

## Chapter 8

# The Philip Seymour Hoffman Project: A Student–Generated, Media Literacy Focus on Opioid Abuse

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this chapter, and the class project upon which it is based, has been to demonstrate the prosocial role social media, and in particular Facebook, can play in media literacy, by providing a framework for showcasing rigorous student research and harnessing creative responses to salient social welfare and policy issues. Specifically, Facebook can potentially raise awareness of opioid abuse, which has spiraled into a global epidemic, provide narratives that reach broader audiences, and thus fill a gap in substantive mainstream media coverage on the topic. The chapter traces the evolution and progress of a student project in a media literacy class at a New York public university and puts efforts to address the current opioid crisis in an historical context. The immediate catalyst for the project was the sudden, tragic, heroin-related death in 2014 of actor Philip Seymour Hoffman, but the “bigger picture” has been broader communities. This study may interest media educators, their educational institution, government agencies, and health institutions that deal with health policy.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter recounts the history, progress, and impact of a student project in a media literacy class at a public university in New York City. The purpose of the project has been to raise awareness of opioid abuse and its impact, and to share student research and narratives on this topic with broader audiences by means of social media, specifically Facebook. The paper also puts the current opioid crisis and how it became an impetus for the project in an historical context. The immediate catalyst for the project was the sudden and tragic death of Oscar-winning actor Philip Seymour Hoffman, who died of a heroin

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overdose in his Manhattan apartment in February 2014 (Weber, 2014). Here the author will begin with the broader context of drug abuse and the failure to successfully curb, if not eliminate it, and then discuss Mr. Hoffman and the class project.

## **Problem: The Dismal Failure of the War on Drugs**

For decades, an anti-drug war that is nearly impossible to win has played out on a national and global stage. Addictions to and overdoses from drugs are at an all-time high in the U.S. According to one CDC report (CDC, 2018):

*During July 2016 to September 2017, emergency department (ED) visits for those aged  $\geq 11$  years for opioid overdoses in the United States increased 29.7% overall and 34.5% in 16 states with high prevalence of overdoses mortality. Significant rate increases were found in five Midwest region states (largest in Wisconsin [109%]) and in three Northeast states (largest in Delaware [105%]) (CDC, 2018, Paragraph 1).*

In addition, the overdose death rate was revised in January 2019, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA, 2019). “More than 70,000 Americans died from drug overdoses in 2017, including illicit drugs and prescription opioids—a 2-fold increase in a decade.”

Efforts to stop drug use and distribution, including the War on Drugs of the 1990s, failed or triggered other problems. Drug manufacturers have been faulted for misleading publics regarding the addictive nature of prescription pills (Buckler, 2019) and the market for obtaining prescription pills illegally has exponentially grown due to laws like IStop (New York State, 2013) and other legal deterrents to doctor shopping and fraud. New, deadlier drugs now readily available on the market—e.g., fentanyl—have raised the stakes for saving lives. Law enforcement and medical and public health professionals have collaborated with affected communities to curb the problem and in some cases have settled for harm reduction, rather than for eliminating addictions. This expanded emphasis on harm-reduction programs and injection sites has been negatively received in some cities and embraced in others (Gaviria, 2016).

Public relations/information campaigns have had mixed success at best, and at times, no success at all. Community-based coalitions have attempted to increase the government’s commitment to getting dealers off the street and addicts into treatment. There has been clear conflict among politicians and community leaders about these issues. The drug crisis has pumped up candidates’ rhetoric, particularly around primary time (as seen during the 2016 campaigns) in states such as New Hampshire, which has a high rate of opiate use, overdoses, and incarceration of parents with minor kids. Grandparents in many states, such as Ohio, have become primary caretakers of their grandchildren because their own children have been incarcerated for drug abuse. In a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) press release, Dr. Thomas Frieden (2011), its director, said, “States, health insurers, health care providers and individuals have critical roles to play in the national effort to stop this epidemic of overdoses while we protect patients who need prescriptions to control pain” (Paragraph 2).

The opioid crisis is now currently considered by many to be a pandemic, rather than just an epidemic. As a professor teaching a media literacy course, it was important to the author to provide students not only with staggering statistics bearing out the pandemic, but also convey the first-hand experiences of individuals and organizations dealing with it. In addition, the author hoped for at least one crucial, aspirational (see below) media literacy takeaway for the students: the way that media coverage for celebrity deaths contrasts with the media’s coverage of the “average” individual who overdoses but lacks public

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