# Drugs, the Internet and Change

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**Abstract**—This article investigates the symbiotic relationship between drugs and the Internet, focusing (though not exclusively) on psychedelics. Programming on psychedelics in Silicon Valley from the 1960s to date is detailed, as are the twinned conceptualizations of drugs as a technology and technology as a drug. The correlation between drugs, the Internet, and consumerism is explored: the Internet is a medium through which "white," "grey" and "black" drug markets .ourish. Thus, this article details the burgeoning online trades in pharmaceuticals, recreational, and "life-style" drugs that turn the Internet into a veritable candy store. Drug forums transmogrify into street corners, threatening the continued existence of the current system of global prohibition. However, it is arguably the use of the Web as an information source that may offer the greatest challenge to the incumbent paradigm, with experiential discourses offering alternatives to the hegemonic narrative, as the relationships between drugs, those who sell drugs and drug takers are reconfigured online.

**Keywords**—drug information, Internet, online markets, psychedelics, technology

No sooner had ARPAnet—the precursor to the Internet—been invented, than it was co-opted in the service of drug commerce by Stanford students with their MIT counterparts: "Before Amazon, before eBay, the seminal act of e-commerce was a drug deal. The students used the network to quietly arrange the sale of an undetermined amount of marijuana" (Markoff 2005: 109). This trade was the first of many, with the Internet widely exploited to enable the distribution of drugs, alongside all manner of information pertaining to them. This article investigates the Internet's continuing impact on the "War on (Some People who use Some) Drugs." A deeper exploration of the symbiotic cultural relationship between drugs and the Internet is ventured, reaching back into the past and (tentatively) forward into possible futures. Though not exclusively, the focus here is on psychedelic drugs; William Gibson (1984: 51) prophetically described cyberspace as "a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions."

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## (RE)PROGRAMMING ON PSYCHEDELICS

The very origins of the Internet are bound up with the exuberant experimentation with psychedelic drugs in Silicon Valley in the 1960s; both can be conceptualized as attempts to augment human capacity. As far back as 1972, countercultural pioneer Stuart Brand likened computers to LSD, seeing them as an alternative technology through which minds could be opened and society reformed (Turner 2006: 139). For Brand (1995) this remained the case, as home computers developed into portals to the Internet —a system with the hippies' fingerprints all over it—that he describes as a "flowering remnant of the '60s, when hippie communalism and libertarian politics formed the roots of the modern cyberrevolution . . . the counterculture's scorn for centralized authority provided the philosophical foundations of . . . the leaderless Internet."

As testament to the significance of psychedelic drug use among many of the Silicon Valley bushwhackers, Steve Jobs, cofounder of Apple Computers, maintains that taking LSD was one of the two or three most important things he has ever done (Markoff 2005: xix). Jobs is far from alone in attesting that LSD can help human thought processing,

particularly in tackling the challenges of computing: "Experienced and intelligent trippers are often characterized by a fluid sense of perception, and a sensitivity to . . . 'The pattern that connects'—just the kind of mental gymnastics that come in handy when you're crafting the giddy complexities of information space" (Davis 1998: 170). Kevin Herbert—a self-taught computer programmer, software designer, and early developer for Cisco Systems—embodies this interrelation: "[LSD] encourages a departure from things being rigid and imposing. Instead, contemporary computer software is flexible and malleable, changeable and not static . . . In a technical context I've seen solutions that otherwise evaded me" (Reiman 2008: 19-20). Further, psychedelics can work as deconditioning agents, leaving people space to (re)program themselves, as—for instance—creative computer programmers.

## DRUGS AS A TECHNOLOGY, TECHNOLOGY AS A DRUG

Both drugs and the Internet can be used for cultural transformation. In the case of the former, this is nothing new: "[D]rugs were to pretechnological man what machines are to technological man: they helped him to increase 'productivity' or'output'" (Szasz 2003: 75). Sadie Plant concords with and develops this idea: "[D]rugs are best thought of as technologies, as quite literally high technologies, as possibly communication technologies . . . If we really want to follow this line of thought, drugs would then be those communication technologies which are most tightly controlled" (Plant 2000). Though, of course, while the technology of drugs might be "controlled" on paper, this is far from the case in reality, due in no small part these days to that other uncontrolled communications technology, the Internet.

Technology works as a drug when virtual reality replaces or supplements psychedelics in the creation of a parallel dream-world: "Spaces and events once possible only through chemistry began to emerge on electronic nets . . . Coleridge's Xanadu is spread out on a Net whose virtual landscapes are neither true nor false, factual or fictional, but simply there" (Plant 1999: 170). The future looks set to intensify this phenomenon, bringing with it drugs that are more like computers and computers that are more like drugs: nanotechnologies small enough to be placed under the tongue are being developed alongside "digital drugs," a process whereby the brain is directly manipulated using computers to obtain drug-like effects (see further Sirius 2006). No doubt the evolution of such "wet wiring" will have its own accompanying moral panic, as foreshadowed in a recent US news report: "[W]ebsites are targeting your children with so-called digital drugs . . . They sell audio files ("doses") that supposedly mimic the effects of alcohol and marijuana . . . You'll find doses that purportedly mimic the effects of LSD, crack, heroin and other hard drugs" (Kommando 2009).

Discussions of addiction, more familiarly applied to drug users, are already being applied to Internet enthusiasts. Rehabilitative centres run programs for those whose use of the Internet is "too high," ironically sometimes utilizing drugs to treat "abusers." Where dependence develops, the Internet and drugs remain bound together, with computers themselves reportedly becoming a "relapse trigger" (Harvard Law School 2006: 13). Explanations of the underlying causes of both genres of "addiction" often mirror one another: "'Over-users' of the Internet are frequently portrayed as lonely escapists battling with underlying psychological problems; as with drugs, alternative conceptualisations of Internet use are offered by consumers, such as 'a feeling of a global home, freedom, and boundlessness'" (Mitchell 2000: 632). This latter, more unorthodox, interpretation is particularly pertinent for psychedelics. "Addiction" can also be understood as a consumer pathology, helping to explain "the development of a paradox within affluent western consumer societies, whereby the values of freedom, autonomy and choice associated with the spread of consumerism have been accompanied by the emergence of . . . the expansion of myriad so-called 'addictive' states" (Reith 2004: 283-4).

Pursuing this antithetical relationship between drugs, the Internet, and consumerism, it has been remarked that: "Drugs are the product of consumer culture. Drugs are dream-worlds . . . A culture which invests so much effort to construct ever more complete dream-worlds, is almost bound to be fascinated by drugs" (van Ree 2002: 351-352). While this explains why the "War on Drugs" is failing, how can it be reconciled with the zeal to embark upon such a conflict in the first place? van Ree resolves this conundrum thus: "Products and lifestyles with markedly 'wasteful' and 'dream-like' qualities provide consumer society with an intensified image of themselves, producing a guilty fear of being part of a decadent spectacle" (van Ree 2002: 352).

## WELCOME TO THE CANDY STORE

The contradiction inherent within governmental attempts to "reconcile its anti-capitalistic fervor with respect to drugs with its otherwise still capitalistic ideologies and institutions" (Szasz, 2003: 73) grows increasingly untenable with the rise of the Internet, "as the dynamic of consumer capitalism proliferates on a global scale, and as conspicuous consumption and self-fulfillment increasingly become elevated to the status of individual 'rights'" (Reith 2004: 285-6). Facilitating consumerism, the Internet is a medium through which "white," "grey" and "black" drug markets flourish, with the boundaries between them shifting and amorphous, fluid and arbitrary. The "white" market in psychoactive substances that are legally available in the West—alcohol and tobacco—turns grey, as the restrictions on their advertisement, such as marketeering targeted at the young, seemingly dissolve online (cf. Levy & Strombeck 2002). When it comes to taking advantage of the

advertising opportunities presented by new media, the alcohol industry is no slouch: this is a world, after all, where alcopops have Facebook entries, along with signed-up friends (http://www.facebook.com/pages/Smirnoff-ice-double-black/38279473724).

There also exists a burgeoning grey market in drugs sold through online pharmacies, a smattering of which are legitimate, while the rest operate without the bother of genuine prescriptions, those magic pieces of paper that transubstantiate the molecule from drug to medicine (cf. CASA 2008). Even where people have the necessary paperwork, they may well have manipulated the system to obtain prescription drugs for pleasure (cf. Tackett-Gibson 2007). Indeed, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that almost anybody can obtain whichever drugs they fancy, just so long as they have no qualms about faking a condition (deKieffer 2006: 174). Further, the Internet creates a global village, leaving people free to obtain "prescription" medicines from countries with markedly different drug laws: giving the old opium wars a modern twist, opiates are being shipped to the West from India, via online pharmacies.

Cyberpharmacists are drug dealers for the Internet age. It is revealing that "11 percent of prescriptions filled by traditional (brick and mortar) pharmacies are for controlled substances. In contrast, 95% of prescriptions filled by Internet (cyber)pharmacies in 2006 were for controlled substances" (CASA 2008: 4). Unsurprisingly, this increase in availability has led to an upturn in abuse. Putting this in context in the US: "By 2006, 15.8 million people reported abusing controlled prescription drugs, more than the combined number who reported abusing cocaine (6.1 million), hallucinogens (4.0 million), inhalants (2.2 million) and heroin (.5 million)" (CASA 2008: 2). Increasingly, it seems, many of us are on a self-medication trip. What is interesting is that, while users of "controlled" drugs are officially branded (almost) as culpable as those who sell to them, in state responses to online pharmacies, the consumer is most often constructed as a victim, while the purveyors are portrayed as "ruthless criminals targeting the vulnerable" (Dr Richard Taylor, House of Commons Hansard Debates, 5 November 2008, column 78WH). This distinction is embodied within the UK's Medicines Act 1968, which targets unlicensed manufacturers and dealers in prescription medicines, but not those who imbibe their wares, in notable contrast to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (MDA) which penalizes possession.

The story of Ryan Haight illustrates this phenomenon. Ryan was a Californian teenager who purchased hydrocodone (a semisynthetic opioid) through an Internet pharmacy, subsequently fatally overdosing on it. Campaigning by Ryan's family in the wake of his death resulted in the Ryan Haight Online Pharmacy Consumer Protection Act of 2008, a piece of legislation that amends the US equivalent of the MDA—the Controlled Substances Act (CSA)—adding the requirement of at least one face-to-face physician encounter prior to prescription drugs being lawfully dispensed over the Internet (CASA 2008: 11). The drug user, rather than being demonized, is clearly construed as the quarry here, with legislation named in their honor, an homage more often reserved for the murdered victims of child sex offenders. Due to the fact that this regulation only applies to those sites based in the US, its implications are limited: the Internet brings challenges that are not easily legislated away.

Whether Ryan was self-medicating with hydrocodone or using it hedonistically is unclear. And, of course, there is no clear line between the two, nor dividing the pharmaceutical, recreational and "life-style" drugs available online. Following through with the theme of drugs and consumerism, the driver behind this latter market seems to be a reluctance to accept not having the sexual prowess of the most virile person on the planet, not being as happy as the most joyous individual, nor quite as skinny as one would like. Thus, drugs developed for impotence transmogrify into pills for sexual enhancement, Prozac is swallowed by people hoping for a smoother come down from Ecstasy, while Ritalin is diverted to become an appetite suppressant. Paradoxically, potentially lethal growth hormones are sold as the fountain of youth, the key to longevity (Taylor 2008). While Google acts as an "external memory prosthesis" (Pesce as quoted in Sirius 2006: 218), drugs that enhance our memories, developed to tackle Alzheimers, are used to enhance cognition in the healthy. This fortifies our earlier understanding of drugs as technologies: "[P]sychoactive drugs can be revisioned as simply another technology for change, as citizens of the postmodern world reject one of life's 'givens' after another" (Lenson 1995:187). Interestingly, the drug taking here is often much more about conformity than about rebellion.

Are these developments something to fear or, rather, "a positive outgrowth of available choices"? (Sententia as quoted in Sirius 2006: 134). Is the real cause for concern on the part of the authorities the threat to "drug protectionism" engendered by "pharmacological self-pleasuring"? (Szasz 1992: 38). Perhaps, but beyond such libertarian idealism, there is room for genuine unease regarding the growth of this online trade: "FDA investigations found that drugs purchased under these conditions are more likely to be contaminated, counterfeit, or inherently ineffective" (deKieffer 2006: 173). This situation is mirrored in the UK, where over half of the drugs seized by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Authority (MHRA) are counterfeits (Boseley 2008). But probably the most dangerous aspect of this trade is the understandable yet insidious assumption—the result of a lifetime's indoctrination with false distinctions—that prescription drugs (even when purchased off-prescription) are inherently safer than street drugs. "The risk for overdose and dependence derives from the dosage, potency of the drug and the vulnerability of the person using it—not the source of the drug or its brand name" (Harvard Law School 2006: 13).

The rise of Internet pharmacies has been highlighted as a concern by those guardians of global drug prohibition,

the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB 2009a: 10). Accordingly, they have published *Guidelines for Governments on Preventing Illegal Sales of Internationally Controlled Substances Through the Internet*; within, the INCB acknowledges that the "online sale of such pharmaceuticals by unscrupulous racketeers is no different from the trafficking in illicit drugs, as it endangers life just as much as street sales do" (INCB 2009b: iii-iv). However, it is one thing to publish guidelines, quite another for them to have any discernible impact: "the few online drug shops that are discovered and shut down often reappear the next day under a different name or address, ready again to do business" (Mills 2000).

## PLANT TRANSPLANTATION

"Legal highs" are ostensibly a branch of the online white market in drugs, though they, too, have a tendency to morph into the grey. The substances sold as legal highs are unregulated by default rather than design, through an inability of the would-be prohibitionists to keep up with the countless psychoactive substances, whether "natural," synthesized, or somewhere in between. Even discounting human intervention, the planet pushes out psychedelics in a plethora of different forms, too multitudinous to be swept under the purview of prohibition. Furthermore, plants previously ingested by indigenous tribes in remote locations are being gathered up via the Internet's long tentacles and delivered globally in vacuum-packed parcels.

Staying within the confines of the law can be a delicate business, even for those online vendors eager to oblige: jurisdictions themselves are often unclear as to whether, for instance, selling a plant is unlawful on the basis that it naturally contains a scheduled substance (see for example R v Sette, 2007, Kingston Crown Court). A popular quick-step around legal potholes is to proclaim that one's wares are not for consumption; this tactic has a down-side, meaning, as it does, that advice on dosages and use are often absent. Further, such tricky behavior may not suffice in avoiding liability: "if it has an ingredient that will have an active physiological effect, it is a medicine" (Lee-Frost as quoted in Marre 2008). Thus, in reality, those involved in the supply side of "legal highs" are commonly acting unlawfully, supplying medicines without the correct license, risking prosecution (and potential imprisonment) under the UK Medicines Act 1968. Further, grey markets can fade to black due to the fact that different countries prohibit different plants, so that which is legal within certain parameters may fall outside the law once a border is crossed. The globalized nature of the Internet age makes this practically an inevitability.

The impression gained from the relevant websites, however, is one of total legality: the substances for sale are promoted using the tools common to marketing with, for instance, herbalhighs.com offering 'buy 1, get 1 free" deals and promising not to be beaten on price. This can be seen as a further example of the relentless creep of consumerism, as railed against by Hakim Bey, who believed consciousness-expanding drugs were an exception to the general trend: "Global Capital and universal Image seem able to absorb almost any 'outside' and transform it into an area of commodification and control. But somehow, for some strange reason, Capital appears unable or unwilling to absorb the entheogenic dimension" (Bey 1999/2000: 37). Perhaps the Internet is showing us that there are no exceptions to such consumerism, or perhaps—switching from a cynical to a shamanic perspective—new technologies are revitalising ancient wisdoms.

Illustrative of these issues is ayahuasca, a brew traditionally used in shamanic rituals along the Amazon, made from combining two plants, most commonly the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and *Psychotria viridis* leaves: while the primary psychoactive constituent of the latter—DMT—is a Class A drug in the UK, the relevant plants themselves are not covered by the MDA and are widely sold through online "legal high" shops. What are the consequences of these vines having been rent from the ritual, of the fact that anyone with Internet access can now become their own shaman? Intriguingly, "[w]hen researchers study drug use in isolated 'primitive' communities, they consider [it] to serve as a mechanism of social integration; when they study drug use in . . . mainstream society, they consider [it] as a marker . . . of social disorganization" (Adrian 2002: 853). Despite ayahuasca losing its meaning as a "diagnostic tool and force for healing" as it travels out of the Amazon along the Web, it still does not fit easily into established Western paradigms of drug use; indeed, the radical shifts in worldview frequently precipitated by drinking the brew pose "a challenge to modern Western drug policies and laws, which are premised on a rationalist/positivist ontology that constructs the psychoactive substances essentially as chemicals and their effects as simply mechanistic" (Tupper 2008: 300).

Similar challenges are posed by a second example of a previously obscure tribal sacrament popularized by the Internet-based legal high market, *Salvia divinorum*, a sage capable of catalysing powerful psychedelic effects, usage of which was previously confined to Southern Mexico. Salvia aficionado Daniel Siebert hosts a website devoted to this plant, describing it as "an extraordinary herb used in shamanism, divination, healing, meditation, and the exploration of consciousness" (http://www.sagewisdom.org). Siebert's personal interests are listed as ethnobotany, botany, horticulture, pharmacology, biology, chemistry, consciousness studies, philosophy, nature, and art, with his site reflecting these diverse interests. He is an exemplary illustration of where an interest in drugs can lead, in stark contrast with the populist conception of any such curiosity only taking people in one direction, namely, downwards. Siebert does acknowledge the potential risks involved in

any form of consciousness alteration, cautioning that salvia "should always be used in a thoughtful, intelligent manner, and only by responsible adults that are of sound mind and clear intent."

The numerous YouTube depictions of people smoking salvia, while entertaining–such as people attempting (and failing) to carry out simple gardening tasks after a bong hit (http://www.break.com/usercontent/2008/5/Gardening-on-Salvia-509939.html)—would perhaps not fall within Siebert's recommended parameters for use. But then, drug-taking is rarely about following rules. These videos have fed into both the appetite for salvia and for its prohibition. In the UK, MP John Mann's Early Day Motion calling for salvia to be brought within the mechanisms of the MDA made reference to his concern that "young people have taken to using sites like YouTube to broadcast their friends taking the drug and experiencing the hallucinogenic effects" (Early Day Motion 2005). This brings to mind Richard Glenn Boire's comment that: "The role of governments is to prevent harm to people and society from dangerous drug use. I think the government has lost sight of this and now thinks its role is to stop people from entering other mindsets" (as quoted in Vince 2006: 45). Former UK Home Secretary Jacqui Smith (who has confessed to the use of illegal highs herself as a student) has asked the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) to look at the legal high market, with a particular focus on salvia.

The UK Government has attempted to bring legal highs under control in the past, notably by criminalizing activities concerning magic mushrooms, the fungi that were central to the surge of interest in this market in the first place. Making the most of the fact that trade in fresh magic mushrooms was legal, the late 1990s and early twenty-first century saw numerous commercial businesses established online that dealt in these psilocybin-containing fungi. While the Government had for years tolerated those who foraged for magic mushrooms in the wild, the burgeoning Internet commerce (in largely Mexican and Dutch imports) led to Section 21 of the Drugs Act 2005, transforming them in one fell swoop from "sacred entheogen" to Class A drug. Foreshadowing the current debate about salvia, having greased the wheels of this market in the first place, the Internet then became a key driver in the hardening of the prohibitive stance by drawing attention to the phenomenon (cf. Walsh 2006). This experience demonstrated how clamping down on one type of legal high achieves little save to stimulate interest in (potentially more harmful) replacements. As has been poetically pointed out, "our law is a machine law, a gridwork, clockwork law, and it is obviously unable to contain the fluidity of the organic" (Wilson 1996).

In the US, the mother of Brett Chidester has been instrumental in orchestrating a ban on salvia in a number of US states, blaming the plant for her son's suicide. The link is extremely tenuous, apparently made out by the fact that, a few months prior to killing himself, Brett wrote the following in his diary: "Salvia allows us to give up our senses and wander in the interdimensional time and space. Also, and this is probably hard for most to accept, our existence in general is pointless. We earthly human beings are nothing" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legal_status_of_Salvia_divinorum). The Chidester's have reportedly filed a wrongful death suit against Ethnosupply, the Internet-based company that supplied Brett with the herb. Tellingly, Brett's use of that most profligate of legal highs, alcohol, seems to have escaped this rather reductive apportionment of blame (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brett_Chidester).

## CLANDESTINE CHEMISTRY

It is not just organic substances that the law seems unable to contain. As the INCB acknowledged in their latest annual report: "Advances in technology that enable tiny changes to be made to the molecular structure of substances . . . have blurred the distinction between licit and illicit manufacture" (INCB 2009a: 10). This has led to the creation of an online grey market in euphemistically named "research chemicals," hallucinogenic analogues that skate the perimeters of legality, due to their similarities to (but differences from) substances regulated (for example) by the CSA. This means that they may (or may not) fall under the Federal Analog Act (FAA), which includes compounds substantially similar to those covered by the CSA. As the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) has stated, "the formulation of analogues is like a drug dealer's magic trick meant to fool law enforcement" (DEA 2004).

They are very often meant to, and, indeed, sometimes do exactly that, with some such websites serving thousands of customers and racking up fortunes over prolonged periods before being discovered. The brazen nature of many of these businesses is particularly striking: "Some openly advertised on Google. Others chose to market virally . . . Most offered one-click shopping systems and let buyers make payments using credit cards . . . Once ordered, drugs were delivered the next day by UPS and other carriers, internationally if necessary" (McCandless 2005). Prohibitionists have had some successes though, most notably Operation Web Tryp, which famously shut down a number of these sites and led to the incarceration (in some cases for life) of the chemists behind them (DEA 2004).

While the UK does not have a direct equivalent of the FAA, paragraph 1(c) of Part 1 of Schedule 2 to the MDA serves a similar (though more limited) function, covering unspecified phenethylamine-derived substances that "substitute in the ring." Further, the MDA (Modification) Order 2001 added 36 substances to Schedule 2: these supplements are also phenethylamine derivatives, a family from which "research chemicals" are frequently derived. However, it could be convincingly argued that governments are doing little more than chasing their tails here: tweaking the chemical compound—with the aid of computers—produces a drug

different enough to evade the regulations, and on it goes, ad infinitum. Sadie Plant comments on this "digitisation of drug synthesis": "Mathematical modeling allows chemicals to be designed and assembled as virtual compounds, tried, tested and manipulated atom by atom on the screen, meeting the wetware world only in the closing stages of their development" (Plant 1999: 201).

Alongside being fruitless, such prohibition is potentially dangerous: it results in people using novel substances about which little is known, such as their inherent toxicity, interactions with prescribed medications, and so on. Indeed, knowledge about "research chemicals" often resides almost exclusively with the highly sophisticated underground chemists who are producing them, along with their most elite clientele, rather than with the authorities: "The technical knowledge on new recreational compounds is hardly obtained through reference books and scientific journals . . . The pharmacological 'know how' is often held within groups of users, who exchange information with each other without any contact with the scientific world" (Psychonaut 2002 Research Group 2006: 644).

## IT CAME IN A PLAIN BROWN WRAPPER

There is also a thriving online market that is more incontrovertibly black: drug forums transmogrify into street corners, and there have even been reports of a helpful "crack dealer locator service" online (Gordon, Forman & Siatkowski 2006: 273). Consider this account of ordering cannabis over the Internet:

> It came in a plain brown wrapper—two varieties of high-grade marijuana totaling a quarter ounce, delivered to a downtown San Francisco office building via regular mail. The pot had been ordered off a website in Amsterdam . . . Of course, buying marijuana online is illegal. But enforcing marijuana prohibition online isn't easy, especially when sellers live in countries with more tolerant drug laws . . . The result is that the Internet, which for years has been making national borders increasingly porous, is slowly helping to subvert marijuana prohibition. The new trade is thriving . . . filling up the stash boxes of recreational users who want the same convenience buying their weed that they have purchasing books and CDs at amazon.com (Goldberg 1999).

An interesting cyber-twist in the tale is that—just as with Amazon—the Internet fosters communities of users who rate drug dealers and their performance. Will the sheer force of consumer demand, in combination with the "unpoliceability" of the Internet, be the unmaking of global prohibition? As the INCB (2009a:11) has highlighted: "Nowadays, drug traffickers are reportedly among the most widespread users of encryption for Internet messaging and are able to hire high-level computer specialists to help evade law enforcement, coordinate shipments of illicit drugs and launder money." Indeed, "the fluidity of cyberspace is ideally suited for illicit drug transactions" (Stetina et al. 2008).

## THE RECONSTITUTED WORLD OF DRUGS (JUST ADD KNOWLEDGE)

Arguably, it is the use of the web as an information source that may offer the greatest challenge to the paradigm of prohibition. There is a plethora of incredibly diverse drug information websites, showing the many what only the few used to know: namely, that portals to the psychedelic state are ubiquitous, found in the most unlikely to the most mundane of places. All it takes is the click of a mouse to find directions to the best sites for fungi-foraging, advice regarding which ornamental cacti to chow down on from the local garden centre, and instructions on how to extract psychedelic milk from toads. Drug prohibitionists could no more seal these egresses than harvest the moon (cf. Montagne 2008).

One of the most respected online drug information sources, particularly among psychedelic drug users, is Erowid: this site is the first port of call for most psychonauts before they embark on an adventure with a new substance (http://www.erowid.org). Erowid's stated mission is to provide access to "reliable, non-judgmental information about psychoactive plants, chemicals, and related issues." Erowid is famous for its "trip reports": information imparted horizontally from fellow travelers with direct experience is accorded far greater weight than the (often moralistic) dry pronouncements on drug effects handed down vertically from on-high. A participatory culture, where users generate their own content, is creating a collective intelligence about drugs, far superior to the propaganda of yesteryear. (Trip reports are also co-opted by drug enforcement agencies to gauge drug-using patterns and trends. To illustrate, when the DEA were calling for the emergency scheduling of the psychedelic 2-CT-7 following the death of Jake Duroy, who had ordered the molecule over the Internet, they cited information from such reports in support of the necessity of this; see Federal Register, September 20, 2002 67: 183).

Mirroring their eclectic approach to drug-taking, young people are developing their own pick-and-mix drug education online, with the (Inter)net result appearing to be a harm-reducing effect sometimes absent in relation to the officially sanctioned programs of yore (Boyer, Shannon & Hibberd 2005: 302). It is unsurprising that an approach to imparting knowledge that presents people with as full a picture as possible, letting them balance pleasures against risks, has greater successes. The human survival instinct is strong: by definition, hedonists truly love life and want to continue living it. In being given a voice, drug-takers have exposed the fallacy that they are not sufficiently drug aware, that, if they only knew the facts, they would stop. Rather, many know exactly what it is that they are getting themselves into; in short, the decision to expand one's consciousness is likely to be a conscious choice.

The information flows in multiple directions: alongside drug enthusiasts using the Internet to learn more about the

substances they are ingesting, it also serves as a useful tool for researchers keen to access these hidden populations. The data generated by this process can help to debunk long-established myths. For instance, an Internet-based survey of the general well-being of recreational drug users demonstrated "the existence of healthy, normally functioning adults who occasionally use psychoactive drugs" (Reneau et al. 2000: 323). What is so often forgotten in the rhetoric is that there are far more people who use rather than abuse drugs; indeed, such imposed distinctions are themselves problematic. (What is more, factoring in alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, and all manner of mood-altering prescription drugs—as one rationally must—dwindles the population of nonusers to vanishing point).

The Internet has also proved a useful tool in learning about the behavior of individuals who are even more notoriously difficult to research: those who sell drugs. Coomber used the Web for his groundbreaking research into this group, attracting them to partake in his survey by posting the following on drug forums: "Have You Ever Sold Powdered Drugs? If So, I Would Like Your Help" (Coomber 1997). The responses obtained verified his earlier hypothesis: namely, that the notion that those involved in illicit drug commerce routinely cut their drugs with dangerous adulterants was more often myth than reality.

The relationships of drug takers, drug dealers and the drugs themselves may be reconstituted online. To illustrate, rather than being viewed as a menace to society, drugs might be constructed as religious sacraments (cf. The Council on Spiritual Practices: http://csp.org/) or as therapeutics. While neither of these ideas is new, the Internet widens the reach of these memes. In this latter category, the work of MAPS (http://www.maps.org) is paramount: on their website—as well as through their impressive real-world activities, orchestrating the psychedelic renaissance via conferences and meetings—these drugs are (re)configured as psychotherapeutic tools. MAPS sponsors MDMA-assisted psychotherapy in the treatment of post traumatic stress disorder in, for instance, victims of sexual trauma. This offers an alternative construction of MDMA—one that harks back to its use in therapy in earlier decades—alongside liquifying the boundaries between controlled drugs and therapeutics.

Further, the essential contributions that psychedelics can make more broadly in society are regularly detailed in MAPS's online journal. A recent such missive had the relationship between psychedelics and ecology as its overarching theme: "The essence of the mystical experience is a sense of unity woven within the multiplicity . . . This common bond can generate respect and appreciation for the environment, for caretaking and wonder" (Doblin 2009: 2). Given the looming ecological crisis, there is a strong argument that anything which helps reveal humanity's essential inner-connectedness with our environment should be embraced rather than sanctioned.

The intelligence flow enabled by the Internet has not gone unchallenged: in the US, a series of (failed) bills (such as the Ecstasy Anti-Proliferation Act of 2000) tried to restrict online information pertaining to the production, use, or purchase of "controlled" drugs, construed broadly so as to even include guidance aimed squarely at harm reduction. These legislative attempts failed due to those pesky protections of freedom enshrined within the US Constitution:

> Apart from the fact that it would be quite impossible to check every internaut and every web site page, it has emerged that in the virtual world of information, some of the articles of the international Conventions (underpinned by the national legislation of the signatory countries) cannot be strictly applied because in democracies, messages are supposed to be confidential and people have a right to privacy with regard to both their personal lives and their personal data. A similar situation arises if one looks at the highly frequent use made of the Internet to exchange drug recipes and messages advocating the use of illicit substances. Although this undeniably constitutes a violation of article 3 of the 1988 Convention, many States consider freedom of expression to be an inalieanable human right and refuse to censure communications (PEDDRO 2003: 12).

Equivalent provisions in Europe (most notably Articles 8 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights) offer similar protections. Talking about taking drugs—and, indeed, taking drugs—are not crimes under UK law (although possessing drugs is a crime).

## THE ENTHEOSPHERE

Alongside acting as a conduit for information, the Internet provides a sense of community that can be difficult to find offline, particularly for those involved in relatively obscure psychedelic drug use and/or domiciled in remote locations: "[T]he individual self, so long trapped in the human body, [is] finally free to step outside its fleshy confines, explore its authentic interests, and find others with whom it might achieve communion" (Turner 2006: 1). (Paradoxically, while disembodied online, the binding commonality here is embodied experiences with drugs or, at least, experiences that originate with the body; cf. Gies 2008). While old-style communities could be experienced as stifling, virtual communities of like-minded souls with shared ideals can form that mirror the back-to-the-land movement of the 1960s and 1970s: "computers somehow seem poised to bring to life the countercultural dream of empowered individualism, collaborative community and spiritual communion" (Turner 2006: 2).

This virtual haven has many names, one of which is the entheosphere: a mind-space concerned with entheogens, psychedelic drugs that are ingested with a view to consciousness expansion and spiritual enlightenment (Ott 1995: 88). Immediately a shift in language is apparent, reflecting the fact that the entheosphere allows for alternative discourses

on drugs and the meanings ascribed to them. Experiential knowledge comes to the fore, as opposed to being subjugated; drug-takers can construct their own identities, after many years of being silenced while others weaved negative depictions around them. Rather than viewing this as a novel phenomenon, it can be seen as a cyclical return to older ways of thinking about drugs, with forerunners of this group including the Romantics, an eighteenth century movement that "accorded drugs a less sinister, even a valuable position. In this discourse . . . [d]rugs could take one closer to truth, could reveal, through hedonistic self-exploration, the real, authentic self, buried beneath capitalism and social convention" (Moore 2007: 357).

The psychedelic community also reflects earlier ideals in that it reveres "the elders" of the tribe, in sharp contrast with the lionization of youth so often dominant in mainstream culture. The Psychedelic Salon, for instance, regularly attracts over a hundred thousand listeners with its podcasts of old—or, as often as not, dead—hippies (http://www.matrixmasters.com/index.shtml). In its accompanying forum on The Grow Report (http://www.thegrowreport.com/Forums/forumdisplay.php?f=42), "saloners" hone their psychedelic philosophies, with recent discussions including attempts to define ego and a debate about the merits of natural as against synthetic entheogens.

What is revealed by these forums is that psychedelic culture is about so much more than the drugs, which are best understood as catalysts to alternative states of consciousness: the insights, life-style changes, art-works, podcasts and music generated by such ontological shifts create an entire way of life, both within and beyond the entheosphere. Because, inevitably, online and offline communities bleed into one another, with people attending the same raves, festivals and conferences, alongside posting on the same boards. Indeed, the Internet has become an invaluable tool in choreographing such events. And, just as the Web can broaden our understanding of psychedelics, the reverse is also true: "[P]sychedelics have opened a deeper understanding of this new multifaceted techno/spiritual/natural relationship we have with the global network" (Huntley 2008: 12). The entheosphere, whether accessed through a computer or through psychedelic drug use, offers the chance for transpersonal communion, enabling you to "leave your robot" (Leary 1995: 274).

## HIGH TECH WAGGLE DANCING

The Internet is a bottom-up technology, heralding a new way of doing things, and a new world, where top-down systems of regulation—such as prohibition—are losing their power. This threat has not gone unnoticed, with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime referring to the Internet as a "weapon of mass destruction" (UNODC 2009: 3). While this organization still clings to the belief that this time bomb can be defused by smothering it with cyber controls, an alternative reading sees the Internet as the death knell of global prohibition. The Internet is as beautifully and anarchically impossible to govern as psychedelic drug use itself, with both throwing up similar questions about the acceptable reach of state control and concomitant restrictions on cognitive liberty:

> [The] notion of cognitive liberty . . . says that you own your own body, you own your own brain, you have freedom of thought—so why don't we have the legal right to use LSD? These are the same issues that are occurring in technology. What represents our freedom? What represents what the government is allowed to regulate, and for what reason? (Herbert as quoted in Reiman 2008: 19-20).

The dismantlement of global prohibition is likely to be just one of many breakthroughs precipitated by this technology, with the possibility that it may even have implications for human evolution itself. Just as psychedelic philosophers see plant-based hallucinogens as having been pivotal in the development of anthropoid awareness in the past (see further McKenna 1992), so the Internet looks set to generate exponential expansions of human consciousness in the future. Consciousness can be envisioned as an emergent property of neurons chattering, the Internet as an emergent property of our collective consciousness, and global consciousness as an emergent property of the Internet (cf. Haggerty 2000). The Internet is engendering global consciousness through bringing us together as a swarm of humans: just as bees use "waggle dances" to communicate information, so the human swarm has the Internet via which to share memes and dreams. The need for a global consciousness has never been greater than in our current (changing) climate.

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