

psychoactives and the internet

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YOUR LOCAL BOOKSTORE may well have a new section... one containing publications pertinent to the "Internet", an entity with a 20+ year history but only now coming into widespread public awareness. The Internet consists of a international web of interconnected computer networks, linking huge numbers of universities research institutes, high tech companies, and increasingly, everyone else. Current estimates are that its growth rate is about 12% a month, and accelerating.

Many different services are supported by the Internet; perhaps the most well-known is electronic mail. Email can generally be sent between users of Internet-connected computers, and through "gateways" to users of commercial services such as America Online, Compuserve, etc. The software to send and read email, and sometimes the addressing schemes, differ from system to system, so consult local resources for guidance.

Additional services are available to computers connected directly to the Internet. The "File Transfer Protocol" (accessed on many systems using the "ftp" command) allows files to be uploaded/downloaded between computers. Often the files one might want to access are carefully arranged in a topical "archive" on one computer by some kind soul who serves as its maintainer. The files in most Internet archives don't change much, though there are a few that are updated frequently. Sometimes you'll see "FAQ" (frequently asked questions) files on various topics - these are often updated as new information becomes available. Of particular

interest to MAPS members, several Internet sites maintain archives of drug-related information.

One drug information archive site is at Harvey Mudd College and is accessed by FTPing to "ftp.hmc.edu". Start at the directory "/pub/drugs", and from there you can move to various subdirectories, currently psychedelics, mdma, marijuana, nootropics, humor, natural, misc, politics, stimulants, opiates, and inhalants. Most of the files in the archive are in a compressed format identifiable by a filename ending with ".Z". If you are using a UNIX system, you can uncompress the file after transferring it to your computer using the "uncompress" command. If you're using a Mac or a PC, you'll need a utility that understands this particular compression scheme. For Macs, the universal Stuffit Expander tool will work. A second site on the net archiving drug information is "techno.stanford.edu" - look in the directory/pub/raves/chemistry.

The Internet also supports a more dynamic mechanism called "Usenet Netnews", "netnews", or simply "news". You can think of netnews as a bulletin board that's automatically distributed so that each participating computer system or "news server" gets copies of all the information submitted by the various readers of news around the world. "Articles" or "postings" in netnews are arranged hierarchically according to topic. You can get an idea of how they're organized by examining a few sample group names out of the 6,000+ available: rec.music.bluenote, rec.audio, rec.audio.pro, sci.med, sci.med.pharmacy, and so on. To read and post netnews you will need a program called a "newsreader". Depending on the computer system you are using the newsreader can be either an intuitive graphic interface or one that is based on commands.

alt.drugs is the name of the most active drug-related newsgroup with dozens to perhaps several hundred new messages a day. There is no limitation on the material in this

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group, making it a rather lively discussion area. Individuals post information on a topic, such as growing cannabis, and others will respond to the posting. Often with popular topics dozens of replies will be made. Many postings are questions that people have about various drugs. The quality of answers varies from simplistic or even wrong on the one hand, to quite complete and accurate discourses on the other hand. Many articles contain references that can be helpful, too. Additional, though somewhat less active newsgroups to check out are alt.psychos active, and alt.hemp.

One thing about the net is that there is a camaraderie that tends to encourage people helping people. Inquiries are often made by people followed by an outrageously incorrect answer. Before you are ready to respond with a correction, several people frequently correct the material in great detail. The freedom in cyberspace to criticize others' material creates a model for self-correcting service. While some of the postings are rather naive (one posting asked "where can I get some MDMA?", others are on rather humorous topics such as "Music to listen to while stoned" or "Best videos to watch while coming down"), at other times there is detailed information about the biochemistry of receptor sites.

You'll see in some of the newsgroups occasional "FAQ" postings, similar or identical to the FAQ files stored in some of the archives. In alt.drugs, they're often about specific drugs, and contain all sorts of information related to that compound. Each month a FAQ is posted that provides a summary of the availability and prices of various drugs on the street in major areas of the country. Another popular FAQ contains mail order sources for books, information, seeds, cultivation supplies, etc.

One question that appears fairly regularly in various groups is whether or not law enforcement may be monitoring the news traffic. Since the safe (or paranoid, depending on your perspective) answer is "yes big brother is watching", two mechanisms for privacy have become popular to fill the need for security.

In order to make anonymous netnews postings (such that your name and return address are not accessible to people who read your postings), servers are setup, often in foreign countries, called anon servers.

Privacy laws in these countries are often more protective than here. It works this way: you email your posting to the anon server. The first time the server receives a message from you, it assigns you an anonymous number or ID with which it will post this and future articles from you. Readers of your anonymous article can use its anonymous ID to send email back to you. To find out more, send an email to help@anon.penet.fi, an anonymous server in Finland.

The second method won't work for netnews postings but will provide increased privacy in email sent between two people. It is called public key encryption. Most encryption software requires both sender and receiver to know the same encryption password - thus the password has to be exchanged via private means. With public key encryption, the password is split into two parts, the "private" key and the "public" key. You can email your public key freely to anyone, and you can have it published in various key directories. Somebody who wants to send you a private message first encrypts it using your public key. When you receive the message, you decrypt it with your secret private key. Once you and a correspondent are using the same public key encryption software and know each other's public keys, you can communicate with a good degree of privacy. If you do so via one of the anon servers, not only is your mail reasonably safe from casual eavesdroppers, the two of you can remain unknown by real name to each other. You can obtain one of the public key encryption software programs, PGP (Pretty Good Privacy), by ftp from soda.berkeley.edu or src.doc.ic.ac.uk. The public nature of the Internet that sometimes makes privacy a concern also makes the Internet a resource that can be used to disseminate good information to many people worldwide. The past 8-12 years has made much of the public information regarding psychedelics more difficult to locate, as well as hard to verify. The Internet is serving as a primary information source for many people, especially of college age. Unlike other news and information sources, this one depends on its open nature and participation of people who can provide reliable information. Net users who have new or better information on these topics can do a great favor by making the effort to post this information for the rest of us. •

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