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Unfolding the coverage of illicit drugs in Estonian print press

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to analyze the changes in the coverage of illicit drugs by the Estonian press in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restitution of Estonia’s independence. The article adapts Anthony Downs’ ‘issue-attention cycle,’ in which he proposes that public concern about certain issues follows a particular five-phase model. The author of this paper conducted a content analysis of 1523 press articles from 1993 to 2009. The analysis indicates that coverage of drug issues follows four of the five phases of Downs’ model, the exception being the fifth ‘post-problem’ phase.

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Introduction
Illicit drug use is a relatively new social issue in Estonia, gaining increased public attention after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In contrast, Western societies have experienced three decades of the post-hippie drug culture. It is no secret that some drugs were used in Soviet Estonia, but it was not perceived as a social problem (Ahven 2000; Liiv 2000). The press, tightly controlled by the Soviet media censorship agency GLAVLIT (see Lauk 1999), did not permit coverage of negative social phenomena like drug addiction, prostitution, homosexuality, or AIDS, throughout most of the Soviet period (Meylaks 2009). The relaxing of censorship during glasnost in the late 1980s enabled the Estonian press to report on these previously banned topics (Lagerspetz 1993). Newspapers published a number of articles on drug addiction authored by members of the medical profession (e.g. Jänes 1987; Liiv 1987).

In the first half of the 1990s, a new paradigm was launched both in the availability of drugs and open public discussion of drug use in Estonia. While statistics indicated growing use of illicit drugs (Kariis et al. 1998), the problem was not a subject of discussion in the main Estonian dailies until 1995 (Paimre and Harro-Loit 2011). Instead, drug addiction made headlines in the tabloids as a peculiar habit of Western celebrities (Paimre 1999). According to agenda-setting theory, there is a correlation between how much coverage the media gives to a problem and how important the public perceives the issue to be (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Dearing and
Rogers 1996). Therefore, it is not surprising that people in Estonia did not consider the use of illicit drugs as a critical social issue in the first half of the 1990s (Narusk 1999).

The issue-attention cycle introduced by Downs (1972) is used as the theoretical background for this article. According to Downs’ theory, certain topical problems are suddenly elevated to national prominence; they stay there for some time, after which they slowly vanish from the limelight, remaining largely unsolved. The growth and eclipse of public interest may occur more or less independently of the actual development of the problem and the political reaction depends instead, to a large degree, on the agenda-setting processes. In his article, Downs (1972) uses the model to explain the ups and downs of public attention to environmental issues, but subsequently several scholars applied the cycle to media coverage as well (Brossard, Shanahan, and McComas 2004; Djerf-Pierre 2011; Schmidt, Ivanova, and Schäfer 2013). This article applies the issue-attention cycle to press coverage, rather than public opinion.

It is important to study media coverage of drug problems because such study reflects how journalists and the public perceive these issues (Forsyth 2001; Körner and Treloar 2004; Belackova, Stastna, and Milovsky 2011). The media play an important role in forming public understanding of the drug issue and in shaping the national drug policy (Noto, Pinsky, and Mastroianni 2006, 1263; Hansen and Gunter 2007, 153).

The aim of the article is to examine the changes in the coverage of drug abuse in the Estonian print media from 1993 to 2009. Specifically, the paper asks: what are the detectable changes in newspaper text related to drug issues? Do these changes form a pattern similar to the issue-attention cycle proposed by Downs? Has media coverage generally been consistent with actual drug consumption statistics?

The rest of the article is structured as follows. First, a short overview of the development of the drug problem in Estonia is offered. Second, the theoretical framework of the study is introduced. Third, the sample and methods are described. Fourth, the coverage of drugs by the Estonian press is analyzed, and finally the paper ends with a discussion of results and conclusions.

**Overview of the development of the drug problem in Estonia**

During the Soviet era, drug addiction was not as widespread in the Baltics in comparison to the Southern Soviet Republics or Western countries (Liiv 2000). Until the second half of 1980s, drug treatment centers in Estonia registered, on average, less than 100 drug-addiction-related patients a year. This total was negligible when compared with the number of alcoholics (Kariis et al. 1998, 31; Lagerspetz and Moskalewicz 2002; Lagerspetz 2005, 95). However, by the second half of the 1980s, there were signs that drugs were becoming a problem in the Baltics. For example, soldiers who returned home from the Soviet–Afghan war had developed a marijuana-smoking habit, and sniffing glue had become rather common among secondary school students (Liiv 2000, 302). A few articles (Allikmets 1968; Nurmand 1970; Liiv 1984) on illicit drugs appeared in the press by the second half of the 1980s.

Partly due to the growing opportunities to travel and partly inspired by the global youth culture, which had started to affect Estonian youth, illegal drugs started to spread Estonia in the 1990s (Allaste 2006). The ignorance of the state and the crumbling of the existing drug control also contributed to the spread of drugs in Estonia (Liiv 2000). In the 1980s, on average, 7.7 drug addicts for each 100,000
inhabitants were registered by hospitals. By 1994, this indicator had increased more than twofold to 16.4 addicts per 100,000 inhabitants. In 1995, the figure had grown to 24.5 addicts per 100,000 inhabitants and the figure had risen to 51.6 per 100,000 in 1996 (Kariis et al. 1998, 31). Drug-related offences were on the rise as well: 27 offences occurred in 1993, 34 in 1994, and 51 in 1995 (Ahven 2000, 32). In the second half of the 1990s, the government began to take steps to address the drug problem. A national program for the prevention of alcoholism and drug addiction (1997–2007) was established. By the end of the 1990s, a noticeable increase in the awareness of the general public concerning illicit drugs was observed (Narusk 1999).

By the beginning of the new millennium, a sharp increase in occurrence of drug offences and drug-related infectious diseases was noticeable (TAI 2002). The emergence of HIV amongst drug addicts at the turn of the millennium, and the fear that HIV would spread beyond the addicts’ community, caused the government to develop a new drug prevention strategy (Sotsiaalministeerium 2004). New institutions, such as the Estonian Drugs Monitoring Centre and the National Institute for Health Development, were set up by the state in the beginning of the 2000s.

During the 2000s, experimentation with illicit drugs spread among the population and students. In 2008, approximately 15% of the population between 15 and 64 years old reported having tried some illicit drug in their lifetime (TAI 2009). A total of 30% of the 15–16-year-old students had experimented with drugs according to the 2007 ESDPAD survey (TAI 2012, 18). The ‘drug of choice’ among the population has been cannabis products.

In the twenty-first century, the use of opiates and amphetamine in Estonia has been greater than in other European countries (UNODC 2011, 52; OECD 2014, 53). Today, Estonia tops the EU for the number of drug-induced deaths per million inhabitants as well as newly diagnosed HIV cases related to injected drug use (EMCDDA 2014). In 2014, the Ministry of the Interior published a new drug policy instrument (Siseministeerium 2014) to improve combating substance abuse at the national level. In conjunction with relevant efforts at the EU level, this document is considerably more focused on harm reduction strategies aimed at preventing drug abuse.

Theoretical framework

The moment when the public starts to become aware of a certain issue or conditions in society and believes the issue or conditions to be a social problem requiring a quick solution depends on both the actual situation as well as agenda-setting processes. Agenda-setting theory suggests a link between media attention given to an issue and the attention of the public to the same issue (McCombs and Shaw 1972). The stronger the media reports a problem, the more likely society will become aware of it, which in turn applies pressure on political decisions relating to the issue (Dearing and Rogers 1996). This process can be applied to the drug-issue (Lancaster et al. 2010).

Downs (1972) developed a theory related to agenda-setting theory to account for the increase and decrease of public interest in social problems: the issue-attention cycle. Downs infers that social problems have to meet a trio of certain conditional characteristics before passing through the cycle. First, the majority of citizens are not affected directly by the problem (e.g. drug addiction). Second, certain arrangements providing the benefits for the powerful minority or a majority of people have led to the problematic situation at the issue (e.g. in the 1990s it seemed economically
feasible to close down big factories in the Eastern part of Estonia; however, this resulted in the emergence of some serious issues in that region, e.g. unemployment and drug addiction). Third, the problem is not inherently ‘exciting.’ As Downs (1972, 41–42) noted, riots are interesting for the media consumers only in their initial stage. However, the problem should be exciting dramatic to catch and maintain public interest because news is ‘consumed.’ Furthermore, the problem needs to compete with all the other prevalent issues being reported by the media. Downs clearly states that the issue-attention cycle is based on the way ‘communications media interacts with the public’ (1972, 39). In the 1970s, ‘communications media’ referred to print media, television, and radio.

Downs (1972, 39–41) explains the cycle as having five sequential phases of the issue-attention cycle, duration of each being variable. Phase 1: ‘Pre-problem’ – the problem exists, but the public is unaware of the extent of the problem. Phase 2: ‘Alarmed discovery’ [of the problem] – caused by an event ‘and euphoric enthusiasm’ [for finding a solution]. Phase 3: ‘Realizing the cost of significant progress’ – this refers not only to the financial cost but also to any changes society may need to make to accommodate the solution. Phase 4: ‘Gradual decline of intense public interest’ – which occurs when society feels any one of three emotions – discouragement at the delay of finding a solution, intimidation at having to think about the problem every day, and boredom with the whole issue. Phase 5: ‘Post-problem’ – at which time the problem as an issue warranting awareness becomes dormant, although any institutions established during the cycle will remain effective. Some scholars have recommended a simplified version of the cycle with only three stages of growing interest, maintenance, and waning of attention (Jung Oh et al. 2012).

Scholars have applied the issue-attention cycle to media coverage of a variety of social problems, such as HIV-AIDS (Fee and Fox 1991; Cullen 2003), international terrorism (Petersen 2009), biotechnologies and stem cell research (Nisbet and Huge 2006), viral epidemics (Shih, Wijaya, and Brossard 2008; Jung Oh et al. 2012), and other issues (Anderson, Brossard, and Scheufele 2012; Daw et al. 2013). Studies generally confirm the cyclic nature of media reporting, but results vary depending on the empirical research focus and cultural peculiarities (Djerf-Pierre 2011; Jung Oh et al. 2012).

Gonzenbach (1996, 43) found that the media coverage of illicit drugs in Estonia followed a pattern similar to the issue-attention cycle in the United States from 1984 to 1991. In the initial phases, several dramatic events related to drugs, like the death of well-known athlete Len Bias from drug overdose or the kidnapping and killing of U.S. Drug Enforcement Agent E.C. Salazar by drug lords in Mexico, drove media interest. The intensive media coverage even captured the attention of the U.S. President. However, public interest in drugs did not last long. In the early 1990s, the attention of the media, the public, and the President shifted from the issue of drugs to economic matters and the Persian Gulf (as cited in Gonzenbach 1996).

**Sample and methods**

The sample consists of press articles on the drug theme that appeared in the Estonian print media between 1993 and 2009 (see Table 1). Only those articles where the main focus was related to illegal drugs were selected. Altogether 1523 articles were analyzed. These articles include editorials, opinions, news, readers’ letters, feature stories, and interviews irrespective of the page they appeared in the publication. Of these,
1272 were produced by the two national Estonian dailies Postimees (PM) and Eesti Päevaleht (EPL). In the earliest period with common reporting on the drug problem (1993–1995), 328 articles were analyzed. These 328 appeared in the 25 Estonian newspapers and magazines with the largest circulations. All articles focusing on illicit drugs were included. Articles from the printed versions of the newspapers were discovered by browsing through these printed editions in the library. While examining newspapers, it became evident the drug problem was rarely reported on in 1991 and 1992. Due to the lack of data from 1991 and 1992, the analysis begins in 1993. Although newspapers began to establish their own websites during the mid-1990s, the websites were simply online versions of the print editions. Dedicated online versions featuring their own journalists, or with articles written specifically for the website, only began to appear in the early 2000s. For this reason, online articles were not included in the analysis until 2005. Between 2000 and 2009, the articles (n = 1195) were published by the two national Estonian dailies with the largest circulations, Postimees (PM) and Eesti Päevaleht (EPL). Limiting the sample to these two newspapers was a conscious choice as national dailies enable broader conclusions to be drawn by the researchers (Clegg Smith et al. 2002; cited by Hughes et al. 2010). In the 2000s, the analysis of articles in PM and EPL was extended to include the Internet versions of the two newspapers. In the new millennium, all the articles on drugs published in PM and EPL hard copies and digital versions were included in the sample.

All the articles were analyzed using a formalized content analysis (Berger 1998; Hansen 1998; Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2005) and complementary close reading (Kain 1998; McClennen 2001; Johnson 2004) of articles at case study level. The content analysis enabled the coverage of drug issues to be mapped and major changes and turning points in the coverage to be identified. The main categories of the content analysis included the themes and voices of articles (individuals participating in or commenting on drug issues, like medical doctors, celebrities, etc.), the type of the article (editorials, opinions, news, etc.), the type of drug, and the level of addressing the issue (e.g. national, group, individual).

In order to verify reliability of a content analysis, a number of units are usually studied by another coder (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2005). In this study, 10% of articles (n = 152) were tested. One possibility to assess the extent of agreement between different coders is to calculate Scott’s coefficient π. The value of π should be at least 0.80 (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2005, 151). In this work it was 0.86.

### Results

Applying Downs’ theory (1972) to these data enabled an issue-attention cycle to be formed, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Using the empirical data, the following stages could be distinguished in the press coverage.
Stage 1: the pre-problem stage until the summer of 1995

By 1993, the transition from the ‘planned’ to ‘free market’ economy had taken place and the transition from censored broadsheets to an unregulated tabloid press began to be reflected in a decline in media professionalism, the emergence of sensationalist celebrity drug-related reporting, and the use of foreign syndicated news agencies. Typical story lines during the pre-problem stage focused on South American drugs cartels and U.S. celebrities: Jackson is drug-free (Liivimaa Kroonika, December 9, 1993); Did Drugs cause Elvis’ Early Death? (Liivimaa Kroonika, May 27, 1993); or Courtney Love acknowledged Using Drugs (Post, December 7, 1994). A total of 37% of articles on drug-related issues were translated from the foreign media between 1993 and 1994.

Although the press mainly reported the ‘sensational’ stories, reports from other commentators on drug-related items began to emerge during this period. Some young politicians (M. Kitsing), economists (T. Lepmets), and social scientists (V. Kärdi) expressed their liberal viewpoints on illicit drugs in the press, discussing the benefits of legalizing narcotics in Estonia (e.g. Hommikuleht, November 25, 1993 and January 11, 1994). In the context of showing the negative aspects of narcotics abuse, the previous reliance on medical experts was broadened to include foreign experts (19% of all the articles on the drug theme in 1993–1994) and Estonian police officers (17%).

A key feature of this pre-problem stage was the small number of articles printed by PM (n = 3) and EPL (n = 9). This shows that the issue of drugs had not yet reached Estonia’s mainstream media. In 1993, seven articles on drugs appeared in PM and EPL in total, of which only three discussed the drug problem in Estonia. As articles on illicit drugs appeared only occasionally in the mainstream media, it was not surprising that the public did not recognize the extent and severity of the problem in the first half of the 1990s.
Stage 2: alarmed discovery of the problem

In the summer of 1995, two events of national concern propelled the drug problem into the mainstream media. The first event was called the ‘Thai Case’ and involved the arrest of four young Estonians in Bangkok on 21 June 1995 on charges of smuggling heroin out of Thailand. This event generated 51 articles in the last six months of the year. The second event was called the ‘Poppy War,’ which involved an ‘illegally’ grown field of poppies in Estonia. This event generated 45 articles in the last five months of the year. A total of 79% of these 96 articles were located in the first four pages of the edition. In the course of two months, the Estonian public was confronted with reports relating to the involvement of Estonians in drugs that the sensationalist coverage of the media in the previous years had conspicuously failed to expose, as explained later in the article.

When covering the ‘Thai Case,’ the Estonian press portrayed the drug couriers as victims of accidental bad luck who were entitled to support, as reflected in the contextualization of the story. The motives (money and the chance to travel to an exotic place) seemed justified because those were understandable values to the people of Estonia involved in a transition from a communist economy to a free market economy. Take, for example, a passage from the magazine Elu Pilt:

You cannot imagine but it is quite possible to live ‘here and now,’ for the present moment. You wish to have this and that and still more – and then someone will offer you a chance to make your dreams come true. Quite naturally one is happy to go travelling, just in order to be able, at an opportune moment to nonchalantly drop a phrase: It happened precisely at the time when I was in Bangkok... (Elu Pilt, September, 1995, 9–11).

The positive side in reporting the case was that the whole mediated drug traffic discourse became more sophisticated. New spokesmen joined in and new sources were disclosed, in particular the Estonian authorities and senior police officers (see also Paimre and Harro-Loit 2011).

At the end of July 1995, the executives of the criminal investigation department cut down the poppy crop in the field of a South-Estonian farmer; this became known as the ‘Poppy War.’ The action was ordered by the Director General of the Police Board and approved by the Minister of the Interior. Government members were in different positions. E.g. the Minister of Justice believed these police activities were unlawful. Interestingly, Minister of Agriculture himself had brought the poppy seeds to Estonia and had encouraged the farmer to grow the plants and had even committed himself to purchasing the crop:

Minister Ilmar Mändmets assured Eesti Sõnumid that there was nothing criminal or novel in poppy cultivation, – that the plant was growing in Estonia for the third year, because he brought the poppy seed to Estonia at the time and that the police had caused a great deal of harm to the farmer (Eesti Sõnumid, August 8, 1995).

Although the expert examination established that the morphine content of the poppies was very high (20%), the police were blamed for overreacting (see e.g. EPL, August 2 and 15, 1995). Some journalists were of the view that the issue was not about the destruction of private property (mowing down the poppy field), but about the larger problem of drug addiction and drug-related crime in Estonia. The journalist Ainar Ruussaar wrote:
By destroying the poppy field in the county of Viljandimaa the police attempted to show that the pitched battle against users and cultivators of drugs has set in. If it is not followed up by effective activity against go-betweens, importers and distributors of drugs, mowing down of an isolated poppy field will remain a performance addressed only to the silly... (Eesti Sõnumid, September 7, 1995).

Against the backdrop of the ‘Poppy War,’ a number of public officials (members of the Parliament, ministers, state prosecutors, politicians, leading police functionaries, etc.) joined the media in discussions about narcotic substances. In 1995, topics concerning drug-related crime and combating illicit drug trade became much more prominent in the media. Some of these topics include 'Estonian drug couriers abroad' (22% of analyzed articles written in 1995), analysis and reviews of narcotics-related crime (6%), news about Estonian crime and the police concerning drug-related issues (6%), and news from courts about drug-related issues (2%). Law and order officers were quoted in a quarter of the articles and political and legal representatives were quoted in almost a third (31%) of the articles.

Although the drug problems of other countries had been reported in the tabloids, Estonian drug issues were now covered as well. However, in 1995, the Estonian media did not consider illicit drugs to be a major problem in Estonia. The euphoric enthusiasm, which should accompany the second phase of the issue-attention cycle, manifested itself mainly in how the Estonian drug smugglers could be rescued and whether the poppy growing farmer could entertain any hope of justice and fair judgment. The ‘Thai Case’ and the ‘Poppy War’ probably played some part in activating the drug political agenda, but the more intense movement to eliminate the drug addiction problem did not arise until five years later.

**The second discovery of the drugs problem at the turn of millennium**

By 2000, much had changed in Estonia regarding drugs: drug-related crime was rife, surveys of school-age children showed a growth in experimenting with softer drugs (Allaste et al. 2008), and indicators of drug addiction had increased tenfold in ten years (Kariis et al. 1998). Media interest in drugs had grown significantly (see Figure 1). In the hard copy issues of PM and EPL published in 2000, one could identify 283 articles on drugs, nearly four and half times more than in 1995. This was definitely the high point of the reporting on the drug problem in the Estonian press.

**AIDS explosion**

In the autumn of 2000 there was an upsurge of media interest in the drug problem due to HIV epidemic among Ida-Virumaa’s intravenous drug addicts. Until the mid-1990s, the number of times AIDS was mentioned in the articles analyzed in this study was close to zero. However, in 2000, the topic of AIDS appeared in nearly one tenth (9%) of the articles. There were several editorial columns (e.g. EPL, September 9 and 21, 2000, etc.) that mentioned AIDS and the ‘AIDS explosion’ and ‘epidemic’ generated a lot of coverage (PM, October 12, 2000; EPL, September 28, 2000). There was also some panic evident in the reporting about the pace at which the deadly virus was advancing in the capital (‘us’) (EPL, September 7, 2000). In autumn, PM reported:
'In August and September almost twice as many HIV carriers were registered as for the first six months of this year combined, doctors are predicting an imminent AIDS explosion,' ... ‘I believe it will get worse also here – we cannot escape an AIDS explosion,’ noted Kalikova (the head of the AIDS prevention centre). (PM, September 18, 2000)

The epidemic started in August in Narva where 8 new people with AIDS were diagnosed within one month. ... This past year saw a massive increase in AIDS virus in Estonia resulting in 425 officially registered HIV carriers by the end of December, 6 of them have already developed AIDS. ... The early autumn outbreak put a squeeze on the AIDS Prevention Centre budget. (PM, December 29, 2000)

Humanistic perspective became distinctive in press reporting related to injecting drug users and AIDS (see e.g. PM, February 7, 2000 and EPL, March 3 and September 6, 2000). A total of 5% of the all articles on drugs in 2000 discussed how the addicts could be helped. Interviews with the next-of-kin of the virus carriers were also published (EPL, September 21, 2000). By the turn of the millennium, new actors had emerged, such as sociologist A.-A. Allaste, Dr. N Kalikova, and Dr. T Kariis. Contrary to earlier experts, like Dr. A. Liiv, the new experts approached the AIDS issue from a more humane aspect. Substance abuse was perceived as a response to major social issues such as unemployment and poverty. The authors often referred to life being bleak for the youth in Ida-Virumaa (the eastern part of Estonia) and that there are no real possibilities to pass spare time meaningfully:

According to Allaste, the youth in Narva frequently struggle with everyday problems at home. For them, the world seems to be riddled only with problems as their often-broke parents suffer from alcoholism, school and street violence are becoming more widespread and there is nothing better to do than wander the streets at twilight. (EPL, October 10, 2000)

Journalists quoted the actual words of the young people living in the most drug-infested area of Estonia, Ida-Virumaa, regarding the spread of drugs and AIDS in that region:

‘In your story on AIDS write that at night there is nothing better to do in Narva than be a junkie,’ says red-headed Žanna, a trainee teacher. ‘There is no cinema, only one nightclub and a zillion unemployed people.’ (EPL, September 30, 2000)

Although more pronounced social and humane elements were featured in the drug-related articles in the media than ever before, the press also started to brand drug addicts as a threat to the well being of ‘ordinary people’ and ‘decent citizens.’ For example, rumors spread that drug addicts stabbed respectable people with syringes in public transport just for fun and stuck the needles into lemons in food stores to clean them, causing the general population to be in danger of contracting AIDS and hepatitis (PM, November 3, 2000; EPL, October 11, 2000). A rural municipality mayor once expressed his opinion in the media that all drug addicts should be deported to Ida-Virumaa to live in the abandoned mines so that they would not disturb the so-called ‘ordinary people’ (EPL, November 16, 2000).

However, drug use was sometimes described completely differently (for example, when experimenting with softer drugs was depicted as a habit of successful Estonian-speaking young people). According to Arter, the culture supplement of PM:

There is a new generation of the young and the restless in Estonia who prefer drugs to guzzling whisky in an attempt to break their daily routine (editorial). ... Dressed head to toe
in designer labels, a group of 20–30 year-olds is preparing to unwind... (PM Arter, January 15, 2000).

To summarize this second stage of alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm, the turn of the millennium was the time of the liveliest media interest in reporting on drug issues. A number of circumstances may have led to increase in media interest. First, drugs could have looked like an exciting, new topic. Second, indicators reflecting drug problems were high and thefts by drug addicts in the streets affected many citizens. Third, it was feared that the spread of AIDS in Eastern Estonia could eventually make its way to Tallinn and ‘decent’ people felt threatened. It is not known how important the role of the active media reporting was in launching major drugs and AIDS prevention policy actions at the state level at the beginning of the 2000s, but presumably the more intense media reporting affected positively the activation of the policies. Raju (2010) argues that in the 2000s, the young were aware that drug addiction was one of the most important problems in Estonian society. In view of this, the media’s role cannot be underestimated.

Stage 3: realizing the cost of significant progress during the 2000s

By 2005, interest in drug-related issues by the print versions of the Estonian main dailies waned considerably (see Figure 1). The analysis of the topics in the articles revealed that the share of ‘helping the drug addicts’ attitude had increased (6% of articles in 2005), but was still significantly lower than the topics of crime (19%) and court news (13%). The articles were more informative and press reporting had become more science-based, and hence became more accurate. The majority of those quoted in the stories, or whose opinion was voiced, were law and order officers and lawyers and the dominant sources of factual information were the police and the courts. The drug problem continued to be reported primarily at the national level (74% print and 81% online versions) in 2005. It seems that by 2005, the narcotics problem was viewed by the media as a national problem to be handled by the police and other law and order operatives. This view was generally correlated with trends in drug policy: on the initiative of Res Publica Party politicians, who came to power in 2003, the terms of punishments for drug offences were increased considerably and the general public was equally ill-disposed toward the offenders as well as the addicts (Inimesed 2004; Kurbatova 2013).

The case of the drug addicts’ center

In 2005, most reports (25 articles) about the Tallinn city government’s plan to open a day center for drug addicts were published in PM and EPL. The opening of such centers was suggested in the new national prevention strategy. When the people of the chosen residential district learned about the opening of the center, a wave of protest was triggered and the case was picked up by the media (e.g. PM, April 14 and 28, 2005, etc.). For instance, one local resident expressed his fear, lest the currently peaceful residential district should become the scene of the proliferation of drug trade and intravenous drug use:
'We are not squeamish, but these quarters cannot accept and ingest so many institutions of that kind' said Kindel by way of motivation of his opinion. 'It is a peaceful district with small houses. The park of this quiet street is the sole larger open children playground for the whole downtown area. You do not have to be the oracle of Delphi to predict what will happen in the park with the arrival of drug addicts' (PM, April 28, 2005).

The press voiced even more objections to the city’s plan; for instance, journalist K. Rooväli wrote:

For procuring drugs the addicts have always gone thieving and they will undoubtedly do it also in the future. Or should the city supply them with drugs and organize a tender to find the best dealer? In any case the drug dealers will be the first to learn about the low-threshold centre (PM, April 14, 2005).

There were also a few advocates of the drug center idea (see e.g. PM, April 14, 2005). For example, Airi-Alina Allaste, the youth sociologist, emphasized that with drugs addiction, Estonia had a problem which was thought of as to do with ‘others’ and Estonia was not yet ready to accept and conduct itself in the Western European way of thinking:

Public discussion on drug addiction in Estonia has rather created a picture of drug addicts as undefined ‘others,’ with whom a decent citizen has no points of contact. It looks like we are dealing with wicked aliens, who have arrived to rob and kill «us» and to poison our children with their foul and grimy needles… (PM, May 2, 2005).

In the same vein, certain journalists adopted a more sympathetic attitude toward addicts while becoming critical of the so-called ‘decent people.’ For instance, Sigrid Tappo, a journalist from PM, wrote:

The residents of Magasini Street in Tallinn oppose the low-threshold day centre in their neighborhood. … There are countless examples of this. Yet, they are all equally dreadful: people who are not ‘decent’ do not deserve to be treated the way ‘decent’ people would like to be treated themselves – at least with politeness. … I am not afraid to walk past the drug addicts hanging around the support centre. They are simply sad, not evil. However, I am scared of the ‘decent’ people because you never know what they might do if given complete discretion over others. (PM, May 11, 2005).

The drug addicts’ center never became operational in the given residential district, as the local residents believed sacrificing their environment of safety for the benefit of drug addicts was too high a sacrifice to make. Here, parallels can be drawn with the claim made by Downs (1972), that the population is actually troubled by the idea of solving many social problems, because the sacrifices are exorbitant.

**Stage 4: gradual decline of intense media interest**

Although in 2009 the online issues of two major dailies reported on drug topics more than in 2005, nothing of any significance appeared in the print versions. The print versions of PM and EPL published only 58 articles on drug issues in total throughout 2009 (see Figure 1). In terms of the content and perspectives of the articles, there were also some changes introduced as of 2009: more articles focused on legal theoretical aspects rather than Estonian crime and police news.

In summer 2009, the Estonian media mused on cannabis and its possible legalization. There was some discussion in the press in July and the media offered the position of several lawyers, such as Prof. J. Sootak and P. Randma, that to respond to the over-
criminalization of the society, less potent drugs could be legalized (PM, July 7, 2009). Various health experts like M. Liiger, and prevention specialists, like A. Kurbatova and A. Talu held contrary opinions (PM, July 14 and 24, 2009; EPL, July 28, 2009). The PM poll from 7 July 2009 disclosed the public’s favorable attitude toward the potential legalization of soft drugs (Gallup 2009). This was no surprise because, by this time, cannabis was already relatively common among the younger generation. Saar Poll (2011), an Estonian research company, reported in 2011 that around 37% of the 15–24-year-olds had experimented with cannabis at one time in their lives.

The drug topic was handled somewhat differently in the hard copies than in online issues. The hard copy issues highlighted the more social topics (helping drug addicts, life of the youth and AIDS), and legal-theoretical and cultural aspects, while the online issues reported primarily on drug problems across the world. For example, there were significantly more stories about celebrities and drug-related crime in other countries in the online issues. In 2009, PM established an online supplement, Elu24, specifically oriented to reporting on the lives of celebrities and this seems to explain the high proportion of stories about celebrities and narcotics in 2009.

The low rate of coverage of the drug problem in the paper version of PM and the online issue’s interest in mainly reporting on the drug habits of musicians, actors, and athletes bears testimony to the fact that journalists were still interested in covering drug issues from a sensational perspective, while ignoring the problem at hand in Estonia.

Discussion and conclusions

The coverage of illicit drugs in the Estonian newspapers changed substantially during between 1993 and 2009. The reporting of the drug issue in the print versions of the Estonian newspapers has undergone a development rather similar to Downs’ issue-attention cycle (1972) with the exception that the phase of alarmed discovery of the problem and euphoric enthusiasm split into two and the last phases were not clearly distinguished.

The pre-problem stage followed the model quite closely and continued in a similar vein until the summer of 1995. The indicators suggested deterioration in the drug situation; however, drug issues did not cross the threshold of the mainstream press. In contrast to Soviet time, the tabloid press placed drugs in a more hedonistic context, at least in 1993 and 1994. Experts on drug fields were only rarely given a voice warning of possible danger and urging punitive drug policy. The people of Estonia did not grasp the severity of the drug problem (Narusk 1999) and the state was also ignorant of this issue during the first half of the 1990s (Liiv 2000). As the pre-problem stage clearly emerged while studying this phenomenon, the five-phase model (Downs 1972) appeared to be more suitable for application.

In the summer of 1995, the drug problem crossed the news threshold of the main dailies with the ‘Thai Case’ and ‘Poppy War’ cases and the intensity of the coverage of these cases made the Estonian people more aware of the drug issue. The drug problem became associated with ‘us’ (Estonians) and negative sanctions (police intervention, arrests, harsh punishments, etc.). This marked the major change in the coverage of drugs by the Estonian press. The media’s role in introducing the problem of narcotics to the public agenda peaked around 1995 when the media functioned as a catalyst in bringing the drug issue to the public attention (Paimre and Harro-Loit...
In the second half of the 1990s, there were several countermeasures adopted at the political level; for example, a national drug prevention program was set up. It is hard to say how important the media were in activating the political agenda but it might be suggested that the recommendations made by external and domestic experts played a more significant role in speeding up the process of tackling the drug problem in Estonia (Lagerspetz 2005).

The second exposure of the drug problem occurred in 2000 in connection with the spread of HIV and drug-related crime. This was consistent with statistics that reflected a significant increase in the drug problem. Considering the intensity of the press coverage, this was the plateau stage in the media. The fear that drug-related HIV could spread beyond the drug addicts’ community into the general population caused some panic in the newspapers. The heightened interest by media could be the reaction to the agendas of other institutions involved in tackling the drug problem, such as the government, police, courts, AIDS prevention center, and others. An active response by the state to the drug problem was prompted at the beginning of the 2000s.

In the twenty-first century, the interest of print copies of major Estonian dailies waned in the drug issue. By 2009, Estonia’s print media only sporadically reported on illegal drugs, despite the fact that Estonia was the leader in Europe with several indicators reflecting a serious drug problem, such as drug-related deaths and intravenous drug use among the adult population (Narkomaania 2009; UNODC 2014). The waning print media (mostly applicable to hard copies) interest in reporting on drug themes does not correspond to the actual situation but to the issue-attention cycle. The press coverage of drug issue seems to follow the commercial logic of selling news content rather than public service duty of dealing with a serious social issue.

From 2009 onwards, the media began to focus on new topics like foreign policy and economic issues. This was also the case concerning withdrawal of the illicit drug theme in the USA in the early 1990s (Gonzenbach 1996). However, in recent years (2014–2015) the media interest in illicit drugs could increase again in Estonia: the legalization of cannabis has attracted media attention, but this requires further investigation. This is again in line with Downs’ model that noted (1972, 41) that problems that have gone through the cycle could recapture media and public interest. According to some other scholars (Nisbet and Huge 2006), the cycle can even re-emerge. This paper, along with some earlier research (Anderson, Brossard, and Scheufele 2012), has indicated that online media may not be bound to the same cycle of print media.

Illicit drugs are only one of many social issues which have started to develop in the newly independent Republic of Estonia. It would be interesting to undertake further research to establish whether other novel problems like prostitution, AIDS, or unemployment have experienced similar ups and downs of media interest and passed through the issue-attention cycle.

Notes

1. All the underlined material in this article is the author’s emphasis.
2. All translations of Estonian language media texts into English in terms of content and meaning are attributable to the author.
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Notes on contributor

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