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How has the media framed the introduction of the supervised injecting room in Victoria? A comparison of editorials of The Age and Herald Sun 2017–2022

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Email: philip.mendes@monash.edu**Abstract**

Influenced by a harm reduction philosophy, the then Victorian Labor Government announced the establishment of the state's first medically supervised injecting room (MSIR) in North Richmond in late 2017. But, public and political opinion remains sharply divided as to the merits of the MSIR. One influence on policy development appears to be media commentary on the MSIR and the wider illicit drugs policy debate. This paper compares the official editorials of the two daily Melbourne newspapers, the Herald Sun and The Age regarding the MSIR, from November 2017 until November 2022. Based on 33 articles (Herald Sun, $N=28$; The Age, $N=5$), our findings identify philosophical differences between the two newspapers as reflected in their sources of information, language and highlighted issues. The Age was mostly supportive of both the introduction of the North Richmond MSIR and proposals for a second site. The Herald Sun's position was more ambiguous, ranging from qualified support for the North Richmond MSIR to strong opposition to further sites.

KEYWORDS

injecting drug use, mass media, social exclusion, social policy, supervised injecting room

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Following advice from two coronial inquests and a parliamentary enquiry, the Victorian Labor Government announced Victoria's first medically supervised injecting room (MSIR) in late 2017. The MSIR legislation Part 55A stated six aims: (a) reduce the number of avoidable deaths and the harm caused by overdoses of drugs of dependence; (b) deliver more effective health services for clients of the licenced medically supervised injecting centre (MSIC) by providing a gateway to health and social assistance, which includes drug treatment, rehabilitation support, healthcare, mental health treatment and support and counselling; (c) reduce attendance by ambulance services, paramedic services and emergency services and attendances at hospitals due to overdoses of drugs of dependence; (d) reduce the number of discarded needles and syringes in public places and the incidence of injecting of drugs of dependence in public places in the vicinity; (e) improve the amenity of the neighbourhood for residents and businesses in the vicinity; and (f) assist in reducing the spread of blood-borne diseases in respect of clients of the licenced MSIC, including, but not limited to, HIV and hepatitis C (Medically Supervised Injecting Room Review Panel [MSIRRP], 2020).

The MSIR began operation in June 2018. A review of the Room by an official Panel reported in June 2020 that the MSIR had been successful in meeting most of its core objectives and should be continued for another 3 years. Additionally, the review recommended that the government add a further MSIR site in the Central Business District of Melbourne, which also has a major street-based injecting drug scene (MSIRRP, 2020). A further review report released in March 2023 confirmed the ongoing effectiveness of the MSIR in saving lives and recommended legislation to establish the MSIR as a permanent programme (Ryan, 2023). Nevertheless, public and political views about the strengths and limitations of the MSIR remain highly polarised and reflect competing views about the causes of illicit drug use and policy solutions.

Head (2022: 116) presents illicit drug usage as a “wicked problem,” whereby there is an absence of values consensus about how to define it as a social and policy problem, and limited commonality on the identification of effective strategies for improving outcomes. Broadly, policymakers in Australia are divided between two contrasting perspectives known as harm minimisation and prohibition or zero tolerance.

Harm minimisation involves policies and programmes aimed at preventing harm to the user, their family or the wider neighbourhood and community. As incorporated within the National Drug Strategy (Department of Health, 2017), it includes three distinct strategies: supply reduction strategies such as legislation and law enforcement, which seek to disrupt the supply of illicit drugs; demand reduction strategies that attempt to prevent the commencement of drug use via public education; and harm reduction strategies that are intended to reduce all drug-related harm to either the user or the community.

The first two strategies are not necessarily incompatible with a prohibitionist approach given that they still emphasise minimising drug use and may be used as a rationale for ongoing surveillance and stigmatisation of drug users (Bacchi, 2009). It is arguably only the third strategy, the harm reduction strategy as described above, which clearly differentiates harm minimisation from prohibitionist practices. Harm reduction adopts a public health rather than a legalistic approach to illicit drug use, and in doing so, it frames drug users as normative citizens entitled to the same rights as other members of the community.

A harm reduction approach does not target abstinence as the sole or preferred outcome of drug treatment; rather, it affirms a number of strategies aimed at reducing risk-taking behaviour by the user. One of these strategies is the introduction of medically supervised injecting rooms (MSIRs) to save the lives of users who may suffer overdoses, encourage them to consider rehabilitation and other support services, and also potentially reduce the adverse impact of their use on the local neighbourhood (Head, 2022; Rickard & Hart, 2022; Rowe &

Mendes, 2004). There are to date only two injecting facilities in Australia: the MSIC in Kings Cross, Sydney, which opened in May 2001, and the MSIR in North Richmond, Melbourne, which opened in June 2018, although there have been official and unofficial recommendations for the establishment of further sites in Sydney, Melbourne and more recently in the ACT (Dertadian & Tomsen, 2020). Globally, there are more than 100 MSIR operating within 60 cities internationally (MSIRRP, 2020).

The opposing prohibitionist view (often identified with social conservatism, a belief in traditional institutions and values such as the nuclear family, see Whitehouse, 1998) frames illicit drug use narrowly as immoral and/or criminal behaviour, rather than as a public health concern. It prioritises law and order approaches, sometimes labelled a “war on drugs,” that aim to disrupt drug supplies and prevent any drug use. The aim of practice interventions with the existing users is to pressure and even coerce them into rehabilitation treatment that discourages further drug use and so enables complete abstinence. Prohibitionists assert that measures to reduce drug-related harm such as needle exchanges and supervised injection rooms only encourage further drug use and do not actually improve the lives of users or benefit the local community (Head, 2022; Rowe & Mendes, 2004). By framing illicit drug use as criminal behaviour, this approach views people using drugs (PUD) as subjects, responsible for their own behaviours despite any influencing social and environmental factors (Goldberg, 2021).

In summary, the harm reduction perspective holds that the key objective must be to keep injecting drug users alive, and only secondarily to connect them with a range of holistic support services that preferably include rehabilitation treatment. But this harm reduction approach may be viewed by some in the community as failing to discourage illicit drug use, and potentially resulting in a larger number of users. Conversely, prohibitionists demand the criminalisation of drug use in order to send a message to the wider community that drug use is never acceptable. But this approach may result in the stigmatisation of drug users as bad people not deserving the same rights as others, which can arguably accentuate poor physical and mental health and associated disadvantages (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013), and potentially contribute to a higher number of existing users dying from preventable overdoses.

2 | THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN THE SUPERVISED INJECTING FACILITIES DEBATE

It has often been argued that the media plays an influential role in framing community attitudes and public policymaking processes around the causes of, and potential solutions to, illicit drug use (Atkinson et al., 2019; Hoare, 2004; Rowe, 2004; Whiteside & Dunn, 2022). Lancaster et al. (2011) apply concepts from media and communications literature to illicit drug issues in Australia. They show that media may influence illicit drug policy through four methods: the setting of policy agendas by establishing the importance of particular concerns such as the number of drug-related deaths, framing of issues so that specific policy solutions are highlighted at the expense of alternatives, influencing public attitudes in favour of particular policy agendas and informing the direction of political debates and decision making.

In one example of media influence on drugs policy, Fitzgerald (2013) argues that a newspaper photograph of a teenage boy engaged in street drug use, which exposed the inadequacies of the existing law and order approach for saving lives, persuaded the then NSW Premier Bob Carr to establish the Drug Summit, which recommended the introduction of the Kings Cross MSIC.

Conversely, Hoare (2004) argues that much media coverage—particularly via News Corp-owned tabloid newspapers such as the *Herald Sun* in Victoria and the *Daily Telegraph* in NSW, and equally conservative talkback radio hosts—reinforces prohibitionist perspectives on drug use. He cites a number of examples whereby these media sources campaigned effectively

against the introduction of harm reduction proposals to legalise marijuana in Victoria (1995–1996) and introduce a heroin pharmacotherapy trial in the ACT (1997) and were instrumental in the campaign to block the establishment of multiple MSIRs in Victoria (1999–2000). Similar evidence of the bias of these populist media outlets against harm reduction initiatives has been presented by other authors (Lancaster et al., 2011; Moore, 2004; Rowe, 2004).

A number of short reports by the Alcohol and Other Drugs Media Watch group argue that the *Herald Sun* has displayed a consistent bias against the North Richmond MSIR, and the proposal for a second MSIR site. They argue that the newspaper has disregarded research evidence, stigmatised people who inject drugs, privileged the views of the police and one group of residents who are antagonistic to the MSIR, selectively used data and language, and failed to present the perspectives of medical professionals who work in the MSIR and service users. Their reports were also critical of the biased views presented by Channels Seven and Nine (AOD Media Watch, 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

However, other commentators present a more nuanced position. For example, Fiona Patten, the former Victorian Legislative Council member (leader of the minority Reason Party) who played a key role in advancing proposals for a MSIR, argues that the *Herald Sun* was largely supportive of the campaign to introduce the MSIR in North Richmond (Patten, 2018). Similarly, Judy Ryan, the leader of the local community group, Residents for Victoria Street Drug Solutions that campaigned in favour of an MSIR, cites significant public assistance from the *Herald Sun* reporter Ian Royall for the campaign (Ryan, 2019).

To date, there has only been a small number of empirical studies of media reporting of MSIRs. One study examined 174 articles in the UK news media that reported on a proposal to introduce what were called “drug consumption rooms” in the city of Glasgow. That study found that the views of some policy actors were highlighted by the media (i.e., experts, professionals and politicians), whilst other voices, particularly those of PUDs, were mostly “silenced” (Atkinson et al., 2019: 72). In particular, media reports failed to engage with the “individual lives” of PUDs. The authors concluded that the absence of PUD voices was significant given the important role that “real life stories” can play in mobilising community support for harm reduction initiatives such as MSIRs (Atkinson et al., 2019: 72).

There are three existing studies of media reporting of MSIRs in Australia. One study compared the editorials of two Sydney newspapers—the “conservative” *Daily Telegraph* (DT) and the “liberal” *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH)—concerning the establishment and ongoing operation of the Kings Cross MSIC from 1999 to 2006 (Roberts & Nash, 2009: 36). Based on 12 articles (six from each newspaper), they reported that the DT was strongly opposed to the MSIR, and the SMH was strongly supportive. They identified a range of anti-MSIR or pro-MSIR sources and interest groups cited to varying degrees by the respective papers including politicians, police, local businesses, health professionals, churches and religious organisations, universities and academics, and the United Nations International Narcotics Control Board (Roberts & Nash, 2009).

The second study, undertaken by the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services for the MSIR review panel, analysed 98 print media reports of the North Richmond MSIR from July 2018 to December 2019. Most of those stories came from the *Herald Sun* (54) and *The Age* (32). The study found that *The Age* was slightly more supportive of the MSIR, presenting 19 stories that were either favourable or neutral (59 per cent) and only 13 that were unfavourable (41 per cent), whereas the *Herald Sun* presented 27 stories that were either favourable or neutral (50 per cent) and 27 stories that were unfavourable (50 per cent). It is not evident from the study report what specific methods were used to analyse the stories or what criteria were employed to differentiate positive and negative views. The two newspapers were identified as quoting a wide range of sources including state government and local government politicians, MSIR representatives, individual local residents, residents' action groups and the police (MSIRRP, 2020).

The third study explored 441 print media reports by *The Age* and the *Herald Sun* concerning the North Richmond MSIR from January 2016 until June 2020, covering both the campaign to establish the MSIR and then its actual operation. The two newspapers were combined as one sample, and no distinction was made within that sample between editorials, opinion pieces and other newspaper articles. The study reported that some voices were highlighted in the media such as experts, professionals and particularly conservative politicians who opposed the MSIR. Family members of those who had died from overdoses were also given some voice. But PUDs, and also consumer and advocacy groups, were mostly silenced. The study suggested that their absence from the debate could be “detrimental to the implementation and continued operation” of the MSIR in terms of providing effective support programmes (Whiteside & Dunn, 2022: 823). However, the study concluded that print media views had little impact on the establishment of the MSIR, or its continued operation, and/or the government proposal for a second site. According to the authors, the government was influenced by wider political objectives such as securing the preferences of the pro-MSIR Reason Party in the Northcote by-election, rather than “public opinion” either pro- or anti-MSIR that may have been influenced by media perspectives (Whiteside & Dunn, 2022: 822).

In summary, there is only limited research evidence available on how the Australian media frames the aims and activities of MSIRs either positively or negatively, the language utilised and the key sources of information. Consequently, we sought to examine and compare the official editorials of the two daily Victorian newspapers, the *Herald Sun* and *The Age*, concerning the North Richmond MSIR from late 2017 until late November 2022, to illuminate the views expressed, and the associated language and sources of information. This extends the existing body of research by providing an analysis of the underlying perspectives within the editorials of the two newspapers and how these have framed the issue of the MSIR.

3 | METHODOLOGY

Our study utilised a content analysis methodology to explore the nature and content of the views expressed in editorials by the two daily Victorian newspapers, *The Age* (owned by Nine Entertainment) and the *Herald Sun* (owned by News Corp Australia). Australia has a particularly concentrated form of print news media ownership. News Corp control about 58 per cent of newspapers, and Nine Entertainment have the second largest holding (Tiffen cited in Martin et al., 2022: 652). News Corp are perceived to promote a hard-line neoliberal (anti-welfare state) policy agenda, which also aims to advance their commercial interests (Environment and Communications References Committee, 2021; Martin et al., 2022).

To be sure, social media has begun to challenge the domination of the traditional media in recent decades. However, the conventional media, publishing online as well as in hard copy form, arguably still influences public opinion and the development of policy agendas and outcomes on contentious social issues (Martin et al., 2022), including attitudes to injecting drug use, by constructing their framing in the public and policy discourse.

The objective of our enquiry was to undertake an up-to-date comparative analysis of editorials in the two newspapers relating to the MSIR, with a focus on the ideological and policy positions that the editorials take. Editorials can be considered a distinct form of journalism, typically organised into text that aims to define situations, summarise news events, evaluate situations or actions and express views and opinions in the form of expectations, warnings or policy recommendations (van Dijk, 1998). Views and opinions in editorials can vary significantly depending on the type and position of a newspaper and can be highly influenced by the ideological positions of newspaper owners and managers (Henry & Tator, 2002).

Editorials are a key component of commercial media institutions that work to define norms and beliefs around the socio-political and economic lives of citizens (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

As such, editorials can be considered representations of the ideological assumptions of society and may advance interpretations of social problems that favour a specific political agenda (van Dijk, 1998). As noted above, they are also likely to represent the social, political and economic interests of major newspaper owners such as News Corp. Consequently, in the field of illicit drugs, editorials may be used to advance either harm reduction or prohibitionist approaches to policy development in which this aligns with the broader ideological or commercial motivations of the newspaper and its owners.

3.1 | Methods and analytical approach

Content analysis is a common and effective secondary data analysis technique that focusses on systematic review and interpretation of textual-based materials (Bryman, 2012). This approach is frequently used for the analysis of media for its capacity to produce nuanced insights into the embedded concepts and understandings that contribute to forms of social realities, governance and policymaking (Hastings, 1998; Saraisky, 2015; Taylor, 1997).

Saraisky (2015) argues that media plays a role in the policymaking process by contributing to the definition of public problems, through both reflecting and creating public policy and opinion. Saraisky (2015) argues that this is done in two ways. First, media can contribute to the framing of an issue in the public discourse. This includes the structuring concepts of an issue, and the language, themes and key arguments that are used to discuss it. The second method that Saraisky puts forward as influencing the policy process is through its ability to provide or deny a platform to particular voices in public discourse. This “gatekeeping” can elevate the voice of certain actors, whilst excluding others. Media content analysis can therefore be used to examine these features and connect them to ideologies and actors present in the policy process.

For this study, we chose to analyse editorials only as they are more likely to present the newspaper's official views on the chosen topic. We decided to examine the editorials of the two newspapers separately as our objective was not only to analyse print media views of the MSIR but also to compare and contrast the views of the two newspapers.

To identify relevant media content for analysis, the news data base Factiva was searched to identify editorials in both *The Age* and the *Herald Sun* regarding the North Richmond MSIR across a five-year period, from November 2017 to November 2022. We chose this period of enquiry because it encapsulates the first five years of the MSIR's operations in Victoria; hence, it arguably captures a significant period of contemporary illicit drug policy reform and debate in Victoria.

The database Factiva was searched using a combination of search terms including the following: “Medically Supervised Injecting Rooms,” “Medically Supervised Injecting Centre,” “injecting room trial,” Richmond, injecting, heroin, drugs and “drug policy.” In total, we identified 33 editorials for this period, comprising 28 from the *Herald Sun* and five from *The Age*. Of the 28 editorials published in the *Herald Sun*, one was published in 2017; seven in 2018; eight in 2019; one in 2020; seven in 2021; and four in 2022. Of the five editorials published in *The Age*, one editorial was published each year between 2017 and 2021, with none in 2022. The length of editorials varied greatly from approximately 150 to 500 words.

The analysis took a deductive approach (Elo & Kyngas, 2008) with relevant passages of text located and then categorised based on predetermined questions that we wanted to apply to the editorials. These questions were selected as we believed they would best achieve the objectives of this study, which is to examine the media constructions of MSIR and their underlying perspectives on drug use and drug policy. These questions build on the features outlined by Saraisky (2015), by asking about sources, framing, language and which actors were given voice. This is extended by examining the ideological perspectives that have been previously identified in drug policy media discussion. Questions included as follows:

- *What were the key sources of information utilised by the two newspapers?* (We wanted to identify which actors [i.e., could be any of professionals, local residents, police, politicians, business groups or PUDs] were highlighted by editorials and hence given the greatest opportunity to influence the public framing of the MSIR and the associated policy debate (Atkinson et al., 2019; Saraisky, 2015)).
- *Did they provide a voice for people using drugs who were users of the MSIR?* We included this category as a UK study identified that including the voices of PUD in news stories was important for destigmatising their experiences and encouraging their use of treatment programmes given they were expected to be the principal beneficiaries of policy innovation, whilst conversely a silencing of their voices was likely to marginalise the influence of their experiences within the policy debate (Atkinson et al., 2019).
- *What were the key terms or language they used to frame their views of the existing MSIR or the proposed new site?* (We wanted to explore what terminology was used and how these influence or frame the policy positions within the editorials).
- *What philosophical differences (prohibition versus harm reduction, see Lintzeris & Spry-Bailey, 1998: 231) were present in their perspectives?* (We wanted to examine whether the two key competing philosophical perspectives highlighted in our introduction were actively employed in Newspaper editorials).
- *How did these philosophical perspectives inform their view of the strengths and limitations of the MSIR?*

The findings are presented in two sections that correlate with the two newspapers and our findings in response to the questions listed above. We note that both newspapers have used the generic term “harm minimisation” to describe policies and programmes that we identified earlier as informed by a specific “harm reduction strategy.” Consequently, we have added caveats in which we believe the term “harm reduction” would be a more accurate description of the views presented.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | The Age

A total of five editorials on the Victorian MSIR debate appeared in *The Age* during this five-year period.

Three of the five editorials were directly informed by what was termed a harm minimisation perspective (2017; 2019). For example, one editorial sharply criticised what they called the failed “war on drugs” (i.e., prohibitionist) perspective, which had informed a narrow criminal justice approach that had allegedly contributed to numerous overdose fatalities. Instead, they welcomed the “harm minimisation” perspective underlying the decision to introduce the MSIR, which they associated with a public health approach (2017).

Associated with the harm minimisation perspective was an assumption that the MSIR would be effective in saving the lives of injecting drug users by “preventing overdoses and by putting many addicts on a pathway to recovery” (2017). They argued that otherwise many unnecessary deaths would occur and highlighted the wider adverse social impact of fatal overdoses, noting “They are our sons and daughters, our sisters and brothers, our friends and neighbours. They desperately need help” (2018).

The Age emphasised that the harm minimisation objective of the MSIR was supported by research evidence. They referred to reports on the MSIC in Kings Cross and also international research, noting that “there has never been a single death reported in any safe injecting facility” (2017). They argued there was “abundant evidence safe injecting rooms save lives and public funds, and set people on a path to recovery” (2019).

They also cited international scientific evidence as a rationale for endorsing the government's decision to add ice use as well as heroin to the MSIR, noting that this perspective was supported by experts and evidence from the Kings Cross MSIC and other MSIRs globally that many fatal overdoses were the result of multi-drug use (2018). Later, they enthusiastically cited the report of the MSIRRP on the benefits of the MSIR, noting particularly the absence of any overdose deaths, and the estimated 21–27 lives saved (2020). They added that there had been a major drop in overdoses per se within the locality, which reduced pressure on the ambulance service (2021).

The Age insisted that the MSIR would advance pathways to treatment and rehabilitation, emphasising that 75 per cent of those using the Kings Cross MSIC had “accepted professional support and embarked on attempts to end their problematic behaviour” (2018). A further editorial added that the MSIR would encourage users to “seek ongoing support from health professionals” (2019). Another editorial highlighted the vulnerability of service users, noting that many were homeless, unemployed or recently released from prison, and praising the MSIR for assisting them to access badly needed physical and mental health and housing support services (2020). They described access to this range of holistic services as “life changing” (2021).

Nevertheless, *The Age* acknowledged that the MSIR was having an adverse impact on the safety and well-being of some residents, given its location nearby a primary school. They argued that public amenity concerns needed to be addressed, particularly manifestations of antisocial behaviour such as the proliferation of drug paraphernalia within the local public housing estate (2019; 2020). They supported the proposal for a new MSIR site within the Central Business District but urged that the concerns of residents and business owners be given serious consideration (2020). They advised the government to consult widely with the local community, insisting that their concerns about having an MSIR located “near where you lived, or worked, or where your children go to school” were legitimate (2021).

The Age cited a range of sources in favour of the MSIR including Reason Party leader Fiona Patten whose “enlightenment and perseverance” they specifically praised (2017). Others cited in support included the Victorian Police Chief Commissioner (2018), Professor Margaret Hamilton, the Chair of the MSIR review panel (2020) and the State Coroner (2021). They also cited the concerns of police and local residents including parents of young children regarding the location of the existing MSIR and the proposed new site (2018; 2020; 2021).

In summary, *The Age* editorials reflected what they called a harm minimisation perspective (but in our opinion often more akin to a specific harm reduction strategy) and supported the MSIR on the grounds that it would save lives and connect users to support services. They framed users as a vulnerable group whose disadvantage was linked to wider structural inequalities but did not specifically present the voices or experiences of PUDs. Additionally, they recognised that there were genuine grievances from local residents around public safety and that further work needed to be done by policymakers to address the impact of the MSIR and associated injecting drug use on the neighbourhood.

4.2 | Herald Sun

A total of 28 editorials on the Victorian MSIR debate appeared in the *Herald Sun* (HS) during this five-year period.

The HS seemed to adopt an ambivalent approach to the North Richmond MSIR, supporting the facility in principle as a means to prevent high numbers of overdose fatalities but often presenting language and rhetoric that was mostly negative or critical, examples of which are outlined below. They have actively opposed the proposal for a second MSIR site in the City of Melbourne.

The HS questioned, but never explicitly rejected, what they termed the “harm minimisation philosophy” underlying the MSIR, which they labelled “controversial” (2018a; 2018b; 2018e; 2019b). For example, they expressed concern that the “war on drugs is being, or has been, lost” (2018e), suggesting that the creation of the MSIR symbolised the failure of the “fight against illicit drugs” (2018g).

Nevertheless, they accepted that an MSIR may be successful in saving lives and improving community safety and recognised that the large number of overdose deaths in Victoria were a tragedy that afflicted family members as well as the deceased. They cited evidence from the Kings Cross MSIC that “medical supervision in a controlled environment prevents death through monitoring and resuscitation,” and agreed that the existing policy was not working (2017a). The HS acknowledged “that the status quo was intolerable and something had to be tried” (2018a), that the high number of heroin-related deaths within a small area of North Richmond meant “something has to change” (2018c), “that a new type of response was needed” to reduce the death rate (2018e), there had to be “a new approach taken to tackle the scourge of drugs” (2019c) and a “trial was worth launching” given the “intolerable amount of fatal overdoses” (2020a).

After 10 weeks of MSIR operations, the HS directly recognised the achievements of the MSIR, citing “indications of success in preventing fatal overdoses, and anecdotal evidence of fewer street injections.” They added that “more than 140 people have been resuscitated after overdoses and saved from possible death,” and also referred positively to 8000 injection visits (2022g). Later, the HS again acknowledged that the MSIR had been effective in preventing fatal overdoses, citing a figure of more than 140 saved lives (2019a; 2019b) and reporting that the MSIR had successfully “managed more than 650 overdoses” (2019c).

From about mid-2019, the HS began using more qualified language to describe the outcomes of the MSIR such as “mixed results” (2019d) and “the jury is still out and likely divided on the success or otherwise” of the MSIR (2019e; see also 2019h). This included an increased highlighting of the views of critical local residents and businesses as noted further below. But nevertheless, they still presented statistics—such as large-scale use of the MSIR resulting in management of large numbers of overdoses estimated at more than 1800—that suggested the MSIR was effective in saving lives (2019d; 2019f; 2019h). In early 2021, the HS acknowledged that the MSIR had “been a success” in that it had “saved lives,” reporting that 271 major overdoses had been reversed by medical intervention, and 21–27 deaths prevented (2021a). A later editorial again noted the MSIR had provided “lifesaving overdose prevention,” estimated at 24 lives every 18 months (2021b). Overall, this demonstrated a consistent trend in HS editorials, acknowledging the MSIR prevented fatal overdoses. Increasingly, however, the HS questioned whether saving lives in itself was the principal indicator of success (2021d) as we discuss further below.

The HS also recognised that heroin use by those labelled “addicts” was primarily a health affliction associated with traumatic experiences such as family violence, sexual abuse, unemployment and homelessness, poor mental health and for many time in prison, that warranted a public health response (2017b; 2018e; 2018g; 2019b; 2019d; 2019h; 2020; 2021a). According to the Swedish theorist Goldberg (2021: 114), this association of heroin use with trauma implies that PUDs are in a sense “objects” who lack agency in relation to their surrounding environment, and hence, their actions can be attributed to wider social and economic factors.

On the contrary, the HS also linked heroin use to contestable individual choices and behaviour (2020a), suggesting that PUDs were responsible for their own plight. To use Goldberg's terminology framing PUDs as “subjects” or “objects” (2021: 114), they were to the contrary presented as “subjects” making free choices and decisions however problematic for their well-being. The HS directly blamed users for their life challenges, arguing that “drug addiction” was “overwhelmingly self-perpetuated through petty crime and individual recklessness” (2019d). They highlighted the criminal behaviour associated with heroin use such as home

and car theft, shop lifting and sex work plus drug manufacturing and trafficking by organised crime groups, and hence the apparent need for ongoing criminal justice interventions (2017b; 2018e; 2018g; 2019h; 2020). This presentation, however, ignored wider structural factors such as experiences of poverty and child maltreatment (Goldberg, 2021) that may have limited the agency of PUDs, and failed to acknowledge that drug use could be influenced by both individual and societal factors. Hence, PUDs could arguably be both “objects” and “subjects” in their framing.

The HS consistently used emotive language that falsely implied the MSIR was aiding and encouraging heroin use or even supplying heroin to users (i.e., creating a new problem beyond the illicit drug market that preceded the introduction of the MSIR in the locality), rather than introducing measures that responded to an existing context of widespread long-term use and associated personal and community harm within the City of Yarra (MSIRRP, 2020).

For example, the HS used inflammatory terms to elicit “high negative affect” (Watson & Tellegen, 1985), which might include feelings of hostility, fear and anger for readers in relation to the MSIR such as “state-sanctioned heroin hit,” and “facilitating illicit drug use” (2017a), “state-sanctioned heroin use” and “facilitates heroin addicts” (2017b), “a government-sponsored centre to facilitate the injection of heroin by addicts” (2018a), “state-sanctioned trial” (2018d), “sanctioning of dangerous, mind-altering substances by the state” (2018e), “the government decision to sanction the consumption of illegal, destructive and potentially lethal drugs” (2018g), “state-sanctioning of illicit drug use” (2019a), “state-sanctioned heroin use” (2019b), “sanctioned drug taking” (2019d), “state-sanctioned illicit drug taking” (2019f), “state-sanctioned injection” (2019g), “state-sanctioned injection clinic” (2019h), “state-sanctioned and facilitated illicit drug taking” (2021a), “state-sanctioned consumption of an illicit and highly dangerous drug and by extension the crimes and drug syndicates that feed it” (2021b) and “state-sanctioned illicit drug use” (2021c).

These terms implied an endorsement by the HS of prohibitionist discourse framing illicit drug use as solely a legal or criminal concern, rather than a public health issue, as the terms used refer to criminality and law. The use of the term “state-sanctioned” also seems to fail to recognise that it remained a criminal offence in Victoria to buy or sell heroin, and to use heroin anywhere other than within the MSIR building. This framing associates the MSIR with enabling heroin use in Victoria, rather than recognising heroin use as an ongoing public health issue that had existed long before the establishment of the MSIR. Hence, the role of the MSIR in saving the lives of PUDs whose drug use was long-term was misrepresented by the HS as instead facilitating their drug use.

The HS argued that the MSIR should do more than reducing harm for those involved in a “continual cycle of use and addiction.” Rather, they insisted the MSIR should also be assisting (or perhaps even coercing) users to access rehabilitation services that would enable them to end drug use and attain abstinence, even though that was not one of the six stated aims of the MSIR legislation. For example, they demanded that the MSIR encourage users to “break the cycle of addiction as against simply being helped to remain captive to it” (2018g). Later, they opined that the MSIR “must actively turn people from drugs, not just watch addicts inject them” (2019a), questioned “How many addicts have been successfully rehabilitated through the clinic's ancillary services?” (2019b), urged the government to help users to “get off the destructive cycle of drugs” (2019c), and recommended that users be “compelled to engage with rehab services” (2019d; 2020).

The use of the terms directed above suggested that a prohibitionist emphasis on achieving abstinence as the preferred solution to drug use should override the MSIR's harm reduction concern with saving lives, even though as noted above, the HS continued to recognise the effectiveness of the MSIR in preventing fatal overdoses. Indeed, the HS argued that the lead agenda of the MSIR had to go beyond merely saving lives, which they labelled “facilitation,” in order to achieve rehabilitation, which they described as “breaking the cycle of addition” via

facilitating referrals to treatment services (2019f). They asked for evidence “on not just lives saved, but lives rebuilt and addictions broken” (2021a), asserted that “addictions” needed to be “broken and lives put back on track with lasting health and employment outcomes” rather than “simply feeding addictions” (2021b), and insisted that addictions needed to be “broken,” rather than just being subjected to “facilitation and monitoring” that enabled continuing drug use. (2021c). Otherwise, the MSIR was just a means to “facilitate a slower method of tragic self-destruction” (2021d). The MSIR needed to enable the rehabilitation of “addicts” and “break the drug cycle” rather than “just feeding it” (2021f). The HS requested evidence as to “how many drug addicts it has helped rehabilitate and get off drugs” (2022c).

The HS strongly opposed the decision announced in April 2018 to include ice (crystal methamphetamine) use within the MSIR, arguing that ice was a “dangerous drug” (2018c). They asserted that in contrast to heroin use, which tended to leave users drowsy and lethargic, ice users were prone to be aggressive and violent and hence a potential threat to the safety of nearby primary school students and other local residents (2018a; 2018b; 2018d; 2018e; 2018f; 2019g; 2021c).

More generally, the HS identified the MSIR as a security and safety risk for local businesses and residents including particularly school students given its proximity to the local primary school (2018c; 2018d; 2018f; 2019g; 2021b; 2021c; 2021f; 2022b). They also alleged that the MSIR had attracted new dealers and users to the area leading to increased levels of drug trafficking, public injecting and associated crime (2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2019d; 2019e; 2019f; 2021b; 2021c; 2021f), and a general rise in what they called “anti-social behaviour” (2019g) and “anti-social offending” (2019h). Additionally, it had allegedly contributed to a decline in local property prices (2020).

Given the adverse impact of this “honey pot” effect on the local community (2020; 2021b; 2021d), they argued that the MSIR should be moved to a new location distant from the school, businesses and public housing estate (2019b; 2019f). On one occasion, they directly called for its “immediate closure” following revelations that two MSIR workers had allegedly trafficked heroin to users (2019h).

Despite arguing that the single MSIR was acting as a “magnet” drawing “addicts and street dealers” to North Richmond, the HS rejected proposals for establishing new or multiple MSIRs to divert demand to new locations (2019e; 2022b; 2022d). They argued that whilst multiple new sites “could reduce the pull factor to Richmond” and the associated increase in dealing and crimes, they would only extend the same safety and amenity problems to further local communities (2021b; see also 2021d; 2021e).

They particularly opposed the proposal for a second site within the central business district (2022a), arguing that the “needs of drug addicts” should not be placed “above Melbourne’s economic health, safety and cultural vitality” (2021c). According to the HS, state and local government deliberations around the CBD site would determine whether “drug addicts or governments are in charge” (2021d). They were critical of the argument that an MSIR should be located near where many drug users inject (2021f), opining that “setting public policy on heroin availability and simply bending to the convenience of a transient drug culture...is not the answer” (2021g).

The HS cited a wide range of sources including the Australian Medical Association, the Salvation Army, the Victoria Police (presenting the official police view) and Ambulance Victoria, and the Richmond West Primary School Principal who broadly supported the MSIR (2017a; 2018c). Other sources cited in stories included the Victorian Mental Health Minister defending the MSIR (2018a; 2018d; 2018f), the Coroner supporting the MSIR (2019d; 2019e), Reason Party leader Fiona Patten’s advocacy for the MSIR (2021b), the Lord Mayor Sally Capp’s support for a second site in the CBD (2021e; 2021f) and the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre’s proposal for multiple new sites (2022b). Additionally, they cited critics of the North Richmond MSIR and a proposed second site such as local residents (2019a; 2019b;

2019c; 2021b; 2022b), local business owners (2019c; 2022c) and the Police Association (presenting the unofficial police view; 2018f; 2019h; 2021c; 2021d; 2021e; 2021f).

The HS did not present the views of PUDs who were consistently stigmatised as undeserving “addicts” that were not part of the mainstream community, and hence not worthy of being included (despite their unique lived experience) as contributors to the policy debate.

5 | DISCUSSION

The two newspapers present different perspectives of the causes of, and potential policy solutions, to injecting drug use. These findings are conversant with Lancaster et al. (2011) argument that the media can play an influential role in affecting public and community views of the causes of a social problem and potential solutions, in this case the merits or otherwise of the MSIR.

There was a far higher volume of editorials in the HS than the *Age*, which may relate to a desire by the HS for political reasons to keep the MSIR on the public agenda. It seems that the HS not only sought to report the news on the MSIR but also sought to act as an interest group campaigning for a specific policy outcome within the MSIR policy debate by utilising frames and elevating voices that were critical of the MSIR. It also utilised emotive vocabulary to elicit negative emotional affect among readers involving fear, anger and hostility toward “addicts” and the “state.” As per the HS's influence on earlier illicit drugs policy debates in Victoria, the newspaper sought to effect changes in the MSIR policy commensurate with News Corp's wider conservative ideological agenda.

Additionally, the *Age* clearly endorsed the harm minimisation (more accurately termed harm reduction) perspective that underlies the MSIR, referring to research evidence in favour. In contrast, the HS viewed what they termed “harm minimisation” with scepticism despite acknowledging the value of preventing fatal overdoses, and instead seemed to be influenced by a “populist” anti-drugs perspective (Mendes, 2022). Indeed, the HS used highly inflammatory language, implying wrongly that the MSIR and government were actively encouraging drug use or even directly supplying drugs. Whilst both newspapers agreed that saving the lives of drug users was a laudable objective, the HS at times presented preventing fatal overdose as “facilitation” of continuing illicit drug use. In our opinion, this demonstrates a prohibitionist framing of illicit drug use, as it implies that an ongoing risk of fatal overdose (without the safety net of the MSIR) may be an effective means for nudging users into treatment programmes.

The HS and *Age* framed rehabilitation quite differently. *The Age* viewed rehabilitation as a positive but secondary by-product of saving the lives of drug users consistent with Part B of the legislation, which urged delivery of “more effective health services by providing a gateway to health and social assistance” (MSIRPP, 2020: 48). That positive language seemed to challenge in part the societal labelling of users as bad individuals (Goldberg, 2021) and suggested a potential for encouraging some MSIR users to voluntarily seek treatment alternatives to ongoing use.

In contrast, the HS adopted an arguably prohibitionist approach, which highlighted rehabilitation leading preferably to complete abstinence as a key objective, if not the key objective, of the MSIR. This is further emphasised by the repeated use of phrases such as “state-sanctioned illicit drug taking” (2019f) that present a deliberate contrast between the “legal” (state-sanctioned) and “illegal” (illicit drug taking), reinforcing a perspective that views abstinence as a moral and legal imperative.

Both newspapers acknowledged the traumatic backgrounds and major support needs of MSIR users as highlighted in the review panel report (MSIRRP, 2020). However, whilst both papers recommended a public health response, the HS regularly denigrated drug users as undeserving addicts involved in widespread crime and antisocial behaviour. Implying

that users were not part of the North Richmond community, the HS made no attempt to seek their views in order to humanise their experiences. Nor did they speak with service user advocacy groups on the merits of the MSIR. The additional emphasis placed by the HS on PUDs' personal responsibility for their situation is consistent with a wider conservative ideological perspective of illicit drug use. It also suggested a reinforcement of existing societal stigmatisation of users as bad individuals who should not be entitled to the same rights as other citizens.

Previous research into media framings of methamphetamine has found that it is often presented as a uniquely dangerous substance and that people who use it are particularly deviant (Cohn et al., 2020; Fredrickson et al., 2019). This was reflected in the strong opposition by the HS to allowing methamphetamine use at the MSIR, and the language used around the substance itself. Language directly stigmatising PUDs can arguably exacerbate their social marginalisation and disadvantage, leading to materially poorer health outcomes (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013).

Both newspapers concurred with the findings of the panel review report (MSIRRP, 2020) that the MSIR had not produced an improvement in public amenity or public safety within North Richmond. However, the *Age* favoured the introduction of a new MSIR site within the CBD although noting this would require careful engagement with residents and businesses, whilst the HS was strongly opposed.

Both newspapers cited a wide range of pro- and anti-MSIR sources including official and unofficial police representatives, local residents and businesses, Reason Party leader Fiona Patten, Coroners, government ministers and local government representatives. The HS highlighted the voices of residents' groups who were critical of the MSIR but did not refer to the views of residents groups that were supportive. Nor did they directly cite the views of the Liberal-National Party opposition who have been consistent critics of the MSIR (Mendes, 2022).

This analysis has introduced key themes in the editorial content of *The Age* and HS regarding the MSIR. It has highlighted similarities and differences in the quantity, framing, sources and tone of the editorials. A distinction between prohibitionist and harm minimisation/harm reduction philosophies was observed, as were the impacts of these philosophies on their framing of certain issues. It was evident that the HS, whilst accepting in principle the harm reduction agenda underpinning the MSIR's aim to save lives, mostly advanced a prohibitionist approach that demanded a combination of criminal sanctions and entry into abstinence-based rehabilitation programmes as the preferred policy option. The views of local residents (at least those who opposed the MSIR), police and business groups were privileged over those of PUDs. However, given that the government has chosen to make the MSIR a permanent programme without any changes to its key operations, it seems the HS's ideologically based advocacy had little or no impact on illicit drugs policy.

In contrast, the *Age* was found to endorse a largely harm reduction agenda (which they called "harm minimisation") that preferenced saving the lives of users and assisting them to access broader social support programmes. That agenda was broadly congruent with the government's policy direction.

The effects of the media on the issue of illicit drug use in Australia are multifaceted and deserve ongoing inquiry. An obvious limitation of this analysis is that it only presents a partial picture of the two newspapers' perspectives, albeit an official editorial view. Additionally, the much larger number of editorials in the HS than in the *Age* suggests interpreting the differences between the two papers with caution. Future research might usefully examine opinion pieces and journalist reports from the two newspapers over the same period to explore whether they reveal a more complex construction of the MSIR, including the extent of convergence between the views expressed in news and editorial pieces.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Philip Mendes: Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Robert Taylor:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing; formal analysis. **Steven Roche:** Methodology.

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