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Spinning the Story of Addiction in the Brain

Background & Objective

In the 2010s, the human brain has become a crucial part of understanding the phenomenon of addiction.

The objective of this study is to find out how popular scientific progress stories serve and spin the idea of addiction in the brain.

Research question

What elements in the plot of the popular story of brain-based addiction make it so convincing, appealing and credible?

Material

Collected via the news aggregator Google News (U.S. Edition with default search settings). The search terms were 'addiction AND brain' Total: 589, Of these: 182 about addiction in general or different kinds of addiction problems / Of these:

67 report on new research discoveries. **= these 67 items constitute the material**

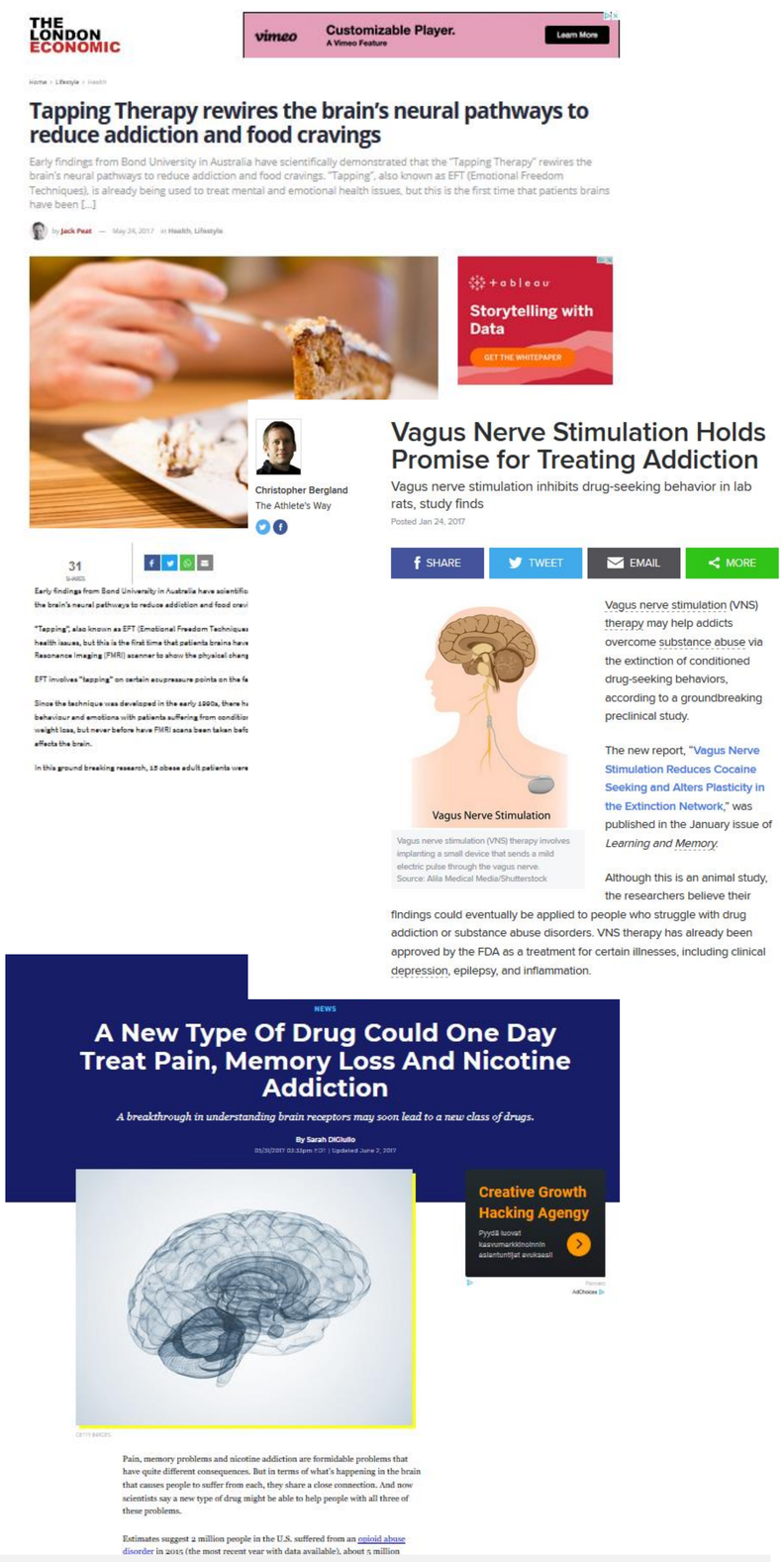
Method

Inductive qualitative text analysis, looking for emplotment elements (temporal and spatial).

We employ:

- Paul Ricœur's narrative theory for approaching our material as 'emplotted' (a plot is created)
- Lubomír Doležel's discursive functions of 'extension' (the brain research referred to) and 'intension' (the ways in which it is "spinned" in the material)

Emplotment = the activity of making a plot. The emplotment of the story of the addicted brain is the process of construing an intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in the narratives.



Results

A.Temporal Emplotment = events follow chronologically as a logical whole from discovery to implications for future solutions

Linear progress story

"Before we knew some things about addiction but now, with information on the brain mechanisms, we know more and better"

Insights with structural consequences

"The new information on the brain mechanisms can and will have structural consequences for how we deal with the problems in society"

Superior proof

"A change in our approach to addiction is possible because now we have a better kind of evidence (brain-based) about the state-of-nature"

From describing to solving

"Due to insight into how addiction works in the brain, we have explanations and insight that can help us solve the problems"

B.Spatial Emplotment = mixing and drawing conclusions between contexts and places, such as laboratory and policy-making settings.

Proportional asymmetry (i)

Small scale technical discovery -> implications for large scale societal problems

Proportional asymmetry (ii)

Animal models → implementation in solving human addiction problems

Proportional asymmetry (iii)

Epistemic expansion = There is a news value in the similarities between the problems (e.g. we might all be addicts, snacks, Facebook etc.) which appear in the same way in the brain.

Conclusions

- The study shows that the content and execution of the study or discovery reported on (new brain research), is secondary in the reporting. The spinning of the story exceeds with a symbolic force that seems to get its nourishment from certain spatial and temporal narrative aspects (some of which are listed above).
- These ways of claiming the value of the new research are likely to be similar in other circumstances, such as how the research is claimed to have impact on recovery and prevention of addiction problems.
- Now that these techniques have been identified, more work is needed for furthering knowledge on what they imply from an ethical standpoint and who is involved in spinning the stories. In the next step of our analysis we will map the sources and speakers in the texts.

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