

Psychedelic Education and Social Media

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THE LATE COMEDIAN **BILL HICKS** once said, “Wouldn’t you like to see a positive LSD story on the news? To base your decision on information rather than scare tactics and superstition?” Today, media coverage of psychedelics has become increasingly positive, focusing more on scientific information than on propaganda. With the help of the internet and social networks like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, accurate information about the risks and benefits of psychedelics and marijuana has never been more prominent than now.

In the 1990s, Drug Abuse Resistance Education, widely known as DARE, was the primary source of public drug education. Police officers visited elementary schools to lecture children about the purported dangers of drugs, instilling fear in the developing generation. The DARE generation was supposed to grow up in complete fear of drugs. Red ribbons were handed out as a way to signify a “drug-free” life. I remember those ribbons being quickly tossed to the ground, and left hanging on lockers or forgotten on backpacks until a single thread remained.

Erowid (erowid.org) was established in 1995 to provide free, public information about drugs. The Erowid drug database has proven to be an effective entry point for people to reeducate themselves about the risks and benefits of drugs. When Erowid began accepting and publishing written accounts of first-hand experiences with psychedelics and other drugs, a new outlet appeared for people to share their stories and learn from others. Experience reports allowed people to see that they were not

alone in feeling or thinking a certain way during psychedelic experiences.

The maps.org domain name was purchased on July 24, 1994, making MAPS one of the very first non-profit organizations on the World Wide Web. MAPS started to utilize emerging social web sites starting with YouTube in March 2007, followed by Facebook and Twitter in 2009. We use these tools to share research updates, news from major media outlets, articles from smaller sites and blogs, upcoming events around the world; and also to provide a place for people to share their views on psychedelic and medical marijuana research. Major news organizations also often look to social networks for comments from their online followers, giving a powerful voice to anyone with a Facebook or Twitter account.

People use Facebook, Twitter, and similar platforms in order to share what they are passionate about and interested in with friends, family, and groups, and commonly tag their friends to alert them about new and relevant information. This is a way to connect with each other over new knowledge, slowly (and sometimes quickly) increasing public perception about psychedelic research.

In December of 2013, MAPS staff participated in a reddit “Ask Me Anything” session, in which people from around the world submitted questions about psychedelics to our staff. The Q&A thread quickly rose to the front page of reddit, generating over 2,000 questions and 75 replies from the MAPS staff. This was our attempt to take one day to provide honest education



about psychedelics and marijuana to as many people as possible, and it worked. The positive response did not go unnoticed, as we began to receive news coverage about our reddit education efforts.

Our Facebook growth has been accelerating faster and faster since we first joined in July 2009. Weeks with over 1,000 new “Likes” on our Facebook page are not uncommon. In 2013, we added over 100 videos to our YouTube video channel, many of them from our Psychedelic Science 2013 conference. In just the last six months, viewers watched over 16,500 hours of educational content on our YouTube channel.

April 2013 marked the official launch of the MAPS Forums on Bluelight (bluelight.org), the largest online community dedicated to active communication about the risks and benefits of drugs. With over 250,000 members, Bluelight is an open, well-moderated education and harm reduction resource. Other popular online forums including the Shroomery, DMT-Nexus, and Drugs-Forum also host strong communities that share new information about drugs and drug use.

There exists a growing array of online networks and resources for people to receive accurate information and help regarding drugs. TripSit (tripsit.me), an online harm reduction network, features volunteers available at all times to provide live harm reduction via a chat service. “We know of a couple users who would not be alive if not for the hard work of our staff,” explain TripSit co-administrators Eric Hofstiezer (Teknos) and Luke Slater (reality).

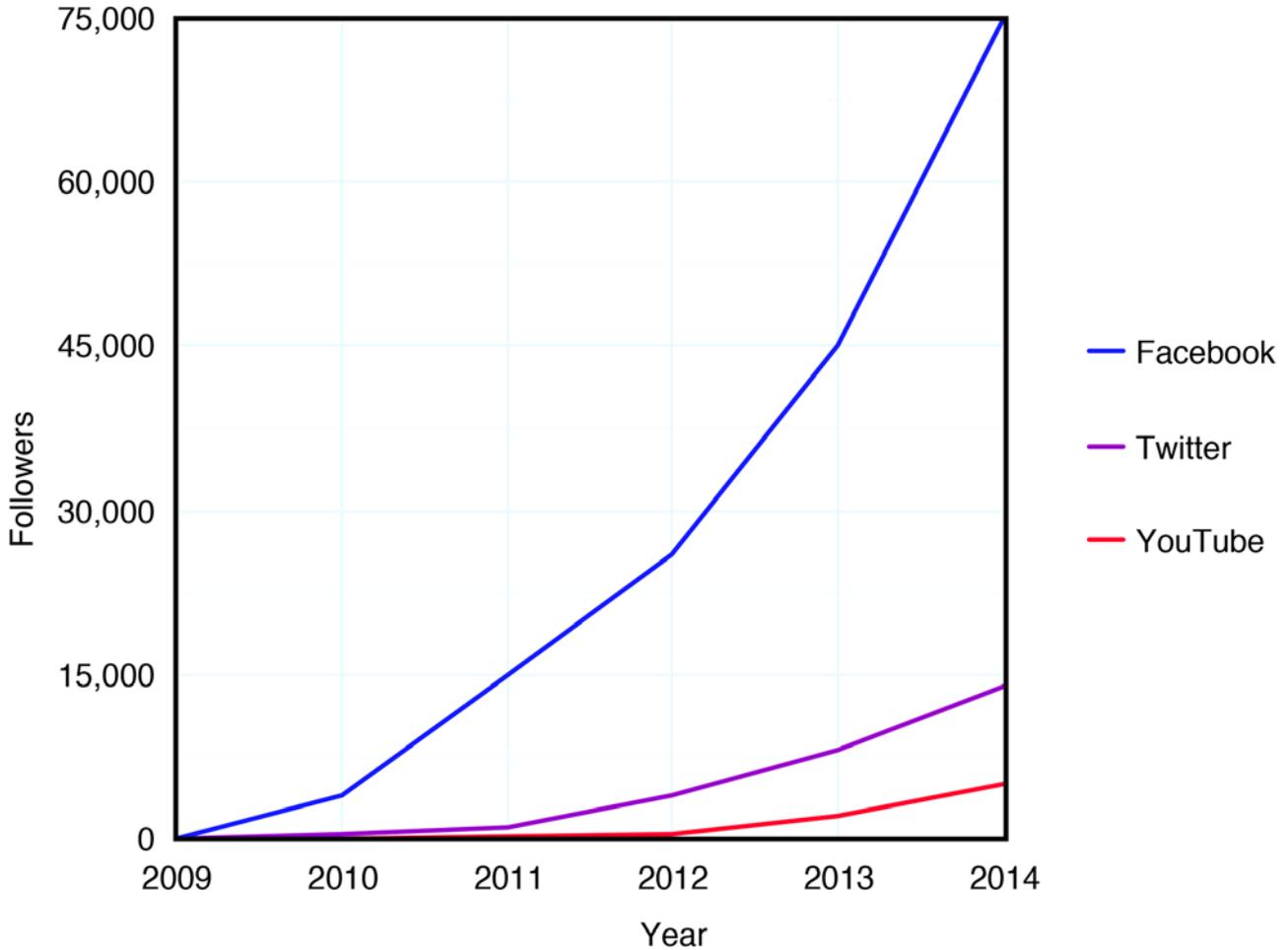
Reddit’s /r/drugs community has over 150,000 subscribers that discuss the risks and benefits of all drugs. News is shared, trends are analyzed, and information is freely disseminated with a focus on accurate sources. The reddit community prides itself on its inclusionary practices. “Nobody is excluded,” explains Borax, an /r/drugs moderator. “Anyone can comment, and any drug can be discussed.”

Social media has also given us new ways to raise funds for psychedelic and medical marijuana research. Crowdfunding sites like Indiegogo and emerging cryptocurrencies such as bitcoin allow supporters innovative ways to contribute to our research and education programs.

MAPS launched our first Indiegogo campaign to raise funds to bring our Zendo Project harm reduction services to Burning Man in 2013. We created a video, rewards, and a compelling campaign before launching to the public. Our initial goal was \$10,000, which we met in just 11 days. This initial momentum carried us through three Stretch Goals, enabling us to purchase a network of two-way radios, provide CPR/First Aid certification to volunteers, and install a solar-powered cooling system. Over the course of our 30-day campaign, our supporters contributed a total of \$17,786, far exceeding our expectations. Building excitement through social media and making projects like the Zendo possible is literally thrilling.

Encouraged by the success of the Zendo Project Indiegogo campaign, on November 11, 2013 (Veterans Day), we launched our second campaign, this time to help complete our ongoing

MAPS Social Media Growth



study of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy to treat posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in veterans, firefighters, and police officers. After our 50-day campaign, we had raised over \$44,000 including direct contributions on Indiegogo, a \$10,000 matching donation, and bitcoin contributions worth over \$5,000.

Bitcoins (BTC) are a new type of digital currency that people send and receive instantly over the internet, then exchange to local currency. MAPS began accepting BTC donations at a serendipitous time (maps.org/bitcoins). The day before our reddit “Ask Me Anything” session, we received our first bitcoin donation from an eager donor. In the midst of the AMA, we began receiving additional questions about BTC donations, so we created a bitcoin page and notified the reddit community. Since we began accepting BTC on December 3, 2013, over 65 donors have donated more than 41.12253776 BTC, which we immediately exchanged for \$30,220.77 USD. On January 10, an anonymous supporter offered to match the next 10 BTC donated to MAPS; within a week 22 donors responded and met the entire match. “As the Internet gave psychedelics a voice, Bitcoins gave the Internet a wallet,” says Brian Brown of MAPS.

As websites and services rise and fall, it is important that honest, fact-based educational content about psychedelics and marijuana remains freely open and available. This is why MAPS will continue to expand our educational resources to as many new platforms as possible, and to experiment with new forms of online education. If you proudly support MAPS and want to help accelerate change, use your favorite social network to educate others and help prove how powerful the voice of a movement can be. 🌐

***Bryce Montgomery** is a Web and Multimedia Associate at MAPS. He studied film production at West Valley College, where he also developed an interest in marketing. Bryce joined MAPS as a Social Media Intern in the summer of 2011, bringing his background in film production and social media to public education about psychedelics. His work at MAPS combines all of his passions; ranging from using the internet to reach people worldwide to creating visually stimulating media projects. He can be reached at bryce@maps.org.*