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Research paper

Virtually a drug scare: Mephedrone and the impact of the Internet on drug news transmission

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ABSTRACT

Background: On the 16th April 2010 the drug mephedrone was outlawed in the UK. This followed news media reports of deaths linked to the drug. In many respects the mephedrone scare represented a familiar pattern of drug framing and legislative reaction. However, the mephedrone scare took place in the era of online news transmission.
Methods: To quantify the mephedrone scare the *Google* Internet search-engine's *Trends* and *News* applications were monitored from when the first death was attributed to the drug until 1 year after it was banned.
Results: Web interest in buying mephedrone peaked when online news stories reported deaths from the drug. Eighteen alleged mephedrone deaths were identified from online news. The fatalities which received the most Internet traffic subsequently proved false-alarms. Online interactive media widened access to alternative explanations of these alleged mephedrone deaths.
Conclusion: It is contended that the advent of the Internet accelerated and inflated the mephedrone scare, but also that online media allowed [web] user-generated information transmission, rather than simple dissemination by news media to audience, fostering competing discourses to stock drug scare themes as they emerged.

Introduction

Familiar drug scares

Drug scares follow a familiar pattern (Jenkins, 1999; Kohn, 1997; Newcombe, 1988). At first a new drug of concern is newsworthy for its novelty value, perhaps only being reported in esoteric publications (e.g. music press) or equivalent specialist sections of mainstream titles (Braden, 1973; Forsyth, 2001a). Should events (e.g. increased prevalence or a high-profile case) lead to the drug concerned breaking into the mainstream press, then the drug is invariably constructed as a problem (Levine & Reinarman, 1988; Young, 1973) with subsequent stories being reported in a disproportionate way (Goode, 2008). After this first news story peak, the media report their own campaigns against the drug, bringing onside politicians, researchers and other moral entrepreneurs in demanding a legislative response (Bean, 1993; Reinarmann & Duskin, 1992). Rather than a 'moral panic' (Cohen, 1972) this process of 'drug framing' may be seen as news being manufactured in a "deliberate and rationale way" by the media and these other actors (Cornwell & Linders, 2002). Once a policy reaction has taken place, the volume of news about the drug subsides, even when concerning real stories which may have been exaggerated in the past (Forsyth, 2001a; Goode, 2008). There may be some counter-reaction from sections of the press, especially if prior stories are subsequently proven unfounded, although this may also be subject to critical reaction (Murji, 1998) ensuring that any amendment to drug policy is unlikely to be reversed. This pattern may vary in duration and scale. For example, of two 1990s UK scares, one concerning alcopops lasted at most 4 years (Forsyth, 2001a), whilst one concerning ecstasy persisted throughout the decade, going mainstream in the 1988 'Acid House Panic' (Davies & Ditton, 1990; Edwards, 1989), and peaking with the reaction to the death of Leah Betts in 1995 (Collin & Godfrey, 1997; Manning, 2006).

During the ecstasy scare reported deaths and associated harms tended to involve disproportionate numbers of teenagers or females, often portrayed as first-time experimenters (Forsyth, 2001b; Manning, 2006; Taylor, 2008). This is what Reinarmann (1997, p. 101) calls the "routinization of caricature". It does not reflect the demographics of actual drug-related deaths in the community, who tend to be male, multi-drug experienced, and are rarely teenagers (Graham, Matthews, Dunbar, & Stoner, 2010; ONS, 2011; Wong & Alexander, 1991).

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Drug scares tend to focus on the 'moral dimension' or 'human interest angle' (Goode, 2008) of individual tragedies rather than the proportionate threat which the substance concerned may actually present in public health terms. Drug scares also tend to involve the same harms being reported, regardless of the pharmacology of the substance concerned. Goode (2008) lists many of these alleged harms, arguing that the more stereotypical, false or scary these are, the more the public will believe that such reports are true, even when compared to empirically verified harms. Some of the alleged harms from previous drug scares have included sudden deaths, violence, self-harm, brain damage, cognitive deficits, unknown 'long-term effects', unique syndromes (identified by specially designed tests), chromosome or synapse damage (only visible to experts using specialist equipment, e.g. electron microscopes or PET scans), blindness, baldness and impotence or sterility. Jenkins (1999, p. 4) describes a "timeless" process, whereby each new drug of concern has the same rhetoric applied as previous ones.

The media raising awareness about a new drug of concern may be unhelpful, because as well as diverting attention from drugs which have a greater impact on public health (e.g. alcohol), this is effectively advertising, providing what Farrell (1989) termed the 'the oxygen of publicity' in the case of ecstasy. If the media's intention was to prevent drug use, or harm, then their reports may risk a 'boomerang effect',[1] that is where actions have the opposite effect to what was intended. As The[2] *Guardian*, a UK national newspaper, affirmed "Young people know that taking ecstasy (or whatever this year's successor is called) can be, and quite often is, fatal" (Berlins, 2006). Three years later that successor arrived – mephedrone.

Mephedrone as a virtual drug scare

In November 2009 several factors (rules of relevance) coincided to make mephedrone perfect for a traditional drug scare. The alleged death of a 14 year-old schoolgirl from the drug fitted the Leah Betts or Anna Wood model (Dillon, Goldspink-Lord, & Parkhill, 1996; Manning, 2006) of 'mainstream over marginality' (Taylor, 2008). Her death took place in a town (Brighton) where the recent high-profile death of another female student, involving the drug *gamma*-Butyrolactone (GBL), had led to that substance being banned at that time (enforced 23/12/09), though unlike that substance, the media reported mephedrone with a catchy nickname – "meow" (Measham, Moore, Newcombe, & Welch, 2010; Silverman, 2010). Also, the mephedrone 'Brighton death' happened 3 weeks after the UK government had controversially sacked its leading drug advisor, from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), in a dispute over the classification of ecstasy (Dyer, 2009; Dixon, 2009). Finally, like previous drug scares (e.g. ecstasy with raves/nightclubs) mephedrone was associated with another supposed threat to young people – the Internet.

The following extract from the UK's largest circulation (hardcopy) daily newspaper, contains many of these themes, and marks the birth of the mephedrone drug scare.

> **"DEAD TEEN 'TOOK PARTY DRUG'[3]"**
> "Fun-loving Gabi Price suffered cardiac arrest after falling ill at a house party. A neighbour yesterday claimed the student had taken the clubbers' drug – which can be bought legally – mixed with illegal ketamine. Meow meow is the street name for mephedrone – sold legally online as PLANT FOOD for as little as £10 a gram." (The Sun, 24/11/09)

Although many traditional drug scare themes were duly attributed to mephedrone by the media, unusually these emerged within a few weeks (as did the political reaction to them), for example reports of the drug causing impotence and baldness.

> **"Meow Meow in Impotence Link**
> . . .Professor Mann said meow meow was similar to a drug used in Somalia called khat which has caused impotence. He said: "Could the dangers of this drug have been predicted? Of course they could." (The *Sun*, 01/04/10, Haywood, 2010a)

> "Despairing Holly Smith, 20, became emaciated and clumps of her HAIR fell out after she got hooked on the lethal substance known as Meow Meow." (The *News of the World*,[4] 6/2/10, 2010a)

What was different about the mephedrone scare was that it took place during the era of digital interactive media. Previous research into drug scares has been concerned with traditional news media, specifically the press (i.e. newspapers) or broadcast media (TV, radio). In these, the media were able to impart their views about a new drug of concern as the "core disseminator of local and national perspectives" (Cornwell & Linders, 2002). Although the public may not have been entirely passive in this process (e.g. those who did not agree could send a letter to a newspaper in the hope it would be published) there was relatively less scope for dissenting voices to be heard. In recent years the advent of the Internet as a news source has changed this traditional pattern of dissemination (Mitchelstein & Bockzkowski, 2009) and has questioned how social science should research the news media (Riesch, 2010). For traditional news media the Internet has opened a fresh channel capable of reaching an ever expanding audience. The flip-side of this being that the Internet also allows the public access to a range of competing news sources including international, local and non-traditional media sources. Thus for example, through publication of an online edition, an article in a local newspaper can potentially be instantly accessible to a global readership, persisting in cyberspace long after the equivalent limited circulation hardcopy edition has expired. Additionally the Internet has interactive properties which allow individuals to respond to online information, by either 'forwarding' it (via e-mail or *Twitter*) or by transmitting their own version of events ('user-generated content'), via blogs, online forums, social networking sites or by posting comments about (drug) stories directly under these on news media sites (although these may be vetted or removed by moderators). Thus mephedrone was potentially subject to different forms of amplification, reaction and counter-reaction to previous drug scares.

With mephedrone being marketed legally online, uniquely whilst still providing the 'oxygen of publicity' for this "killer net drug meow meow" (The Metro, 04/12/09), the press could also inform readers where they might buy it – over the Internet. This connection could be made either directly (e.g. news reports that the drug could be bought via social-networking or Internet auction sites) or indirectly/interactively, for example by automated ads for mephedrone appearing as pop-ups alongside stories of supposed harms, as is illustrated by the following online press reports retrieved by monitoring *Google News*.

[1] An example of the 'boomerang effect' in the drug field is where Public Service Announcements about cannabis increased risk of use amongst vulnerable young people (e.g. Kang et al., 2009).

[2] National newspaper titles are prefixed with "The", local titles with the locality's name.

[3] All quotes centred in bold are headlines.

[4] The *News of the World* ceased publication on 10/07/11 following a phone-hacking and corruption scandal and is no longer available online.