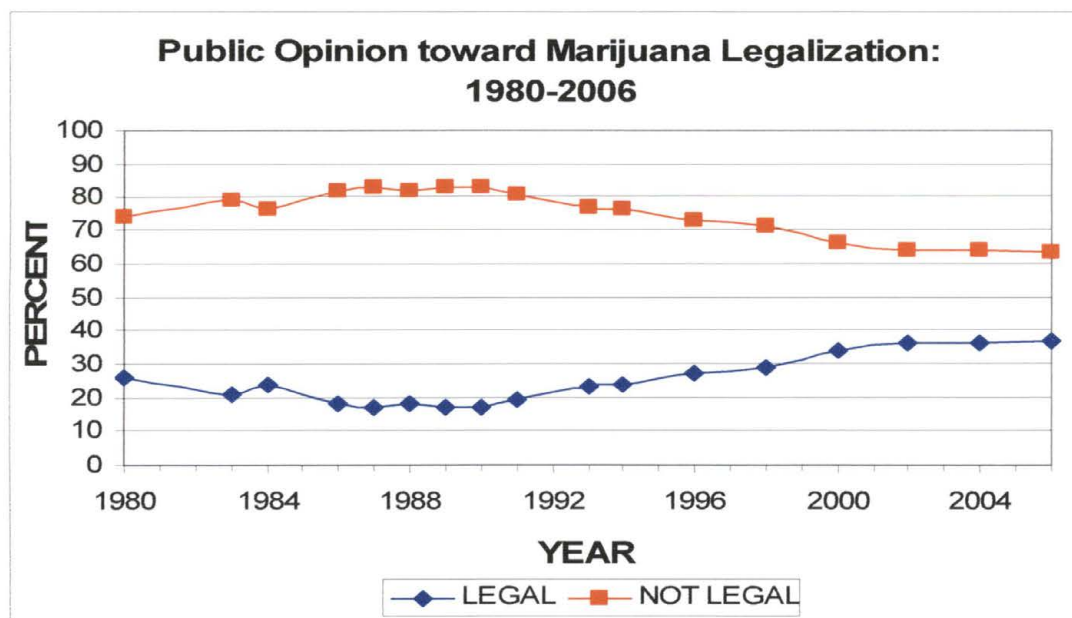
Figure 3: Public Opinion toward Marijuana Legalization: 1980-2006
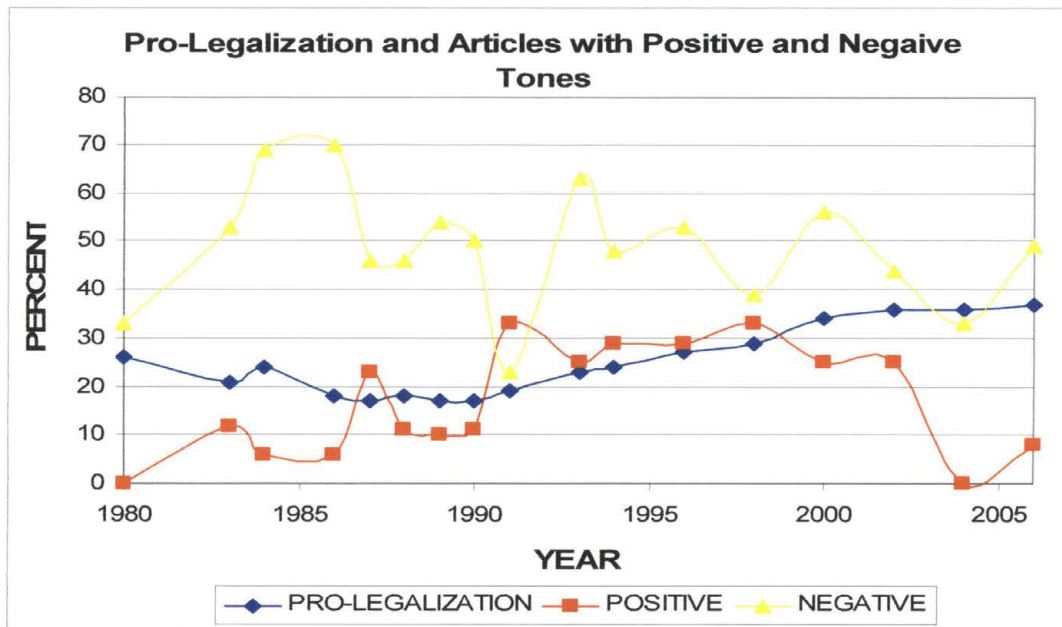
Figure 4: Pro-Legalization and Articles with Positive and Negative Tones

Marijuana User Comparisons

Many articles in the *New York Times* exposed a person's marijuana use if that person was in the news for any reason. Figure 5 shows the overall tone of the articles that mention marijuana with regard to one's personal use. Articles regarding marijuana use were coded into two separate groups based on the user's relation to the government. On the one side, political figures running for office, and on the other side, regular citizens suspected of criminal activity.

The total number of articles about a political figure's marijuana use totaled 54, while the number of articles about a suspected criminal's marijuana use equaled 71. Articles falling into the *political user* category had primarily positive tones toward marijuana. In all, 63 percent of articles about a political figure's marijuana use had positive tones (N=34), and 26 percent had neutral tones (N=14). Only 11 percent of *political user* articles had a negative tone toward marijuana (N=6). The following

provide examples of typical *political user* articles with a positive tone toward marijuana

use:

> *...Mr. Gingrich acknowledged on 'Meet the Press' that, like Mr. Clinton, he had smoked marijuana. But the Republican leader dismissed that by saying, 'That was a sign we were alive and in graduate school in that era.* (December 6, 1996).

> *...George W. Bush left Yale University in the spring of 1968 with a diploma in hand but no plans what to with it. So for five years, not unlike many young men his age, he drifted...'There are some people who, the minute they get out of college, know exactly what they want to do,' he [Bush] said in a recent interview about what he calls his nomadic years 'I did not. And it didn't bother me. That's just the way it was.'*
> *...And this was a period in which Mr. Bush has seemed to acknowledge trying drugs, if only by not denying that he did.*
> *...Of those preceding years, he stood on an earlier answer: 'When I was young and irresponsible, I was young and irresponsible.* (July 22, 2000).
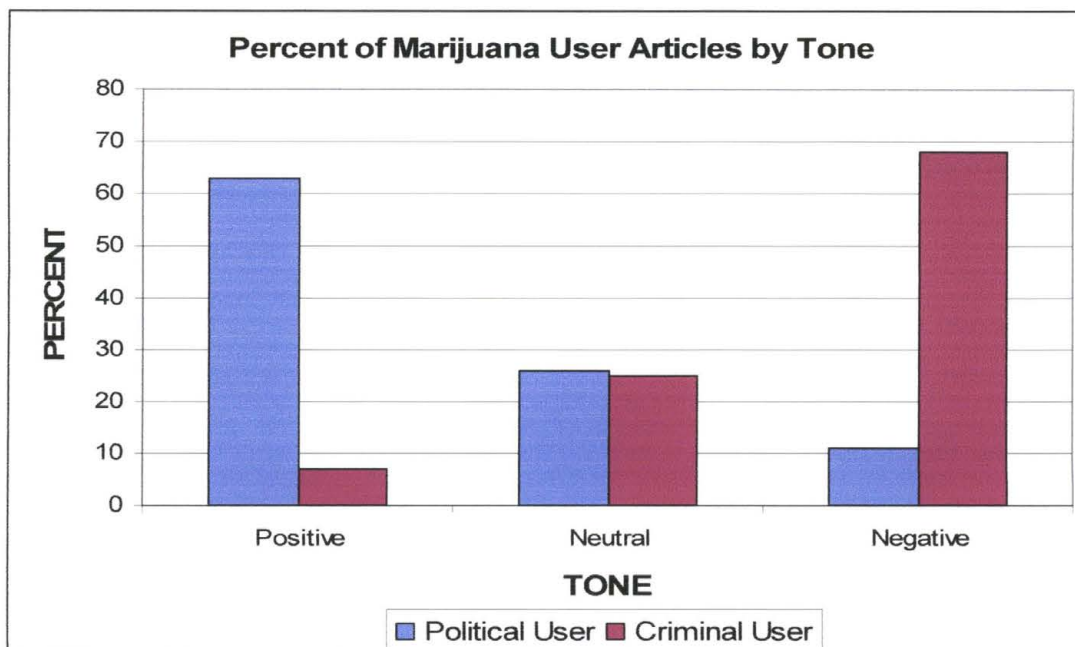
Figure 5: Percent of Marijuana User Articles by Tone

Conversely, articles falling into the *user/health* category were primarily negative toward marijuana. Overall, 68 percent of articles had a negative tone (N=48), with 25 percent holding a neutral tone toward marijuana (N=18). Just 7 percent of *user/health* articles had positive tones toward marijuana (N=5). The following provides an example of a typical *user/health* article with a negative tone toward marijuana:

> *Neighbors and co-workers of a Manhattan couple charged with attempted murder in the beating of their 6-year old daughter say that repeated calls were made to the police and a child-abuse hot line [sic] over many years...Ms. Nussbaum 'was clearly the victim of repeated physical abuse,' the neighbor said. 'She looked terrible, like she was disintegrating.'*
>
> *Undetermined amounts of cocaine and marijuana, $25,000 in cash and drug paraphernalia were found in the couple's apartment, the police said.*
>
> *The girl, Elizabeth Steinberg, was listed in critical condition at St. Vincent's Hospital yesterday. A prosecutor said tests showed no brain function...* (November 4, 1987).

DISCUSSION

Change in Tone toward Marijuana

The first research question of this research sought to investigate whether the tone toward marijuana in articles on the front page of Section A in the *New York Times* changed from 1980 to 2007. To address this connection I examined the frequency and tone of marijuana-related articles, and compared the proportions of articles between years in the event of noticeable differences. This analysis revealed a noteworthy increase in 1987 when positive articles increased to comprise 23 percent of all marijuana-related articles, which is a considerable jump from the previous year. In 1986 positive articles made up only 6 percent of the sample for that year.

One possible reason for such an increase is the "crack epidemic" of 1986. At first look, I speculated that the sharp increase in 1987 was just a return to the usual amount of positive articles regularly published in the *New York Times*, but quickly ruled out this possibility after examining the articles in the years before 1986 and after 1987. The number of positive articles did not provide any evidence that the increase in 1987 was merely a stabilizing effect. A more reasonable explanation is that the *New York Times* concentrated on the more harmful drug spreading though society: crack cocaine. With society fearing the worst as crack cocaine exploded across society, it is reasonable to assume that marijuana was viewed in a more positive light in news stories in the *New York Times*.

Subject of Marijuana-Related Articles

With regard to the second research question of this study, the present analysis did not reveal a noticeable shift in the subject of marijuana-related articles between 1980 and 2007. While some subjects received more attention than others, all 12 subjects surfaced in the *New York Times*. The more common subjects repeatedly appeared in marijuana-related articles from year to year, and usually with prevailing numbers. Articles about marijuana legislation, marijuana-related crime, political efforts to reduce marijuana production in other countries, and marijuana using political figures were the most frequent subjects of marijuana-related news stories. Just as the subject of marijuana articles exhibited no significant shift from one topic to another, the overall tone toward marijuana of each subject did not change over time. Subjects with a predominately negative, or positive, tone tended to maintain that tone from year to year. An obvious example is the negative tone of articles regarding marijuana-related crime, but a less

obvious one is the generally positive tone of articles about a political figure's marijuana use. As discussed below, an unexpected majority of *political user* articles had a positive tone toward marijuana in nearly every year since 1980.

Public Opinion and Marijuana

The third research question of this study analyzed the connection between public opinion of marijuana and the overall tone toward marijuana in articles from the *New York Times*. I addressed this relationship by comparing data from the General Social Surveys to the tone of marijuana-related articles. Support for marijuana legalization decreased from 1980 to 1986, remained stable between 1988 and 1991, and then increased every year from 1993 to 2006. This trend in public opinion toward marijuana legalization corresponds with the rise in the proportion of negative articles in 1986 and may provide evidence of an association between the media and public opinion. Support for marijuana legalization dropped from 24 percent in 1984 to 18 percent in 1986, the same year as the "crack epidemic" and negative marijuana-related articles were highest. While there would likely be some lag before media coverage affected, or was affected by, the general public's opinion, the drastic changes in marijuana-related articles and public opinion in 1986 increase the possibility that one of these changes was cause by the other's actions.

Conversely, public opinion did not correspond with the change in articles from 1982 to 1984, by which the tone toward marijuana in news articles, and public opinion changed in the opposite direction. Between 1982 and 1984 positive articles increased, while public support for marijuana legalization decreased. I cannot say for certain why this difference emerged between public opinion and marijuana articles in the *New York Times* during these years, but this finding may provide evidence of a potentially weak

correlation between the media and public opinion. It is possible that either, or both, of

the disparities between public opinion and marijuana-related articles in the *New York*

Times occurred by accident, but these observations lend support to the possibility that the

media, or at least the *New York Times*, may not have as much power and influence over

public opinion as previously thought and/or may be losing its significance in society.

Examining the overall trends in public opinion on marijuana legalization and

positive and negative articles reveals an unexpected relationship between media effects

and public opinion. From the mid- to late-1980s marijuana coverage in the *New York*

Times was predominately negative in tone (refer to Figure 4). Public opinion, however,

remained stable throughout this intensely negative marijuana coverage. The lack of

change in public opinion despite the media's coverage and allowing for some lag effect

contradicts the common belief that the media can have a significant effect on the general

population. One could reasonably expect the *New York Times'* coverage of marijuana in

1986 to have some effect on public opinion but the results prove otherwise. Furthermore,

the comparison between public opinion and media coverage reveals another disparity in

overall trends. Looking at pro-legalization and positive marijuana articles displays yet

another divergence between public opinion and media coverage. After following

somewhat similar trends in the 1990s, the two measures split around 2000 and continued

proceeding on different paths until 2006, the last year of available data on public opinion,

where public opinion continued to favor legalization but positive marijuana articles

dropped substantially.

These two observations provide evidence that validates the propaganda model

discussed in Chapter Five. The propaganda model contends that money and power

dictate media discourse. One would not expect such a large amount of negative marijuana coverage to persist in the media during the late 1980s, or positive coverage to drop during the 2000s, without the majority of the general public holding similar views. It seems only reasonable to assume that based on these data the general public has very little influence over media behavior and performance. The media, therefore, must be greatly influenced by those with money and power thus, validating the propaganda model of media discourse.

These measures also prove useful in examining the relationship between public opinion and legal change. For more than a decade public opinion has increased but marijuana legislation has changed very little. Marijuana legislation at the state level has experienced some change; some states have incorporated a more positive approach to regulating marijuana. Conversely, the federal government has yet to change marijuana's legal status, in that marijuana remains illegal despite the increasing acceptance of legal marijuana by the general public.

Marijuana User Comparisons

It is likely that a person's current or previous marijuana use will be exposed to the general public if that person happens to make the news. In some cases the person of interest still uses marijuana regularly, while in other cases the person no longer uses marijuana, but did so as a teenager or college student. Two distinct types of people were regularly revealed as either current, or former, marijuana users: political figures and suspected criminals. Marijuana use by political figures during adolescence and/or young adulthood consistently emerged as a top news story during election times. Any political figure running for office, or vying for an appointed position, with a history of any degree

of marijuana use, should expect to explain his or her past marijuana use. Similarly, a suspected criminal can expect that the media will expose past marijuana use, regardless of when it occurred.

While it may seem as if these two groups of people share a common bond, political figures and suspected criminals are treated very differently in the media in regards to past marijuana use. Marijuana-smoking political figures making the news receive a more positive attitude toward their marijuana use, whereas it is not likely that a suspected criminal's experience with marijuana will be discussed in a favorable tone. In this study an overwhelming number of articles falling into the *user/health* category were usually mentions of someone's marijuana use who had been suspected, charged, or convicted of a crime. Regardless of whether the person was under the influence of marijuana at the time of the incident, or had smoked marijuana one time over a decade ago, the media included that information in the article. While I cannot determine whether the media intentionally print a suspected criminal's prior marijuana use, or if it happens by chance, the prevalence of these types of stories raises some doubt about the likelihood that these negative portrayals are purely coincidence.

The difference in how the media discuss marijuana users lends support to the propaganda model in that the media, either by force or by choice, downplay marijuana use by political figures but exaggerate marijuana use by suspected criminals. The media may be forced into such biased coverage by political figures who want to maintain a particular image or their careers, or the media may choose to make light of political figures' marijuana use out of fear of losing funding, benefits, or privilege.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

The present research investigated the relationship between media portrayals of, and public opinion about, marijuana by examining newspaper articles on the front page of Section A in the *New York Times*, and analyzing public opinion through data from the GSS. I specifically examined whether the tone toward marijuana in newspaper articles, and the subject of marijuana-related articles changed from 1980 to 2007. I also compared this information with the GSS data for the public's opinion on marijuana legalization.

The results reveal that the attitude toward marijuana did not change uniformly from 1980 to 2007, but instead fluctuated from year to year except for two noteworthy changes. The first noticeable change occurred in 1987 when positive marijuana-related articles increased to 23 percent from only 6 percent in the previous year. The second change occurred in 1992 as positive marijuana articles increased to 55 percent from 33 percent in 1991. Other than these changes in 1987 and 1992, the tone toward marijuana did not drastically change over time.

An examination of the subjects of marijuana-related articles did not reveal any distinct changes in the type of news most likely to include some mention of marijuana. Although the results did not reveal any significant shifts in how marijuana was discussed, they do illustrate marijuana's salience in many aspects of society. Nearly all subjects—

some consistently, and others periodically—emerged throughout the 28 years of this study illustrating the variety of sectors concerned with, or affected by, marijuana.

The results also provide evidence that public opinion and the media do not always operate with a positive relationship where one follows the other. Media coverage of marijuana and public opinion toward marijuana legalization did correspond with each other in 1986. In this year, the public had a very disapproving opinion on legalizing marijuana, which dropped from the year before, and articles with negative tones marijuana drastically increased. From 1982 to 1984, however, public opinion and the media did not follow similar trends. While positive marijuana articles increased during this time, support for marijuana legalization dropped. Additionally, this study revealed inconsistencies in the way the *New York Times* discussed different types of marijuana users. Marijuana-smoking political figures tend to receive more positive attention with regard to their past use, whereas suspected criminals regardless of the nature of the crime are more likely to be demonized in the media because of any previous experience with marijuana.

This research does have some limitations. Firstly, the data came from only one source. While the *New York Times* is a well-respected news source, it is possible that other newspapers would have produced drastically different results. Secondly, this investigation analyzed only the articles on the front page of Section A. News coverage in the *New York Times* may vary, either slightly or drastically, in the pages and/or across the different sections in the newspaper, which would produce biased findings. Lastly, the lack of statistical analyses limits the ability to make claims about these relationships, and therefore, cannot determine causal order or say for certain whether the relationships

revealed are significant or coincidence. Although this research used basic analyses to examine media coverage of marijuana and public opinion on marijuana legalization, the data provide a sound foundation for future explorations. Despite lacking a more sophisticated investigation, this research serves as an adequate initial examination of marijuana in the media.

Despites a few limitations, many aspects of this study add value to the overall reliability of the results. Firstly, all articles used in this analysis were coded by one individual. While no formal tests of coder reliability were done, informal tests were performed to ensure consistency in the data. Additionally, using only one coder reduces the likelihood of producing faulty data due to conflicting interpretations by multiple coders. Secondly, this study spans across nearly three decades, which provides a better picture of potential differences in behavior. An examination of a shorter timeframe may not capture the true nature of social trends. Lastly, the total number of articles used in this research supports the reliability of the findings. In all, every marijuana-related article on the front page of Section A in the *New York Times* was collected and recorded producing a total sample of over 500 articles. Examining each marijuana-related article eliminates the potential that selection biases, either deliberately or by accident, will produce a sample not representative of the actual conditions.

Despite minor limitations, the present research provides a comprehensive look into marijuana coverage in the *New York Times* over time, and how this corresponds to the public's opinion on marijuana legalization. Suggestions for future researchers interested in a similar investigation should incorporate data from multiple sources and/or from different areas in the *New York Times*. An interesting examination, albeit a

challenging one, for future research would be to determine causal order in the

relationship between media coverage of particular social issues, and how public opinion

affects, or is affected by, the news media.

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