Harm minimisation vs zero tolerance: A comparative study of press reporting of the Victorian street prostitution debate

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of the print media in the Victorian street prostitution debate. A comparison of the coverage in the two daily Melbourne newspapers, The Age and the Herald Sun, suggests an overt ideological division between the conventional philosophies of harm minimisation and zero tolerance. Some conclusions are drawn about the implications of this rather limited debate for the political construction of social problems in Victoria.

In recent years, the media has appeared to play an increasingly influential role in shaping the public policy agenda. Given the narrow ownership of the Australian mass media, it is hardly surprising that much media coverage has sought to guide proposals for policy reform in a neoliberal direction (Argy, 1998: 224-225; Bessant and Watts, 1999: 353-59).

In particular, sections of the media seem to have reinforced conservative explanations of, and solutions to, social problems (Beresford, et al., 1999; Putnis, 2001). For example, the tabloid media has played a significant role in promoting public hostility towards the unemployed, and portraying them as welfare cheats and dole bludgers. A prime instance of this stereotyping was the attack by Channel Nine’s ‘A Current Affair’ in 1996 on the Paxton family - three naïve, unemployed young people from Melbourne’s disadvantaged western suburbs (Beder, 2000: 158-67; Twentyman, 2000: 83-88).

Similarly, the tabloid media has often opposed the liberalisation of illicit drug laws. For example, a campaign by talkback radio hosts and the Sydney tabloid newspaper, the Daily Telegraph in 1997, seems to have been significant in destroying Federal Government support for the ACT’s proposed heroin trial (Lawrence, et al., 2000). As we shall see, the tabloid media appear to have a particular distaste for harm minimisation programmes based on addressing social problems as value-neutral public health concerns, rather than as criminal, legal or moral issues. They also tend to ignore the broader social and structural factors contributing to the problem.

The Victorian street prostitution debate

The Inner City Melbourne suburb of St Kilda has had a distinctive street sex trade since World War Two. For many years, Fitzroy and Grey Streets were regarded as unofficial red-light zones. However, this trade seems to have increased significantly in recent years, and to have shifted beyond the major thoroughfares into adjoining residential streets (AGSPAG, 2002: 27-28 and 43-44).
The street sex trade has often provoked friction between prostitutes and local residents (Johnston, 1984: 338-347; Neave, 1985a: 48-49 and 254-255; Neave, 1985b: 47-64; Perkins, 1991: 110-112; Sullivan, 1997: 103-05). The formation of the Port Phillip Action Group (PPAG) in late 1999 renewed this tension. PPAG sought the establishment of a designated sex work area in an industrial district away from residential areas. They also demanded increased police patrols to discourage sex workers (PPAG, 2001).

In February 2001, PPAG organised a public march to the St Kilda Town Hall of over 300 people against street prostitution. The march provoked two smaller counter-marches (by the Prostitutes Collective and a radical Left group respectively) in defence of sex workers, and attained enormous media publicity (Mendes, 2002a: 51).

The State Labor Government responded to this public confrontation by establishing a consultative, bipartisan reference group to be known as the Attorney General’s Street Prostitution Advisory Group (AGSPAG). The AGSPAG group consisted of representatives of sex workers, police, local traders, welfare agencies and local government, and included two members of PPAG. Yet despite its diverse membership, the group's agenda was arguably driven by the needs of local residents rather than by the health and safety concerns of street sex workers.

This was in part because the government’s principal concern was to manage local community angst about street prostitution, rather than to address the structural causes of street prostitution (McNamee, 2002: 12). In addition, the formal AGSPAG structure and forums tended to favour the local middle-class resident groups who were vocal and effective in articulating their demands. In contrast, the sex workers appear to have found these structures intimidating, and would perhaps have benefited from less formal outreach meetings and consultations on their own turf. One consequence of this apparent bias in the political process towards the rights of residents was that only limited consideration was given by AGSPAG to expanding support services for sex workers (AGSPAG, 2001: 27-29; AGSPAG, 2002: 88-91; McNamee, 2002: 15; Rowe, 2003).

The Final Report of the Group released in June 2002 recommended the establishment of tolerance areas in the City of Port Phillip, and the establishment of legal designated street worker centres for street sex workers to service clients (AGSPAG, 2002). The tolerance areas were not to be located in close proximity to child care centres, schools, places of worship, or residential or retail areas. The street worker centres required parliamentary approval, and it was always unlikely that the proposed legislation would pass the conservative-dominated Upper House. However, in August 2002, the government withdrew the legislation due to an apparent lack of community support following a campaign by some local residents and traders against the proposed tolerance area sites.

The methodological framework of the media analysis

The researchers used the Lexis Nexis and Electric Australasia newspaper data bases to acquire all articles that appeared in the Melbourne Age and Herald Sun on street prostitution from February 2001 (the time of the PPAG march) to September 2002 (following the shelving of the AGSPAG recommendations by the government).

A code analysis was developed for analysing the media coverage based on type of reporting (e.g. editorial, news or opinion piece), views expressed about the trial of tolerance zones and sex centres (pro, anti or neutral), ideological perspective (harm minimisation, zero tolerance or other), and news sources (e.g. local residents and traders, politicians, police, sex workers, local government, brothel owners etc.).

Harm minimisation is defined here as a concern to reduce the adverse consequences of street prostitution for both the community and individual sex workers, rather than to prevent street prostitution per se. It implies that street sex work should be viewed as a public health, rather than a criminal or legal issue. In contrast, the zero tolerance model views street sex work narrowly as a criminal and moral issue, and favours strategies directed solely at policing and prohibition (Mendes, 2002b: 141).
The media and the construction of social problems

All public policy processes have a structure within which problems are defined, and particular agendas set. The actions of various stakeholders – interest groups, consumers, bureaucrats and the general public – then converge to influence the adoption and implementation of particular policies by government (Palmer and Short, 2000: 32-33; Edwards, 2001: 4-7).

As noted by Schon (1979), problem definitions are strongly influenced by the telling of ‘stories’ about social issues. These stories are underpinned by metaphors based on certain purposes and values which name and frame the concerns to be addressed, and the possible solutions. Depending on the metaphors used, it is possible for the construction of social issues to proceed down entirely different paths. For example, a low-income area could either be defined as a slum that requires regeneration, or alternatively as a vibrant and healthy community.

The media plays an important role in constructing definitions of social problems via the use of various techniques of reporting including the use of metaphors, the mobilising and focusing of public opinion, the selective use of evidence, and the use of language based on particular values (Beresford, 2000: 136-139). As we shall see in the street prostitution debate, The Age and Herald Sun respectively used different techniques to present differing constructions of the same problem.

The Age used mainly conventional news reports and editorials to support the government’s harm minimisation perspective. Particular emphasis was placed on the potential of the AGSPAG recommendations to reduce harm to the St Kilda community, and to relieve the friction between local residents and street sex workers. Less attention was given to the structural causes of street prostitution, and the particular needs of street sex workers.

In contrast, the Herald Sun used a range of techniques including biased news reports and opinion pieces, selective use of sources, and emotive and sensationalist metaphors to articulate a zero tolerance perspective. The Herald Sun narrowly identified street sex work as the problem to be addressed, and ignored contributing structural factors.

The techniques used by the newspapers arguably contributed to a limited construction of the street sex work issue around the harm minimisation versus zero tolerance divide. This construction emphasised the concerns of residents, and paid far less attention to the needs of street sex workers. It is arguably not surprising that this debate hit a political dead end with the government failing to pass even its limited proposals for tolerance areas and street worker centres due to resident opposition.

The Melbourne Age

The Age is owned by the Fairfax Press, and is generally regarded as one of the three or four quality Australian newspapers (Loane, 1997: 57). The Age appeals particularly to an educated/professional audience, and currently has an average daily circulation of 196,000 readers. The Age generally articulates a soft, small ‘l’ liberal approach to social issues, and has often been labeled (fairly or otherwise) as sympathetic to the positions of the Australian Labor Party (Mendes, 2000: 55).

On issues such as illicit drugs, The Age has persistently advocated a harm minimisation position. For example, the newspaper strongly supported both the ill-fated 1996 proposal by the Kennett Government to decriminalise the use and possession of small quantities of marijuana, and the equally unsuccessful 2000 proposal of the Victorian Labor Government to introduce supervised injecting facilities for heroin users (Mendes, 1996: 19; Mendes, 2002b).

However, The Age has generally been reluctant to advocate more radical constructions of social problems that would lead to alternative solutions such as structural reform. These solutions could arguably lead to a more explicit focus on the social and economic empowerment of excluded groups. For example, advocates of structural or demand reduction link illicit drug
use and street prostitution to broader social inequities and injustices. The solution then lies with macro-economic reforms involving a redistribution of wealth and income (Goldberg 1999).

Equally, *The Age* has rarely critiqued the economic rationalist as well as human rights assumptions that underpin harm minimisation measures. Whilst supervised injecting facilities and tolerance areas may help keep illicit drug users and street prostitutes alive, they can also be seen as a form of social control which aims both to reduce harm to the population, and to reintegrate ‘deviant’ groups with the capitalist economy via returning them to mainstream social and employment structures. Harm minimisation measures appear to reflect a variety of professional, political and community interests and agendas that go well beyond the needs of service users (Zajdow, 1992; Mugford, 1993; Zajdow, 1999; Miller, 2001).

As we shall see, *The Age*’s emphasis on harm minimisation tended to reinforce the limiting of the street prostitution debate to either conventional harm minimisation or zero tolerance measures. *The Age* made some reference to structural factors associated with street sex work such as poverty and drug dependency. However, there was little extended discussion of the link between street prostitution and broader economic, social and gender inequities, and/or discussion of potential structural solutions such as increased health, housing, and welfare supports (Neave, 1985a: 425-456; Dixon, 1997: 32-40; Pyett and Warr, 1999: 195; Mitchell, 2000: 6-8; McNamee, 2002; Rowe 2003). Rather, *The Age* accepted the parameters of the AGSPAG process which was to primarily concentrate on addressing the concerns of socially included groups such as local residents and traders, rather than on empowering marginal groups such as street workers who were excluded from the community (Mendes, 2002a).

**The Age’s reporting of the street prostitution debate**

*The Age* published a total of 32 articles during the monitored period. They consisted of 25 news reports, six editorials, and only one opinion piece.

The news reports used a wide range of sources including the Port Phillip Action Group (11 occasions), other local residents (11 occasions), the ALP Government (11 occasions), the Liberal Party Opposition (11 occasions), police (six occasions), the City of Port Phillip (13 occasions), local traders (six occasions), individual street workers (five occasions), Resourcing Health and Education in the Sex Industry or RHED (formerly known as the Prostitutes Collective) (three occasions), local welfare agencies (one occasion), and specialist academics such as Professor Marcia Neave, the Chair of an earlier Victorian Inquiry into Prostitution (two occasions).

In general, the news reports were balanced, and fairly presented both sides of the harm minimisation vs zero tolerance debate. However, the interpretation of harm minimisation was relatively conservative in terms of prioritising harm to the community rather than to street workers. As noted above, many of the reports tended to emphasise the concerns of local residents and traders around public nuisance issues, and gave only limited consideration to the concerns of street workers.

For example, early reports referred to resident concerns around St Kilda becoming an ‘open-air brothel’ due to the proliferation of sexual acts, assaults, and used condoms and syringes in people’s gardens, lanes, streets and parks, and the associated presence of ‘sex tourists’ (Cauchi, 2001; Chessell, 2001). However, some space was also given to local residents who defended the rights of street workers (Munro, 2001a; Chessell, 2001).

Further reports consistently emphasised resident concerns that street work be relocated away from residential and retail areas (Elder and Guerrera, 2001; Munro, 2001b; Baker, 2001). Later when the proposed tolerance zones were announced, considerable space was given to the vocal opposition of residents and traders (Tomazin, 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; Kissane, 2002). Such reports focused public concern around the adverse impact of street sex work on local residents.

The paper did not ignore the needs of street workers. A number of references were made to the AGSPAG recommendations as potentially providing a safer environment for sex workers. And space was also given to the views of workers and their representatives. For example, Karen Sait from RHED was cited on a number of occasions discussing the health and safety needs of
workers (Cauchi, 2001; Munro, 2002). Some street sex workers were interviewed expressing support for the AGSPAG recommendations (Milburn, 2002). And later a number of workers were cited as feeling ‘abandoned and betrayed’ by the shelving of the AGSPAG plan (Choahan, 2002).

In addition, some reference was made to structural factors associated with street prostitution such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, illicit drug use and mental illness (Munro, 2001a). One editorial suggested that the government concentrate on addressing the structural causes of street prostitution such as poverty, unemployment, and drug abuse (Sunday Age, 6 February 2001). However, no detailed consideration was given to discussing potential structural solutions to street prostitution.

The Age editorials were consistently slanted towards supporting a harm minimisation position, and specifically the recommendations of the AGSPAG report. A value-neutral approach was adopted regarding street prostitution which was accepted as a normal part of modern society. However, the principal emphasis tended to be on reducing harm to St Kilda residents, rather than addressing the particular needs of street sex workers.

For example, an early statement argued that:

…attempted suppression of prostitution through zero tolerance and harsh sanctions is likely to be seen as too oppressive, costly and – as has been found with other forms of prohibition – ultimately futile. Containment to minimise the nuisance factors is perhaps the most that can be expected from the criminal justice system (The Age, 25/2/01).

A further contribution explicitly supported a designated red-light district, arguing that ‘prohibition does not work. The best society can do is try to minimise the harm’. Attention was drawn to the Kings Cross example which had reportedly ‘succeeded in reducing the complaints of local residents’ (The Age, 30/7/01).

A later statement congratulated the government for ‘accepting that street prostitution is here to stay’, and for ‘seeking to accommodate the competing needs of traders, residents and prostitutes’ (The Age, 21/6/02). Similarly, the City of Port Phillip was praised for:

…listening to a wide range of opinions and making a decision in the best interests of the whole community that would regulate and control a situation that has become intolerable for many locals (The Age, 31/7/02).

The Age regretted the government’s decision not to proceed with the AGSPAG reforms, and restated its belief ‘that an appropriate process of discussion had been undertaken in the formulation of the tolerance zones’ (15/8/02).

The only opinion piece to appear in The Age was written by Heather Benbow, a doctoral student at the University of Melbourne. Using structural feminist language, Benbow attacked the ‘femocrats’ of the ALP for permitting the sexual exploitation of women. Drawing attention to structural issues such as sexual abuse, drug use, mental illness and homelessness associated with street prostitution, she argued for the decriminalisation of soliciting, and a greater focus on supports for those wanting to leave street sex work (Benbow, 2002).

Benbow’s argument seems to reflect the views of many radical feminists who argue for greater legal and industrial empowerment of existing street sex workers whilst continuing to view prostitution per se as exploitative and degrading (Jackson and Otto, 1984; Sullivan, 1992; Sullivan, 1994; Jeffreys, 1997; Gorjanicyn, 1998). However, this arguably significant viewpoint received no further consideration in The Age.

The Herald Sun

The tabloid Herald Sun is owned by Rupert Murdoch, and has an average daily circulation of 555,000 readers. The paper has long been overtly sympathetic to the conservative Liberal Party, and is generally regarded as appealing to populist blue-collar or socially conservative views on social issues (Schultz, 1998: 91-92).

In contrast to The Age, the Herald Sun has consistently advocated prohibitionist/zero tolerance solutions over alternative harm minimisation measures. For example, the Herald Sun played a
prominent role in opposing the Kennett Government’s proposed decriminalisation of marijuana, and was also influential in the 2000 campaign against supervised injecting facilities (Rowe, 1999: 278-282; Penington, 2002: 5-6 and 11-12; Rowe, 2002a). The paper also mounted a major campaign against the alleged supervision of young people engaged in volatile substance abuse (chroming), by a Victorian non-government welfare agency (Mendes, 2002c; Bessant, 2002a).

The Herald Sun’s campaigns on social policy issues seem to have a number of major characteristics in common. Firstly, they advocate law and order solutions to social problems. As we shall see, the tabloid consistently argued for greater policing of both sex workers and their clients. Secondly, they are furiously critical of the welfare state and welfare professionals.

In addition, they explicitly reject potentially structural explanations of social problems. For example, they are not interested in investigating the complex reasons why people turn to street prostitution. Rather, the emphasis is on black and white definitions which lead comfortably to the legalistic solutions discussed above. Similarly, there is little attempt to attain the views of welfare consumers on their understanding of, and preferred solutions to, social problems. For example, the Herald Sun has rarely spoken to representative consumer groups such as the Resourcing Health and Education in the Sex Industry group. Rather, there is a consistent paternalist emphasis on imposing solutions on socially excluded groups.

Finally, much of the Herald Sun’s reporting appears to fit the pattern of what has been called ‘moral panic’. This term refers to the stereotyping of certain social events or groups as posing a disproportionate threat to traditional social values and interests. This threat is then managed by isolating and censuring those individuals or groups (e.g. street sex workers and their clients) judged to have transgressed (Rowe, 2002b).

**The Herald Sun’s reporting of the street prostitution debate**

The Herald Sun published a total of 40 articles during the monitored period. They consisted of 20 news reports, four editorials, and 16 opinion pieces.

The news reports utilised a wide range of sources including the Port Phillip Action Group (6 occasions), other local residents (7 occasions), local traders (3 occasions), the Liberal Party Opposition (7 occasions), the State ALP Government (8 occasions), the City of Port Phillip (9 occasions), RHED (1 occasion), street workers (1 occasion), local welfare agencies (1 occasion), police (2 occasions), legal brothel owners (4 occasions), the Australian Family Association (1 occasion), Independent State MPs (1 occasion), the anti-child prostitution group Child Wise (1 occasion), and Herald Sun readers (1 occasion).

Throughout the debate, the Herald Sun strongly opposed any liberalisation of street prostitution laws, and favoured a narrow law and order solution. Street prostitution was defined as an immoral and illegal activity which should be eradicated, and the complex social and structural factors underlying street sex work were ignored.

This zero tolerance position was presented via the following themes:

1) The state has no right to use taxpayers’ money (allegedly $600,000 a year) to fund brothels. Prostitution is an immoral activity which undermines traditional family values, and should not be sanctioned by government (Burstin, 2002a; Gray, 2002a);

2) There are no suitable areas for street sex in St Kilda. Tolerance zones will only lower property values, threaten the safety of children, and undermine local businesses (Burstin 2002c);

3) Tolerance zones are based on the same misplaced harm minimisation philosophy advocated by naïve welfare workers and bureaucrats that has led to the endorsement of supervised injecting facilities for drug users, and supervised chroming for young people in care (Morrell, 2002; Editorial, Sunday Herald, Sun 11 August 2002);

4) Tolerance zones and street worker centres mean the legalisation of street prostitution which will not help existing street workers, but only lead to an increase in the number of prostitutes (Bolt, 2001; Gray, 2001b; 5). The policy solution is tougher policing. Street workers should be prosecuted, and male gutter crawlers publicly named and shamed (Gray, 2001a; Bolt, 2002).

Many of the Herald Sun’s news reports were not balanced, and clearly favoured the zero tolerance
Selective reports and inter-views were used to focus public attention on street sex work as the problem to be addressed. For example, whilst some reports fairly presented both sides of the debate (Jamieson, 2001; Hodgson, 2002b), others highlighted the opposition of local residents and conservative family groups such as the Australian Family Association to the AGSPAG recommendations (Burstin and Jones, 2002; Ferguson, et al., 2002; Jones, 2002a; Kelly, 2002; Kelly and Burstin, 2002). The paper also highlighted the specific objections of local traders including the manager of the popular children’s facility, Luna Park (Burstin, 2002c; Jones, 2002b; Tinkler, 2002).

Only one report noted the sup-port of street workers for the AGSPAG recommendations (Hodgson, 2002a), whilst another report cited sex workers on the alleged presence of under-age prostitutes (Tinkler and Hodgson, 2002). In addition, only one brief reference was made to the views of RHED.

In contrast, the paper gave considerable space to the views of brothel owners organised in the Australian Adult Entertainment Industry Incorporated. Firstly, they were given the opportunity to argue (no doubt strongly influenced by their own vested commercial interests) that the proposed street worker centres would undermine the legal brothel industry, and its protection of the health and safety needs of both workers and clients (Kelly, 2001; Tinkler and Hodgson, 2002). The paper seemed to endorse these claims by arguing that licensed brothels were morally acceptable to the community, but that street worker centres designed to protect sex workers unable to work in legal brothels were not (Editorial, Herald Sun, 21 September 2001 and 11 August 2002). However, this argument seemed to ignore the reality that numerous prostitutes were already operating on the street without any health or safety protection.

Secondly, brothel owners were used as expert sources to doubt the validity of government costings for the proposed street worker centres. According to brothel proprietors (no doubt influenced again by commercial imperatives), a centre would cost taxpayers at least one million dollars a year rather than the $600,000 estimated by the State Government (Burstin, 2002b).

Nevertheless, it was the editorial and opinion pieces that really drove the policy debate. To be sure, the Herald Sun featured a wide range of contributors including the ALP Attorney-General Rob Hulls, the then State Liberal Party leader Denis Napthine, City of Port Phillip Mayor Darren Ray, prominent youth worker Les Twentyman, and journalists Sarah Wilson and Mischa Merz. However, the majority of the opinion articles (10 out of 16) were contributed by zero tolerance advocates Andrew Bolt, Paul Gray, Sally Morrell and Michael Barnard. In addition, the editorials were uniformly in favour of zero tolerance solutions.

The language used by the Herald Sun was frequently sensationalist, and intended to shape rather than merely present the policy debate. In short, the proposal for tolerance zones was presented as morally outrageous. For example, one report referred to ‘public money’ being used to run ‘taxpayer-funded brothels’ (Kelly and Burstin, 2002), whilst an editorial suggested that a ‘state-sponsored brothel’ would make Melbourne ‘one of the sleaziest’ cities in the world (Herald Sun, 30/7/02).

Columnists Sally Morrell and Michael Barnard referred respectively to ‘government pimps’ running ‘state-supervised brothels’, and ‘governments living off the immoral earnings of the flesh trade’ (Morrell, 2002; Barnard, 2002), whilst Paul Gray argued that the Bracks Government were ‘on record as favouring an even easier ride for men who abuse prostitute’s bodies’ (Gray, 2002b). Another columnist Andrew Bolt complained rather sardonically that not only would the government impose a ‘state-run brothel set up with our cash’, but that this brothel was unlikely to make a profit (Bolt, 2002).

In a blatant attempt to shock readers, the Herald Sun also claimed without any verifiable evidence that children as young as 12 were working as prostitutes in St Kilda, and that proposed tolerance zones and sex worker centres would sanction child prostitution (Tinkler and Hodgson, 2002). This report was made despite a specific reference in the AGSPAG report banning the presence of under-age sex workers in either facility (AGSPAG, 2002: 74-75).

The sensationalist language described above was intended to promote a ‘moral panic’ around
the issue, and clearly influenced the stand of the Liberal Party Opposition. For example, former
Opposition Leader Denis Napthine picked up many of the *Herald Sun*’s principal themes. He
regularly referred to ‘taxpayer-funded brothels’ (Hodgson, 2002a), to the alleged linkage between
harm minimisation policies on injecting facilities, chroming and street prostitution, and to the
ready solution of ‘stricter policing’ (Napthine, 2002). The new Opposition Leader, Robert Doyle,
has similarly accused the ALP of pursuing a ‘radical social engineering agenda’ focused on
injecting facilities, legalised street prostitution and supervised chroming (Doyle, 2002: 59-60).

The link between the political rhetoric of the *Herald Sun* and the Liberal Party did not appear
to be accidental. The paper seemed to view the use of ‘wedge politics’ (Wilson and Turnbull,
2001) around divisive social issues such as illicit drugs and prostitution as an effective and subtle
means of aiding the conservative forces in Victoria. And the *Herald Sun* was not backward in
encouraging the Liberal Party to ‘exploit these fears’ in the forthcoming state election campaign
(Editorial, *Herald Sun*, 14/8/02).

**Policy implications and
conclusion**

A comparison of *The Age* and *Herald Sun* found significant differences in their reporting of the
Victorian street prostitution debate. Both favoured a particular philosophical approach.

In its editorial statements, *The Age* expressed support for the harm minimisation perspective
of the ALP Government, and the specific recommendations for tolerance zones and street sex
work centres. However, *The Age* did not actively campaign for these outcomes, and its news
reports presented a balanced perspective utilising a range of perspectives. Whilst *The Age* made
some reference to structural factors underlying street prostitution, it failed to develop any
structural remedies beyond the limited recommendations of the AGSPAG report.

In contrast, the *Herald Sun* actively sought to shape the policy debate in favour of zero
tolerance outcomes by promoting a ‘moral panic’ around the AGSPAG recommendations. In
contrast to *The Age*, its news reports lacked balance, and favoured sources critical of the AGSPAG
recommendations such as brothel owners. Sensationalist metaphors equating tolerance zones to
‘taxpayer-funded brothels’ were used to shape the definition of the problem and potential
solutions. In addition, very little attention was paid to the views of street workers and their
consumer group.

In conjunction, the reporting of the two daily newspapers arguably served to limit the
construction of the street prostitution issue. As with earlier debates around injecting facilities for
illicit drug users, policy proposals were restricted to conventional harm minimisation or zero
tolerance measures. Neither newspaper gave consideration to potential radical alternatives based
on decriminalisation and/or structural reform.

This limited construction of policy options arguably has significant implications for
governments and policy makers seeking to introduce different and innovative policies and
programs. In particular, the moral panics promoted by the *Herald Sun* around street prostitution
and related social problems such as illicit drug use do not produce rational debate, and are not
likely to facilitate good practice or policy outcomes. Rather, they tend to encourage the
introduction of simplistic and generally ineffective solutions that ignore the broader social and
structural factors contributing to the problem. This is particularly the case when governments fail
to provide clear political leadership, and instead cave in to populist media pressure.

Equally, *The Age*’s presentation of harm minimisation as an essentially conservative or
‘damage control’ policy meant that potential structural constructions of the street prostitution
issue received little or no hearing.

There was no serious discussion of arguments for and against decriminalisation of street
prostitution, and little discussion of policies and programmes to empower street sex workers.
Hence those issues that were of most concern to street workers – such as the full details of
proposed exit programmes for workers - were virtually excluded from the mainstream press debate.

The poor outcomes of this policy debate suggest the importance of supporters of structural reforms in areas such as street prostitution and illicit drug use running their own media campaigns in order to reframe definitions of these problems (Bessant, 2002b: 21). This would potentially involve introducing sex workers and/or drug users, their families and other key supporters of policy reform into the public debate in a more organised way, in order to counter the simplistic discourse propagated by the tabloid media.

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