Whenever I fall into a funk over the press corps' abysmal coverage of illicit drugs, I console myself with the knowledge that, as awful as the coverage is, it's always been that way. Then, to confirm my cynical sentiments, I pull out a monograph from 1974 titled "Major Newspaper Coverage of Drug Issues" from the drug section of my library and reread it.

Robert P. Bomboy wrote the monograph for the Drug Abuse Council, a 1970s project of the liberal Ford Foundation that assessed the impact of illicit drugs and made policy recommendations. Bomboy found drug coverage to be moralistic in conception, gullible in sourcing, and formulaic in execution.

"Today's headlines and news stories on drug abuse often echo those found in newspaper stories of the thirties, when Harry J. Anslinger, the stern and energetic foe of drug use, took over the Federal Bureau of Narcotics," writes Bomboy. Anslinger was an original exponent of the "reefer madness" school of drug education. "Hemp Around Their Necks," a chapter from his 1961 book The Story of the Narcotic Gangs, provides a taste of his rhetorical style, one that survives in today's coverage of illicit drug use, especially methamphetamine use.

Bomboy interviewed reporters and editors across the country during his research and came up with these drug-coverage axioms that are truer today than they were in 1974:

A great deal of drug reporting on [sic] major newspapers reflects ignorance, fear and false preconceptions.

Nothing that happens to a journalist will shake him of his false ideas about drugs and drug users when he begins his reporting, Bomboy asserts. "His editors and colleagues, having the same mental picture, are not likely to challenge his story," he writes. "So the old myths are perpetuated in the public's mind."

Newspapers continue to be most strongly interested in the sensational or dramatic aspects of the drug abuse story.

For confirmation, please see the recent press treatment of "meth mouth."
Acting out of a lack of interest at best, class bias, racism and fear at worst, newsmen take pains to disassociate themselves from addicts.

"Newsmen still too easily accept conceptions of drug abusers as dope fiends, 'crazies,' uncontrollable animals, the leading contributors to urban crime, objects of fear and loathing," he writes.

Reporters too seldom attempt to cross-check official information with sources on the street.

And if they do interview street sources, it's generally to confirm what the official sources said in the first place.

Major newspapers often don't have "drug beats."

At many papers, general-assignment reporters write the stories and fail to develop any expertise or alternative sourcing that would improve their pieces.

Drug abuse coverage is warped by regional points of view.

To put the contemporary spin on this, the regional press tends to believe that the entire nation must be captive of a meth epidemic because they've observed meth in their own back yards. But even the federal drug warriors don't fall for this line. About 18 months ago, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy ventured: "[A]ccording to the National Drug Intelligence Center, in some areas of this country, methamphetamine use and production is not classified as a significant problem. Yet in other regions, it is a significant threat."

Bomboy's critique can't be universally applied. Obviously, not every reporter is a dupe of the "just say no" crowd. The Oregonian, for example, has produced a methamphetamine series over the last nine months that doesn't rely on meth-mouth distortions. (In fact, a Nexis search indicates that the newspaper has never published the phrase.) While I don't agree with the paper's assumption that meth can be eliminated by locking up the chemical precursors used by clandestine labs to manufacture methamphetamine, there's no denying the Oregonian's journalistic accomplishment. The editors better build their trophy case for all the awards they'll win.

And as long as we're handing out drug-coverage awards, how about one for Alec MacGillis of the Baltimore Sun? In last Sunday's (Aug. 7) edition, he vigorously debunked the estimate of "60,000 addicts" in Baltimore, which had become a national object of faith.

But such skeptical, substantive reporting remains rare. The majority of journalists in 1974 had a good excuse for producing hysterical and hackneyed crap: Drugs were a thousand leagues outside their comfort zone. Your average pressman had never met a heroin user,
had never smoked marijuana, and mistakenly believed that some college kids on LSD had gone blind from looking at the sun.

But today's top editors are all young enough—or old enough, depending on how you look at it—to have observed illicit drug use firsthand, and I'd wager that most have partaken of recreational drugs at some point in their lives. They know that police officers exaggerate drug menaces, that not every drug user turns into Charles Manson, and that not all drug use constitutes drug abuse. Such personal familiarity with drug lore and legend should have better prepared them to cover the subject.

What's their excuse?

[END]