

Struck by the Potentials of Cannabusiness: Exploring the Relationship Between Neoliberal Ideology and Journalism in the Reporting on Legal Cannabis

Ernesto Abalo

School of Education and Communication, Jönköping University, Jönköping, Sweden,
ernesto.abalo@ju.se

Abstract: This study examines the reporting on legal cannabis in order to explore the operation of neoliberal ideology in journalistic discourse. Cannabis legalisation is here understood as a way for capitalism to create new market opportunities, besides being a turn away from the so-called ‘war on drugs’. The study understands neoliberalism as operating via market-based logics that are interrelated with other social logics, such as those pertaining to journalism (Phelan 2014). Critical discourse analysis is used for studying Swedish newspaper reporting on legal cannabis between 2013 and 2018. The study shows that a struggle between market-based logics and journalistic practices is visible, where journalism has difficulties in challenging core tenets of neoliberal ideology. The article concludes with a discussion of how the current conditions of journalism limit its ability to challenge neoliberal perspectives.

Keywords: cannabis legalisation, capitalism, critical discourse analysis, hegemony, ideology, journalism, marijuana, media, neoliberalism

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank the two reviewers and the editor for their productive comments.

1. Introduction

The renegotiation of cannabis that is taking place in different parts of the world, evidenced by the legalisation of the substance for recreational use in Canada, Uruguay, and several US states, represents a deviation from the UN drug conventions (UNODC 2013) and a turn away from the so-called global ‘war on drugs’. Advocates argue that drug legalisation would reduce the social costs of combatting the illegal drug trade and the violence that comes with it, as well as hindering discrimination cast as combatting drugs (Barry, Hiilamo and Glantz 2014). On another level, and viewed against the background of the ongoing crisis of capitalism (Foster and Magdoff 2009; Foster and McChesney 2012; Fuchs et al. 2010), the legalisation of cannabis opens new national and international markets and provides new opportunities for securing revenues, both for corporations directly involved in the production and sale of cannabis, and for nation-states, in the form of taxes. Legalisation thus becomes another way for capitalism to transform itself in the “search for new paths to profit”, in the words of Boltanski and Chiapello (2018, 488). From a public health perspective, as Room (2013) argues, the aim should be to minimise the use of cannabis with the help of regulation. However, the economic incentive that exists in places where cannabis legalisation also allows private companies to sell the substance paves the way for increased cannabis use and increased public health risks. As Barry, Hiilamo, and Glantz (2014) argue, major corporations, mainly from the tobacco industry, but also from the food and beverage industries, are standing ready to enter the legal cannabis

market to increase its use and maximise profits – and they have both the marketing tools and the political muscles to do it.

This study approaches cannabis legalisation from a critical media studies perspective (Fuchs 2011), using the reporting on legal cannabis as a case to explore the operation of neoliberal ideology in journalism. The potential of cannabis legalisation to provide business opportunities, financial gains, and tax revenues on the one hand, and on the other hand to increase the risk of public health concerns (and, with that, increase costs), makes journalism about cannabis legalisation a good locus for ideological struggles, where different logics, interests, and perspectives potentially meet. The aim of this study is to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between journalism and hegemony, and more specifically to the understanding of how neoliberal ideology operates in journalism and intersects with other logics surrounding journalism.

The study relies on empirical materials from Sweden, a country where the goal of a *drug-free society* has guided the formation of a strict and prohibitionist drug policy (Goldberg 2004; Lenke and Olsson 2002) and formed part of the national identity (Tham 1992). Sweden, for decades known as one of the most egalitarian countries in the world, has undergone a severe neoliberalisation during the last three decades, seen in the deregulation of several welfare services, such as schools and health care, and leading to increased inequality (Therborn 2018). Swedish journalism is therefore a rich case to study because of the intersection of different logics. On the one hand there is a prohibitionist drug policy that enjoys broad political and popular support, and that could serve to challenge neoliberal arguments on cannabis legalisation. On the other hand, the neoliberalisation of Swedish society potentially lowers the threshold for neoliberal perspectives in journalism. In the middle of this, there is journalism, with its own set of logics, mediating between the two. In this context, Swedish journalism potentially provides a complex picture of the operation of neoliberal ideology in journalistic discourse.

Looking at previous studies, it is safe to say that the conduct of the media in times of neoliberalism has been a central object of enquiry for critical media scholars. Scholars have studied the effects of deregulation and privatisation on the media and journalism from a political economy perspective (Chakravartty and Schiller 2010; de Mateo, Bergés and Garnatxe 2010; Freedman 2010; Herman and McChesney 1997). Moreover, scholars have investigated the links between the journalistic habitus and neoliberalised logics, showing how marketised logics can dissolve the distinction between the journalistic watchdog role and (neoliberal) advocacy (Phelan and Salter 2017). Furthermore, scholars have problematised the relationship between journalism and business-oriented sources, and how this relationship may reinforce perspectives that take the market for granted (Duval 2005; Manning 2012; Rafter 2014). Djerf-Pierre, Ekström, and Johansson (2013) show that the marketisation of the public sector weakens journalism's ability to do accountability work, leading to the moralisation of social problems instead of pointing them out as policy failures. Studying the reporting on the Greek economic crisis, Mylonas (2015) argues that the media reproduces neoliberal ideology by negating alternative frames to the austerity politics proposed by the EU. In a similar vein, Jacobsson (2016), in a series of discourse studies on the reporting about the automotive crisis in Sweden, has shown how journalism fails to transcend the neoliberal postures of key actors, which in turn leads to the failure to assign political responsibility in relation to the reported crisis.

Previous studies have thus shown how journalism is hindered in different ways by neoliberal policies – as well as by its inability to offset their ideological tenets – in

pursuing its watchdog role. In this way, journalism ends up reproducing a neoliberal understanding of society. The current article draws on critical discourse analysis as well as on Phelan's (2014) understanding of neoliberalism as a set of logics that intersects with other logics of a specific social field, such as journalism. The study contributes to critical media studies by showing, at the level of discourse, how market-oriented logics that serve to construct cannabis in ways that cohere with neoliberal ideology struggle against journalistic ideals and social values. The study shows that the controversies surrounding cannabis are not necessarily an obstacle for constructing the substance in ways that take market perspectives for granted.

The next section discusses the theoretical approach of the study and the ways in which the relationship between journalism and neoliberalism is conceptualised. Next, the methods and materials of the study are presented. This third section is followed by the presentation of the main results, and lastly the conclusions of the study are presented.

2. Journalism and Neoliberal Ideology

Neoliberalism can be a somewhat fuzzy concept to define because it can be referred to as an economic theory, a set of policies, a set of practices, but also ideological conceptions corresponding to these (see Brenner and Theodore 2005; Peck 2010). In his Marxist historiography of neoliberalism, geographer David Harvey (2005, 2) defines it as

[I]n the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and to preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.

With this definition, Harvey places the focus on the macroeconomic characteristics of neoliberalism, highlighting the supporting role of the state in freeing the economy, promoting free markets and strengthening private property rights, a project with the aim of restoring class power (2005). As Harvey also notes, another characteristic of contemporary neoliberalism is what he calls accumulation by dispossession, that is the privatisation and financialisation of, for example, land and welfare.

On another level, Harvey also understands neoliberalism as being "hegemonic as a mode of discourse" and having been "incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (2005, 3), making neoliberalism an ideology in the interests of the ruling classes. Neoliberalism can thus be understood as part of what Gramsci (1971) calls hegemony: class rule by consent rather than force (although without excluding force), in which ideology is pivotal for securing consent. Media scholar Sean Phelan (2014) expands on the ideological character of neoliberalism, saying that neoliberalism "is packed in ways that can secure popular consent, strategically exploiting the inherent human appeal of the language of freedom and individual rights" (2014, 15). He argues that the rhetoric of free markets and free trade can in fact "act as the ideological cover" for the establishment of a regime that serves global capitalist interests (2014, 15).

In order to understand the operation of neoliberal ideology in journalism, we need to pay attention to how neoliberal perceptions of the world intersect with journalistic practices. In order to avoid oversimplifying any analysis by pointing to neoliberalism in any causal, totalising, or deterministic way, Phelan (2014) focuses on what he calls the

logics of neoliberalism. “A neoliberal logic”, states Phelan, “is a logic that neoliberalizes the social, either in the form of reproducing an already sedimented logic or in the form of a political logic that extends and intensifies the process of neoliberalization” (2014, 57). Key here is his conceptualisation of neoliberalisation, which is said to be

The process where market-based logics and practices, especially logics of market determinism, commodification, individualization, competitive ritual and self-interest, are dialectically internalized and generated in particular social regimes (Phelan 2014, 57).

Phelan’s conceptualisation is helpful for understanding how neoliberalism can operate by imposing its logics on other social spheres, a conceptualisation that serves to bridge the gap between political and economic practices and journalistic practices. Of relevance here is Phelan’s (2014, 59) emphasising that “we need to capture how neoliberal logics are always articulated with other social logics, often in messy and paradoxical ways” that sometimes are not perfectly coherent with a neat idea of neoliberalism. Regarding journalism, in this study “other social logics” are interpreted as professional ideals of objectivity and neutrality, or the ideal of being a watchdog against power. Here it is pivotal to place journalism in a greater sociopolitical context. As discussed by Berglez, Olausson and Ots (2017), journalism is suffering a crisis, which to a certain degree is tied to a decline in sales and revenues, but also to an overreliance on technology, resulting in staff cuts, which in turn affect the ways journalists can fulfil such ideals (see also Davis 2010; Freedman 2010). Moreover, as scholars have shown (Duval 2005; Jacobsson 2016; Lewis 2017; Manning 2012; Rafter 2014), journalism has difficulties in transcending neoliberal perspectives that frequently come from the sources used: this ought to be seen as connected to the structural conditions of journalism. As Phelan (2014) points out, journalism’s aim of being neutral or anti-ideological may ultimately result in the normalisation of so-called market realism.

On another level, social logics are here also understood as being specific cultural conventions or hegemonic values in a specific context. For this study, it is central to understand the hegemonic status of drug prohibition in Sweden (Abalo 2018; Månsson 2017) as a social logic that could intersect with journalistic and neoliberal logics in the reporting of cannabis legalisation. Given the overall critical stance on drugs in the Swedish political landscape (Goldberg 2004; Lenke and Olsson 2002), it may well be the case that such dominant perceptions serve to counter eventual market-friendly perspectives on the drug. Research on Swedish media’s portrayal of cannabis (Abalo 2018; Månsson 2016) has shown that although room is given to cannabis-friendly voices, there are also portrayals that focus on the downsides of the drug. On the other hand, cannabis legalisation is to some extent a progressive move in the context of the criminalisation of the substance and its use, which can serve to legitimise legalisation among journalists. In a neoliberal context, however, the progressive characteristics of legalisation risk being absorbed by the logics of the market, with the potential consequence of reproducing neoliberal ideology if discourses promoting commodification are not challenged.

This takes us to the level of discourse, because it is in language use that this study seeks to identify how neoliberal ideology and corresponding logics are reinforced or contested in journalism. Discourse and its surrounding social structures are here seen as being set in a dialectical relationship with each other (Fairclough 1995), meaning that they can shape one another. The discursive output is to a great extent, then, a

result of the struggle between different social logics. I find the concept of discursive strategies – discursive interventions used by journalists and other social actors more or less unconsciously “in order to achieve a certain effect or goal” (Carvalho 2008, 169) – helpful for operationalising how different logics are articulated in journalistic discourse. The logics of commodification and individualisation, to take a couple of examples of those that Phelan (2014) mentions as providing neoliberalisation, can be articulated via discursive strategies, where social actors frame reality in ways that promote neoliberalised interpretations. For example, the uncritical reproduction of market discourses can serve to promote understandings of cannabis that match neoliberal ideology. In the same way, discursive strategies by the journalistic voice or other social actors can serve to offset neoliberalised constructions by, for example, problematising the marketisation of the substance. To be sure, the focus on discourse does not mean that neoliberalism is understood as lacking a material side, but rather that in scrutinising its ideological character one needs to pay attention to how it is composed in language use.

3. Methods and Materials

3.1. Sample Construction and Data Collection

This study employed a strategic approach for the collection of data and the construction of the sample. Materials from two leading morning newspapers in Sweden, *Dagens Nyheter* (*DN*) and *Svenska Dagbladet* (*SvD*), have been collected and analysed. These two newspapers are based in Stockholm but have a national reach, and they were chosen because they traditionally have been two of the most prominent morning newspapers in the country, with a readership across Sweden. The political allegiance of *DN*'s editorial pages is liberal, and *SvD*'s is conservative.

A time frame was set between January 1, 2013 and August 31, 2018. This time frame aims to cover a period when legalisation of cannabis in different parts of the world was either being discussed or taking effect. Legalisations in Colorado, Washington, and Uruguay took effect in 2014, and materials from the year before were included in order to cover possible coverage that centred on the run-up to these policy changes. Furthermore, the time frame follows the increased number of legalisation initiatives around the world, such as those in several US states as well as in Canada. During this period, it is possible to note the establishment of legal cannabis as a news topic, appearing in different sections of the newspapers.

Materials were collected by using the Mediarkivet Retriever database and searching for the keywords “cannabis” and “marijuana”. Because the study is interested in the discourse about legal cannabis, items that did not frame cannabis in relation to legalisation were excluded. So were items that only mentioned legalisation briefly and did not contribute information relevant to the aim of the study. The sample centred on news journalism, meaning that opinion pieces such as editorials, debate articles, letters, essays, and cultural commentaries were not taken into consideration. In total, 77 items were included in the sample: 42 from *DN* and 35 from *SvD*. The items included text as well as additional graphics and information boxes. The sample included news and feature articles, briefs, blurbs, and columns by correspondents. The selected items were published on the first page and in the national news section, foreign news section, feature section, business section, and cultural section.

3.2. Analytical Approach

The study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a method for the qualitative analysis of journalistic discourse. Central for CDA is the unveiling of the ideological character and the political positions present in texts that may appear to be neutral (Carvalho 2008; Fairclough 1995). Key in this ideology-critical endeavour has been to identify how on a macro-level each item serves to promote or challenge neoliberalised constructions in the reporting on cannabis legalisation. This was inferred by using an analytical approach that included analysing the following elements (Carvalho 2008):

- (a) *Layout, structural organisation, and visuals*: What type of item is it and in which section does it appear? What topics are given prominence? How do visual elements contribute to meaning-making?
- (b) *Objects*: What objects or realities are constructed in relation to cannabis? What are the main topics constructed in headlines, the lead paragraph, and the body of the text? How are broad objects linked to narrow ones?
- (c) *Actors*: What social actors are quoted or referred to? What is the framing power of each actor; what influence does the actor have in shaping the general meaning of the text?
- (d) *Language, grammar, and rhetoric*: Is the language of the text formal or informal, technical or not? What implications do lexical choices (the use of specific terms and concepts) have for ascribing specific characteristics to social actors and practices? In what ways can specific words and figures serve rhetorical purposes?
- (e) *Discursive strategies*: How do social actors and the journalistic voice organise discourse around a specific perspective (*framing*)? How is the relationship between actors constructed (*positioning*)? How are actions justified (*legitimation*)? How is a political nature ascribed to specific events and practices (*politicisation*)?
- (f) *Comparing text to context*: What discursive patterns and differences are there between texts? What connections are there between specific discourses in the texts and different positions in the general debate on cannabis? What can online searches on specific sources and actors tell about their motives and positions?

Each item was analysed by following each step above and noting the presence of the different elements and how they serve to construct wider objects and meanings. Objects that were found to be of theoretical relevance for the study were then examined across texts in order to find patterns and contradictions related to that specific object in the overall coverage.

As a method, CDA relies heavily on interpretation, which can increase the risk of subjectivity in the analytical process. However, by analysing the elements listed above, these risks are believed to be reduced.

4. Results

In this section I present the key findings of the study. They are organised around two central objects that have been induced from the analysis: the construction of legal cannabis as bringing economic optimism, and the construction of the risks of legalisation. As will be shown, the construction of cannabis as bringing economic optimism reveals a neoliberalised (Phelan 2014) approach to legal cannabis, insofar as cannabis is constructed around strategies of marketisation and commodification.

The construction of risks, on the other hand, largely serves to problematise the monetary gains with legalisation, although this is mainly done in an indirect manner. All in all, the analysis points to a somewhat dynamic relationship between neoliberal ideology and Swedish news journalism, showing a struggle between market perspectives, journalistic ideals, and hegemonic values about drugs in Sweden.

4.1. The Miracle of the Market: Legal Cannabis as Bringing Economic Optimism

There are constructions at different levels and involving different strategies in both newspapers that serve to construct legal cannabis, either recreational or medical, as something that brings economic optimism. Common to these constructions is that market logics are hegemonic and direct the construction of legal cannabis. Central here is the commodification of cannabis and the marketisation of the discourse on the substance. Constructions of this kind serve to downplay the social risks of cannabis legalisation and to reproduce the logics of the market, showing how market logics are taken for granted in journalism (Herman and Chomsky 2002; Lewis 2017). The hegemony of market-based logics in such constructions is here argued to indicate how discourse on cannabis is neoliberalised.

At the level of headlines, which are important components in the framing of a story (Carvalho 2008), it is possible to see that commodification is an important framing strategy through which to understand cannabis legalisation. Headlines such as “Investors hope to make money like grass” (*DN* May 5, 2014), “An industry is growing around marijuana” (*DN* November 12, 2014), “Legal marijuana a growing billion-kronor industry” (*DN* September 24, 2016), “Legal marijuana ‘big business’” (*DN* October 19, 2016), “Going upwards in the cannabis store” (*SvD* December 17, 2013), “Marijuana tourism has grown to become a billion-kronor industry in Colorado” (*SvD* May 8, 2017), “The entrepreneurs are herded around the drug” (*SvD* May 8, 2017), and “Grass becomes gold for Nevada” (*SvD* July 2, 2017) use commodification and marketisation as central discursive strategies, and construct optimism around legalisation, although alluding to cannabis as a “drug” in some instances.¹ These headlines, which pertain to items from the first page, the foreign news section, and the economy section, centre on the growing character of the sale of cannabis and its ability to create revenues, which is to be perceived as good news, from a market perspective.

This type of optimistic framing can be seen more clearly when looking into some of the headlines and lead paragraphs:

Investors hope to make money like grass

In the beginning it was the gold rush, then came the dot-com companies. Now it is the grass rush and cannabusiness that is talked about in the USA (*DN* May 5, 2014).

Free-for-all in legal market for cannabis

The legalisation of cannabis in Uruguay has become a success. Far more [people] than the government thought have registered to buy governmental [cannabis]. Now international capital is rushing to the small South American country to invest in medical cannabis above all (*DN* March 5, 2018).

¹ All excerpts from the empirical materials have been translated from Swedish to English by the author.

Marijuana tourism has grown to become a billion-dollar industry in Colorado

In Colorado, there are twice as many marijuana stores than there are Starbucks and McDonalds put together. The legalisation of marijuana for medical use in that American state has become a billion-kronor industry (SvD May 8, 2017).

These excerpts represent the headline and full lead paragraph of the respective articles – the first two are from the economy section and the third is from the foreign news section – and they summarise the general framing of each piece. The excerpts show how the choice of headlines and the framing strategies of the journalistic voice in the lead, by marketising, commodifying, and centring on the monetary opportunities of legal cannabis, serve to celebrate legalisation and to construct a sense of optimism. The use of lexical choices such as “grass rush” and “cannabusiness”, labelling legalisation a “success” due to the large number of customers, and comparing the number of cannabis stores to that of food franchises, not only serve to frame cannabis from a market perspective, but also to construct it as something creating wealth. Downplaying health and social risks of the substance in the general framing serves to construct the commodification of cannabis as something positive.

The importance of the market for framing legal cannabis is also visible in how the business side of legal cannabis can absorb other dimensions in the reporting of legal cannabis. The reporting about a health care project in Denmark, where patients would be offered cannabis for medical purposes, serves as an example. The items, mainly briefs, come from the Swedish news agency TT. One of the headlines, “Danish yes to medical cannabis” (*DN* November 9, 2016), focusing on the medical aspect of the initiative – can be compared to “Danish farmers want locally produced cannabis” (*DN* November 18, 2016) and “13 companies want to grow cannabis” (*SvD* October 29, 2017), headlines shifting the focus to the business side of the initiative.

Economic optimism is not only constructed around business, but also around the tax revenues that cannabis sales may provide. Constructions like “Colorado was first to legalize marijuana and is now collecting hundreds of millions of taxes on the sale” (*SvD* August 14, 2016), or “The first month of legal sale of marijuana gave the state of Nevada 3.6 million dollars, about 28 million kronor in tax revenues, write several American media” (*SvD* October 2, 2017) lend legitimacy to the sale of legal cannabis by pointing to revenues that are in the service of the public. On one level, it is tempting to argue that such constructions oppose a neoliberal framework by legitimising taxes and thus the increase of state revenues. On another level, the tax revenues are constructed as a result of the sales. Thus, the emphasis on tax revenues can work rhetorically to legitimise the opening of new markets, which in the end strengthen business revenues.

The business-oriented focus as seen above is to a certain extent explained by the framing power given to business sources, especially those representing the cannabis industry. This can be seen mainly in two ways: the heavy reliance on quotations from business-associated social actors and the reliance on facts coming from cannabis industry groups. A business feature about Colorado published in a two-page spread in *DN* with the title “Legal marijuana a growing billion-kronor industry” (*DN* September 24, 2016) serves as an example of the framing power that business sources enjoy. Apart from a second-hand quotation from the Colombian health minister speaking positively about the trade of marijuana, the article contains direct interview quotations from four actors, three of whom work in cannabis-related businesses, and the fourth representing a pro-legalisation lobby group. These quoted actors describe the success

of the cannabis trade, how policy is now shifting to become more accepting towards cannabis and how more people are starting to use cannabis due to the change in policy. One actor is quoted as saying “The market has exploded. We are in the ‘green rush’”, while another says that “More Washingtonians are definitely using marijuana after the law change, not least old people who used to smoke when they were young. Isn’t that wonderful!” (*DN* September 24, 2016). In one instance the journalist poses a critical question, and the interaction between the journalistic voice and the quoted actor is worth observing as an example of how, discursively, the struggle between journalistic ideals of accountability and logics of marketisation and commodification can look.

‘But isn’t there a risk that marijuana will create new problems?’

‘Yes sometimes. Marijuana can in the worst case provide increased problems for those with high levels of anxiety. Our task is to educate patients to use the right substance and the right amount,’ answers Kathleen McKinnon.

A zealous atmosphere pervades the event. In a big hall, producers are showing the new generation of fanciful marijuana variants and you can even find preparations that have been formed into small Lego figures. Growing tents for home use, energy-saving strip lights and fertilizers also attract the curious (*DN* September 24, 2016).

The excerpt shows how the journalist’s attempt to problematise the liberalisation of cannabis instead ends up in the reinforcement of the marketisation and commodification of the substance. In her answer to the journalist’s question, McKinnon, who is said to represent Canna Care Docs, a company that is described as offering “medical diagnosis in order to recruit patients to the marijuana clinics” (*DN* September 24, 2016), legitimises actors such as herself by stressing their importance for diminishing cannabis-related health risks. Her answer downplays health risk concerns by referring to situations “in the worst case” and to a specific group of patients (“those with high levels of anxiety”). The journalist does not, however, follow up on the concerns raised, and the answer provided by McKinnon therefore serves to close the journalist’s enquiry. In the next paragraph, the journalistic voice changes topic and starts describing a fair that the cannabis industry is arranging, and the variety of cannabis commodities being offered there. In this way, journalism reproduces rather than problematises the discourse of the cannabis industry actors, and this is enabled by the inability to profoundly offset the business discourse.

The analysed materials also offer examples of how business journalism uses cannabis industry groups as sources without engaging critically with them, something that also exemplifies how market discourses become hegemonic in the journalistic framing of legal cannabis. This is especially the case in the use of information from the cannabis industry group Arcview Market Research, which declares that its mission is “To forge a principled and profitable industry from the ashes of cannabis prohibition” (Arcview 2018).

Arcview market research, an association of investors in the marijuana business, published a report last year where the legal marijuana market in the USA in 2013 was said to be worth 1.5 billion dollars. This year, it is expected to grow to 2.6 billion dollars (*DN* May 5, 2014).

Last year, marijuana worth 57 billion kronor was sold in the whole USA, according to Arcview Market Research. (*SvD* May 8, 2017).

In three years, the legal marijuana industry in the USA will have a turnover equivalent to 320 billion kronor and create 400,000 new jobs, according to the lobby group Arcview, which gathers investors in the marijuana business (DN January 4, 2018).

Arcview, which among other things writes reports on the cannabis market, is referred to when some of the items provide economic figures about the cannabis industry, and, as visible in the excerpts above, serves to provide a positive image of the business side of legal cannabis. Arcview is in the last excerpt labelled a “lobby group”, without this precluding their being used as a central source. The construction of cannabis sales as being successful is helped by the presentation of figures (“1.5 billion dollars”, “57 billion kronor”, etc.), which work rhetorically to emphasise the success of the business. However, these figures are not explained. What, for example, does 1.5 billion kronor mean in the broader national-economic context of the United States? Or what does the creation of 400,000 new jobs imply? Are they qualified jobs or jobs with low wages, and in which sectors will they be? The reader is left without any clear answers. My point is that this way of uncritically reproducing facts from business sources shows how market logics, in instances like these, prevail in the struggle against journalistic logics such as the ideal of critically scrutinising sources. The failure to scrutinise sources is not proof of neoliberalisation *per se*, but in a context where the discourse of the cannabis industry is reproduced and has the effect of commodifying cannabis as well as constructing the industry in an unproblematic way, it certainly serves to reproduce market-based logics. The result of this is a construction of cannabis that is in line with neoliberal ideology.

4.2. Questioning Marketisation: Constructing Risks with Legal Cannabis

Phelan (2014) argues that neoliberal logics are intertwined with other social logics, sometimes in ways that do not cohere with a spotless idea of neoliberalism. One way of grasping this is to analyse how critique against business optimism is constructed. To be sure, the materials do offer counter-perspectives to the optimistic discourses that have hitherto been accounted for. These counter-perspectives mainly centre on the health risks of cannabis use, as well as on the risk of misuse, and to a certain degree they are in line with the dominant scepticism towards illicit drugs in Sweden (Goldberg 2004; Lenke and Olsson 2002; Månsson 2017) and cohere with previous results on the reporting on cannabis in Swedish journalism (Abalo 2018; Månsson 2016). In this way, the good sides of legalisation (business) are offset with the downsides (health risks and misuse). However, this type of neutrality challenges the market perspectives mainly indirectly, because direct challenges to the positive economic discourse on legal cannabis are not typically part of the general framing. Also lacking is a direct criticism of the market economy. Constructions of the risks of cannabis legalisation exemplify the struggle between neoliberal logics and journalistic logics and how neoliberal ideology is renegotiated in journalism.

The construction of cannabis legalisation as accompanied by risks is visible in the way headlines use framing strategies that allude to uncertainty, as in “The experiment has only begun – soon we will see the consequences” (DN June 7, 2014); or to controversy, as in “Colorado a disputed marijuana paradise” (SvD August 14, 2016); or to misuse, as in the sub-headline “The misuse is increasing” (DN May 19, 2013). The construction of risks is also visible in how the journalistic voice uses the discursive strategy of positioning to explain different opinions on legal cannabis. For example, in a news feature on Colorado, the journalistic voice counters arguments for legalisation

(such as the possibilities to reduce the amount of drug-related arrests and increasing tax revenues) by stating:

But the liberalization also has its sharp critics and there is no consensus regarding the aggregate effects of the drug. There is, however, support for [the argument] that the brains of children and youth are harmed by THC. School performance drops, and the IQ levels are lower among children who have used marijuana (*DN* November 12, 2014).

Here, the journalist is focusing on (children's) health and implicitly alluding to (uncredited) facts when presenting arguments against legalisation. This serves to delegitimise cannabis legalisation from a moral point of view and indirectly also to challenge economic optimism around legalisation. What is visible here is how the sceptic's perspectives become important in upholding neutrality by offsetting previously stated arguments for legalisation. Moreover, what is also to some extent operating here is the traditional scepticism towards illicit drugs, which may have influenced why the journalist chose to question the positive arguments on legalisation in the first place. Thus, journalistic logics and the logics pertaining to hegemonic views on drugs serve to challenge positive views on cannabis, among them economic arguments.

The ways in which scepticism towards illicit drugs serves to question the trade of cannabis can also be seen in a first-page blurb and a business news article in *DN*, focusing on the ethical problems that some Swedish funds face now that it is possible to trade cannabis shares on the stock market (*DN* January 25, 2018). The article quotes different actors from the financial industry who raise different opinions about trading cannabis shares. What is interesting here is that cannabis trade is framed as an ethical question, which points to the controversial nature of cannabis in Sweden. However, it is only the trade of cannabis that is questioned in the article, not the financial system itself. This shows that core tenets of neoliberal ideology can remain unquestioned while risks associated with cannabis sales are constructed.

The material also offers examples where the liberalisation and selling of cannabis is questioned in a more direct manner in quotations by social actors that frame their critique around the marketisation of cannabis. An anti-legalisation activist, when contesting the arguments of another social actor who was referring to the revenues of legalisation, is quoted as saying: "He 'forgot' to say that for each dollar that the state collects one has to spend 10 on combatting the effects of marijuana" (*SvD* August 14, 2016). The same social actor also argues that there are an increased number of cases where children became intoxicated by using marijuana by mistake. Another example is the quotation of a legalisation sceptic: "We are opening up to a new industry and the enormous economic interests that want to increase consumption are impossible to resist" (*DN* November 12, 2014). Although the framing strategies used in these two quotations serve to question the revenues of legal cannabis and the interests behind them, one must remember that they appear so as to balance economically optimistic discourses in the same articles, again showing how criticism against market logics becomes part of the aim to uphold journalistic neutrality.

There is also an example of the journalistic voice presenting a critique against cannabis legalisation by framing the discursive intervention around the economic incentives that exist.

In a situation when fewer and fewer cigarettes are being sold, there are opportunities for the tobacco companies within the trend that Colorado and Washington represent.

Here, there exists a new niche for other types of smokes. It is rumored that a tobacco giant has searched the terrain in Denver for production and warehouse facilities.

Behind what is called “the drug-industrial complex” are mighty financiers. The billionaire George Soros is one of the sponsors, and he has contributed for years with millions of dollars (*DN* May 19, 2013).

This excerpt is taken from a feature article about Colorado that was one of the first articles that was published within the studied time frame, and that in general terms provides a sceptical framing to cannabis legalisation. The journalistic voice is here contextualising what has been said by a cannabis entrepreneur who was previously quoted. The framing strategy used by the journalist places legalisation in a wider context of economic power, which serves to cast doubts on the economic incentives of legalisation. The references to the tobacco industry and to philanthropist George Soros serve to construct powerful interests behind cannabis legalisation. This type of contestation of marketised arguments is not aligned with a neoliberal position, but rather bears closer ties to the journalistic ideal of being neutral (by critically engaging with market arguments), and to the traditional Swedish scepticism towards illicit drugs. It is important to note here that the excerpt is from a feature article, thus allowing the journalistic voice to be freer in framing events. Also, features normally involve a greater time-budget and are longer than news articles, allowing the journalist to provide more nuance and show more complexities.

5. Conclusions

This study shows an ongoing struggle between market-based logics, journalistic logics, and logics pertaining to dominant views on illicit drugs in Sweden. The marketisation and commodification of cannabis, which is sometimes labelled cannabusiness, is a central framing strategy in the reporting, and directs the journalistic discourse on legal cannabis. Discourse of this kind serves the neoliberalisation (Phelan 2014) of journalistic discourse on legal cannabis and the reproduction of neoliberal ideology. On the other hand, the study also shows that marketised arguments about legal cannabis are questioned, mainly by constructing risks around it. Here, market-based logics are renegotiated and to some extent controlled by journalistic logics and logics cohering to the traditional scepticism towards illicit drugs.

Different factors can explain these results. On one level, the study’s sample and its exclusive concentration on cannabis in relation to legalisation may have excluded some perspectives and arguments – for example discourses about law and order – that may have provided more complexity. On another level, one must also look at cannabis legalisation itself and the political and ideological context that surrounds it. Some of the optimism seen in the reporting could be a response to the liberal and yet progressive side of legalisation, namely the move away from the so-called ‘war on drugs’ which has led to repression, not least among minorities, in many contexts. The liberalising character of legalisation has both a political (moving away from prohibition) and an economic (bringing new market opportunities) dimension, where the economic dimension can absorb the political rationale that legitimises legalisation. In a global context where neoliberalism is “hegemonic as a mode of discourse” (Harvey 2005, 3), and has come to be seen as common sense, discourses aligned to such a logic are in

an advantaged position. Reporting that centres on the economic potentials or the success of cannabis legalisation is basically just responding to what is commonplace in a neoliberal context. This seems especially to be the case in business journalism, where one can find a greater reluctance to offset neoliberal perspectives.

This takes us to the meso-level, the journalistic practice, which is central for understanding discursive production, because it is on this level where the struggle between neoliberal and other logics are discursively formed. In a context where journalism is in crisis (Berglez, Olausson and Ots 2017) and sufficient resources for checking and critically engaging with sources are lacking, traditional journalistic logics are disadvantaged in relation to neoliberal ones. This is evident in how some facts of business groups are taken for granted in the analysed reporting. Thus, the combination of neoliberalism as hegemonic ideology and the need to create fast news may explain why some business groups are used as trustworthy sources, which in turn leads to the reproduction of perspectives that take the market as a given. The traditional scepticism towards illicit drugs in Sweden, on the other hand, serves to strengthen the realisation of journalistic ideals of objectivity and to present perspectives that, at least in an indirect manner, criticise market perspectives. This is visible especially in longer articles, journalistic content that one can assume has had a larger budget.

Furthermore, one should not overestimate the ways in which neoliberal logics are offset in the analysed cases. In its most critical form, journalism about legal cannabis proposes an indirect critique to market logics by pointing to health risks that legalisation may cause, to the power of business actors, or to ethical dilemmas for the market. But there is no thorough problematisation of the implications of new markets for class relations, for the conditions for workers in the legal cannabis industry, or for its effects on inequality. These aspects fall outside the scope of the analysed journalism, implying that the core of neoliberal ideology remains safe, which in turn shows the limits of dissent to capitalist hegemony in mainstream journalism (see Herman and Chomsky 2002).

A suggestion for future research is to analyse, in a detailed manner, how cannabis for medical purposes is constructed in the media, and in what ways that discourse serves to (de)legitimise neoliberal approaches to cannabis and medical drugs in general. Cannabis is legal as a medicine in several parts of the world, and there is an ongoing debate about its medical effects. Given that this debate on medical cannabis takes place within a wider debate about cannabis for recreational use, there is a risk that discourses on medical cannabis are mixed up with discourses about recreational cannabis and framed by commodifying and marketised discourses such as those shown in this study. Although medicines are also commodities in the capitalist context, their promotion should ideally be based on their positive effects rather than their commercial potentials. Studying such a case could increase our understanding about how neoliberal ideology is reproduced and challenged in journalism.

References

- Abalo, Ernesto. 2018. Rifts in the Hegemony: Swedish News Journalism on Cannabis Legalisation. *Journalism Studies*. doi: 10.1080/1461670X.2018.1533416
- Arcview. 2018. Who We Are [webpage]. Accessed November 22, 2018. <https://arcviewgroup.com/about-2/>
- Barry, Rachel Ann, Heikki Hiilamo and Stanton A. Glantz. 2014. Waiting for the Opportune Moment: The Tobacco Industry and Marijuana Legalisation. *The Milbank Quarterly* 92 (2): 207-242.

- Berglez, Peter, Ulrika Olausson and Mart Ots, eds. 2017. *What is Sustainable Journalism? Integrating the Environmental, Social, and Economic Challenges of Journalism*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Boltanski, Luc and Ève Chiapello. 2018. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Brenner, Neil and Nik Theodore. 2005. Neoliberalism and the Urban Condition. *City* 9 (1): 101-107.
- Carvalho, Anabela. 2008. Media(ted) Discourse and Society: Rethinking the Framework of Critical Discourse Analysis. *Journalism Studies* 9 (2): 161-177.
- Chakravartty, Paula and Dan Schiller. 2010. Neoliberal Newspeak and Digital Capitalism in Crisis. *International Journal of Communication* 4: 670-692.
- Davis, Aeron. 2010. Politics, Journalism and New Media: Virtual Iron Cages in the New Culture of Capitalism. In *New Media, Old News: Journalism & Democracy in the Digital Age*, edited by Natalie Fenton, 121-137. London: Sage.
- de Mateo, Rosario, Laura Bergés and Anna Garnatxe. 2010. Crisis, What Crisis? The Media: Business and Journalism in Times of Crisis. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 8 (2): 251-274.
- Djerf-Pierre, Monika, Mats Ekström and Bengt Johansson. 2013. Policy Failure or Moral Scandal? Political Accountability, Journalism and New Public Management. *Media, Culture & Society* 35 (8): 960-976.
- Duval, Julien. 2005. Economic Journalism in France. In *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, edited by Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu, 135-155. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Goldberg, Ted. 2004. The Evolution of Swedish Drug Policy. *The Journal of Drug Issues* 34 (3): 551-576.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Fairclough, Norman. 1995. *Media Discourse*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Foster, John Bellamy and Fred Magdoff. 2009. *The Great Financial Crisis: Causes and Consequences*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Foster, John Bellamy and Robert W. McChesney. 2012. *The Endless Crisis: How Monopoly-Finance Capital Produces Stagnation and Upheaval from the USA to China*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Freedman, Des. 2010. The Political Economy of the 'New' News Environment. In *New Media, Old News: Journalism & Democracy in the Digital Age*, edited by Natalie Fenton, 35-50. London: Sage.
- Fuchs, Christian. 2011. *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Fuchs, Christian, Matthias Schafranek, David Hakken and Marcus Breen. 2010. Capitalist Crisis, Communication, & Culture – Introduction to the Special Issue of tripleC. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 8 (2): 193-204.
- Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Herman, Edward S. and Noam Chomsky. 2002. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Herman, Edward S. and Robert W. McChesney. 1997. *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Corporate Capitalism*. London: Cassell.
- Jacobsson, Diana. 2016. *Bruised by the Invisible Hand: A Critical Examination of Journalistic Representations and the Naturalization of Neoliberal Ideology in Times of Industrial Crisis*. PhD Diss. Göteborg: Göteborgs Universitet.
- Lenke, Leif and Boerje Olsson. 2002. Swedish Drug Policy in the Twenty-First Century: A Policy Model Going Astray". *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 582 (July): 64-79.

- Lewis, Justin. 2017. Quick and Dirty News: The Prospect for More Sustainable Journalism. In *What is Sustainable Journalism: Integrating the Environmental, Social, and Economic Challenges of Journalism*, edited by Peter Berglez, Ulrika Olausson & Mart Ots, 3-18. New York: Peter Lang.
- Manning, Paul. 2013. Financial Journalism, News Sources and the Banking Crisis. *Journalism* 14 (2): 173-189.
- Månsson, Josefin. 2017. *Cannabis Discourse in Contemporary Sweden*. PhD Diss. Stockholm University. Accessed January 9, 2018. <http://su.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1086649&dswid=-4348>
- Månsson, Josefin. 2016. The Same Old Story? Continuity and Change in Swedish Print Media Constructions of Cannabis. *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* 33 (3): 267-285.
- Mylonas, Yiannis. 2015. Austerity Discourses in “Der Spiegel” Journal, 2009-2014. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 13 (1): 248-269.
- Peck, Jamie. 2010. *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Phelan, Sean. 2014. *Neoliberalism, Media and the Political*. Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Phelan, Sean and Leon A. Salter. 2017. The Journalistic Habitus, Neoliberal(ized) Logics, and the Politics of Public Education. *Journalism Studies*, doi:10.1080/1461670X.2017.1370976
- Rafter, Kevin. 2014. Voices in the Crisis: The Role of Media Elites in Interpreting Ireland’s Banking Collapse. *European Journal of Communication* 29 (5): 598-607.
- Room, Robin. 2013. Legalizing a Market for Cannabis for Pleasure: Colorado, Washington, Uruguay and Beyond. *Addiction* 109: 345-351.
- Tham, Henrik. 1992. Narkotikakontroll som Nationellt Projekt. *Nordisk Alkoholtidskrift* 9 (2): 86-97.
- Therborn, Göran. 2018. *Kapitalet, Överheten och Vi Andra: Klassamhället i Sverige – Det Rådande och det Kommande*. Lund: Arkiv Förlag.
- UNODC [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime]. 2013. World Drug Report 2013. United Nations. Accessed December 21, 2018. https://www.unodc.org/unodc/secured/wdr/wdr2013/World_Drug_Report_2013.pdf.

About the Author

Ernesto Abalo

Ernesto Abalo is Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication at Jönköping University, Sweden. His research is centred in critical media studies and focuses mainly on the relationship between journalism, ideology and hegemony.