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Changing the script

Media portrayals of addiction, such as celebrity biopics, peddle a dangerous fiction about substance use disorder, says **Anna Wolfe**

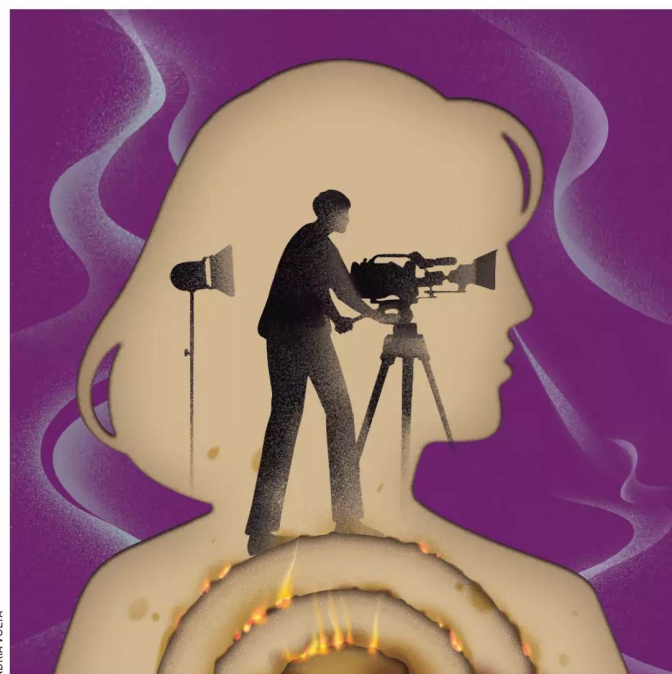
A PODCAST and a comment on a London Tube line one morning made me acutely aware of the disconnect in how we discuss addiction.

The podcast was an episode of *Empathy for the Devil* featuring mental health and addiction specialists compassionately exploring the struggles and death of Rolling Stones member Brian Jones through the lens of his childhood, environment and trauma. The comment was a muttered word, “junkie”, directed at a man asking for money in our carriage. That word overshadowed the more profound questions in the podcast: What led this man to his situation? How was a complex tangle of societal issues reduced to a tale of personal failure?

I wondered if the passenger would have said the same to me because, technically speaking, I’m a “junkie” too – I’m just one of the lucky ones that got sober.

With September dedicated to National Recovery Month, we need to reconsider how every headline, film and celebrity scandal shapes our understanding of addiction, especially when claiming to tell “true stories”.

Take biopics. These films, marketed as reflections of reality, wield enormous influence over public perceptions of addiction. This is borne out by a 2023 study showing the content we consume shapes how we view and treat the condition. It highlights the effect of media in solidifying societal attitudes, and suggests repeated



exposure to these portrayals can make it increasingly difficult to shift entrenched opinions.

Back to Black, for example, reduces Amy Winehouse to the “troubled artist” stereotype, ignoring the complexities of her addiction and mental health. *Bohemian Rhapsody* depicts Freddie Mercury’s addiction as a personal failing.

The issue isn’t just what’s shown on screen, but what’s left out. By neglecting to address root causes, films often reduce addiction to a series of poor choices, lack of values and weakness. This kind of framing not only reinforces

damaging stereotypes but also contributes to a cultural landscape that dehumanises those who have problems with drug use. Worse yet, it influences policies that focus on punishment rather than rehabilitation, ignoring the more complex realities of addiction.

These films are just one part of an overwhelming messaging machine of misinformation. Tabloids turn struggles to clickbait; government campaigns, such as the UK’s “Know Your Limits” initiative, which included scenes of a girl vomiting, stoke shame; schools dish out outdated and simplistic education materials.

It’s a relentless flood of warped ideas, leaving the public adrift in a sea of misconceptions.

This misalignment has real-world consequences. The US opioid crisis shows how media coverage impacts policy, with one study finding that racial bias disproportionately hindered harm reduction strategies in Black and Hispanic communities. In the UK, high addiction rates in socioeconomically deprived areas and focus on prison over prevention raise concerns about misallocated funding, leaving mental health and ongoing support deprioritised.

The World Health Organization and England’s Office for Health Improvement and Disparities have advocated for a holistic approach to addiction treatment, one that addresses underlying issues like poverty, social isolation, mental health and trauma, rather than merely treating symptoms. The aim is to break the cycle and support long-term recovery.

Of course film-makers aren’t responsible for public health, but choosing to tell the whole story of addiction could alter perceptions. While the stories of celebrities and the person on the tube may seem worlds apart, they are threads in the same tapestry. And prioritising truth over drama can save lives. ■



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