

MDMA, the Oreo Cookie, and the Path to Cultural Acceptance

This special issue of the *MAPS Bulletin*, with guest editor David Jay Brown, is about the myriad ways that psychedelic experiences have been incorporated into popular media such as movies, television, the arts, and music. We're highlighting how psychedelics are becoming more integrated into mainstream culture to show how a core part of MAPS' mission—to obtain government approval for the legal medical uses of psychedelics and marijuana by prescription—is becoming less controversial over time.

From the desk of Rick Doblin, Ph.D.

Part of this shift is due to our expanding and increasingly successful efforts to educate medical professionals, media, and the public at large about the long-recognized healing power of psychedelics and marijuana. Another reason has to do with the impressive results that we are now getting from our meticulously designed clinical studies. Next time you see psychedelics represented in a clear and honest light on television or in the theater, it's probably in part because of the quarter century of research and education that MAPS supporters have made possible.

2012 is the 100th anniversary of the creation of MDMA. MDMA was first synthesized in 1912 by Dr. Anton Köllisch of the Merck Pharmaceutical Company, though the exact date is unknown and not mentioned in any existing Merck documents. We do know that the company submitted a patent application for the drug (as an intermediary chemical for the development of a blood-clotting medication) on December 24, 1912, and received the patent in 1914. As it turns out, Merck chemists were completely unaware of MDMA's psychoactive properties. The first published study of MDMA in humans, by Alexander Shulgin and David Nichols, did not appear until 1978, more than six decades later.

For the sake of comparison, it helps to look at another famous creation born in 1912. According to Nabisco records, the first Oreo cookie was manufactured at the Chelsea Market Bakery in Manhattan on March 6, 1912. Today, there are about 25 billion Oreos eaten every year (about 70 million per day), with about \$1.5 billion in annual revenue.

While we've come a long way with the cultural integration of MDMA—from an unrecognized precursor chemical to a promising therapeutic adjunct—we still have a long way to go. According to a variety of different estimates, annual global sales of illicit Ecstasy are well in excess of the \$1.5 billion spent on Oreos. Sales of legal, pure MDMA for scientific research are probably not more than

\$50,000, if that. Sales of MDMA by prescription currently amount to exactly \$0, a number that—if our drug development research succeeds—will start to grow in about 8-10 years.

Two recent examples of positive media about psychedelic research from unexpected sources suggest that MDMA and other psychedelics may one day be as culturally accepted as Oreos. On March 14, 2012, the U.S. federal government's international multimedia broadcast service Voice of America posted a strongly favorable 5½-minute radio story about the renaissance in psychedelic research, focusing in part on MAPS' MDMA-assisted psychotherapy for PTSD research (www.maps.org/voamarch2012). Depending on local interest, this report may be translated in up to 43 languages. When Voice of America, the official international broadcast agency for the U.S. government, speaks positively about psychedelic research, there's a shift underway!

On March 12, 2012, the Partnership for a Drug Free America reported positively on a meta-analysis of pioneering LSD research in alcoholics from the 1960s that was just published in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology*. The meta-analysis revealed that that LSD-assisted psychotherapy could indeed help some people overcome alcoholism with overall benefits lasting up to six months after a single session. The positive findings in the paper were reported all over the world and have created additional public support for the expansion of psychedelic research. Meanwhile, Dr. Peter Gasser, the Principal Investigator of MAPS' Swiss study of LSD-assisted psychotherapy for end-of-life anxiety, is working with his MAPS and his Swiss co-authors on a paper reporting the promising results of his study, which we anticipate will be submitted to a journal for review in the next two to three months.

The phenomenal strides that MAPS is making are the result of the work of MAPS staff and researchers, empowered by the generosity of MAPS members. With the continuation and expansion of our partnerships into MAPS' 26th year, we'll see ever more positive examples of the beneficial uses of psychedelics and marijuana in movies, television, the arts, music, and—most centrally for MAPS' mission—in science and medicine.



Rick Doblin, Ph.D.
MAPS Founder and Executive Director

Psychedelically yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'R. Doblin'.

Rick Doblin, Ph.D.

MAPS Founder and Executive Director