The same old story? Continuity and change in Swedish print media constructions of cannabis

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ABSTRACT
AIMS – The purpose of the study is to describe and analyse how cannabis is constructed in Swedish print media and if this has changed over time. Sweden is known for its prohibitionist cannabis policy, but this approach seems increasingly challenged on both international and domestic arenas. It is therefore important to see if and how this international change is mirrored and processed in a key arena such as print media. METHODS – Newspaper material from two years, 2002 and 2012, was included to analyse continuity and change. The theoretical backdrop for the study is social constructionism, and methodological concepts such as discourse and subject positions from discourse theory were used to investigate how cannabis and cannabis problems are constructed. RESULTS – The analysis showed that print media in both years seem to draw mainly on a juridical, a social problems and a medical discourse when portraying cannabis. It is through these discourses that some subject positions become relevant as users (e.g. youth) and as experts (e.g. police). Despite a strong continuity in these cannabis constructions, the analysis also shows signs of change. For example, in 2012 there are articles drawing on economic and recreational discourses, and there is a global outlook enabling new cannabis constructions. CONCLUSION – The Swedish print media generally has a crime-centred and deterrent approach towards cannabis, with prohibition at the heart of the reporting. International events do however introduce discursive alternatives in 2012. It remains to be seen if these new ways of writing about cannabis will strengthen or challenge prohibitionist constructions.
KEYWORDS – cannabis, media, press, Sweden, change, discourse

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Introduction
The purpose of this study is to describe and analyse how cannabis is constructed in Swedish print media and to investigate if this has changed over time. Sweden has traditionally had a drug policy based on zero tolerance and prohibition, and under the slogan “a drug-free society” political parties across the ideological field have battled drugs with all means possible (Lenke & Olsson, 2002). Cannabis has not been viewed as a soft drug, as for example in the Netherlands, but rather as a dangerous substance that in time will lead the user into injecting drugs. In the Western world

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however, the perspective on and handling of cannabis seems to be changing: liberal cannabis policies are being implemented in US states, the Copenhagen (Denmark) mayor is working to legalise cannabis sale, and in Uruguay cannabis cultivation and sale has become legal (Bjørnager, 2014; Røgeberg, 2015). Also, previous research has shown that some Western youth cultures are normalising cannabis use (Duff et al., 2012; Järvinen & Demant, 2011; Parker, Aldridge & Measham, 1998) and that there is a growing acceptance of cannabis use in news media (Taylor, 2008). It is thus important to see if and how this international change is mirrored and processed in different arenas in Sweden. Media is one such key arena, as it has been recognised to be an important actor, shaping public opinion and setting the political agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Fairclough (1995) also emphasises that “[m]edia texts constitute a sensitive barometer of sociocultural change, and […] should be seen as valuable material for researching change” (p. 52). Newspaper articles are therefore suitable material for investigating movement in public debate, and this study incorporates articles from two years, 2002 and 2012, to analyse continuity and change in cannabis constructions.

There has been an expansion in public debate beyond traditional media, primarily due to technological developments. A wide range of voices and media outlets compete to set boundaries for drug discourses, making it necessary to question the social impact of traditional print media (Giulianotti, 1997; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). Previous research does nevertheless indicate that cannabis discussions in “new” media outlets are presented in relation to images from traditional print media (Månsson & Ekendahl, 2013). For example, oppositional and drug-liberal voices can be heard in online forums, but their arguments are shaped by the prohibitionist images that have dominated print media. This, together with numbers showing that newspapers are still read by 69% of Swedes aged 9–79 makes it vital to concentrate on the print media (Nordicom, 2012). Traditional print media has also been recognised as an essential intermediary when informing the public on specific issues (Fairclough, 1995). This makes a media study on cannabis important, as the aspects included in a news story and the events that are foregrounded, namely that which is considered newsworthy, can influence how we perceive the substance. While it has been suggested that the relationship between media, political leaders and the public is complex (Gonzenbach, 1992; Hill, Oliver & Marion, 2012; Johnson et al., 1996; Snyder & Nadorff, 2010), several studies have shown that media attention can play an integral role in influencing drug policies (Beckett, 1994; Forsyth, 2012; McArthur, 1999; Olsson, 2008). Lancaster, Hughes, Spicer, Matthew-Simmons, and Dillon (2011) write more specifically that media coverage of illicit drug issues can lead to multifarious effects on drug policy, perceptions of users and public opinion. Also, previous research has acknowledged that print media can be considered to be an opinion maker that can “define deviant behaviour related to cannabis use” in the public debate and thus add to the “configuration of the cannabis issue” (Acevedo, 2007, p. 180). Consequently, mass media has been identified as a “battleground” in the drug field.
(Proctor & Babor, 2001), and a multiplicity of studies focus on media and illicit drugs (e.g. Bright, Marsh, Smith, & Bishop, 2008; Gould, 1996; Jepsen, 2001; Reinarman & Levine, 1989; Törnqvist, 2009; Törönen, 2004).

According to Fairclough (1995), official constructions of problems generally influence media formulations in a constant flow between political arenas and media. Taylor (2008, p. 381) concludes that “news media and criminal justice policy seemingly mirror each other’s beliefs”. Existing research on Swedish media reports about drugs accords with these findings, showing that elements of the restrictive drug policy are emphasised in media coverage of drugs without much room for alternatives (Fondén & Sato, 2005; Gould, 1996; Pollack, 2001; Tryggvesson & Olsson, 2002). However, these studies were published a few years back, and previous research focusing on discussions opposing cannabis prohibition has showed that cannabis-liberal voices are prominent in new online environments (Månsson, 2014; Månsson & Ekendahl, 2013).

There have been comparatively few empirical studies of media portrayals of cannabis, as earlier research tends to concentrate on hard drugs such as heroin (e.g. Ekendahl, 2012; Lawrence, Bammer, & Chapman, 2000) and methamphetamine (e.g. Boyd & Carter, 2010; Dwyer & Moore, 2013) or illegal drugs in general (e.g. Bright et al., 2008; Törnqvist, 2009). Existing studies seem to focus primarily on media influence on cannabis use/attitudes towards cannabis (e.g. Beaudoin & Hong, 2012; Primack, Kraemer, Fine, & Dalton, 2009; Stryker, 2003) and the influence of anti-cannabis media campaigns (e.g. Alvaro et al., 2013; Kang, Cappella & Fishbein, 2009; Zimmerman et al., 2014).

Still, media reporting on cannabis has also been studied to highlight questions such as national identity (Lipset & Halvakzs, 2009), policy implications (Lenton, 2004; Silverman, 2010) and ethnicity and gender issues (Boyd & Carter, 2012). There are also studies that have a more discourse analytical approach, focusing on how cannabis use and users are constructed. For example, Acevedo (2007) showed in her UK newspaper study that cannabis was represented by eight discourses, which constructed cannabis as either remedy or poison. She also found that media reports tended to dwell on issues of criminality. Several studies have correspondingly shown that media outputs on cannabis are dominantly associated with law enforcement, criminal action and legal problems (e.g. Cross, 2007; Haines-Saah et al., 2014; Hughes, Spicer, Lancaster, Matthew-Simmons, & Dillon, 2010; Stryker, 2003) and that “media reports echo law enforcement claims” (Boyd & Carter, 2012, p. 244). However, research from a Nordic context seems particularly scarce, and international research can be difficult to generalise between countries. Furthermore, most studies have concentrated on specific article types (e.g. debate) or particular time periods when media has been said to have a more central role in agenda setting (Hughes, Lancaster & Spicer, 2011). With a more general approach, which includes elucidating media constructions in qualitative detail and by comparing media material over time, this study contributes with new knowledge on whether cannabis is still represented through “traditional” legal/criminal discourses that fit with a
prohibitionist Swedish context or if the print media has been influenced by drug-liberal international trends.

**Theoretical framework**
The theoretical backdrop for this study is the social constructionist contention that reality is socially constructed through language (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Language shapes the way we engage in and relate to society, and provides a demarcated structure for conceiving and talking about it; it is in the linguistic articulations, the discourses, that the world is conceptualised.

For example, cannabis may have some particular qualities, but it is how we interpret and relate to these that are important (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). In this study it is therefore not relevant to evaluate the veracity of different statements, but rather to focus on what can and cannot be said about the substance in a specific context.

Within social constructionist theory there are thus two main aspects that need to be considered: what makes some claims socially and culturally accepted as true and what actors are defined as trustworthy and competent to make such claims. Social problems, like drug problems, are not something stable that exist independent of our actions and words but rather something that is constructed through, for example, policy documents, media messages and public opinion. This makes it reasonable to look at newspaper material with a qualitative approach to examine how the involved subjects (e.g. users, experts), the substance (cannabis), the effects of use and the problem solutions are constructed (Brook & Stringer, 2005; Laclau, 2005). Following Laclau and Mouffe, the theoretical and methodological tools of discourse analysis are used to investigate how cannabis is constructed in media messages, i.e. which discourses create and define the substance, and whether this is different between the years studied. More specifically, the methodological concepts of discourse and subject position are employed to answer the research questions.

In discourse theory, a discourse can be characterised as a historically specific system of meaning (consisting of actions, words and objects), which makes it possible for us to relate to a phenomenon, such as cannabis, in a certain way (Howarth, Norval, & Stavrakakis, 2000). A discourse can be said to be centred on some key signs that structure its meaning (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). These signs may seem stable in that they can unify and organise a given field, but some of them are up for contestation by other discourses. Such controversial signs are important, because they highlight struggles for dominance between discourses (Laclau, 2005). As we will see, cannabis is such an important sign, for different discourses are used to define, create and construct the substance in the material. Cannabis can be portrayed as either a destructive drug or as an effective medicine depending on which discourse is used in talking about it.

Further, the structure of the discourses makes some positions possible for the concerned individuals; these are called subject positions (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Certain behavioural expectations are linked to the available subject positions within a discourse. Subject positions, like discourses, are relational configurations and defined against what they are not. For example, in a medical discourse a doctor is the authority and expert on cannabis and its ef-
fects. The user (or patient) is then, in relation to the doctor, not the expert on his/her own behaviour. The subject position of the expert has been shown to be especially important in shaping news stories, and some experts (the police and government officials) are seen as specifically reliable sources in news production (Conrad, 1999; Shehata, 2010).

Material and methods
Five Swedish newspapers were chosen for this study: four nationwide newspapers (two evening papers with tabloid profiles and two daily papers with broadsheet profiles) and one daily paper with a more regional coverage. The evening papers are the social democratic Aftonbladet and the liberal Expressen. The daily papers are Dagens Nyheter (DN), which is liberal, Svenska Dagbladet (SvD), which is conservative, and the liberal Sydsvenskan, mainly distributed in southern Sweden. Sydsvenskan was included due to its relatively large readership and its coverage of a region geographically important for the cannabis issue; southern Sweden is commonly referred to as a “gateway to Europe”, and the drug-liberal Copenhagen mayor is located just across the Øresund Bridge. Supplementary papers were not included, as most of them did not exist in both years. Photographs and illustrations were excluded from the study to make the material manageable.

A diachronic analysis was made to capture change and continuity in the material, with two years, 2002 and 2012, included in the study. These years were chosen to include the latest year possible (the study was initiated in mid-2013) and to let enough time to pass between the years to allow important political events to take place both internationally (e.g. referendum on legal cannabis in California 2010) and nationally (e.g. political shift from a social democratic to a liberal/conservative government in Sweden in 2006).

The digital news archive Retriever and its website search tool were used to collect material and to find all articles mentioning cannabis* or marijuana* or hash*, where “*” was included to find compound words. The Retriever archive consists of printed material from each daily newspaper included in this study, and the full scope of articles was 879 for 2002 and 604 for 2012. To condense the sample and still keep it reasonably representative, articles from every third month of the year were included in the study (January, April, July and October). This resulted in 513 articles: 313 from 2002 and 200 from 2012. (For a list of all articles, contact the author.) All types of articles were included in the analysis: news, entertainment, debate, feature, etc. About 75% of the articles in both years could be characterised as news articles.

The material was read repeatedly and foregrounded, and coherent ways of writing about cannabis were noted as their frequent occurrence emphasised their importance (Burr, 1995). An initial coding aiming for an open analysis was done using Atlas.ti (a software for qualitative analysis). This coding followed the patterns emerging in the material. By studying what cannabis was described to be, not to be and what it was in relation to other phenomena, the material could be coded and organised (Howarth, 2000; Laclau, 2005). The material was then re-read to gradually refine these codes into key discursive signs. According to a compre-
hensive analysis, most codes seemed to be gathered under three main themes. For example, the codes criminal, arrest and police contained descriptions of cannabis as an illegal problem; the codes destructive, bad company and youth at risk contained reports about cannabis as a social problem; and the codes health, addiction and doctor portrayed cannabis to be a potent drug. With the help of previous research it became evident that these themes could be understood as three well-established discourses that defined and constructed the meaning of cannabis: a juridical, a social problems and a medical discourse. With these discourses as interpretative frames, the texts and quotes became meaningful, and these are thus the discourses that are mainly drawn on in Swedish print media portrayals of cannabis. However, some of the codes (e.g. internet and drug cartel) appeared to be present mainly in the 2012 material, indicating a change between the years.

Further, some codes did not seem related to either of these discourses, yet their occurrence indicated that new perspectives on cannabis were introduced, as they mainly appeared in the material from 2012. For example, the codes regular commodity and legalisation contained descriptions of cannabis as something other than the illegal and problematic drug defined by the three discourses above. Instead, these codes could be seen as key signs in two other discourses: an economic and a recreational discourse. Although these discourses had not been explicitly described in previous research on Swedish media material, similar discursive constructions could be located in the international research. In all, five discourses were located in the 2002 and 2012 material (see table 1).

As part of the analysis, groups and individuals foregrounded in the material were identified and classified into different subject positions that became important and got their meaning through a specific discourse. For example, deviant youth subjects became meaningful in a social problems discourse, as their presence in the discourse seems to accentuate the problems with consuming cannabis. The positioning of these subjects made by the narrator in the article was also located, as it allowed for a more detailed analysis (cf. Bogren, 2010).

The quotes included in this text have been translated from Swedish to English with the aim of keeping as closely as possible the original wording. Where inessential passages have been omitted from quotes, this is indicated with [...] . The quotes were chosen because they provide good examples of the different discourses.

Table 1. Overview of discourses located in 2002 and 2012

| Discourse      | 2002 material | 2012 material |
|----------------|---------------|---------------|
| Juridical      | X             | X             |
| Social problems| X             | X             |
| Medical        | X             | X             |
| Economic       |               | X             |
| Recreational   |               | X             |
Analysis
Outlined below are the key discourses that Swedish print media draws on when depicting cannabis as a substance, the effects of its use and the subject positions involved in the issue reported. The analysis is structured according to these discourses. As seen in table 1, some discourses were visible in both 2002 and 2012, and others mainly in 2012. As will be seen, similarities and differences in how the discourses were expressed between the years are described in the running text. Quotes providing good illustrations of overall findings are presented under each discourse.

Juridical discourse
Cannabis is tied closely to illegal activities (drug dealing, smuggling, illegal consumption) and policing (drug raids, arrests, legal proceedings) in the lion’s share of the articles in both years. This emphasises that a juridical discourse is predominant in both 2002 and 2012. All article types contain descriptions of the illegality of cannabis, while in both years the most frequent news articles are those reporting on successful control measures. These articles are usually short notices informing the readers about police work, for example “Six arrested at drug bust” (Sydsvenskan, January 21, 2002) and “Two arrested for drug smuggling” (DN, July 24, 2012). This demonstrates how a juridical discourse is used to construct the cannabis problem: arrests and criminal offences are key to defining the substance. Quote 1, lifted from such a short notice on legal action, illustrates the character of these articles.

Quote 1:
A 30-year-old inhabitant from Lund is prosecuted for driving while intoxicated, for a drug offence and driving without a licence. On two separate occasions, in April and May, the man was driving around Lund after using cannabis. On both occasions he was also in possession of drugs when the police stopped him. (Sydsvenskan, local news section, July 8, 2012)

This quote exemplifies the description of cannabis as an illegal substance, and highlights that the use of juridical language is typical (“driving while intoxicated, drug offence and driving without a licence”). As diverse illegal activities are linked to cannabis, this also emphasises the use of a juridical discourse. Associations between cannabis and crimes such as murder, burglary and robbery are also recurrent in the material during both years, which underlines that the substance is constructed as both unlawful and deviant.

Quote 1 illustrates the two primary subject positions that are made relevant in both 2002 and 2012 by drawing on a juridical discourse: the subject position of a law enforcer (police, customs, prosecutor, etc.) and the positions of those affected by the law (criminal, user, suspect, etc.). In both years, law enforcers emerge as experts. For example, short notices on arrests and crackdowns are common throughout the material (especially in Sydsvenskan). These are usually written in language similar to police reports and do not include the voice of the affected. In longer articles, credibility is attributed to the police in two ways, by allowing them to comment on cannabis issues and by presenting a narra-
tor who speaks from a police perspective. This is illustrated in quote 2, taken from a longer article that was part of a series of articles the DN published on “the drug problem” in 2002.

Quote 2:
Sweden is swarming with cannabis and party drugs – the amphetamine price is dropping, and most young people know who to buy from. […] The police do not have enough resources to work full-time with early interventions on those trying drugs for the first time. Only Stockholm has a special police force – the so-called rave commission – that works with 15–25-year-olds. (DN, domestic news section, January 20, 2002)

The basic assumption in quote 2 is that the quantity of drugs in Sweden is troublesome and that early police interventions can solve this. This assumption is upheld as a truth. In both quotes 1 and 2, the journalists borrow the voice of the police, making it difficult to separate one perspective from the other. Quote 2 illustrates a recurrent construction of the police as both experts and solvers of the cannabis problem.

The DN articles on “the drug problem” from 2002 travel through Europe to find and report on illegal drug activities. When cannabis is depicted as an illegal substance, it is however in the 2012 material that a global perspective becomes truly visible: there are several articles in 2012 on international drug wars in drug-producing countries. This indicates a change in how the juridical discourse is expressed.

Quote 3:
More than two tons of marijuana that was buried in a cemetery in northwest Mexico has been discovered. Soldiers patrolling the village of Los Villanueva in the state of Chihuahua found 241 packages of marijuana hidden under stone blocks in two graves. […] The region is one of the most violent in the country, where the powerful Gulf cartel and the paramilitary Zeta cartel are battling for control over drug traffic routes. (DN, international news section, July 30, 2012)

Quote 3 comes from a shorter news story on a cannabis find in Mexico. Here, as in similar news stories from 2012 that place emphasis on the problem in producing countries, the substance is constructed not only as an illegal product, but also as a cause for violence. These descriptions centre on subject positions such as international drug cartel members and military/police force members. In this kind of reporting, cannabis is tied closely to war-like problems on a societal level. These articles still draw on a juridical discourse (illustrated by the close connection between cannabis and illegal activity), but by not focusing exclusively on the Swedish context, cannabis is tied to new problems (e.g. war), and new subject positions become important (e.g. military, international drug cartels).

Social problems discourse
Descriptions of cannabis as a social problem are evident in all newspapers from both 2002 and 2012 as well as in different types of articles. What signifies this construction in both years is that cannabis use
is part of a “bad life story” usually starting in adolescence.

Quote 4:
Sebastian was 10 when he started to misuse drugs and commit crimes. First it was alcohol. In seventh grade he started smoking hash. A year later it was amphetamine. For Sebastian drugs were an escape from complicated home conditions. The gang became his new family. He slept in dope dens or at older friends. They were the ones introducing him to harder stuff. (Expressen, debate section, April 5, 2002)

In quote 4 a politician is promoting a prohibitionist drug policy. The debate article is thus written to make prohibition seem reasonable, illustrating how the politician draws on a social problems discourse to construct cannabis as a problem that needs to be addressed by society; cannabis users are self-destructive, as they come from broken homes and associate with bad people. The substance is used to escape from problems but becomes a gateway to hard drug addiction, destructive living and, in a worst case, death. This standard story, also used by journalists (see quote 5 and 7), appears intended to deter people from using cannabis and to challenge drug liberals who claim that cannabis is not harmful. Cannabis becomes a powerful symbol of social deprivation, and it is easily combined with a juridical discourse: key features of a “bad life story” are drug use and crime. Reasons for consuming cannabis relate to negative social and structural circumstances, and this standard story of a “bad life” is noticeable in both years.

As indicated above, the construction of cannabis as a social problem centres on youth during both years. The consuming youth is frequently described as victims of circumstances, as an object rather than a subject. This status is further reinforced by the lack of comments from youths in both the 2002 and 2012 material. In the few articles where youth voices are present they are followed by an expert or journalist comment.

Quote 5:
– It’s easier to do drugs than alcohol. It doesn’t show in the same way, parents can’t tell, says Martina.
– You want to try new drugs, see what fits you, says Susanna.
[…]
– There is an element of recklessness to it. Girls try drugs they can’t handle.
[Says chief physician at Maria Ungdom]. (Expressen, general news section, January 22, 2002)

Quote 5, taken from an article on youth attitudes towards drugs, does not specifically address cannabis only, but it illustrates how young girls’ own understanding of drug taking (“easier”, “see what fits”) is questioned and criticised as reckless and irresponsible. The girls’ statements do not seem to fit the experts’ view on drug use and are ignored or contradicted in the text. In quote 5, this is done by inviting readers to agree with the expert opinion held by the chief physician that drugs create social problems as they make girls vulnerable to
sexual assaults (cf. Bogren, 2010; Haines-Saah et al., 2014). That youth opinions about cannabis are often considered misguided is further accentuated in quote 6.

Quote 6:
She [commissioner of social services] says that it is crucial to inform about risks with smoking cannabis, as young people today believe cannabis is harmless.
– […] There is plenty of online information stating that it is not harmful, and youth discuss this with their parents. Many parents feel lost and lack enough information.
The measures are preventive work, early efforts and treatment.
– During the spring and the years ahead we will direct generous education measures at school, school counsellors, school psychologists, local police, recreation instructors, field social workers and parents. (DN, local news section, April 28, 2012)

Quote 6 comes from an article that presents a new political programme targeting cannabis. To prevent the problems described in the standard story, the commissioner of social services echoes a common political understanding; the solution to the cannabis problem is attentive adults and early discovery of young users (cf. quote 2). Several articles in both 2002 and 2012 describe it as an alarming social problem that parents are not taking care of their children and preventing them from using cannabis. The argument is that “normal” kids today have easier access to “drugs than to a hot-dog” (Expressen, April 3, 2002). This reiterates a familiar notion in media reporting on cannabis from both 2002 and 2012: the use of the substance is on the rise, and the adult world needs to react. Quote 6 also illustrates a new social problem introduced in 2012 that misleading information about cannabis is easily obtained on the internet. Such outside and international sources are rejected and met with what is described as true and trustworthy information from known experts such as school, police and social workers (quote 4 and 6).

By drawing on a social problems discourse, former drug misusers (or their families) talking about troubled youth who use cannabis and experience social problems also stand out as important experts during both 2002 and 2012. These experts are typically presented as morally righteous persons who through their own experience have the right to condemn cannabis use. Take “Monica” in quote 7, who describes how trying cannabis was the start of a destructive life course.

Quote 7:
The first time Monica tried drugs she was twelve and she used both hash and amphetamine.
– I met an older addict, 30–35 years old, at a friend’s house. He asked if I wanted to smoke hash with him and I said yes. It is one of the worst things I ever did, and yet I kept on doing it. (Expressen, news section, April 15, 2002)

Medical discourse
A basic assumption in almost all sampled articles from both years is that cannabis is harmful. This argument has also been identified by previous research (e.g. Boyd & Carter, 2012; Gould, 1996; Manning,
While a social problems discourse (see above) can emphasise such harms as destructive living, a medical discourse in the articles links harms to physical damages. When cannabis is given such a medical and biomedical meaning, it is constructed as a pathogen that is harmful to both body and brain, as in quote 8 below.

Quote 8:
– Yes, there is no doubt that it leads to addiction, answers [name], addiction researcher and professor in pharmacology at the University of Gothenburg.
– Cannabis affects the brain’s reward system and leads to activity in the dopamine system, just like any other drug, heroin, for example. (DN, human interest section, October 5, 2002)

Quote 8 is taken from an article on the dangers of cannabis use. It is typical in that the language on cannabis is scientific (“the brain’s reward system”, “dopamine system”), and that cannabis is said to produce long-term adverse effects. As information about the physical effects of cannabis use usually derives from (bio)medical research in both 2002 and 2012, this construction of cannabis is upheld to be the “truth” (“there is no doubt”) by references to researchers of good repute and scientific studies (cf. Campbell, 2012).

Furthermore, quote 8 illustrates that cannabis is recurrently described as leading to addiction just like “any other drug”. This reiterates a common notion seen in both years that cannabis is a medical substance and affects the brain just like heroin. However, cannabis is not only considered a pathogen, it is also described as a medical remedy in both 2002 and 2012.

Quote 9:
The prominent group has left no stone unturned in this complex debate on hash as both an intoxicant and as an alternative medicine for people who, for example, suffer from cancer and sclerosis. (Sydsvenskan, international news section, April 14, 2002)

In quote 9, Sydsvenskan reports that Danish politicians are discussing cannabis legalisation. Unlike what is usually feasible in the Swedish context, reports on Danish policy discussions make it possible to write about cannabis as medicine, a cure instead of a creator of health problems. Even though such comments are not common, they do exist in the material in both years and are always associated with foreign researchers or policy suggestions. Consequently, whether or not cannabis has a negative or positive impact on users’ health, it is constructed to be a potent medical substance. When print media draws on a medical discourse, three subject positions become relevant: expert doctor/researcher, sick patient whose health is positively influenced by cannabis and addicted user whose health is negatively influenced by cannabis.

Economic discourse
In the 2012 material, there are articles portraying cannabis as an economic asset. Such constructions are not particularly recurrent in the material (especially not in 2002), but in these articles cannabis is referred to as an ordinary commodity, and cannabis trade is compared to a regular
commercial market. The emergence of this discourse in 2012 is one of the main differences between the years.

Quote 10:
– I am definitely in favour of the cannabis cultivation. It would provide jobs, and we need that, says [name], who is born and raised in the village and who has no plans of leaving. (SvD, international news section, July 24, 2012)

Quote 10 is lifted from a news article about a Spanish village attempting to grow cannabis for the “economic survival of the village”. Here, cannabis is described to be an agricultural commercial product that is important for the economy. With rational descriptions, the substance thus becomes a provider of new jobs and new business. These articles suggest that cannabis is similar to alcohol, which is clearly in conflict with the construction of cannabis as any other illegal drug (see quote 8). The subject positions that become possible when drawing on an economic discourse are those of legitimate businessmen and workers. Also, cannabis users are described as customers and actors of a free commercial market. It should however be noted that when an article highlights the economic benefits of cannabis, it always happens in another cultural context (e.g. Denmark, Spain, the United States). The emergence of this “new” discourse in 2012 is consequently connected to events and political developments in other countries.

Recreational discourse
In the full scope of the material it is uncommon to connect cannabis with pleasure. Writing about cannabis as fun and relaxing, which many consumers, for example, would do (see e.g. Sandberg, 2012), is notably rare. Some articles do however depict cannabis as a possible recreational activity in 2012, which is a key aspect of change from 2002. In these articles the use of cannabis is not directly described as illegal or problematic, but rather included in descriptions of substances that can be consumed during leisure activities such as parties. This consumption is mainly linked to foreign male celebrities (cf. Blackman, 2004; Haines-Saah et al., 2014; Manning, 2007), such as the hip hop artist whose concert is reviewed in quote 11.

Quote 11:
By way of introduction he has a hand-rolled marijuana cigarette the size of an ice cream cone in his hand. At the end of the concert he has wolfed the whole thing down with help from sections of the audience. Maybe that is why so many of the songs appear to be wrapped up in cotton. (Sydsvenskan, culture and entertainment section, April 12, 2012)

In the context of the concert, cannabis is said to give a smooth feeling (“wrapped up in cotton”), and use seems normalised as many audience members are doing it. Here, the use is not appraised or described as mere pleasure, nor is it directly condemned. The activity is however linked to negative effects when the passage above finishes with a quote stating that “maybe that is why the obvious final tracks are scrambled through” – indicating that cannabis makes people unfocused and careless. This ambivalence is typical in the entertainment sections of the evening pa-
pers, where there are several descriptions of international celebrities using cannabis for party purposes. Word choices such as “drug parties”, “wild partying” and “marijuana and booze orgies” make it obvious that a recreational discourse is used when depicting cannabis, but it is unclear if these parties are constructed as fun or as deprivation and deviancy.

Conclusions and discussion
My reading of the newspaper articles included in this study underlines that in both 2002 and 2012 there were three main discourses in the Swedish print media portrayals of cannabis: a juridical discourse, a social problems discourse and a medical discourse. These construct and define cannabis and its effects (or problems), and it is through these discourses that some subject positions become relevant as users (e.g. youth) and as experts (e.g. police). Using discourse theory, it can thus be concluded that cannabis is mainly constructed as an illegal substance, a producer of social problems and as a potent drug in both years studied, and that media portrayals of cannabis are dominated by continuity. It can also be concluded that in both years cannabis appears as news in Sweden: articles focus on “facts” about cannabis rather than on political opinions. This is important for the reproduction of the problem descriptions and the social concerns linked to the substance, as it indicates that media constructions of cannabis are indisputable and rather continuous. That is, articles reproducing “facts” about the illegal, problematic and harmful nature of cannabis cannot be questioned.

Although Swedish media draws on this variety of discourses when portraying cannabis, there is also a consistent construction of cannabis as harmful and deviant in both years. By reproducing standard stories of a “bad life” and descriptions of cannabis as poison rather than remedy, the use of these discourses also seems to be in line with prohibition (cf. Acevedo, 2007). In both the 2002 and 2012 material this is further reinforced by mainly giving voice to the police, by accentuating this subject position as an expert and by constructing active cannabis users as objects of these expert opinions. The subject position of the user is thus constructed as a “them” separated from the “us” of mainstream society. Also, the focus on (innocent) youth as consumers accentuates the threat of cannabis as a social problem and the need for prohibition to suppress such problems. In 1996 Gould concluded that “the press reinforces many elements of the restrictive line” (p. 101), and in this study it can be concluded that print media constructions of cannabis strengthen a political prohibitionist approach both in 2002 and in 2012. From this perspective not much seems to have changed between the years, and new global cannabis-liberal trends do not, at least on an overall level, seem coupled with corresponding constructions of the substance in Swedish print media.

However, despite the strength of continuity in these cannabis constructions, the analysis also shows that there are signs of change. For example, in 2012 there are articles drawing on economic and recreational discourses which do not fit with a prohibitionist approach. These discursive alternatives become visible mainly when international perspectives and events are introduced. For example, reports on less strict cannabis policies from around
the globe enable stories about cannabis as a regular commodity, articles on international celebrities portray cannabis consumption for party purposes, foreign researchers may suggest that cannabis can be a remedy instead of a pathogen, and online sources claim that cannabis is harmless. This indicates that novel ways of handling and discussing cannabis abroad may challenge prohibitionist Swedish constructions of the substance. Previous research also suggests that output from alternative media environments such as internet forums routinely refer to cannabis as both a regular commodity and a pleasurable activity (Månsson & Ekendahl, 2013; Månsson, 2014). In addition, the use of such “new” discourses when writing about cannabis emerges in Sweden at a time when prohibition is increasingly contested by international legalisation and decriminalisation policies (Room, Fischer, Hall, Lenton, & Reuter, 2010).

It is thus obvious that such international changes are visible in Swedish print media and in some ways affect how cannabis is portrayed. It is however not certain what this change may imply. The introduction of economic and recreational discourses in 2012 does not necessarily mean that prohibition will be challenged or abandoned. The dominating prohibitionist approach may instead be reinforced and tightened by opposing such “new” constructions. As there is a political goal in Sweden to eradicate drug use and to keep “normalisation” of cannabis use at bay, these signs of change can seem threatening (Prop. 2010/11:47). In the *Sydsvenskan*, for example, which covers the region closest to what is felt to be a cannabis-liberal environment (Copenhagen, Denmark), the judicial discourse is most noticeable. Of the papers examined, *Sydsvenskan* also has the most prevalent reporting on cannabis issues in both years. Consequently, prohibitionist constructions of drugs may be strengthened when trying to oppose drug-liberal policies (cf. Ekendahl, 2012). It is also possible that these “new” constructions may be incorporated into prohibition without changing it significantly (cf. Howarth, 2000). For example, when writing about cannabis as a recreational activity, it is not necessarily linked to pleasure or described as a remedy as in the UK media (Acevedo, 2007). When cannabis is portrayed as a commodity, the substance is linked with foreign practices, which mitigates the threat through cultural distance. And while drug wars may be used as an argument for cannabis liberalisation, in Swedish media such incidents are mainly used to emphasise that cannabis is an illegal substance.

Despite the inclusion of two contrasting years in this study, the material is limited in scope and the results can only be seen as temporary pictures of how the Swedish print media constructs cannabis. Including articles from the years between 2002 and 2012 would probably have yielded more nuanced results, and extending the analysis to a longer time period might also have shown that the introduction of “new” ways of writing about cannabis in 2012 have actually been there before. A more comprehensive sampling (e.g. by including alternative newspapers or a different time span) could also have made visible other constructions and discourses. Further, it is possible that another researcher would have classified the discourses in another way or would have given them
other names. Despite these limitations, this study provides important information about possibilities and boundaries of how cannabis can be portrayed in Swedish print media, and in extension how the substance can be discussed in the public.

It has previously been shown that drug constructions in Swedish print media have changed over time, but that the main idea – that drug use is wrong and should be prohibited – has lingered since the modern drug policy became firmly restrictive in the 1980s (Gould, 1996; Törnqvist, 2009). This study can also conclude that portrayals of cannabis as a harmful drug dominate the print media in both 2002 and 2012, and that this is in line with professional and political cannabis constructions in Sweden. This indicates that newspaper articles are more likely to strengthen a discursive and political status quo than to instigate change. However, this study also suggests that even though such continuity dominates, we can see “new” ways of writing about cannabis in 2012 that may not fit with prohibitionist constructions of the substance. Research from other arenas (e.g. among service providers and consumers) also proposes that prohibition is both supported and rejected within different contemporary Swedish contexts (Månsson, 2014; Månsson & Ekendahl, 2015). As Swedish drug policy is still envisioning a drug-free society grounded in prohibition, the “new” and alternative constructions in print media seem to relate mainly to events from international contexts. When alternative constructions of cannabis become available to the public through print media, this can make arguments for a prohibitionist drug policy seem reasonable to question. What effects these constructions have in practice and how they are received by the readers requires more research. However, similar discursive changes have been vitally important in areas where cannabis policies have become more liberal. What now may seem like small changes can thus enable new ways to talk about cannabis in the public debate in the future. It remains to be seen if the stories about the illegal and problematic cannabis have further staying power or if they can be adapted to fit the new international drug-political landscape.

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