

DIAGNOSTIC

MEPHEDRONE AND THE MEDIA

Has sensationalist reporting and media-informed government policy worsened the war on drugs?

Words Nic Fleming

In March 2010, *The Sun* newspaper called for a ban on the then-legal drug mephedrone beneath the front-page headline: “Meow Meow Kills 2 Teens”. When, two months later, tests revealed that these two young men from Scunthorpe who’d died had in fact not taken the drug, the paper’s editors didn’t deem it worthy of coverage.

Five months earlier the infamous tabloid published a story under the eye-catching (or watering) headline: “Legal drug teen ripped his scrotum off”. This was based on a report written by a policeman in Durham who found the alarming, anonymous account on a “user experience” section of a website that sold mephedrone. The policeman’s prominent warning that he had no way of verifying the story did not find its way into the paper’s article. Neither did the website owner’s view that he considered the so-called account to have been a joke.

Crimes against responsible journalism at *The Sun* will doubtful come as a surprise to many. But more alarming, and illuminating, is the extent to which selective news judgements, sensationalism and basic inaccuracy characterised the coverage of the mephedrone story by most mainstream media outlets. National newspapers and broadcasters were guilty of failing to carry out the most basic research and fact checking. Worse still, even at supposedly serious outlets, journalists consciously omitted and distorted facts to “sex up” their stories.

Twelve days after the media frenzy surrounding the deaths of the aforementioned Nicholas Smith, 19, and Louis Wainwright, 18, began, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) recommended mephedrone and related synthetic cathinones should be banned. That very same day Home Secretary Alan Johnson announced plans for emergency legislation to make them class B controlled substances. Maybe this doesn’t matter. Scientists warn mephedrone is a stimulant and that those with existing heart conditions who take large enough doses could be at risk of potentially fatal complications. Some young people who might previously have taken it because it was legal may now be deterred from doing so. So what’s the problem?

The problem, is that legislation has been introduced as a result of inaccurate and hysterical journalism, the advice of a scientific committee so weakened by a confrontation with ministers that it now acts as little more than a rubber stamp and a government so desperate to be loved it would have done practically anything the popular press demanded.

Not enough time has elapsed to evaluate whether the ban will reduce or increase harms associated with the drug. But many of those

who actually know something about drugs policy fear prohibition has simply driven the trade underground where it is harder to monitor, criminalises young users, potentially encourages acquisitive crime and pushes existing users back to other illegal drugs or new legal highs about which even less is known. “Impure Meow Meow Kills Teens Thanks to Ban” and “Criminal Gang Profits Up Thanks to Meow Meow Media Storm” are among the headlines you will not be reading despite there being more chance of them being accurate than many of those we have already seen.

The most widely reported death linked to mephedrone before the Scunthorpe cases was that of Gabrielle Price. Seven national newspapers published reports stating the 14-year-old died “after taking” mephedrone at a party in Brighton in November or suggested her death was linked to it. When the results of toxicology tests released in December showed the cause of her death was “cardiac arrest following broncho-pneumonia which resulted from streptococcal A infection”, none of these papers considered it newsworthy enough to retract their earlier hysteria.

Then there’s the mysterious case of the unnamed secondary school in Leicestershire at which one hundred and eighty pupils went off sick as a result of taking mephedrone, according to the *Leicester Mercury* and the five national newspapers who followed up its story. The *Mercury* backed up its allegations with a quote from Steve Jackson, the Leicestershire police drugs liaison officer. The obvious question is how this alleged school persuaded these alleged absentees to admit their alleged absenteeism was linked to taking the drug. The other obvious question is how the school identity was never unearthed despite the efforts of the local media and what used to be known as Fleet Street’s finest. Jackson subsequently commented, “The figure quoted in this article was not confirmed or supplied by me”. A spokeswoman for Leicestershire County Council further added, “Those figures don’t relate to any school in Leicestershire”.

One of the key pieces of evidence on which the ACMD based its recommendation to ban mephedrone was a compilation of twenty-seven deaths – eighteen in England, eight in Scotland and one in Guernsey – in which mephedrone had been found or implicated in post mortem tests. Les Iverson, chairman of the ACMD, repeatedly referred to this list of victims at a meeting attended by many journalists on 29 March, the day Johnson announced plans for emergency legislation to ban the drug. However, journalists who put in a quick call to the author of that list at the National Programme on Substance Abuse Deaths at St George’s, University of London, could easily have confirmed that the

twenty-seven included Gabrielle Price whose death came from natural causes. At the time of the ACMD recommendation, in only one of these cases had a coroner ruled the drug was a contributor factor in the death, and even then the heroin substitute methadone was also found in the victim's blood. Three months later, of the twenty-seven, mephedrone has been found to be a primary but not sole cause of death in two people, both of whom had underlying heart conditions, and a contributory factor in two others who had also taken other drugs or alcohol. Those reading *The Daily Telegraph* the day after Johnson announced plans for a ban were told "new figures showed that up to 26 people [were] likely to have died from its effects".

Three days after the meeting, ACMD member Eric Carlin resigned. In a letter to the Home Secretary he concluded, "Our decision was unduly based on media and political pressure. The Chair came to brief you before the whole Council had even discussed all of the report. In fact, I still haven't seen the final version". Polly Taylor, another member, had resigned the day before the meeting. These were the sixth and seventh resignations from the council in the wake of the sacking of its chairman, Professor David Nutt, six months earlier after he criticised the government for rejecting ACMD recommendations on ecstasy and cannabis. Ministers were infuriated by headlines that accompanied his publication of a paper showing the risks of a serious adverse event when horse-riding were around one in three hundred and fifty exposures, compared to one in around ten thousand for those taking ecstasy, and his tendency to express evidence-based views they did not share.

In 2001 Alasdair Forsyth, now at Glasgow Caledonian University, showed how public perception of drug risk is distorted by selective reporting. In a ten-year review of drug deaths in Scotland it showed the likelihood of newspapers reporting a death from paracetamol was one in two hundred and fifty, a death from amphetamine was one in three and that every death from ecstasy was reported. "The big danger is 'cry wolfism'," he notes. "When it becomes apparent the media has distorted the picture, if it turns out mephedrone really is dangerous, many young people simply won't believe the health messages related to it and subsequent new drugs."

The two central misconceptions that underpin our failed attempts to deal with drugs

are well known to those familiar with drugs policy. The first is well summed up by Danny Kushlick of drugs policy think tank Transform when he says, "What we generally call the drug problem is in reality a combination of problems associated with drugs and their prohibition, with the vast majority of the problem caused by prohibition and only a small part of it by the drugs themselves." The second mistake is the notion that the supply of mind-altering substances can be dealt with in isolation of demand. It can't, and attempts to do so simply lead to "product displacement". Asked several weeks after the mephedrone ban was introduced whether she thought the legislation would achieve its aims, Dr Fiona Measham, a criminologist at Lancaster University and the member of the ACMD with the most research experience of the drug, acknowledged many younger users would switch to new legal highs such as NRG-1 and MDAI. She said more experienced users were switching to new forms of old illegal drugs such as ecstasy tablets with names like *Facebooks* and *Blue Smurfs*.

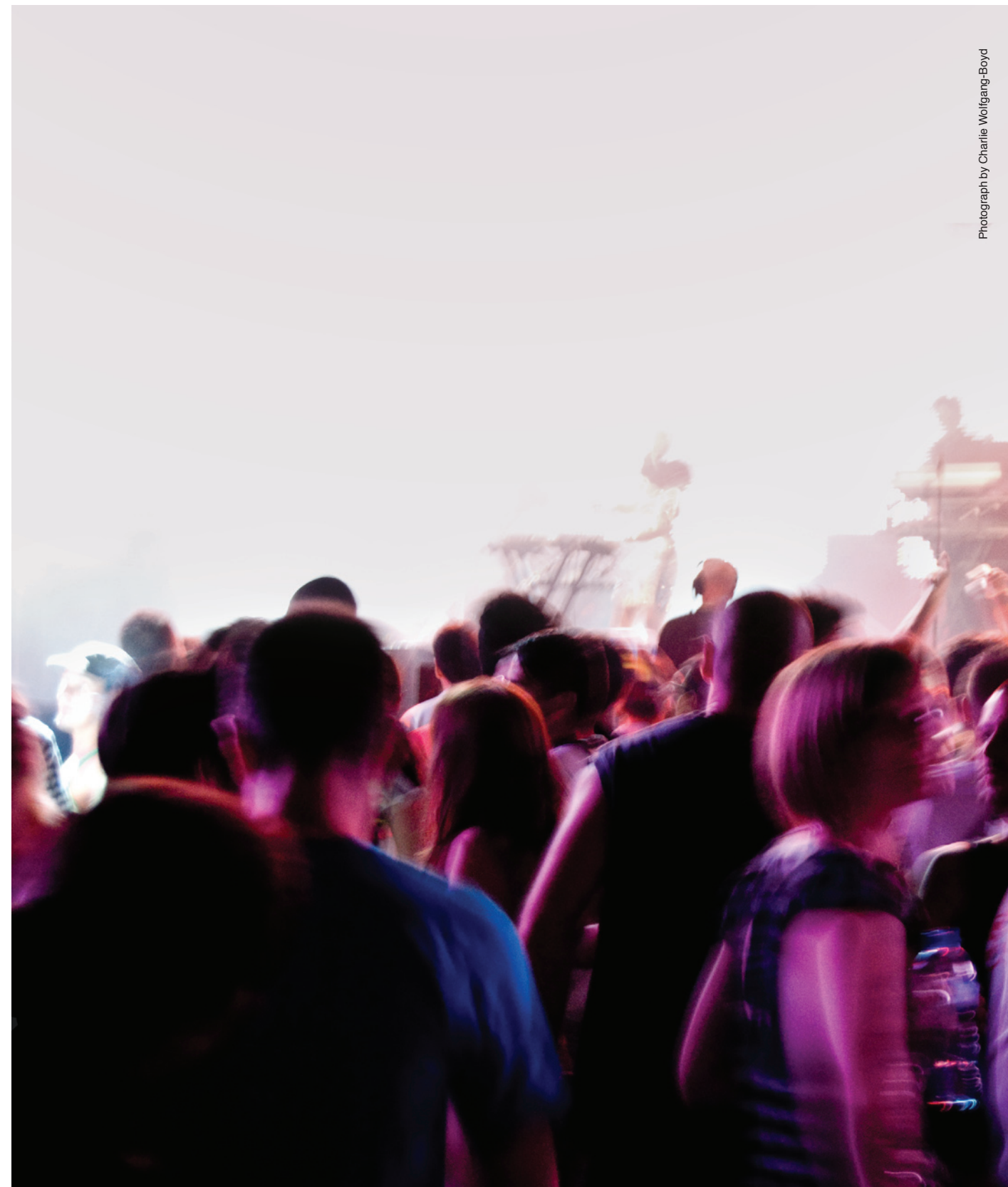
So just why were low journalistic standards so widespread in the reporting of mephedrone? To start with, journalism by its nature attracts opinionated individuals. Humble shrinking violets with a tendency to defer to those who know better need not apply. In his 2008 book *Flat Earth News*, *Guardian* journalist Nick Davies outlined how declining advertising revenues and sales figures, in part due to the internet and communications revolution, is triggering job losses and falling standards. Those still in work face ever increasing demands for more content. With the advent of twenty-four-hour news, blogs, Twitter and the like, reporters increasingly find they don't have time to leave the office to find out the truth of what they're reporting. Chained to their desks, they rely more on press officers, and recycle each other's work without fact checking. The old dividing line between the quality and tabloid press has vanished, those with a sense of fair play and public service mocked by the cynics telling them to "get real".

This gloomy background is however only half the picture, because while falling standards are affecting the reporting of all topics, they are not doing so to the same extent. There are undoubtedly deficiencies in the reporting of other subjects, yet not to the extent exhibited on the mephedrone story. Of course rubbish reporting on drugs has a long,

undistinguished history. Reports in nineteenth century newspapers shocked readers with vivid descriptions of vice, fighting and gambling in opium dens, and served as a useful tool for those seeking to stir up fears about the "yellow peril". In 1995 the media and government stoked up another moral panic following the death of Essex schoolgirl Leah Betts at her eighteenth birthday party. Front-page headlines and advertising billboards proclaimed that just one tablet had killed her. Less attention was given to the reality as described by the coroner who revealed she died of water intoxication and hyponatremia, or low sodium levels in the blood, caused by her drinking seven litres of water in the space of ninety minutes.

That war is probably the only other subject where journalistic standards routinely drop to the same extent as they do in the reporting of drugs is no coincidence. Drugs policy experts including Kushlick explain the similarities through "securitisation theory", a term used in foreign policy discussions to explain how states react with extraordinary measures when they perceive a threat to their existence. "In a securitised system, normal rules don't apply," he says. "You don't check value for money on wars, you don't apply evidence-based templates to assess cost-benefit analysis. What you do is fight, and as in any war you require propaganda to sustain the fight."

Yet the picture it is not all gloom and doom. The mephedrone story certainly highlights some of the deficiencies of "old media" news outlets, illuminating how they largely reinforce and enlarge problems associated with drugs. But in several senses mephedrone has marked a coming of age of the internet where drugs are concerned, both as a method of supply but more crucially as a disseminator of information. Dr Measham says research shows young people are being exposed to sensible harm reduction messages about drugs on internet forums and social media sources. Some of the more ridiculous newspaper stories about mephedrone were being debunked and mocked on Twitter within hours of publication. Whereas once sensationalist and inaccurate reporting in mainstream newspapers and television would have gone largely unchallenged, the internet is slowly starting to undermine ill-informed, knee-jerk media and policy responses, potentially giving those with alternative and better informed perspectives a louder voice, if people choose to listen.



Photograph by Charlie Wolfgang-Boyd