
Changing the Narrative

Press Release

HEALTH IN JUSTICE ACTION LAB

Changing the Narrative

A New Web Resource to Advance Accurate, Science-based Coverage of Addiction and Drug Policy Issues

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<http://changingthenarrative.news>

Everyone complains about inaccurate media coverage of addiction— **so we decided to do something about it.**

Changing The Narrative is a network of reporters, researchers, academics, and advocates concerned about the way media represents drug use and addiction. **Our mission is to help journalists and opinion leaders provide accurate, humane and scientifically-grounded information about this complex and often misunderstood terrain.** We have compiled expert sources —including people with lived experience of the issues — and up-to-date, fact-checked, and evidence-based information on news and controversies.

The website, which launches today, calls out flawed narratives, inaccuracies, debunked myths, and stigmatizing language to avoid. The site includes a directory of accessible expert sources and people with lived experience who are available for comment by reporters in need of quotes, along with examples of rigorous news articles and scientific documents from a diverse range of reputable institutions.

Journalist and author Maia Szalavitz, one of the original organizers of Changing The Narrative, explains how the group formed. “The idea for Changing the Narrative came from a series of conversations on Twitter, which found a group of us repeatedly reacting to media coverage that was factually inaccurate, presented ignorant, outdated and unscientific views about people with addiction or was otherwise so flawed that it made everyone with genuine expertise in the area cringe,” Szalavitz says.

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“When we informed editors and reporters about these problems, we found that most were genuinely horrified and wanted to do better— and we realized that there was a real need for a resource to help general assignment journalists and people new to the beat avoid common mistakes and find sources who are truly knowledgeable,” Szalavitz says. “We hope that Changing the Narrative can help meet these needs.”

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Over 60 researchers, health care providers, activists, and journalists from across the country teamed up to form Changing The Narrative. After months of analyzing and sifting through media coverage, the Changing The Narrative team identified persistent inaccurate information and stigmatizing language that frequently appears in news articles about drugs and addiction. The website is the result of this months long process, which aims to support journalists at local and national news outlets with their coverage of addiction, drug use, and the overdose crisis.

“Drug policy has long been a province of alternative facts, long before that concept entered popular lexicon,” says Leo Beletsky, a professor of law and health sciences at Northeastern University. “Many tropes about addiction aren’t just tired and inaccurate, but they cause real harm by perpetuating stigma, shaping harmful policies, and challeling resources to failed approaches. So Changing the Narrative isn’t just about shifting the vocabulary, it’s also about informing societal responses to problematic substance use that are effective and humane.”

Beletsky, who directs the Health In Justice Action Lab, helped organize Changing The Narrative’s founding meeting at Northeastern in Boston. “Our unifying belief is that addiction is a health and social problem and should be framed as such,” he says.

Changing The Narrative has no single ideological political orientation. We are a diverse group of concerned scholars, reporters, activists and organizers from across the country.

Our singular goal is to ensure that the news media and other commentators rigorously and factually represent addiction and related topics from a compassionate, science-based perspective.

We welcome others to join Changing The Narrative and help us advance a better, more nuanced discourse.

www.changingthenarrative.news

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