

Cannabis, News, and Storytelling: Introducing a Cultural Politics of “Marijuana”

Abstract

This paper suggests a better understanding of the institutionalization of cannabis, that is how cannabis becomes part of social activity in patterned ways, necessitates understanding how cannabis is made meaningful. First, it notes how the importance of cannabis’s symbolic dimensions were recognized in the sociological literature as early as the 1960s. While sociological research on symbolic dimensions of social life, particularly where it concerns politics and media, has progressed immensely, cannabis has not been made part of these discussions. As a corrective, the paper then traces other areas of interdisciplinary social scientific research that begin to bridge the symbolic lacuna by examining the relationship between cannabis and mass media, specifically news. After noting some contributions and limitations of the extant literature the paper argues that the relationship can be further rethought by reintroducing cannabis more rigorously to a symbolically centered sociology from which it was disconnected. Last, an empirical project tracing cannabis in US news is described, and some initial findings are offered.

Introduction

Stories matter. There are symbolic dimensions to social life, and how they come to narrate the social world are far from “impotent reflections on reality” (Alexander and Smith 2020 263). In fact, they help shape reality and how we come to experience it (Alexander and Smith 2003, 2020; Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2012; Jacobs 2007, 2012). In studies about race (Alexander 2006; Jacobs 2000), religion (Alexander 2006), power and politics (Alexander 2006, 2010; Gorski 2017; Jacobs 2017; ; Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Polletta and Callahan 2017), and even global pandemics (Alexander and Smith 2020; Morgan 2020; Luengo and García-Marín 2020; Sonnevend 2020) the important role of the symbolic, of “meaning-making”, is central.¹ Each provides vivid illustrations of how collective meanings are just as important as other causal factors like economic conditions, scientific consensus, or regulatory regimes.

During the mid-20th century, the importance of storytelling and meaning-making about cannabis was highlighted in the sociological literature. The symbolic and ritualized characteristics of the plant and associated actions were integral to analysis. Research by Howard Becker serves as a useful introduction as he suggested that what cannabis means is intimately experiential, in that symbolism is built into

¹ For an interesting set of discussions on how stories play a role in shaping social experience and outcomes two special editions journals from the American Journal of Cultural Sociology are particularly instructive. See Volume 5, Issue 3 (2017) and Volume 8, Issue 3 (2020) focusing on the 2016 US Presidential Election and the COVID-19 Pandemic, respectively. <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/journal/41290>

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practice.² Acknowledging both the psychological and physiological effects of the human use of the plant, as well as the legal ramifications of production and consumption, he noted the importance of cannabis's collective meaning in shaping a user's experience. For Becker, the source of meaning was important. In fact, to develop a "greater appreciation of the drug's effect" a user must not only "use the drug so as to produce effects but also to *learn to perceive* these effects when they occur" (Becker 1953 7 emphasis added).

The stories new users were told by the initiated came to shape their experiences. As the new became the initiated, stories circulated and evolved through successive iterations. How the psychoactive was defined by those who had power and legitimacy to enforce those definitions set standardized reference points impacting and enchanting the practices of uses and users. The ritual(s) surrounding use, the accompanying expectation and recognition of effects, and personal and interpersonal consequences of use were meaningful because they were socially constructed and contextually contingent (Becker 1953).³ Those who could define the situation, and reinforce those definitions, created impactfully shared understandings of cannabis that were real in effect. Meaning, experience, and practice were inextricably tied.

Like Becker, Erich Goode (1969) noted that although cannabis alters perception along common biological paths of action, the evaluation and interpretation of the ostensibly "common" experience could be quite different among people. In other words, how one comes to experience the effects of the psychoactive, and what meanings one carries away, can radically diverge from one person to the next. Extending this logic to broader collective experiences, Goode argued that the "essential reality" of a given drug and its use, then, is a highly contingent event. Therefore, when they occur, public discussions about cannabis may not necessarily be interested in the plant in and of itself, but rather affords an "occasion for ideological expression." What society selects as crucial to perceive about drugs, and what it ignores, "tells us a great deal about its cultural fabric" (Goode 1969 85). Not only should the collective meanings be analyzed, expanding understandings of cannabis from a social scientific perspective necessitates it.

Becker and Goode offer a conceptual foundation for thinking about the symbolic dimensions of cannabis, and how this affects the relationship between the psychoactive and society. In particular it opens an avenue for thinking of cannabis as a symbol. Like all symbols, its meaning may be relatively stable, but that does not mean it is fixed or uncontested. It becomes crucial to map how cannabis, as a symbol, is built into a complex constellation of positions, beliefs, and activities. It's important to trace how that symbol is articulated in public discussion. To borrow from Goode (1969 90), the very "naming (of cannabis) has political implications". Thinking about cannabis with this as a reference point helps illuminate new paths of research, and offers additional insight into understanding the social import of its collective meaning(s).

² While not strictly sociological, an important contribution to a sociological understanding of cannabis, that included notes on the transformation of consciousness and the experiences of associates, predates Becker by nearly 50 years. See Walter Benjamin's, *On Hashish* (2006).

³ Given Becker's use of labelling theory for exploring deviance, the importance of collective stories was central to his work prior to his research on cannabis (Becker 1963).

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If the symbolic dimensions of cannabis are to be studied, it's important to consider the social spaces and institutions where symbolic content plays a prominent role. One important place where the symbolic interfaces with society and influences social action is through journalism, which is itself located within a broader media ecosystem (Jacobs 2016, 2020; Jacobs and Townsley 2012; Schudson 2003, 2008, 2012). While the news media does not dictate what people think, it plays an overwhelmingly powerful role in what people think about. The collective mediated political meanings we find in news set boundaries and expectations for people's "horizon of interpretations" (Hirsch 2013). This has far reaching consequences impacting collective and individual action in very real ways (Alexander and Smith 2020; Schudson 2003, 2012; Jacobs 2007, 2012, 2017).

As it relates to cannabis, interdisciplinary research specifies associations between how the plant is presented in mass media, and how this relates to evaluation by public opinion, codification into public policy, and practices associated with use. This "cannabis media" scholarship suggests that how the plant is regulated, and more broadly discussed by the public, is intimately tied to representations of it in mainstream news. Parsing this literature is where we turn next.

The "Cannabis Media" Literature

Scholarly research about cannabis is overwhelmingly oriented towards issues of physiology, biology and health, criminal justice, and political economy (Earlywine 2002, 2007; McNamarra forthcoming). Beginning in the late 1970s, and coalescing in the 1990s, a related yet distinct subset of scholarship started exploring the important and impactful role of mass media in engendering collective social understandings and practices associated with cannabis in the United States. The "cannabis media" research argued that many of our collective experiences with cannabis are mediated through key social institutions, including mass media. In fact, scholars note the importance of cannabis's inclusion in the news media is constitutive of an "important component of the national discourse on drug use" (Haines-Saah et al 2014 48). Salient social facts (e.g. reported rates of use, positions on policy, or ideas, beliefs, and values) about cannabis correlate with different types of news articles in terms of how they are produced, consumed, and conceptualized (Barabas and Jerit 2009; Haines-Saah et al 2014; Hanneman and McEwen 1973; Palmgreen et al. 2001; Stephenson et. al 1999).

One insight generated by this scholarship is the discovery of a correlation between public opinion concerning policy-specific knowledge about cannabis and the frequency of cannabis-centric media exposure. The more attention given in terms of sheer *volume*, the more public opinion regarding cannabis is impacted. Under conditions of "high media coverage," the public reports knowing more about the psychoactive (Hanneman and McEwen 1973), with scholars capturing this idea through self-reported positions on related public policy by proxy measures like voter choice (Barabas and Jerit 2009). Increased exposure to news about cannabis provides a reservoir of information people draw on to develop understandings and feelings, informing their public positions about the plant. They also use it to legitimize ideations of its normative place in society.

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Other research suggests the evaluative position, or *valence*, of content impacts audience opinions in addition to the sheer *volume* of content consumed.⁴ While not news, ostensibly factual Public Service Announcements (PSAs) critical of cannabis contributed to decreased levels of reported use by “high sensation seekers,” while impacts on rates of use by moderate or light users were comparatively negligible (Palmgreen et al. 2001; Stephenson et al. 1999).⁵ For Stryker (2003), negative news coverage is positively associated with decreased rates of usage and increased perceptions of harmfulness. However, an inverse relationship found by Kang, Cappella, and Fishbein (2009) noted higher rates of reported use, particularly for high risk adolescents, when evaluations of PSAs were negative. Interestingly, political decision makers seem to be impacted similarly to the public at large. For instance, the amount of policy debate in state legislatures about medical cannabis varied in relation to the evaluations by legislators of a media source’s perceived legitimacy and factuality. In a study of medical cannabis news content, when articles communicated information in a serious manner, legislators seemed to devote an increased amount of time debating associated issues (Witte 2013).⁶ In these cases, casting cannabis in relatively supportive or adversarial lights correlated with ways people felt about, and even in instances used, the intoxicant.

In research that dove deeper into properties of the news content featuring cannabis the importance of narrative frames communicated were central to analysis (Haines-Saah et al 2014; Verbrugge 2014).⁷ Findings were interesting. Coverage ranged from dispassionate reporting to decidedly sensationalist stories. In one study sampled news stories organized cannabis, its use, and its users around a central binary opposition of “privileged normalization” (Haines-Saah et al 2014 52-54). It’s implied legitimate use of cannabis was reserved for those possessing some form of elite capital while those lacking were stigmatized for analogous actions. The distinction between elite normalization and the pathologizing of non-elite use held true across specific demographic markers like race, gender, class, nationality, and age (Haines-Saah et al 2014).⁸ In another analysis focused on frames used in high-circulation newspapers from 11 different US states, research found an interesting relationship between content and which collective meanings gained public traction. Findings showed that “framing of marijuana legalization in

⁴ The term valence is used in the sense whether how a subject is being spoken about if measured along a continuum of negative to positive evaluation (Grazian 76 -77 2010).

⁵ High risk is considered two standard deviations above the mean of the sampled frequency of times use was reported by sampled respondents. The level of sensation seekers was determined using the Sensation Seeking Targeting (SENTAR) Prevention Approach (Palmgreen et al 2001 292 – 2932).

⁶ “Seriousness” was described as a news story offering balanced arguments. Serious stories make note of multiple perspectives on the subject. Both pro and con issues about law, ethics, and health are presented. Moreover, experts featured are used to inform and legitimize debate as well as provide potential consequences presented by the plant and related policy.

⁷ Narratives can be thought of an “account of events in the order in which they occurred so as to make a point” (Poletta and Callahan 2017 394). Moreover, narratives help set expectations for social and political action (Jacobs 2000). In the research highlighted here, narrative focused on *themes* and *tones* found in sampled articles. Themes refer to discursive categories contextualizing a story and providing important information to a reader, while tones refer to the normative evaluations of the theme (Haines-Saah et al 2014).

⁸ Celebrities, including professional athletes, actors, and musicians “were not only expected to smoke marijuana, they were seen as ambassadors of its use”. News stories pathologized non-elite users. Symbolically polluted, the latter were stigmatized as deviant, while marijuana use for the former was ostensibly sanctioned. For instance, non-elite females who used were understood as “increasingly vulnerable to moral corruption” (Haines Saah et al. 2014 52-54).

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print media opinion relates to public opinion on the topic” (Verbrugge 2014 13-14,18). In both cases, research suggests the *narrative frames* scaffolding, contextualizing, and legitimizing a story where cannabis is present impacts public and political opinion about the plant and associated topics.

A different subset of the “cannabis media” research noted important features of the organizational environment, or fields, in which content was produced and consumed.⁹ McGinty et al (2016) compared more than 600 news articles about recreational cannabis taken from national, regional, and local outlets in states where legalization had been adopted.¹⁰ Pro-legalization and anti-legalization arguments constituted 24% and 18% of sampled articles, respectively.¹¹ The remaining (roughly) 60% of sampled news was evenly split between those containing both arguments, or none. Over the sampled time-period the volume of news stories featuring pro- or anti- legalization arguments increased. Peak frequencies of stories occurred after passage of legislation legalizing recreational use, and after implementation dates for legalized consumer markets. Coverage expansion followed legislative action, with the implication being that news plays an important role in reinforcing as well as steering public opinion (McGinty et al 2016).¹² Most striking is perhaps the correlation between coverage and legislative action. As the research here suggests, “*where*” (in terms of markets or geographic area) and “*when*” (in relation to legislative action) cannabis appeared in the news are important to analyze.

In a different sense of “*where*”, as cannabis appeared in different sections of newspapers some scholars noted that different types of articles were written by distinct sets of authors. Corresponding variations in content were identified. In articles found outside of the opinion pages, different aspects of public debates about cannabis were presented while others were absent. Still, a broad range of issues related to cannabis and society were discussed. Op-eds most likely highlighted personalized “medical” issues related to cannabis while editorials were more expansive in terms of frames employed, focusing on “legal” and “social” issues (Golan 2010). Importantly, the research notes that op-eds and editorials were written by writers that can be categorized by type; “media outsiders” authored op-eds, while “media

⁹ “Organizational environments” are described as the social contexts where the “taken-for-granted beliefs and widely promulgated rules that serve as templates” guide norms, and decision-making processes. They asserted that these activities were “mapped into organizational forms”. Organizational environments are in part structured by cultural dimensions that influence collective and individual action within institutions (Powell and DiMaggio 1991 27-28). The institutional logics in operation shape interests, determine available means to pursue goals, and certify events, practices, and organizational forms as significant and legitimate (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Fields are sets of “social universes” are defined by specific rules, values, and actor occupied positions. Those occupying dominant positions in a given field define value and exercise influence through “symbolic” force (Bourdieu 1984, 1993; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

¹⁰ Sources were extensive, including national, regional, and local news outlets across channels (e.g. print, television, and digital). Most news coverage of recreational cannabis overwhelmingly occurred in local outlets within ‘legalized’ states (~ 64% of the sampled text).

¹¹ Pro-legalization positions offered arguments about criminal justice costs, loss of potential tax revenue, and issues of mass incarceration and identity, specifically race, ethnicity, and class. Anti-legalization arguments centered on potential consequences for public health of concentrated on purported consequences for youth). In the ‘none’ category “news stories provided information about legalization but did not include any argument for or against” (McGinty et al 2016 115 – 117).

¹² Interestingly, political affiliation of a news outlet *did not* impact content in a statistically significant way. Political affiliation was determined by an outlet’s 2012 endorsement (or lack thereof) of a US presidential candidate (MCGinty et al 2016 116).

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insiders” wrote most editorials.¹³ *Who* writes news and *where* news content is published arguably exerts influence impacting public opinion about cannabis.

Taken together, each of these studies offer ideas about the importance of the mediated, symbolic dimensions of cannabis as it is presented in news. The “cannabis media” scholarship highlights *how* media renders cannabis, *who* does the rendering, and *where* the rendering happens are all necessary to study. In turn it makes claims about impacts on public opinion, legislative outcomes, and other actions in the political public sphere. Ultimately it suggests that how we collectively think about cannabis, what we do with it, and how we institutionalize it are impacted by the substantive content and structural features of news items referencing it. As Golan writes, news about cannabis carries “real life implications... (as people) are exposed to asymmetric perspectives regarding controversial political issues” (2010 59).

Importantly, a sense of praxis emerges from the “cannabis media” literature. Understanding how media produces and circulates content about cannabis, which in turn is asserted to impact individual and collective thoughts and actions, is crucial to the shared *appel aux armes* of these scholars. The biggest challenge facing how society treats cannabis, they argue, is a lack of “good” knowledge.¹⁴ While not completely disregarding the instrumentality in the suggestion, a crucial point is raised. It is imperative to know more about these stories, who is telling them, where they are being told, and what content is communicated.

This scholarship collectively suggests indirect, impersonal, mediated experiences with the plant play an important role in informing ideas about, and actions related to, cannabis. With this research we start to see how mediated experiences with cannabis are “real in their effects” independent of experiences with the actual psychoactive.¹⁵ The “cannabis media” scholarship provides critical foundational concepts for thinking about the importance of the presentation and production of cannabis in media, particularly journalism, as well as the spaces of reception where this happens. The research maps ways cannabis is folded into mediated public discussion, and helps steer practices of use, public opinion, political action, and social regulation. Despite differences in methodological approach, or a concentration on topical emphasis it seems there is consensus that “media is leading public opinion”

¹³ Op-eds are written with a named byline representing the opinion of a specific contributor while an editorial denotes an opinion supported by the imprimatur of the publication. Generally, op-eds were named as such because they appeared “opposite the editorial page”. “Media insiders” are those deriving legitimacy, identities, and resources from inside the journalistic field, (e.g. journalists, editors, commentators, reporters, critics, columnists, etc.) while “media outsiders” derive the same from other social fields but claim a stake in the journalistic field. This is important because “media insiders” and “media outsiders” are likely to produce different kinds of content (Bourdieu 2005; See Jacobs and Townsley 2011).

¹⁴ In addition, the research presented here shares at least one normative commitment: public opinion and public policy about cannabis benefits from the availability of adequate information on the subject. But adequate information, many of these scholars suggest, is difficult for the public to find, especially in news. Gatekeepers responsible for media publishing and production, they argue, should build this insight into their media strategy when creating content about marijuana (Barabas & Jerit 2009; Palmgreen et al. 2001; Stephenson, M. T et al 1999; Stryker 2003). Without the latest public policy and health research, information made available to the public is inadequate. The scholars insist that addressing such deficiencies need to be incorporated into media planning where marijuana is concerned.

¹⁵ This resonates with the broader sociological principle, the Thomas Theorem, which suggests that what we treat as real will have real consequences.

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about the plant and what ought to be its appropriate place in society (Verbrugge 2014 21- 22). In short, the “*construction of the meaning of the drug ... (T)he rhetoric of marijuana morality matters*” (Witte 2013 199 -202 emphasis added).

A central insight read from the “cannabis media” literature is that Americans have a powerful *mediated* experience with the psychoactive that is more ubiquitous than other types of experiences with the plant, including use. Given this research, the powerful role media plays regarding cannabis can be initially inferred from polling data. Consider that at the time of writing researchers note about 12% of Americans report using cannabis over the past month, with under 50% reporting any use at all. Polls also report nearly 70% of Americans believe cannabis should be legal for both medicinal and recreational use (Schaeffer 2021). Assuming 12% is underreported, it still seems more people “know” about the plant, its effects, and what rules should be in place concerning its status and role vis-à-vis those that report use.¹⁶ This suggests what most Americans know, or think they know, about cannabis *does not* come from direct experience. When people “interact” with cannabis it appears they are more likely to do so through collective mediated representations, namely those found in mass media.

The Cannabis Media Literature: A Need for Increased Analytical and Methodological Synthesis

For all the contributions made certain methodological and analytical limitations of the “cannabis media” literature should be considered. For example, the methodological net cast in several studies to gather data does not capture a robust enough range of instances and contexts where “cannabis” becomes part of news. Several papers examining how framing of medical and recreational cannabis in the news correlated with various measures of public political sentiments drew on relatively small sample sizes. Witte (2013), Golan (2010), and Verbrugge (2014) used sample sizes of 61, 101, and 160 articles, respectively. This makes these studies more sensitive to distortions in generalizability vis-à-vis studies with larger sample sizes.

Other studies, which incorporated larger sample sizes, meant more sensitivity to small but important variations in content, offered stronger support for generalizability. Capturing longitudinal data from Canadian and US news (local, regional, and national, as well as cross- channel) Haines-Saah et al. (2014) analyzed 1999 news items, while McGinty et al (2016) examined 610. Still, even in these studies containing an impressively large initial sample size, automated coding used to build language classification models (Haines-Saah et. al 2014; Voth et al. 2013 27 – 28) risk that algorithms may not pick up on comparative nuances and ambiguities in content.¹⁷

¹⁶ People can alter behavior because of an awareness of observation ala the Hawthorne effect. In a broader sense about social institutions, this can be understood in light of Foucault’s ideas of self-discipline and surveillance. Underreporting use of a substance with an ambiguous moral, legal, and health status is consistent with these exercises of power (see Foucault and Rabinow 2003).

¹⁷ Voth et. al. noted, for instance, that certain patterns in the data set “may suggest than an exclusive reliance on formal terminology would have significantly underrepresented” certain types of stories, particularly those related to arts and culture” (2013 23). This calls for a consideration of “network” and “network-making” power. It is important to recognize that those responsible for writing the rules behind our computer networks and code do so according to their interests and values. As such, implicit distortions are built into the very tools used for analysis. While this may be inescapable, it is worth addressing to

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Irrespective of sample size, data filtering mechanisms focused on structure presented additional issues. A range of “types” of news content were eliminated in pre-analysis data scrubbing in all the studies. Despite the sophistication of the underlying analytical models, there are subtleties in meaning that may be overlooked when “types” of content are eliminated from a data set. In some instances, articles that were not op-eds or editorials were removed (Golan 2010; Verbrugge 2014). Others excluded content containing “100 or fewer words, letters to the editor, book reviews, and obituaries” (McGinty 2016 115). Reading about cannabis in one section of a newspaper is equally as important, albeit for different reasons, as reading it in another.

In another sense content was filtered with studies privileging certain topics while excluding others from analysis. Doing so overlooks important ways in which different focuses about cannabis, for instance medical and recreational, may be inextricably linked. For instance, Witte’s (2013) and Golan’s (2010) research excluded “non-medical” articles, while McGinty et. al.’s (2016) and Haines-Saah et. al.’s (2014) research excluded articles not addressing issues pertaining to commercial recreational legalization. Filtering criteria to only allow for stories about medicalization (Golan 2010; Verbrugge 2014; Witte 2013) or only recreational legalization (Haines-Saah et al 2014; McGinty et al 2016) misses the important interplay of these two types of discourses, impeding subsequent analysis.

There is also inadequate attention in current scholarship paid to the political economy of the media outlets used to construct the data sets. Structural properties of media organizations producing news can also affect content uniformity *prior* to data collection. For instance, although samples sizes were relatively large, ownership of many of the news sources used in the Haines-Saah et al. (2014) as well as the McGinty et al (2016) studies were vested in less than a handful of media conglomerates.¹⁸ While not inherently problematic this should at least be acknowledged, as this can have a discernable impact on content (Benson 2005, 2019; Bourdieu 2005; Croteau and Hoynes 2018; Jacobs 2003; Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Schudson 2003, 2010, 2012, 2016).¹⁹

It’s important to make a final observation. A fundamental assumption made in the research outlined above assumes an indirect or tangential reference to cannabis translates into a lack of importance. In instances where cannabis functioned indirectly or tangentially within a story, that sampled article was

expand on Voth et. al’s point. See Castells’ *A Network Theory of Power* (2011) for an extended conversation about network power, and network-making power.

¹⁸ Sampled papers, like the “*The Calgary Herald*”, “*Edmonton Journal*”, “*Montreal Gazette*”, “*Ottawa Citizen*”, and “*Vancouver Sun*”, are collectively owned by Postmedia (Postmedia brands - <http://www.postmedia.com/brands/> retrieved 10.21.18.). The sources selected for the McGinty et al (2016) study are synergistically related as well. In this case “*USA Today*”, “*The Arizona Republic*”, and “*The Cincinnati Inquirer*” are all Gannett holdings (Gannett Brands For context, at the time of writing Gannett’s assets include 143 daily newspapers (national and local). - <http://www.gannett.com/brands/>. Others like “*Fox News*”, “*The New York Post*”, and the “*Wall Street Journal*” are assets of News Corp (NewsCorp Brands. <https://newscorp.com/about/our-businesses/> retrieved 10.21.18.).

¹⁹ Media organizations are highly conglomerated and exert significant influence. One effect of such is the production of a media landscape prioritizing “pooling resources, a reduction of local content, and, generally, a more homogenous product” (Croteau and Hoynes 2018; Jacobs 2003 118, 2005,2007, Schudson 2012). Results of such corporate consolidation have included “fewer journalists working in a smaller number of news bureaus (creating) a more homogenized product” (Jacobs 2003 120). Understanding the institutions and fields in which news content is produced, how it is produced, by who it is produced, and how it is consumed are crucial to consider, especially in terms of potential impact on the ultimate form of content itself In other words, although there may be many spaces of publication, large legacy media organizations overlap considerably in content.

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either downplayed or missing in extant analysis. This is problematic in that publicly affective discussions *pertinent* to cannabis may exist independently from debates and discussions *about* cannabis. Both the former and latter should be included alongside one another in analysis. The “cannabis media” literature privileges the latter to the detriment of the former.

A corrective to many of these issues is to not initially filter according to datatype or privilege certain types of articles over others before a deep iterative reading of the data is made. Capturing a more holistic view of how cannabis is presented in the press requires a more inductive approach where different types of news are analyzed in tandem, along with a larger analytical net to be more sensitive to the variation in types of texts. The filtering mechanisms and protocols employed to generate the final data sets used as the source of in-depth analysis in many of the extant studies raise concerns that crucial information risks elimination of data *before* analysis is conducted. Restricting articles to specific types or sections (e.g. the inclusion of an op-ed, but exclusion of a letter to the editor), specific story types (e.g. a medical or legal story), specific backgrounds of authors (e.g. media insiders or media outsiders), or even the extent to which cannabis is referenced (e.g. directly or tangentially) ignores mutually constitutive features of content and structure that engender collective meanings.

It’s important to take in material with a broad net and consider myriad ways cannabis is “textualized”. It may be helpful to analyze op-eds along with news items from other sections. Similarly, long articles should be analyzed along with those under 100 words. Likewise, stories about issues related to medicalization or legal commercialization might benefit from being considered together. But filtering is not the only consideration. For all the insight generated from the “cannabis media” literature a more culturally centered sociological analytical foundation is necessary if the symbolic dimensions of cannabis are to be further explored. To create a discursive “map” of the cultural terrain where cannabis is found in the news opens possibilities for further discussion about journalism and politics generally, and cannabis and news specifically.

Bringing Back the Symbolic: A Cultural Sociology of Cannabis and News Media²⁰

The “cannabis media” literature lays important foundational groundwork for understanding the collective iterations of cannabis in news and how they affect social practice. Still, this line of inquiry can be pushed further. To better account for how cannabis has been folded into public discussion, and what influence this exerts “beyond” mediated spaces, scholarship must recognize the subtler but no less important ways cannabis is communicated and made meaningful in the news. To help address this, an expanded discursive “map” of the cultural politics enveloping cannabis in mass media is needed. Refining such a map will help further clarify and crystalize important but overlooked symbolic dimensions of cannabis along with their social import.

One potentially fruitful approach to creating a new “map” is provided by the “strong program” of cultural sociology. This scholarship is useful for addressing questions concerning the relationship between mass media, public opinion and policy, and collective representations. It can be adapted to explore these relationships as it concerns cannabis. Collective understandings of the ways in which

²⁰ For an interesting discussion on “Bringing-back” in sociological research that highlights the usefulness of data visualization, see Lizardo et al. 2018.

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cannabis becomes a symbolic artifact in the mediated political public sphere, and to what extent it exerts a cultural influence, can be further refined by this hermeneutically sensitive framework. While a detailed discussion of the “strong program” of cultural sociology is beyond the scope of this paper, an admittedly vulgar comparison can be made with “weak programs” of the sociology of culture. In the context of a causal relationship, where the “weak program” treats culture as a dependent variable the “strong program” treats it as an independent variable.²¹

Deep(er) Play: “Marijuana”, and the *New York Times* 1990 – 2015

To better understand the relationship between cannabis, news, public opinion, and public policy, the research presented here integrates concepts and methodologies drawn from the “strong program” of cultural sociology. Applying them to questions raised by scholars interested in cannabis and mass media opens further lines of inquiry that may help unpack the role media coverage inclusive of cannabis plays in relation to things like rates of use, public opinion of, and legislative action. The strong program analytically and methodologically helps specify ways media coverage of cannabis affects social action. Moreover, it insists on a “cultural autonomy” in how this works. While other social-structural and social-psychological factors must be considered when studying media, those factors work con-jointly with culture and are not deterministic of it.

Empirical research grounded in a strong program approach draws from and extends existing scholarship about cannabis and news. To this end, there are some important cues this research has taken with regards to the extant “cannabis media” literature. For an initial point of consistency an analysis of cannabis and the news will focus on how the term “marijuana” is incorporated into news text. Without exception, the aforementioned research either used the term exclusively or in combination in analysis.²²

²¹ The strong program of cultural sociology is a “meaning centered approach” to understanding and explaining social phenomena. It emphasizes how “culture constitutes the social world of things” (Alexander 2008 161; Alexander, Smith, and Jacobs 2017). Many cultural sociologists adapt “hermeneutical and interpretive model building” (i.e. structural hermeneutics) used to understand the ways culture steers social life. It also describes a methodology combining an inductive Geertzian “thick description” focused on the “social texts that are simultaneously the source of individual subjectivities and their expression” (Alexander 2008 161).

The strong program of cultural sociology draws on the use of binary codes, narratives, and semiotic features of texts conceptualized as articulations of ideal culture that carry the capacity to act as causal social forces (Alexander 2006, Alexander 2020). The strong program emphasizes the role of cultural autonomy (i.e. culture is a causal social force, and not merely a reflection of other social structures), making a commitment to develop robust “thick descriptions” (ala Geertz 1973) of all of the symbolic elements in the object of analysis. Methodologically speaking, this requires a “bracketing-out” of the non-symbolic and non-cultural (Alexander 2003, 2006; Alexander, Smith, and Jacobs 2017). Lastly, the strong program specifies how “culture interferes with and directs” social actions (Alexander 2003 14). In this manner cultural structures found locally in a text can be connected to more encompassing, extra-individual cultural structures where the latter contextualizes the former with actors building them into social performances and actions (Alexander 2008).

Comparatively, “weak programs” of the sociology of culture often attribute meaning as dependent on and “read off of social structure” like elite interest, economic imperatives, or political expedience (Alexander 2003 13). For instance, the content of a newspaper is reducible to publishers, advertisers, or shareholders. The same is true of content merely being the product of the instrumental actions of writers and editors. While those factors are certainly at play the strong program suggests the symbolic features of content, the semiotic and narrative elements of the text, must be analyzed in their own right (Alexander 2006, 2008; Schudson 2012).

²² The use of the “marijuana” has a storied history which is beyond the scope of this paper. The term “marijuana” has figured prominently into the US sociocultural and political landscape for the past century. It has been used in the extant literature

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Additionally, in all but one example (Kang, Cappella, and Fishbein 2009), news was used as the textual corpus data would be drawn from. Here, the news organization chosen, the New York Times, shares important organizational properties with many of the data sources used in the prior research.²³

Articles mentioning “marijuana” were collected from the New York Times at five-year intervals beginning in 1990 and ending in 2015. The data set spans two Democratic and two Republican presidential administrations while also including periods when each party exercised a congressional majority. Legislatively, the corpus starts shortly after the institutionalization of President Reagan’s “War on Drugs” under the administration of President George H.W. Bush. It ends in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, the first after recreational legalization of cannabis was instituted in several states during the administration of President Obama.

Two major divergences with prior scholarship appear at this point. The first regards sampling and filtering. Using Lexis-Nexis, the keyword “marijuana” was searched for within the time frame described above. In any instance where the keyword appeared in an article, irrespective of what the article was about, what section it was found in, who wrote it, or length, it was included in the corpus. After collecting and cleaning for repeats and false positives, the total number of articles was 2,463.²⁴ Taken in its entirety, articles incorporating the word “marijuana” appeared at an average rate of nearly one and a half articles per day over the whole of the data set.

With 1990 serving as a baseline, frequency trend lines for the term continually increase over the time period of the sample. Disaggregated by year, peak frequencies emerged in 2000 and 2015 with an uptick in mentions over the entirety of the period. The only decrease in frequencies occurred between 2000

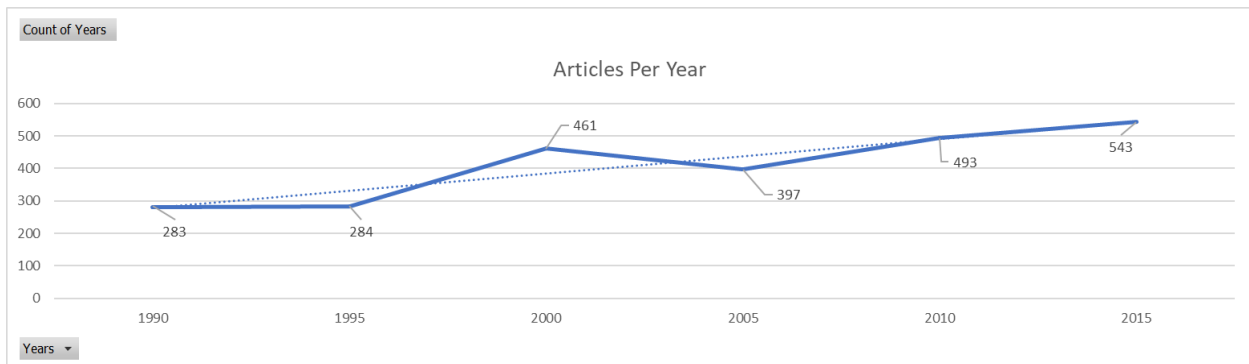
reviewed here (as well as more broadly throughout the social and physical sciences), prominently featured in the press and popular media throughout the 20th century, ubiquitously used in academia (evident in names of courses offerings, titles of academic papers, and names of research organizations), and the political public sphere (use by lobbying and public interest groups, political parties, and included in legal statutes on both a federal and state level in the United States). Using “marijuana” as opposed to “cannabis” (or any other related term) in empirical analysis allows for a focus on the term as a prominent signifier in American political culture. Still, it is still integral to note that the term itself is steeped in a particular sociolinguistic and sociohistorical context that saddles it as value laden and stigmatized. Rightfully so. Its use is undergoing reflexive re-evaluation including inside and outside of academia. This, however, is also beyond the scope of this paper and connected research.

²³ The New York Times was also chosen as a data source given the paper’s position within the US national political public sphere. The Time’s content plays a large role in shaping the public agenda as it’s broadly followed by politicians, decision makers, and the press corps. It is considered a national paper of record often acting as a standard by which other news organizations compare themselves. Research demonstrates that news items covered in the Times serve as good indicators for items covered elsewhere in the US national press (Jacobs 2000, 2003, 2012; Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Schudson 1978, 2002, 2012). In the age of digital media, traditional media hasn’t disappeared as much as it has specialized and adapted to digital spaces (Jacobs 2003, 2005, 2017). The Times is no exception, and as such remains relevant. In addition to its print circulation of about 440,000 weekday issues (almost 1 million on the weekends), it also produces a website with content updated 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Doing so has expanded readership, with the estimated global audience of the paper reaching 150 million unique monthly global visitors to the web site and 7.5 million subscribers to services, with nearly 6.7 million of those being digital only. Additionally, the Times organizes its own space of discussion for users on its website (via comment sections) and through its social media presence. At the time of writing the paper had slightly more than 17.6 million following on Facebook, and about 49.9 million on Twitter (The New York Times Annual Report 2020; The New York Times Facebook Account Summer 2021; The New York Times Twitter Account Summer 2021).

²⁴ False positive refers to a search term producing a hit (e.g. searching for marijuana is tagged with the related term, “weed”), that is not about marijuana at all (e.g. a gardening expert describes how to best “weed” a flower bed).

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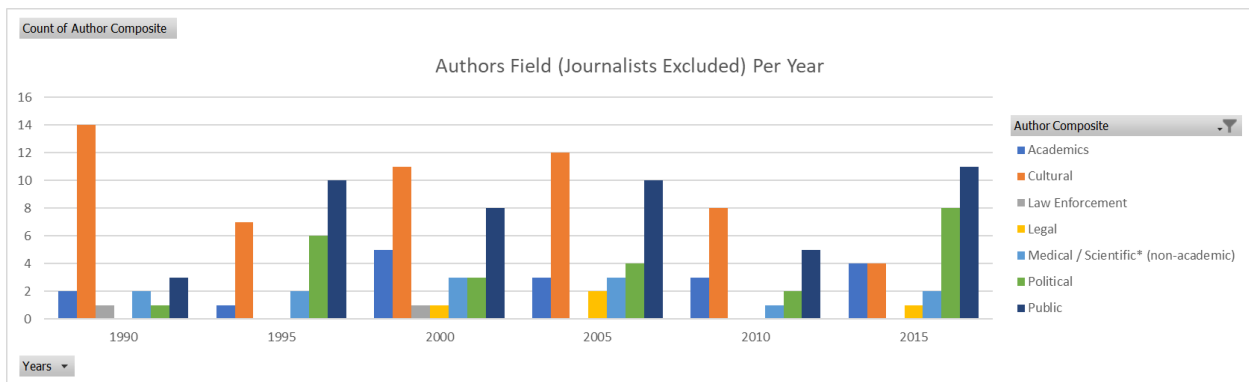
and 2005. Still, even when total mentions decreased in a sampled year compared to a prior year, occurrences did not fall below their initial 1990 levels.



The sample suggests “marijuana” has been increasingly included in news content. Where these preliminary findings complement the extant cannabis media literature (Golan 2010; Witte 2013; McGinty 2016; Haines 2014; Verbergge 2014) is that the data suggests the volume of “marijuana” being included in news has increased over time. The difference is that the increase in volume found here may be more expansive than initially implied in the existing literature.

While related to changes in sampling and filtering, the second empirical divergence has to do with what is done with that data now. Here a completely inductive, interpretative, and culturally sensitive narrative analysis was combined alongside of field, or institutional, analysis. The former was captured through two measures of “content” while the latter with two measures of “structure”.

Here, “structure” refers to the production, distribution, and consumption of news text. In this instance structure was operationalized as consisting of the social field an author draws authority from, as well as the section of the *New York Times* an article appeared in. Gathering information on authors allows inferences to be made about the “variety of different conditions under which people speak and write, as well as marked differences in autonomy, influence, and proximity to power” (Jacobs and Townsley 2011 78). Analyzing the social field of an author provides important insight into the effect of the variety of voices and styles of rhetoric contributing to this public discussion (Benson 1999, 2005; Bourdieu 1993, 2005; Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Schudson 2012).



The second measure of structure focuses on the section of the paper an article featuring the word “marijuana” appeared. Noting where an article appears is a way to model links between the text and the

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audience. Someone reading an article from the Sports Desk, may find themselves in a different imaginative and interpretive community than someone reading an article found in the Culture Desk, Metro Desk, Editorial Page, or Business Desk. A section of a newspaper primes an audience and suggests with it, different interpretive frames to approach the text (Croteau and Hoynes 2006; Jacobs 2000, 2005, 2007; Schudson 1978, 2012 166). To be sure, a reader does not read content from the Foreign Desk as they would from the Obituaries.²⁵

Shifting to “content”, emphasis was placed on the specific symbolic narrative, and semiotic characteristics of the text. The first measure of content detected several narrative frameworks at play within the collected texts where “marijuana” was present. Repeated readings noted characters, plots, and settings that could be typologized as a set of patterned stories distilled from the idiosyncrasies of any particular article in the dataset. Five frameworks in total were identified through this method. The categories were designated as Juridical, Biological/Biochemical, Cultural/Culture, Economic, and Political.²⁶

(Chart 5)

A final measure was made as to the degree marijuana was referenced in a text. This constitutes a measure of embeddedness, position, and centrality of “marijuana” in any instance of news. Informed by Barthes’s (1968, 1977) structuralist semiotics, the term “marijuana” was treated as a symbolic unit with a presence in an article classified as “primary”, “secondary”, or “tertiary”. “Primary” stories were about cannabis, and without its presence a text would be unintelligible. A syntagmatic chain would break if a paradigmatic substitution was made. In “secondary” the inclusion of the term “marijuana” helps resolve ambiguities in the text, but its presence is not indispensable. A syntagmatic chain would be preserved even if paradigmatic changes were made. The final category, “tertiary” described those articles where the term “marijuana” was superfluous. Its presence or absence has minimal impact on the syntagmatic chains comprising the text.²⁷

²⁵ Please see appendix for chart. Its size prevented it from being included in the text.

²⁶ Categories were determined by looking for several elements within a text, specifically characters, plots, and settings. All are central to various forms of narrative analysis (Barthes 1975, 1977; Frye 2020, Propp 2003; Jacobs 2000, 2017). For instance, the category, “*Juridical*”, describes stories concerned with some matter of the application or evaluation of existing law. These stories are frequented by characters like “police”, “criminals”, “victims”, “defendants”, “plaintiffs”, “judges”, “suspects” or “syndicates”. Plots generally revolved around actions related to “alleged commissions of crimes”, “prosecution of a crimes”, or the “application of sanctions”. Settings provided dynamic contexts where characters act within plots. They could refer to physical spaces like “jails”, “courtrooms”, “law enforcement organization offices”, and even “organized crime summits”, as well as metaphoric spaces like the “front line” of the War on Drugs. All categories were classified using this method.

²⁷ Barthes (1961, 1964, 1977, 1979, 1984) suggested symbols, or signs, are based on the arbitrary relationship between a signifier (i.e. what does the representing) and a signified (i.e. the thing represented). While much semiotic analysis initially focused on the denotative relationship between the signifier and the signified Barthes emphasized the centrality on the connotative relationship linking signifiers to other signifiers. For instance, think of “marijuana”, a term, as text, a word, an utterance, or an “acoustic image”. Then consider how its meaningfulness emerges from a relationship to a variety of

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In primary stories, the stories are about cannabis, and without its presence the story would be unintelligible. Action (captured by plot) would not progress without its incorporation. In these types of articles cannabis is broadly recognizable and relatively explicated. Minimal supplemental information is needed to follow the story or how marijuana moves the action since much is provided in text; marijuana is presented in a largely denotative fashion.

Other articles incorporated “marijuana” in a way coded as secondary. Cannabis did not drive action. While marijuana’s incorporation helps move a story along or resolve ambiguities presented in a text, its role is to complement action already at play; it does not engender it. It is not indispensable for a text’s intelligibility. In other words, the story can be communicated without the word “marijuana”, and it would still make sense. Ancillary knowledge is helpful, but not necessary. There is no doubt “marijuana” is literally incorporated in the article, but it is not the critical focus. If anything, it’s expendable.

A final category of inference described as tertiary featured stories where “marijuana” was present, but was superfluous regarding action and meaning in a story. Borrowing again from Barthes, “marijuana” is conceptualized here as a signifier connotating “trivial incidents or descriptions” certainly coloring a narrative, but ultimately not consequential for its outcome (Barthes 1977 94, 1984). As a signifier, “marijuana” operated on overwhelmingly as a second order connotative level signifier. Marijuana is not necessary to understand the action at play, not it is it always clear in the text what it even is. If removed, the story could still meaningfully unfold. It is unlikely narratives would significantly deviate if marijuana was absent from the text. Yet its presence is simultaneously extraneous. Cannabis is not the central focus of articles in this case and is incorporated more as a malleable hypertext.

chloroplastic, photosynthetic, gas exchanging organisms. But that isn’t *all* the term is, means, or infers. “Marijuana” is built into a specific sociohistorical context, and is used in certain contexts while not in others.

Crucially, it is related to other terms used for the above referenced variety of flora. Now we can imagine relationships between “marijuana” and other terms like “cannabis”, “weed”, “pot”, or any other myriad cognates. Then what of comparisons to other psychoactive substances, or distinct chemical compounds, or anything else that can be conceivably connected with “marijuana”? There is no shortage of artistic expressions, spiritual, religious, and philosophical positions, or moral crusaders, entrepreneurs, and opportunists that can likewise be connotated with “marijuana”. And this is Barthes’s point. Denotation, or first order signification, connects a signifier to a signified and is immediate and limited. Connotation, or second order signification, connects a signifier to another signifier and is theoretically limitless. In practice connotation can be limited and relatively fixed. However, signs are never determined and the chains of signifiers connecting them can be arranged and re-arranged in, again theoretically, limitless forms.

As the chains of signification are identified an act of substitution moves analysis a step closer to a designation of “primary”, “secondary”, or “tertiary”. Still another distinction highlighted by Barthes is necessary to consider. Signs can be analyzed in terms of “paradigmatic” and “syntagmatic” systems. The former refers to how meaning is constructed through presences and absence, or the comparison between signifiers. The latter describes how meaning of a signifier emerges in relation to the signifiers that precede and follow it. Analyzing whether these chains are intact or disrupted, which consequently impacts their ability to carry meaning, is the final component in determining the classification used here.

(Table 1)

(Table 2)

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(Chart 6)

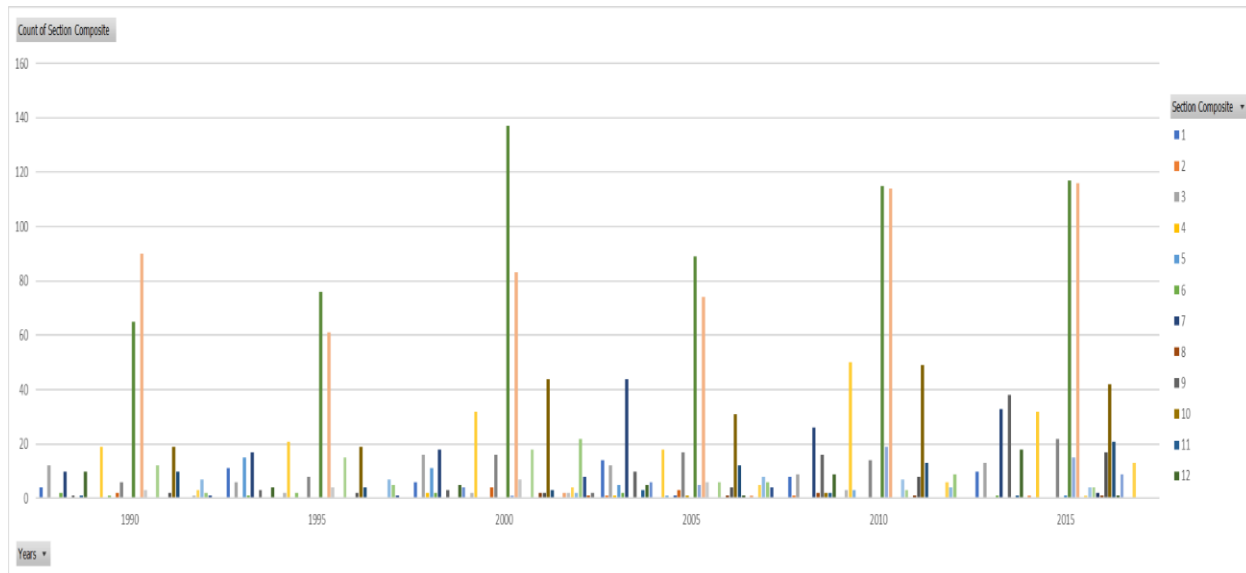
Closing

The collected data suggests discernible changes in how “marijuana” is textualized in the sampled news has occurred over the past several decades. This initial analysis opens some interesting avenues for further exploring how “marijuana” is used in the news. The preliminary findings complement the extant “media marijuana” literature, in that the data suggests the volume of “marijuana” being included in news has increased over time. An initial difference is that the increase in volume found here may be more expansive than initially implied in the existing literature. There are also more pronounced changes in valance than implied in extant literature.

A next step in this process is to further explore the measures of content and structure for relationships among and between them. The measures of “content” and “structure” compiled for the sample call for further analysis. For instance, we can see patterns emerging for each measure of content and structure. The data should be further explored to see whether the patterns of variation hold when measures of content and structure are factored against one another over time. For instance, do further patterns emerge when we look at a relationship between inference and narrative, or author and section? What of the relationship between inference and section, narrative and author, or any other combinations or permutations? What are the effects generated when measures of structure and content are placed in relation to one another? What if we control one or another element to further specify relationships?

Continuing to develop more robust maps of the constellation of meaning that is “marijuana” is a worthwhile project. Despite the substantive range of topics covered by the “strong program” of cultural sociology research focused on cannabis, media, and politics is lacking. (Re)introducing cannabis Applied, such analysis would be capable of capturing the social reverberations, accretions, and traces of cannabis’s public meanings, as well as how they are engendered and activated. The “strong program” of cultural sociology could continue to be helpful for studying how cannabis acts as an increasingly ubiquitous, collective, and polyvocal referent in public discussion. Evaluating the presence of “marijuana” in news with these tools can reveal further insight into the relationship between media content, public opinion, public policy, and social action more broadly as it pertains to cannabis. Doing so sheds further light on the importance of cannabis as a potent signifier in the political public sphere, in addition to a plant, medicine, sacrament, or intoxicant.

Appendix:



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