

## Mediamonitor Program of The HCLU

Contact person: István Gábor Takács, psychologist, Hungarian Civil Liberties Union

[takacsistvan@tasz.hu](mailto:takacsistvan@tasz.hu)

One of the most important drug policy aims of HCLU is that **evidence based scientific knowledge** should play the largest role in discourse around drug issues, both in professional and societal level, instead of old preconceptions, myths and misbeliefs. Therefore the long term objective of our Mediamonitor Program<sup>1</sup> is to achieve a much more valid and fact based coverage of drug issues. In order to move this direction, we need to improve coverage quality through raising journalists responsibility and informing them with valid scientific facts.

### Background

Drug users are the less tolerated group in Hungarian society, more rejected than any other minorities, like roma, homosexual, alcoholic people or those with a prison history.<sup>i</sup> Fear and hostility towards them rarely involves real knowledge. According to researches conducted in this field,<sup>ii</sup> Hungarian people perceive illicit drug use in a highly exaggerated, and undifferentiated manner. The undifferentiated and biased image of illicit drugs and their users is developed and still well maintained by our media. Although there has been a development in the quality of media coverings of drug related issues since the early 90's, media articles and programs often make no distinction between the very different types of drugs and drug use patterns, also exaggerate the dangers and harm done by illicit substances by themselves and compared to those that are currently free to consume. By doing this, the media contributes to the stigmas associated with drug use, and undermines not only the chance of a rational drug policy discussion but also the possibility of the prevention and reduction of real harm done by substance abuse. Until our Mediamonitor Program, there has been no effort to control the quality of Hungarian media that deals with drug issues. This means until today anyone could write anything without getting any comment or critique. The following are examples of the most common media biases monitored by our program:

**Exaggeration of the „drug problem”** - *Media very often exaggerates the individual and societal costs and problems associated with illicit drug use, in itself, and compared to those substances that are currently free to buy and consume.* “Not only our physical and mental existence may perish using drugs, but we might become completely useless for the society. It can be, that the statistics show that less people die of illicit drugs than alcohol or tobacco related issues, but the state of drug users is the most frightening, because they are incapable of any work, they are almost undead”<sup>iii</sup>

**Undifferentiated images of drugs** - *Marijuana, LSD, ecstasy, heroin and cocaine are THE DRUGS, as if they had the same effects:* “They usually start using drugs at the beginning of secondary school, and when they get to graduate, the trouble is there. Most endangered are the 15-24 age olds. Until the beginning of adulthood, they either quit or die”<sup>iv</sup>

**Exaggeration of the dangers of illicit drugs and the rejection of the possibility of moderation** - “The latest scientific research show obviously than ever, that regular use of marijuana can result in severe psychic damage, insanity and schizophrenia”. “First of all, weed did not socialise into our culture, it needs time, like thousands of years in case of alcohol, to be paired with the concept of cadence”<sup>vi</sup>

**Undifferentiated images of drug users** - “Drug use is followed by behavioural changes: money and other valuables regularly disappear. The person often begs, asks for a loan. The school performance of the till then eminent students decline, they become wags, and often do not go home. Their relationship

---

<sup>1</sup> Available at: [http://www.drogriporter.hu/index.php?op=mediamonitor\\_all&catalog\\_id=562](http://www.drogriporter.hu/index.php?op=mediamonitor_all&catalog_id=562) Including the Mediamonitor Blog at: [http://www.drogriporter.hu/index.php?op=contentlist2&catalog\\_id=562](http://www.drogriporter.hu/index.php?op=contentlist2&catalog_id=562)

with parents deteriorates, they change friends, what they try to keep in secret. They neglect themselves and their clothing. They become reserved, lonely and burned out. They use too much perfume against the smell of drugs. It is also suspicious, when someone wears sunglasses without a reason.”<sup>vii</sup>

**Causal relationship between the use of certain drugs (the gateway theory)** - *One of the strongest myths around drug use is that using marijuana almost inevitably leads to use of other drugs:*

“According to Hungarian brain researchers, if someone smokes marijuana cigarette regularly, it is 80-90 percent, that sooner or later he/she will touch other heavier drugs too.”<sup>viii</sup>

**The role of experts. Can we trust them?** - *Unfortunately, very often those who would be otherwise authentic, make the most unscientific and prejudiced remarks about drug use. The most outstanding case in 2005 was the TV presentation of the head of the Hungarian Science Academy, Szilveszter E. Vizi, an acknowledged neurologist. He educated probably millions of people about dangers of “hard drugs” like this: “[the drug user] commits crimes, steals, cheats and murders. This is the biggest tragedy of society, that such a desire and craving arose in individuals, that lead them to commit crimes.” “[the drug user] degenerates mentally, ghostly desolates, physically weakens, and loses his/her ability of decision, which means, becoming limited in personal freedom”. “Drug use has become such an endemic, whose victims are the youth in the first place, and is more and more often the cause of crimes”*

### ***Program methods***

We are constantly monitoring drug related articles, TV and radio broadcasts, and react on the biases with scientific facts, through the readers letters of the visitors of our website ([www.drogriporter.hu](http://www.drogriporter.hu)). Our program is partly based on the activity of our visitors, whom we offer a system to send readers letters for the writers and editors of the problem articles.

*Monitoring* - Through the main media observer company we receive weekly all the drug related articles of most of the hungarian press and online journals. Besides we constantly monitor TV and radio programs, and we regularly receive articles sent by our website visitors.

*Critiques* - We write critiques of the most important problem articles, strictly based on reliable scientific sources. Every statement has a reference to a scientific source, like a research study with hyperlink or a book chapter and page. Being evidence based is the most important feature of our program.

*Building database* - We build a fact database from the sources we use for our critiques. It is constantly expanding, available on our website, and we can also use it for our future critiques. We also constantly build a database from the hyperlinks, listing all the important Hungarian and most of the useful foreign websites.

*Writing readers letters* - We react the problem articles with readers letters. We send them to the journalists and/or editors, and publish them on the website. We write our own critique and letter, providing all the important facts for our readers. We give the addresses of the editors and journalists, and provide a mailing engine which our readers can use to write, edit and send their own letters with.

Our program is supported by our Patron Advisory Body, which consists of five well know and acknowledged journalists, all of them known because of their fact based and objective drugrelated pieces.

### **Program Results**

From the beginning there was high interest in our program from the media. Several radio program invited us and the Hungarian Television made a live interview with the coordinator of the program. Our program has been appreciated by several illustrious drug experts. From January 2005 till January 2007, we have monitored approximately 6000 articles, and criticised and sent readers letters for the authors or editors of the most problematic 90 articles. We have also suggested several articles that

were good examples of unbiased and factual journalism. During the course of our program we have changed our method. At the beginning, we wrote a sample letter in each case, our readers only had to send it (though they could edit the text) to the given address. This method had a side effect, namely the journalists regarded the letters as spam, and perceived the letters more as a simple confrontation, than something to consider. Now we only provide the mailing engine, with the address, and the readers have to write their own letter. We have an expanding visitor group, more and more people come back to our site. Feedback given by our visitors is absolutely positive, although visitors mostly read the pages but few write letters.

In several cases, we wrote not only letters, but inspired by the articles claims, wrote longer comprehensive summaries on our website. In some cases we did not „just” write critiques on our site, but published longer essays in press media and expert journals. As part of the broader program, we have made interviews with various drug policy and drug experts, like the researcher Peter Cohen, from the University of Amsterdam (CEDRO), Josch Steinmetz, the chief of the biggest injection room in Frankfurt, Germany, or Peter Reuter an outstanding drug policy researcher about the relationship between science and drug policy.

We have been invited several times to hold lectures of our program. We also consider partly a success of our program, that an initiation has developed among journalists themselves, to improve their own knowledge and credibility in the issue of drugs. Organised by the journalist of a major radio station “Petőfi,” in March 2006 an expert training has been held for 15 journalists representing various media. HCLU was one of the supporter of this initiative, and the mediamonitor program coordinator has held a presentation about the experiences of the program. The Mediamonitor program coordinator has been invited to Belgium in September 2006, to hold a presentation about the Mediamonitor program methods and its experiences, for NGO representatives involved in HIV/AIDS prevention from European, mostly Central and Eastern European countries. The seminar “Working with the Media” was organised by Sensoa, Belgium and AIDS Action Europe. At the end of 2006, the Mediamonitor program coordinator has been invited by the Hungarian National Drug Prevention Institute to hold a lecture about media and drug use for the representatives of the local Coordination Forums on Drug Affairs. We have also held lectures for psychologists at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, for a broader audience at the “Psychology days” at the University of Szeged or for Student Journalists at the festival of the National Association of Student and Youth Journalists.

Reactions given to our readers letters range from support through indifference to rejection. Most of the journalists still do not answer the letters. Some of those who answer publish our comments, some write back with fury. It seems like our journalists are not used to such letters, but we think it is the success of our program, that a discussion begun and we started to raise awareness in this topic. It is a thin ice, being confrontative and at the same time behaving like their partner. We think we achieved this so far, we could present our letters as corrections, but for the same purpose as theirs: credible coverage and honest public education.

The program was run by two persons at HCLU, the Mediamonitor program coordinator and the drug policy program coordinator. Recently we have employed two interns to help us continue our work, and soon we will have our new website with more easy to use interface and database.

---

<sup>i</sup> Four fifth of the adult population gives negative answer about a potential drug user neighbour, and more than half is unequivocally against it.

<sup>ii</sup> Elekes, Paksi 2003 cited in: National Drugprevention Institute, Hungarian National Focalpoint (2004) Report on the drug situation in Hungary, New developments, trends and detailed informations, Budapest p. 29-31

<sup>iii</sup> XIV. kerületi Helyi Téma (2005a) Tóth Kovács Krisztina: Drogmegelőzési Program, Szakmai szervezetek a kábítószer ellen, XIV. kerületi Helyi Téma, 2005. június 8. (Krisztina Tóth Kovács (2005) Drugprevention Program, Professional Organisations against drugs. XIV. District Local Matters, 8 June 2005.)

<sup>iv</sup> Nők Lapja (2005) Nagy EmNke (2005) "Nincs könnyű drog, csak drog van" válaszol Dr. Juhász Krisztina pszichiáter, Nlk Lapja, 2005. január 26. (EmNke Nagy (2005) „There is no light drug, only drug” Dr. Krisztina Juhász answers, Womens Magazine, 26 January 2005 )

---

<sup>v</sup> Hetek (2005) Sebestyén István (2005) Újra terítéken a szabad kenderezés, Hetek 2005. április 1. (István Sebestyén (2005) Free hempering is on carpet again, Weeks, 1 April 2005)

<sup>vi</sup> Magyar Nemzet (2005) Tóth Szabolcs Töhötöm (2005) A menekülNk egyre csak jönnek... Csernus Imre: Nem lehet a drogokat szétesett emberekre rázabadítani, Magyar Nemzet, 2005. április 16. (Szabolcs Tóth Töhötöm (2005) The fugitives keep coming...Imre Csernus: You can't set loose drugs on broken people, Hungarian Nation, 16 April 2005)

<sup>vii</sup> Heves Megyei Hírlap (2005) Szalay Zoltán (2005) Lassan halálba cipelő pillanatnyi boldogság, interjú Kocsis Irén Mária r. alezredessel, Heves Megyei Hírlap, 2005. június 27. (Zoltán Szalay (2005) Minutes of happiness that slowly carry us to death, interview with Irén Mária Kocsis police lieutenant-colonel, Heves County News, 27 June 2005)

<sup>viii</sup> TV2 (2005) Jana Gabriella, Ligeti László (2005) Vadkender, csak fű alatt Van, aki vállalja, van, aki ellenzi és vannak, akik illegálisán fogyasztják - a vita örök: a drogfogyasztó beteg vagy bűnöző? TV2 „Aktív”, 2005. március 30. (Gabriella Jana, László Ligeti (2005) Hemp, only in secret. Some acknowledge, some are against it and others consume it illegally – the debate is persistent: is the drug user sick or criminal? TV2 „Active”, 30 March 2005)