

Crime, Media, Culture

<http://cmc.sagepub.com/>

Mephedrone, assassin of youth: The rhetoric of fear in contemporary drug scares

Liviu Alexandrescu

Crime Media Culture 2014 10: 23 originally published online 11 December 2013

DOI: 10.1177/1741659013511975

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://cmc.sagepub.com/content/10/1/23>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Crime, Media, Culture* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://cmc.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://cmc.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Apr 9, 2014

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Dec 11, 2013

[What is This?](#)

Mephedrone, assassin of youth: The rhetoric of fear in contemporary drug scares

Crime Media Culture
2014, Vol. 10(1) 23–37
© The Author(s) 2013
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1741659013511975
cmc.sagepub.com



Liviu Alexandrescu
Lancaster University, UK

Abstract

This article examines how mephedrone, the most popular legal high sold freely in the United Kingdom until its classification as a high-risk drug, in April 2010, was constructed by the British popular media as a moral epidemic that threatened the very symbolic heart of the nation – its youth. News of teenagers committing suicide after taking the drug or dying of overdose had been presented in the pages of tabloid dailies for months when the government decided to ban the substance despite the lack of solid scientific data on the medical and social risks it posed. Drawing on Teun van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to critical discourse studies, this article demonstrates how in its attempt to influence national policy the media largely responded to the new drug problem with panic discourses that perpetuated the old 'war on drugs' ideology, choosing to frame mephedrone as an agent of death and moral downfall even when its destructive influence was questionable. In this perspective, a blueprint made of multiple layers of historical drug scares and repressive drug policies shaped the metaphors and narratives used by the media to codify a sense of threat and by the audiences to interpret the symptoms of a social pathology.

Keywords

discourse analysis, drug panic, drug scares, drugs in the media, fear, mephedrone, moral epidemic, moral panic, tabloids, war on drugs

Introduction

On 29 November 2009 the British tabloid, the *Sun*, ran an article titled 'Legal drug teen ripped his scrotum off'. The feature described how after getting high continuously for eighteen hours a teenager had hallucinated that centipedes were crawling over his body and biting him. This had apparently led him to the desperate reaction referred to in the *Sun* headline. By the time this article saw the printing press, a new media scare drug was getting ready to enter the stage and start

Corresponding author:

Liviu Alexandrescu, PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Bowland North, Office B114, Bailrigg, Lancaster, LA14YW, UK.
Email: l.alexandrescu@lancaster.ac.uk

building a career. This new substance was called mephedrone and what a 'glorious' career it turned out to be. Almost five months later, following frequent reports of fatal accidents (and suicides) supposedly caused by use of mephedrone – at a moment which also witnessed the sacking of the head of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), Professor David Nutt, and the resignation of some of its members who had complained about research data being ignored in favour of political considerations – mephedrone was finally classified as a Class B substance. This made the drug illegal. Possession would now carry a sentence of up to five years in prison and dealing up to fourteen.

The drug had apparently come out of nowhere and was legally sold as plant fertiliser, mostly through the Internet. It had no known history and no clinical observations on its effects had been made. As the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 stipulated, the new substance first had to be assessed by the ACMD before any form of control could be imposed. The freelance journalist Jeremy Sare (2011) later remarked that the ACMD's report (2010) on mephedrone and cathinones which led to the ban 'showed a marked decline in quality from previous studies'. Sare, a former member of the council himself, pointed to the complete lack of data on purity and to the fact that a large share of the body of data on the epidemiology of the drug was taken from an article published in *New Musical Express* magazine. He also observed that the data on prevalence included in the report were only based on a survey conducted by the dance music magazine *Mixmag* and on the number of hits on a drug information website (www.talktofrank.com). All these details seemed to suggest that serious pressure had been weighing on the shoulders of the members of the council so that the mephedrone trade could be choked.

This article argues that the mainstream right-wing British media framed mephedrone as a 'moral epidemic' and a 'killer of youth', perpetuating the traditional 'war on drugs' rhetoric and using panic messages that helped audiences decode the suggested threat in accordance with an interpretation scheme defined by previous drug panics and repressive drug policies. In doing so, it uses Van Dijk's (1998, 2005, 2009) socio-cognitive model of discourse analysis, in an attempt to observe the metaphors and narratives used to arouse fear stimuli in relation to the drug's presumed destructive agency.

The story of 'meow meow' in the UK

Mephedrone (4-methylmethcathinone), with street-names 'meph', 'meow meow' or 'TopCat', turned out to be the star of a new line of designer drugs that have entered Europe over recent years. These novel psychoactive substances – 'variations on existing chemicals that have yet to be classified or controlled' (Nutt, 2012) and commonly referred to as legal highs – have created highly volatile markets of their own and have generally escaped regulation, largely due to their designers' ability to operate changes in their chemical structures at any time. A vast array of products that were sold under ever-changing market labels and were almost impossible to monitor and control thus made their way into online and street 'head-shops'. One new substance was detected in the European Union almost every week in 2013 alone (EMCDDA, 2013; see also UNODC, 2013). Response strategies involved restrictive penal measures, the limitation of sales through medical regulations or the monitoring of the trade through consumer protection legislation (RHRN, 2011).

A central nervous system stimulant and synthetic derivative of cathinone (the main psychoactive ingredient in the khat plant), similar in its structure to amphetamines, mephedrone came to be the fourth most commonly used drug in the UK after 'veteran' competitors cannabis, ecstasy and cocaine (see Europol-EMCDDA, 2010; Measham et al., 2010; Meyer et al., 2010; Vardakou et al., 2011; Winstock et al., 2010; Wood et al., 2010). It was generally advertised on the Internet as 'research chemical', 'bath salt' or 'plant food', even though some websites offered more specific indications on its actual use. Sold as powder or tablets, it can be swallowed (wrapped in tissue paper), sniffed or injected (Europol-EMCDDA, 2010), often in combination with alcohol and other controlled substances such as MDMA (ecstasy), cannabis or opiates. Users have reported ingesting doses of 200 mg or more at a time and an average of 1 to 2 grams per session (ACMD, 2010). Some of mephedrone's mental effects are euphoria, talkativeness, a distorted perception of time and even visual hallucinations, whereas some of the unpleasant side-effects observed include nose-bleeds, blurred vision and palpitations. Post-consumption fatigue, dizziness and depression have also been reported (Newcombe, 2009).

Research carried out by Measham et al. (2011) in the northwest of England also revealed that, more than half a year after the ban, mephedrone largely remained the preferred drug of choice for those who had used it prior to its criminalisation and who had regular contact with street dealers. The same team of researchers observed that the drug was added to the pre-existing repertoires of drug users familiar with the night-time economy, without it acting as a gateway initiation drug for newcomers or as a full substitute for other illegal substances in the case of experienced consumers. Data collected in gay-friendly South-East London clubs more than one year after mephedrone had been made illegal confirmed that this was the only novel psychoactive substance to become part of the recreational drug scene, with one in two consumers admitting that they had used it at least once during the month preceding the interviews (Wood et al., 2012).

But one of the most spectacular aspects of mephedrone's rise was the extraordinary reputation that it managed to build for itself. This was the perfect media scare drug – it was legal, totally unpredictable and very appealing to naive and inexperienced users looking for a fast kick. It was easily accessible, as literally anyone using an Internet connection, regardless of age and education, could simply place an online order and have it delivered to his or her front door in a matter of hours. And all of these 'qualities' did not pass unnoticed by the vigilant eyes of newspaper editors. Teenagers and children – some of them as young as eleven years of age (*Daily Mirror*, 2 April 2010) – were now apparently getting high on mephedrone by the hundreds and missing from school (*Daily Mail*, 8 March 2010), getting depressed and hanging themselves while under the influence (*Daily Star*, 9 April 2010) and even killing their parents in cold-blooded knife attacks (*Sun*, 17 October 2011).

The public scare triggered by mephedrone unfolded along lines that were all too familiar to British media and audiences. The drug entered the scene like some of its other 'predecessors' had done before – by presumably claiming the life of a teenager who had tried to have fun with it at a house party. The death of Gabrielle Price, a 14-year-old girl from Brighton, was similar to that of Leah Betts or Anna Wood, the victims of another substance which had gained its share of fame in the 1990s – ecstasy (see Dillon et al., 1996; Manning, 2006). Forsyth (2012) observes that, as in the case of other drug scares from the past, mephedrone had to be associated with a supposed threat to the safety of vulnerable young people and this time it was the Internet – as ecstasy before had been linked with rave parties and nightclubs, for example. Paradoxically, the same

author notices that intensive news coverage (and web reporting, in particular) also helped arouse the interest of Internet users in buying the substance via online shops.

It was later revealed that Gabrielle Price's death was triggered by 'natural causes'. Furthermore, out of the 27 deaths on the list that the AMCD and its chairman, Les Iversen, compiled and cited as a body of evidence when recommending the adoption of emergency anti-mephedrone legislation, at the end of March 2010, the substance was found to be the primary but not sole fatal cause in only two cases, where the victims had been suffering from underlying heart conditions and had also ingested other high-risk drugs or alcohol (Fleming, 2011). However, Price's tragic end as a media event could well have had the effects of what Innes (2004) calls 'signal crimes'. There was no perpetrator in this story (apart from the drug itself, maybe) but the message that the event managed to transmit undoubtedly touched sensitive chords in the collective imagination and dug up deeply rooted anxieties. The image of rebellious but morally vulnerable youth, the dissolution of the family and its traditional values are some of the factors that have been identified as determinants of increased perceptions of risk and public fears over the last decades (Jenkins, 1992).

It is not the goal of this article to assess the actual harm that mephedrone caused – irrefutable data to support any view in this sense are still to be gathered and processed. Its main objective is, however, to study the ways in which the media chose to demonise it and sell a scarecrow image of the drug to their audiences at a moment when very little was known about it. In doing so, it must first be specified that this analysis will not look at the British press, political establishment and civil society as a unified and coherently acting/thinking entity, as sometimes can be inferred by drawing on the traditional body of moral panic literature (see Cohen, 1972; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Critcher, 2003). It will only focus on popular media discourses, acknowledging McRobbie and Thornton's (1995) warning (see also Garland, 2008) that the moral panic model should not be taken and applied per se to multi-mediated social universes where a diversity of voices (including those of the 'folk-devils' themselves) can easily make themselves heard (through a vast network of audio-visual, print and digital outlets) and where moral panics themselves are likely to be unmasked and dismantled by those who conceptualised them in the first place. As Measham et al. (2011) point out, in this case *moral panic* was in fact 'used pejoratively by liberal commentators to criticise media coverage of mephedrone and accuse tabloid journalists of at best exaggeration, and at worst misinformation' (Measham et al., 2011: 138).

Discourse and the 'drug wars' ideology

Newspaper reporting on drug use (and on many other forms of deviance, for that matter) is often accused of exaggerating, using inaccurate information and looking for the sensational. Research has shown that the British print media employ almost no quality control mechanisms to eliminate such distortions (Coomber et al., 2000). Looking back at the 1970s and the work of Stuart Hall, Stanley Cohen, Jock Young and the Glasgow Media Group on the 'manufacturing of news', Fowler (1991) writes:

News is not a natural phenomenon emerging straight from 'reality', but a *product*. It is produced by an industry, by the relations between the media and other industries and, most importantly, by relations with government and with other political organizations. From a

broader perspective, it reflects, and in return shapes, the prevailing values of a society in a particular historical context. (Fowler, 1991: 222)

Manning (2006) shows how significantly different symbolic frameworks are discriminately applied to represent 'problems' associated with different drugs and how this selection is made in accordance with the cultural assumptions and the inferential frameworks that underpin processes of news production. News source activity and the marketing strategies of newspapers also hold a significant role in shaping content. News is thus complex and unpredictable. On more general lines, however, Taylor (2008) argues that media coverage and policy usually adopt a vision of users as risk-bearing outsiders and presumed offenders, with specific stereotypes and simplified notions usually casting aside more complex and holistic discourses on drugs and their impact.

A fully-fledged 'declaration of war' took shape at the beginning of the 1970s, when US President Richard Nixon announced that his establishment was committed to leading a 'war on drugs'. Nixon's war metaphor thus helped shape and affirm an ideology that was going to determine global discourses on drugs for decades to come. This ideology legitimises a narrative that 'provides a particular definition of the drug problem (how to stop all use of illicit drugs), posits the source of the problem (drugs are too cheap and easily available), and suggests the appropriate solution (coercion and punishment)' (Bertram et al., 1996: 57). *War* itself, in such semantic instances, is a condensation symbol – it evokes heroes and common enemies, it directs the imagination towards vast battlefields and announces huge resources, effort and determination put in to ensure victory (Elwood, 1994).

In a very broad understanding, remarks Teun van Dijk (1998), such ideologies are defined as systems of beliefs. They are both mental and social, they are rooted in the general beliefs of societies and cultures, they underlie social representations and they are shared by specific social groups. They have the ability to polarise these groups ('us' versus 'them') and they imply assumptions about the basic properties of their members: identity (who are the members and where do they come from?), activities (what do they usually do?), goals (what do they want to obtain?), norms and values (what is good and bad, what is permitted and what is prohibited?), group relations (who are the allies and who are the opponents?) and resources (what determines the group's power or lack of it?).

In Van Dijk's (2011) socio-cognitive model of discourse analysis, ideological discourse is always the sum of underlying representations which reside in social (common ground and group knowledge) and personal (event and context models) cognition. Ideologies are used both for the legitimation of power abuse and inequality and as a foundation for resistance and dissidence. They are both reproduced top-down and bottom-up (Van Dijk, 1998). But as the 'war on drugs' type of rhetoric illustrates, ideological discourses coming from above help elites impose their domination precisely because they tend to structure the cognitive maps of social universes and shape the social context in which they are decoded (see Van Dijk, 2008). While this is not saying that audiences at the bottom of the social ladder are mere passive actors whose main role is that of absorbing whatever folk-tales their enlightened rulers may come up with at the end of the day – a vision that Van Dijk himself strongly repudiates – elite discourses tend to impose themselves as a form of domination. Precisely in the same manner in which discriminatory discourses are a form of racist practice, as the Dutch researcher has observed over the years while studying racist and xenophobic discourses disseminated throughout the public sphere by the media and other social actors (see Van Dijk, 1991, 1993, 2002, 2005).

It is thus no coincidence that both racist and drug discourses often tend to polarise between the dominant and morally healthy 'us' and the alien and depraved 'them', emphasising 'our' qualities and 'their' flaws. As Chomsky (cited in Veit, 2003) points out, drug wars are also a means of controlling what the elites define as the 'dangerous' classes or minorities or those who do not contribute to mainstream meaning-making and affluence. One of the most relevant examples comes from the United States, where black drug offenders are up to ten times more likely to be imprisoned on drug-related charges than whites (HRW, 2008).

'War on drugs' (fear-inducing) discourses as tools of identity polarisation and power consolidation thus have the following characteristics:

1. They help construct and disseminate a central narrative of harm that is often seen to spread as a highly contagious disease which targets the very order and moral health of social universes. In the 1930s marijuana users were said to lose their minds and become violent; in the 1960s LSD was thought to cause chromosome damage and make users stare at the Sun for long hours until they went blind; and in the 1990s crack cocaine was believed to cause irreversible damage to fetuses and newborns if consumed by pregnant mothers and to cause 'instant addiction', literally 'sweeping the US' and 'invading any community' (white upper-middle-class included)(Goode, 2008).
2. They associate the source of evil with a foreign parasitic force that wants to destabilise its host body. Different social groups (such as ethnic minorities) which are portrayed as 'others' are thus targeted and scapegoated. Chinese opium addicts were thought to seduce middle-class white women in the late 1800s; cocaine was believed to make Afro-Americans violent, especially towards the white population, and to give them superhuman strength which also made them invulnerable to bullets, in the early 1900s (Goode, 2008); heroin-addicted Vietnam veterans were seen as the bearers of an anti-modern and highly dangerous sickness that was threatening the American spirit itself, in the 1970s (Weimer, 2003).
3. They help create a sense of panic and emphasise the need for immediate action to be taken at any cost against the deviants and the deviant condition: 'the bottom line of all ideological discourse is the use of reports – whether they distort reality or not – to mobilize popular support to do something in the public arena. ... because they employ rhetoric like "epidemic", "firestorm", "rising tide" and "plague" the urgency of swift and serious action is explicitly justified' (Chiricos, 2006: 117).

Thus, the 'moral epidemic' that was suggested to unfold along with mephedrone's proliferation on the British recreational drug market was signified on all these levels. The drug was said to spread rapidly – it was highly 'contagious' – and the effects of the 'contagion' would manifest immediately in the form of the increasingly reprehensible behaviour of users, as will be further shown. It came from unknown geographical and cultural territory and thus virtually carried with it the germs of an unpredictable type of moral infection. Its growing visibility called for action, allowing journalists and other moral crusaders to step in and make urgent claims for drastic policy measures. In this sense, the virtual threat of a moral epidemic would be the signal that would justify a sense of a moral panic – the limitations and political connotations acquired by this concept in different contexts must be once more acknowledged. The moral epidemic was thus

suggested to be the syndrome threatening the social organism and the moral panic the only possible legitimate response of its immune system.

Mephedrone, assassin of youth

News on the 'mephedrone menace' in the right-wing media closely followed the panic-making recipes discussed above. Using Van Dijk's model of discourse studies I will focus on three central themes or metaphors: (1) mephedrone as deadly disease; (2) mephedrone as moral downfall; and (3) mephedrone as homeland invasion.

The results were obtained by analysing a corpus of around 110 news items retrieved from the websites of four tabloid dailies: the *Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Star*. The articles were found by performing searches on each website using keywords such as 'mephedrone' or 'meow meow'. Only those that featured mephedrone's legal status and effects as the central theme were kept – articles referring to it in a wider context, such as policy debates focusing on the general regime of narcotics or celebrities experimenting with psychoactive substances, were discarded. Almost all the items that featured mephedrone framed it as the cause of harmful (fatal) health effects or antisocial behaviour. The time-span covered stretched from November 2009 (when the drug's appearance is first noted) to November 2011, when suicides and mephedrone-related attacks were still being reported. The highest frequency of appearances was recorded for March and April 2010, when media pressure calling for the substance to be banned reached its peak.

A total of 12 articles came from the *Sun*, another 24 from the *Daily Mail*, while the *Daily Star* and *Daily Mirror* each contributed 37. The numbers of news items generated by the websites of these publications does not necessarily reflect the intensity of coverage or the importance given to the topic in question, but are subject to the biases of the search engines incorporated by each website or to the key terms utilised while searching for relevant items, among other factors. Each item was given a short code that expressed the type of agency or origins as attributed to the drug in question – e.g. 'teenager commits suicide', 'gang beat an innocent man' or 'Chinese dealers ship drug to UK'. Recurring themes were then grouped into the three main categories that also revealed the three key metaphors that will be further discussed. Critical discourse analysis was then performed on relevant samples of text from each category.

Popular and mid-market dailies are the best-sold and most read publications in the United Kingdom. According to the NRS Print and Digital Data Survey (cited by the *Guardian*, 2012), in April 2012 the *Sun* was the most consumed media brand in the country, totalling a combined print and online readership of about 17.8 million people. It was followed by the *Daily Mail*, with 16.4 million readers (18.5 for the *Mail on Sunday*), and by the *Daily Mirror*, with 10.6 million readers (12.7 for the *Sunday Mirror*). The *Daily Star* had about 4.6 million print and online readers (5.2 million for the *Star on Sunday*). Their wide distribution, sensationalist style of packaging information and obvious tendency towards exaggeration makes them significant contributors to, and allows them to have considerable impact on, public opinion trends. They are also often capable of influencing the policy agenda by sustained campaigns on specific topics – mephedrone was one of them, as repeated calls for a ban were formulated during the months preceding its classification as a high-risk substance.

Mephedrone as deadly disease

The image of death 'haunted' most news reports on mephedrone. Fatal experiments with the drug or suicide acts presumably caused by mephedrone-induced depression became the most familiar expressions of the substance's symptomatology, even in the absence of relevant medical data. In the first article cited below (titled 'Law student who led "Lady Asbo" double life as escort died after taking meow meow'), a young woman is assumed to have been killed by mephedrone even though she was 'two and half times over the drink-drive limit' and had also taken GHB ('liquid ecstasy') and Valium. 'Meow meow' is forcedly made the star ingredient of the cocktail. A similar notion of the substance's deadly agency is present in the second text – the final line mentions that the coroner registered an open verdict.

A talented law student who led a double life as an escort died after taking a cocktail of alcohol and drugs including meow meow, an inquest heard. Laura Main, 28, was training to be a solicitor but also worked for an escort agency called Bunnies of London under the name Eve. (*Daily Mail*, 16 April)

A fun-loving dad hanged himself after taking club drug mephedrone. Mark Jolly, 30, became aggressive and depressed after using the drug – also known as meow meow – an inquest was told. (*Daily Mirror*, 17 October 2010)

Such reports draw on the authority of specific expertise ('an inquest heard/was told') concentrated in the law enforcement sector (that of police agents or coroners, for example) to legitimise assumptions and interpretations made by the journalists themselves.

To augment their rhetorical force these accounts are constructed on a semantic scaffold of contrast. At the texts' very foundation sits the stark contrast between youth's potential and death's disintegrating silence, with the drug assuring the passage between the two sides. The victims' identities are first constructed with positive terms that reflect socially valid roles or ideals: we are looking at a 'talented law student' who 'was training to be a solicitor' and at a 'fun-loving dad'. When mephedrone enters the stage, legitimate dreams and the harmony of family life disintegrate. As the curtain is raised, the 'popular student' is now 'lying on her stomach on the floor', breathless, while the young father had turned 'aggressive and depressed' only to be later found by his brother 'hanging from railings at his flat'.

It is this stark contrast that also mirrors the duality of Laura Main's persona. In the first article, her legitimate goal to be a solicitor and her 'underground' activities compose her identity. But it is the victim's presence in this latter sphere that is to be associated with the downfall, as she could not have been introduced to the drug in any seminar room, library or courtroom. Mephedrone (like death) thus lurks in uncharted territory – in the dark and dangerously mysterious club scene or behind the closed doors that the aspiring solicitor had to knock at as a professional escort. The imaginary juxtaposition of these two faces – also illustrated by the two photographs that accompany the text: the first one showing the victim having fun at a club party (possibly in her working hours as DJ or escort), and the second one showing her wearing a graduation (or, in a more aspirational perspective, a solicitor's) gown – announces a conflict (or contradiction) that cannot be neutralised or negotiated. The only possible outcome thus announced can only be a tragic one.

It was in this dark corner that all those seduced by the drug would find themselves. As the *Daily Mail* wrote, they would be literally 'playing Russian Roulette with their lives' (17 March 2010). And as with all dangerous games, those most tempted to take part in them would also be the youngest and most naive. And they would also be the players to most likely find themselves on the losing side:

A heartbroken mum told yesterday how her teenage son hanged himself after taking legal party drug Meow Meow. Rachel Higginson was at first baffled why Will Filer, 18 – who hoped to join the Army this summer – committed suicide last month. But pals have told her he took the drug hours before he was found dead in woods. (*Daily Mirror*, 9 April 2010)

When Rebecca Cardwell handed over £5 for her share of party drug meow meow, she effectively signed her own death warrant. Within hours the carefree teenager collapsed and three days later died of acute liver failure. (*Daily Mail*, 14 October 2010)

Reports like these show how causal links are suggested to connect the drug with the tragic ends of innocent ('carefree') teenagers. Looking at the systems of transitivity of the two texts, it is interesting to observe how in the end it is the drug that actually imposes its agency on the users, transforming them into ticking time-bombs and making them executioners in the acts of their own destruction. A young aspiring soldier literally takes his life after consuming it – a gruesome image of the teenager hanging himself in the woods is suggested – while a teenage girl 'signs her own death warrant' when paying for the substance. The *death warrant* metaphor thus connects with the *Russian roulette* metaphor and closes the circle of harm – one cannot dance with the devil without staring into the abyss. Both texts present interpretations of the events in which mephedrone's decisive contribution to the victims' demise is suggested as fact. There are no direct statements in this sense, however – e.g. 'mephedrone killed the teenager' – but the sequencing of actions seems to indicate that no other actor can take the blame: Will Filer committed suicide *after* taking meow meow and Rebecca Cardwell sealed her faith *when* handing over the £5 bill for her share of the drug.

Mephedrone as moral downfall

People reading the pages of British tabloids in the months preceding and following the ban of mephedrone would have had all the reasons in the world to fear the chaos that the drug had apparently managed to unleash outside their homes. Apart from the wave of suicides and fatal party accidents, the substance was presumed to be the source of a series of antisocial deeds of the most bizarre kind. Many of them involved extreme violence. A gang of thugs high on the drug beat an innocent man unconscious and tried to burn him alive after a row on Facebook (*Daily Mirror*, 17 June 2010) and a teenage addict robber threatened to shoot a 77-year-old woman for her £10 note (*Daily Mirror*, 2 October 2010). But probably the most disturbing attack on the moral order was the one taking place in the nation's schools: a sixth-form pupil collapsed at school after using the drug (*Daily Mirror*, 18 January 2010), two teenage girls took it during classes (*Daily Star*, 31 March 2010) and a secondary school came close to being emptied when 'almost 200 pupils' got sick after consuming the substance (*Sun*, 18 March 2010). This latter account originated from

the *Leicester Mercury* and was followed by five national newspapers, despite the school's identity never being revealed and Leicestershire County Council officials stating that the figures did not relate to any school in their district (Fleming, 2011).

A CRAZE for the 'miaow-miaow' party drug has left 180 pupils off sick in just one school. Children as young as eight are taking mephedrone, also known as MCat and sold as fertiliser. All the pupils at a secondary school in north-west Leics have been off since December at a rate of more than two a day. The drug is known to kill and the Government is considering a ban. (*Daily Star*, 9 March 2010)

As Van Dijk observes (2000), in the news 'numbers are the rhetorical device to suggest precision and objectivity, and hence credibility' (p. 46). Numbers also make use of the imperative of high quantities as a powerful tool of persuasion. The text outlined above draws on such imperative itself to suggest the sense of an overwhelming threat that the drug constitutes if capable of causing negative effects of this magnitude. The reader finds out that 180 pupils have been missing from classes in only *one* school, at a rate of *two per day*. The numeral 180 is then dropped in favour of the indefinite pronoun *all*, augmenting the inventory of harm to the scale of absolute damage – not one pupil was kept safe from the influence of the drug. All the numbers and quantities mentioned or suggested illustrate a notion of excess, and the fact that children as young as *eight* are targeted by mephedrone only comes to complete this picture of a total menace that cannot be negotiated away but has to be urgently eradicated through any possible means. The noun CRAZE (graphically emphasised through the use of capital letters) binds together all the information dispersed throughout the text. It serves to explain the abnormally and irrationally exaggerated numerical values and thus strengthens the underlying script of a world gone out of control, in which a drug 'known to kill' (as the final background paragraph informs) is able to reach this many schoolchildren this easily, corrupting their innocence (a very familiar theme to drug panics), threatening their lives and (on a symbolic level) ultimately that of the society whose future they represent.

Mephedrone as homeland invasion

The scarecrow image of the 'other', of the enemy who attacks the homeland with a clear-cut agenda of destruction, is one of the most widely used themes in drug panic discourses. The mephedrone story had victims and visible effects. So it also needed perpetrators.

The killer drug Meow Meow is being flown into Britain every day by ruthless Chinese dealers – and Customs are powerless to stop them. Massive quantities of the drug, blamed for the deaths of two teenagers this week, are being manufactured in sweatshops in China using an illegal substance. (*Daily Mirror*, 21 March 2010)

A RUTHLESS foreign dealer boasted to *Sun* investigators he could supply 50kg of meow meow a month – as the killer drug floods Britain. Latvian Amirs Abidi says profits have already been boosted by the surging UK demand for the legal drug – and boasts of five 'very big clients' who distribute it here. (*Sun*, 29 March 2010)

Reports like these suggest an assault in its own right. They help sketch a setting of massive and continuous ('every day') war operations. This imminent invasion rhetoric relies on the suggested scale of the preparations ('massive quantities' or '50kg a month' of the drug are 'being flown into' or 'flooding Britain') and on the fierce image of the invading force (both newspapers use the adjective 'ruthless' to portray foreign dealers). Mephedrone thus stands as lethal weapon in the hands of the enemy – both publications label it 'killer drug'. Both texts are also constructed on the opposition between the overwhelming actions of the enemy and the incapacity of the homeland to defend itself, as Customs cannot do anything to stop shipments of the highly demanded 'legal drug'. Causes and effects are linked in a chain of events that offers an oversimplified definition of the problem: the drug which is known to have killed users is legal and thus highly wanted [link] authorities cannot do anything to stop it from entering the country and being accessed on a mass scale by literally anyone, teenagers included [link] forces from dark places seize this opportunity and use the substance in their attempt to destabilise the homeland [link] the victim (British society with all the values that hold it together) is thus immobilised and forced to await its faith at the hands of the attacker.

The presence of foreign (Chinese and Latvian) dealers in these texts also invokes racist clichés and fears which the popular media disseminate and cultivate on a regular basis. The Chinese are the exponents of a cryptic and hostile culture associated in popular discourses with an overt intention of expansion and global domination, while Latvians are situated in a geo-political area (Eastern Europe) which popular media discourses have helped construct as an ever-active source of undesired immigration and organised crime. The imaginary spaces that usually readers experience exclusively through such texts are charted using the same type of negative connotations that frame the identity of the immigrants who come from these places. Mephedrone is thus 'being manufactured in sweatshops in China using an illegal substance' or, going deeper into the text, 'in back-street factories in rural China where wages and rents are rock-bottom'. The Latvian dealer and his associates produce it at a pharmaceutical factory in Latvia, 'but not officially'. Lexical chains of depreciative terms and expressions like 'ruthless', 'illegal', 'back-street', 'rural', 'rock-bottom' or 'not officially' construct a moral topography of corruption, of morbid, backward and dangerous corners of the map from where the germs of crime start to spread, eventually invading the readers' close environment.

Concluding remarks: Legal highs and the evil within

'THE police have sabotaged the attempt to ban mephedrone, before it has even begun', wrote Peter Hitchens in his column in the *Mail on Sunday*, on 4 April 2010. His comment was made after a 'spokesmoron' for the Association of Chief Police Officers stated that following mephedrone's classification as a high-risk drug, police forces were only going to target the dealers who sold it and not the users who bought it, so as to not 'criminalise' the latter. 'What this uniformed cretin should realise', added Hitchens, 'is that young people criminalise themselves by buying an illegal drug. ... Drug-takers are criminals, not victims', he concluded, arguing that 'if we took this view there would be many fewer of them'.

Without performing any discourse analysis on it, what Hitchens' column manages to articulate in a plain and simple manner is the very type of thinking that lies at the foundation of all populist ideologies, the 'war on drugs' type included. Any war calls for blood and for radical measures just like any treatment against a cancerous disease claims the destruction of healthy cells, limbs and other body parts which have been corrupted. Denouncing drug users as criminals is giving evil

another name in the absence of a true understanding of what evil is. Such discourses seek to legitimise the notion of a treatment whose only goal is that of extirpating a tumour without diagnosing the overall state of the organism.

This article has analysed the symbolisation strategies used by the British tabloid media to reflect mephedrone's appearance on the British recreational drug market as a threat to the moral order and health of the nation. By symbolically framing the drug as a menace to the safety of the most vulnerable segment of the social body – the young and naive – these discourses have followed a pattern that has been observed in the case of other drug scares in the English-speaking world. Using Van Dijk's model of ideological discourse analysis I was able to identify three key metaphors that have helped shape the 'rhetoric of fear' and the image of the 'dangerous other': mephedrone as deadly disease, mephedrone as moral downfall and mephedrone as homeland invasion.

Just like other drugs which have ignited (puritan) spirits before it, mephedrone was portrayed by the tabloid media as the source of a fatal disease that was both destroying its victims and using them to spread the seeds of a moral corruption that bore the mark of a ruthless invading force. This article is not meant to absolve the drug of any allegations (research based on more solid data will have to shed light on its actual harm potential) or to accuse conservative news outlets of trying to create hysteria.

But recent data (Moore et al., 2013) came to confirm that clubbers now add mephedrone to drug cocktails that contain other substances like ecstasy or cocaine, a trend that exposes users to far more complicated and severe risks than those posed by any of these drugs taken individually. Even though the price of mephedrone more than doubled (from around £10 a gram to £20–25), users were not deterred from buying it. The ban so virulently called for by the British tabloids apparently only pushed the drug underground and made things even more complicated for those primarily affected by it. Professor David Nutt (2012) argues that the extended media coverage of the alleged harms caused by mephedrone actually increased the prevalence of use, as people understood that most of it was exaggerated. He advocates the collection of a minimum dataset related to the pharmacology, toxicology and human psychopharmacology of any given substance before its legal status can be changed. This would allow policy makers, he argues, to 'make decisions based on evidence rather than headlines' (Nutt, 2012: 124).

Almost 40 years after introducing the concept of 'moral panic' to the social sciences, one of its fathers (Cohen, 2011) wrote that the new panics of our time can act as 'anti-denial movements' and that now 'acknowledgement becomes the slogan' (p. 241). This conceptualisation involves an increased ability for both researchers and activists to distinguish moral panics (the exaggeration of a problem) from denial (the trivialisation or underestimation of the negative effects of a problem). It also allows 'more space for social movements, identity politics and victims' (Cohen, 2011: 241) and it establishes a moral consensus on at least one dimension – that non-interventionism or 'turning a blind eye' on sensitive social realities are no longer valid options. It maybe lays the foundation for a new civic culture.

And if traditionally panics have been thought of silencing the 'outsiders', what about new panics that actually make them 'insiders', that make a priority of allowing them to be heard? Panics that, instead of claiming for immediate and radical measures, call for the right questions to be asked: Who are the victims and who are the aggressors, how powerless or how powerful are they and how can we intervene without causing more harm? Would the thought of not panicking enough or not panicking the right way inspire a new platform for dealing with social problems?

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) (2010) *Consideration of the Cathinones*. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/119173/acmd-cathinones-report-2010.pdf [accessed 2 June 2013].
- Bertram E, Blachman M, Sharpe K and Andreas P. (1996) *Drug War Politics: The price of denial*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chiricos T (2006) Moral panic as ideology. In: Critcher C (ed.) *Critical Readings: Moral panics and the media*. Maidenhead; New York: Open University Press.
- Cohen S (1972) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The creation of the Mods and Rockers*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Cohen S (2011) Whose side are we on? The undeclared politics of moral panic theory. *Crime Media Culture* 7: 237–243.
- Coomber R, Morris C and Dunn L (2000) How the media do drugs: Quality control of drug issues in the UK print media. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 11: 217–225.
- Critcher C (2003) *Moral Panics and the Media*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Dillon P, Goldspink-Lord L and Parkhill N (1996) Sex, drugs and just say no: A media perspective. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 7: 183–186.
- Elwood WN (1994) *Rhetoric in the War on Drugs: The triumphs and tragedies of public relations*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Abuse (EMCDDA) (2013) *European Drug Report 2013: Trends and developments*. Available at <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/edr/trends-developments/2013> [accessed 4 May 2013].
- EUROPOL–EMCDDA (2010) *Joint Report on a New Psychoactive Substance: 4-methylmethcathinone (Mephedrone)*. Available at <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/html.cfm/index132196EN.html> [accessed 19 November 2013].
- Fleming N (2011) Mephedrone and the media: Has sensationalist reporting and media-informed government policy worsened the war on drugs? *Palladium International* 6: 24–27.
- Forsyth AJM (2012) Virtually a drug scare: Mephedrone and the impact of the Internet on drug news transmission. *International Journal on Drug Policy* 23: 198–209.
- Fowler R (1991) *Language in the News: Discourse and ideology in the press*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Garland D (2008) On the concept of moral panic. *Crime Media Culture* 4: 9–30.
- Goode E (2008) Moral panics and disproportionality: The case of LSD use in the sixties. *Deviant Behavior* 29: 533–543.
- Goode E and Ben-Yehuda N (1994) *Moral Panics: The social construction of deviance*. Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Guardian (2012) *Digital and Newspaper Readerships Combined: Figures for major UK newspaper and magazine*. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/sep/12/digital-newspaper-readerships-national-survey#tabloid> [accessed 20 August 2013].
- Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2008) *Targeting Blacks: Drug law enforcement and race in the United States*. Available at <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/05/04/targeting-blacks> [accessed 4 November 2011].
- Innes M (2004) Crime as a signal, crime as a memory. *Journal for Crime, Conflict and the Media* 1: 15–22.
- Jenkins P (1992) *Intimate Enemies: Moral panics in contemporary Great Britain*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Manning P (2006) There's no glamour in glue: News and the symbolic framing of substance use. *Crime Media Culture* 2: 49–66.

- McRobbie A and Thornton SL (1995) Rethinking 'moral panic' for multi-mediated social worlds. *British Journal of Sociology* 46: 559–574.
- Measham F, Moore K, Newcombe R and Welch Z (2010) Tweaking, bombing, dabbing and stockpiling: The emergence of mephedrone and the perversity of prohibition. *Drugs and Alcohol Today* 10: 14–21.
- Measham F, Moore K and Østergaard J (2011) Mephedrone, 'bubble' and unidentified white powders: The contested identities of synthetic 'legal highs'. *Drugs and Alcohol Today* 11: 137–146.
- Meyer MR, Wilhelm J, Peters FT and Maurer HH (2010) Beta-keto amphetamines: Studies on the metabolism of the designer drug mephedrone and toxicological detection of mephedrone, butylone, and methylone in urine using gas chromatography–mass spectrometry. *Analytical and Bioanalytical Chemistry* 397: 1225–1233.
- Moore K, Dargan PI, Wood DM and Measham F (2013) Do novel psychoactive substances displace established club drugs, supplement them or act as drugs of initiation: The relationship between mephedrone, ecstasy and cocaine. *European Addiction Research* 19: 276–282.
- Newcombe R (2009) *Mephedrone: Use of mephedrone (M-cat, Meow) in Middlesbrough*. Manchester: Life-line Publications.
- Nutt DJ (2012) *Drugs – Without the Hot Air: Minimizing the harms of legal and illegal drugs*. Cambridge: UIT Cambridge.
- Romanian Harm Reduction Network (RHRN) (2011) *Evaluarea riscurilor asociate consumului de substanțe noi cu proprietăți psihoactive în rândul copiilor și tinerilor din România*. Bucharest: Alpha Mdn.
- Sare J (2011) How the media helped ban mephedrone. *British Medical Journal* 342: 472–473.
- Taylor S (2008) Outside the outsiders: Media representations of drug use. *Journal of Community and Criminal Justice* 55: 369–387.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2013) *The challenge of new psychoactive substances*. Available at <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2013/March/new-unodc-report-sheds-light-on-the-phenomenon-of-new-psychoactive-substances-worldwide.html?ref=fs2> [accessed 13 March 2013].
- van Dijk TA (1991) *Racism and the Press*. London: Routledge.
- van Dijk TA (1993) *Elite discourse and racism*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.
- van Dijk TA (1998) *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. London: SAGE Publications.
- van Dijk TA (2000) New(s) racism: A discourse analytical approach. In: Cottle S (ed.) *Ethnic Minorities and the Media*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- van Dijk TA (2002) Discourse and racism. In: Goldberg D and Solomos J (eds) *The Blackwell Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- van Dijk TA (2005) *Racism and Discourse in Spain and Latin America*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- van Dijk TA (2008) *Discourse and Context: A sociocognitive approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- van Dijk TA (2009) *Society and Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- van Dijk TA (2011) Discourse and ideology. In: van Dijk TA (ed.) *Discourse Studies: A multidisciplinary introduction* (2nd edition). London: SAGE Publications.
- Vardakou I, Pistos C and Spiliopoulou C (2011) Drugs for youth via Internet and the example of mephedrone. *Toxicology Letters* 201: 191–195.
- Veit J (2003) Interview: Noam Chomsky, the drug-war industrial complex. *High Times*, August 2003. Available at http://hightimes.com/entertainment/ht_admin/721 [accessed 13 July 2013].
- Weimer D (2003) Drugs-as-a-disease: Heroin, metaphors, and identity in Nixon's drug war. *Janus Head* 6: 260–281. Available at <http://www.janushead.org/6-2/Weimer.pdf> [accessed 1 August 2013].
- Winstock AR, Marsden J and Mitcheson L (2010) What should be done about mephedrone? *British Medical Journal* 340c: 1605.
- Wood DM, Davies S, Puchnarewicz M, Button J, Archer R, Ovaska H et al. (2010) Recreational use of mephedrone (4-methylmethcathinone, 4-MMC) with associated sympathomimetic toxicity. *Journal of Medicine Toxicology* 6: 327–330.
- Wood DM, Hunter L, Measham F and Dargan PI (2012) Limited use of novel psychoactive substances in South London nightclubs. *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine* 105: 959–964.

Author biography

Liviu Alexandrescu is currently a PhD researcher in Lancaster University's Sociology Department. His work focuses mostly on European recreational drug markets and on the moral discourses and material practices of injecting use shaped by 'novel psychoactive substances' or 'legal highs'. A freelance journalist, he holds a Bachelor's degree in mass communication studies from the University of Bucharest, Romania, and a Master's degree in society and politics from the Centre for Social Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw.