New psychoactive substances and British drug policy: A view from the cyber-psychonauts

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To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.3109/09687637.2014.989959

Published online: 09 Dec 2014.
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Abstract

Aims: (i) To collect data on the consumption patterns, purchase patterns and motivations of the online NPS community, and (ii) engage this specific group of NPS users in an exploration of recent policy developments in the UK focusing on their experiences of new legislative controls and the perceived harms they may cause, and eliciting their suggestions for future policy developments in this area. Methods: We employed an exploratory online methodology comprising a survey and participatory online research designed to interact and engage with experienced users of NPS. Findings: The findings of our small-scale exploratory study illustrate that what we term the cyber-psychonauts are well equipped to make a valuable contribution to NPS policy debates in general, and are ideally placed to report on the effects of recent policy changes on NPS-related harms in particular. The majority of NPS users in our study supported the introduction of a regulated market for NPS, which would not criminalise users and which would focus on the reduction of NPS-related harm. Conclusions: We argue that the cyber-psychonauts are well placed to contribute to NPS-related drug policy debates and, furthermore, that there may be a role for them in disseminating emerging information about NPS-related harm.

Keywords

Harm reduction, NPS, policy, users-view, youth and drugs

Introduction

In the last decade, new psychoactive substances (NPS) have been attracting the attention of drug policy makers around the globe and have been conceptualised as the next major challenge facing those who work in the field of licit and illicit drugs (EMCDDA & Europol, 2012; European Commission, 2011; International Narcotics Control Board [INCB], 2011; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2013). Emerging research depicts NPS markets as significantly different from existing drug markets (Birdwell, Chapman, & Singleton, 2011; Coulsdon & Caulkins, 2011; Hughes & Winstock, 2011; Seddon, 2014), for example, describes three novel features of NPS markets – the speed with which substances emerge, the role that the internet plays in their marketing and distribution and their transnational nature. Despite relatively low prevalence rates in many countries, governments around the world have nevertheless striven to adapt existing systems of drug control to this new phenomenon.

Some innovative policy responses have been suggested: for example, experimentation with the use of medicines/foodstuff regulations that do not criminalise the users of NPS (EMCDDA, 2012; Reuter, 2011), and New Zealand, viewing prohibition as a last resort (Birdwell et al., 2011), is attempting to create a regulated NPS market where only products tested and confirmed to be of “low risk” of harm are licensed and sold (Wilkins, 2014). The majority of governments, however, are attempting to stem the tide of emerging NPS by extending and adapting existing legislative and control oriented powers. In the UK, the Coalition government has utilised existing generic legislation to bring clusters of similar substances under control. Temporary controls have also been introduced in many countries: for example, the Temporary Class Drug Order (TCDO) in the UK, which allows the government to immediately bring a substance under control for a period of approximately 12 months, during which time supply but not possession is illegal, and data can be collected to determine whether or not it warrants being brought under permanent control. Stevens & Measham (2014) have described the process of generic and temporary controls as part of the UK “drug policy ratchet”, whereby sanctions are progressively increased and NPS are classified as illegal drugs on precautionary grounds.

There remains, however, a lack of relevant social research to draw upon when seeking to implement NPS-related policies (Measham, 2013). Only a handful of studies have moved beyond prevalence to explore user experiences and motivations (McElrath & O’Neill, 2011; Measham, Moore, & Østergaard, 2011a; Perrone, Helgeson, & Fischer, 2013; van Hout & Brennan, 2011). These studies and others that have been more specifically focused on policy responses to NPS (Birdwell et al., 2011; Stevens & Measham, 2014), have highlighted the significant limitations of, and problems with a predominantly control oriented response to emerging NPS markets.

Research studies have consistently shown that the legal status of a drug does not impact significantly on the levels of
use, with several key studies showing continued use and popularity of mephedrone amongst specific drug using populations after it was brought under control (Measham, Moore, Newcombe, & Welch, 2010; Measham et al., 2011a; Measham, Wood, Dargan, & Moore, 2011b; Wood, Measham, & Dargan, 2012). Such legislative controls can potentially criminalise users or bring them in contact with criminal markets for the first time (Stevens & Measham, 2014), as well as hinder legitimate research into emerging substances (Birdwell et al., 2011; Stevens & Measham, 2014). They can also result in a decrease in purity of substances available (Measham et al., 2011a; Miserez, Ayrton, & Ramsey, 2014), an increase in price (Wood et al., 2012), increased speed of innovation by manufacturers to bypass controls, and the users of recently criminalised NPS may turn to newer substances which may well be more dangerous (Hammersley, 2010).

The research described above, however, does not attempt to engage the users of NPS themselves in a detailed evaluation and assessment of policy responses to NPS. This is perhaps unsurprising as drug users are a highly stigmatised group (Corrigan, Kuwabara, & O'Shaughnessy, 2009; Lloyd, 2010; Peretti-Watel, 2003; United Kingdom Drug Policy Commission, 2010) not frequently called upon to enter policy debates (Jürgens, 2008; Lancaster, Sutherland, & Ritter, 2014; Latkin & Friedman, 2012). Furthermore, in at least one piece of research (Measham et al., 2011a, p. 140), NPS users have self-identified as being "not only unclear about, but also apparently unconcerned about, the specific chemical identity of the stimulant white powders they consumed", an identification that some might argue precludes their sensible contribution to drug policy debates. Yet, despite these perceptions, previous research has successfully engaged (often injecting/dependent) drug users in policy evaluation (Darke & Torok, 2013; Lancaster, Ritter, & Stafford, 2013; Lancaster et al., 2014; Morgan, Naranha, Muetzelfeldt, Fielding, & Curran, 2013). This body of research generally emphasises the important role contributions from users can play in enriching drug policy discussions in general and recommends that we "should not shy away from the challenges involved in seeking and integrating the opinions of this community". Furthermore, Lenton (2004) lists the involvement of drug users themselves in drug policy formulation as essential criteria for the success of drug policy reform and suggests that strategies implemented in the control of drugs should seek the input of drug users to reduce drug-related harm (Lenton, Boys, & Norcross, 1997).

Following this example, it might be presumed that if a more discerning group of NPS users than identified in Measham et al.'s (2011a) study could be accessed, they might have an equally valuable contribution to make to the development of policy responses to emerging NPS markets – particularly in terms of understanding unintended consequences and assessing the harms caused by increased legislative control. Tackett-Gibson (2007, 2008) documents the existence of online communities populated by self-defined experts in drug use that provide a contrasting narrative around drug use and risk to that provided by the scientific establishment. A brief perusal of relevant websites confirms the existence of a great number of NPS-related discussion threads, suggesting the existence of an online community of more discerning NPS users.

Aims of current study

It is the intention of the exploratory research described here to attempt to tap into this online community of potentially more experienced, and arguably more discerning, NPS users. We employed Internet methodologies to: (i) collect data on the consumption patterns, purchase patterns and motivations of the online NPS community, and (ii) engage this specific group in an interactive online-evaluation of recent policy developments in the UK, focusing on their experiences of new legislative controls and the perceived harms they may cause, and eliciting their suggestions for future policy developments in this area.

Methods

Using a mixed methods approach, we combined an online-survey with participatory online research carried out during July and August 2013. An online survey was created using SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com) and was advertised on seven drug-related websites, four of which were entirely related to NPS. These four NPS sites all hosted discussion forums devoted primarily to information sharing about NPS. The survey was also advertised on social media sites including on dedicated NPS Facebook groups and fan pages, and via Twitter.

We used the websites’ discussion forums to begin a thread outlining the purpose of the study and providing a link to the survey. We emphasised that we were interested in hearing from active NPS users living in the UK, aged 16+ years. The survey consisted of a brief project summary page that included a consent form, information about how they could access the project findings and reassurances about participants’ anonymity.

The survey consisted of 15 questions, including opinion scales and a mixture of closed and open-ended questions. We asked our participants to give us basic demographic information, to tell us about their NPS purchasing practises and legal and illegal drug taking behaviours and to describe the social contexts in which they preferred to take NPS. We included an open-ended question inviting participants to offer their views about current NPS policy and their recommendations for the future direction of NPS policy in the UK.

We also engaged NPS users in participatory online research (Barratt & Lenton, 2010) consisting of an online-dialogue via a discussion forum hosted by one of the websites used to recruit survey participants. This website is one of the largest UK based sites devoted to the discussion of the effects of NPS and we were given permission to engage with forum users by the website administrators. Our aim was to move beyond the survey tool and towards more meaningful interaction with NPS users about NPS policy. Over a 6-day period NPS users were invited to comment on five NPS policy-related themes: (i) the effectiveness of TCDOs, (ii) the consequences of introducing an analogue approach, (iii) reducing NPS-related harm amongst younger, less-experienced NPS users, (iv) the pros and cons of current labelling of

1We informed users that the data collected for the project would be used for academic purposes and that names/handles and website names would not be disclosed.
A total of 183 participants participated in our survey but only 93 participants completed the entire survey including the final qualitative questions. A total of nine participants took part in the participatory online research exercise.

NPS as “not for human consumption” and (v) ideas about licensing and regulating NPS. Whenever a new theme, or thread, was introduced a summary of the previous theme was included and participants were encouraged to verify and add further comments on the previous theme. Participants were invited to comment on the themes in as much detail as they wanted. In total, nine NPS users actively participated in this exercise.

Internet-based research methods such as those described above are by now a relatively well-established method for researching hidden populations like drug users (Barratt, 2011; Miller & Sønderlund, 2010; Miller, Johnston, McIewee, & Noble, 2007; Potter & Chatwin, 2011). In an exploratory study like ours, where we were trying to recruit and engage with a group of NPS users that were active in online forums, they were deemed essential. Sampling problems do remain: Internet research participants are a non-random and self-selecting sample (Andrews, Nonnecke, & Preece, 2003) and, furthermore, we do not know the characteristics of the overall pool from which the sample was drawn. While these factors also remain issues for more traditional methodologies, it must be borne in mind that our findings are specific to the online NPS community and are not generalisable to the wider population of NPS users.

Findings

Sample: The “cyber-psychonauts”? 

Our sample was made up of 183 participants, the majority were aged 16–29 years; 76% were men, 24% women. This gender disparity is probably related to the fact that it is still more likely for men to be regular users of illegal substances than women (Smith & Flately, 2011), and it is also more likely for men to engage in Internet-based research (Coomber, 1997; Miller & Sønderlund, 2010). Based on the results of our exploratory study, we coined the term “cyber-psychonauts” to refer to our sample – a post-mephedrone, predominantly NPS-using version of the traditional psychonaut, described by Newcombe (1999, p.18) as adult users of psychoactive drugs who take these substances in “normal, everyday settings” with the intention of subjectively exploring their effects. Our cyber-psychonauts share the same motivation but tend to be younger and have a shorter back-story of psychoactive substance use. Our participants reported that they use NPS in a range of different social spaces, including within the context of the night-time economy. However, the most common site for NPS use was within the domestic context where users reported regularly experimenting with chemicals at home alone. Like their predecessors, the cyber-psychonauts are motivated by a desire to explore drug effects, to document and share drug experiences with like-minded individuals. However, the cyber-psychonauts do this primarily online. Our sample were IT “savvy” and enjoyed internet trawling with the purpose of accumulating information about chemicals and sharing drug journeys and knowledge with other members of the online NPS community. As we highlight below, the cyber-psychonauts are further defined by their commitment to harm reduction, to using NPS safely and responsibly and to purchasing chemicals online.

Our participants had experiences of consuming well over 100 different substances between them. Rates of NPS use were very high compared with other groups of prolific drug users such as clubbers (Wood et al., 2012), with 32% of participants reporting use of an NPS in the past week. The majority were well informed about the substances they had taken, with several providing us with detailed information about lifetime use and listing over 20 different specific substances:


Survey user 63

In sharp contrast to the NPS users described in previous studies (Measham et al., 2011a), the majority of participants in our study did not identify themselves as undiscerning consumers of unknown white powders and pills. In contrast, the majority defined themselves as responsible and knowledgeable users of NPS and presented themselves as using forums extensively for the purpose of researching purity, safe dosage and potential health risks: “the Internet is a great resource for information on dosage and safety precautions” (Survey User 4). The following extract is a useful illustration of the profile of the cyber-psychonaut:

I’m well read, discerning and concerned about harm reduction. . . . I do my own research before purchasing any “research chemicals” to get an idea of what to look for regarding the effects I am after and any potential problems/side effects related to use. I have learned that there’s a lot of stuff out there I wouldn’t touch with a bargepole . . . (Survey user 40)

Many of our participants documented their NPS experiences and journeys online with the purpose of informing their peers about potential harms: “I’ll always let users know exactly what they are in for, what the substance is, does, and feels like. Not everyone is like this though, and this is dangerous” (Forum participant 8).

We asked our participants to tell us about their purchasing practices by asking them to select from a list of five options which methods they had ever used. Given that our sample were recruited from the online NPS community, it is not surprising that purchasing from online NPS retailers was the most common mode of transaction (69%), followed by purchasing from friends (46%) and headshops/smartsops (42%). Only 24% reported that they had purchased NPS from
street/club dealers. We also asked our participants to select their preferred method of purchase, this time restricting them to one choice, and found that buying from online NPS retailers was most popular (51%), followed by purchasing from friends (21%). The minority (14%) preferred to buy their NPS from headshops/smartshops or from street/club dealers (2%). These findings reflect the importance placed on purity and availability when it came to selection of NPS. The NPS users in our study reported that they were more trusting of online vendors and valued the information and product feedback provided by NPS users on forums. They also preferred purchasing online because transactions tended to be quick and easy, often with next-day delivery.

Critiques of current NPS policy: impacts on drug harms

The cyber-psychoauts were critical of prohibition policies. For the vast majority, demand and availability of NPS was explained as a consequence of the criminalisation of existing illegal drugs, such as cannabis, cocaine and ecstasy. According to our participants, drug prohibition has simply created periodic slumps in purity and difficulties in access, which has had a knock-on effect in terms of demand for NPS. These trends are important because, as we have detailed above, purity and ease of access were identified as the most important criteria when it came to drug purchasing decisions of the cyber-psychoauts. Many told us that they preferred the effects of existing illegal drugs but that the proliferation of online vendors had made purchasing NPS much easier, and had provided greater assurances regarding purity. Thus, our participants corroborate the findings of earlier work (Measham et al., 2010), that prohibition has simply created new and arguably more profitable markets to emerge, and opened up new possibilities for those seeking to experience altered states of intoxication. According to many of our participants, prohibition has simply paved the way for the proliferation of NPS and with it, much greater harms for drug users:

NPS drugs are a lot more dangerous [than existing illegal drugs] in my opinion because people don’t really know what kind of effect the drug is meant to have on them...I had a friend do methoxetamine which is meant to be like ketamine but legal from china, he was in a 9hr ‘k hole’...something that could never ironically come from ketamine, and he only took 0.1 g.
(Survey user 18)

Our participants were forthright in their views about emergency legislation in the form of Temporary Class Drug Orders (TCDOs) and were highly critical of this policy tool.

Those behind the implementation of TCDOs are playing nothing more than whack-a-mole. As currently available NPS are removed from availability, more substances which will be even less understood and with the potential for greater/real harms move into the vacuum. (Survey user 93)

While this criticism could be applied to drug control policies more generally, and TCDOs could be viewed as preferable because they do not criminalise users, many of our participants perceived TCDOs as a quick-fix way of banning substances, prompted by media driven anxieties about the NPS issue:

TCDOs provide an illusion of scientific assessment and rational consideration of the harms of NPS. But predominately they allow the government to react to recent media moral panics.
(Forum participant 3)

Another respondent suggested that, chemicals get banned when they become popular rather [than] when proved unsafe resulting in us trying larger numbers of chemicals (Survey user 19). Our participants commented at length about the consequences of TCDOs on their abilities to employ harm reduction strategies and argued strongly that TCDOs lead to more risky behaviours:

With APB/MAPB being placed on a TCDO, then 5-EAPB becoming available I was in bed for 2 days unable to do anything but watch Netflix with pains in what I suspect is my liver, and my chest. If I had taken 5-MAPB like I used to, I’d be completely fine. (Forum participant 2)

A key concern expressed by our sample, and emphasised in the extract above, was that TCDOs paved the way for the production of tweaked but similar chemicals, which according to one user, frequently turn out to have more health risks than the product just banned (Survey user 40). Replacement chemicals are released quickly, and frequently enter the NPS marketplace with little or no health and safety information.

The consequence of this is that: ‘the responsibility is placed entirely in the hands of the users first to obtain information and to discover the negative side effects of these substances’ (Forum participant 4).

TCDOs also caused some users to stockpile NPS ahead of a ban and this was viewed as potentially harmful: ‘hoarding inevitably leads to overuse, which contrasts with the harm reduction goals of a lot of members of the NPS research community’ (Forum participant 5). Some participants provided us with lengthy accounts of how TCDO-related stock piling caused them to engage in harmful and risky behaviours (Measham et al., 2010; Carhart-Harris, King, & Nutt, 2011 on stock piling ahead of the mephedrone ban in 2010). Referring to the chemical compound 5/6 APB one of our participants explained that:

People bought ridiculous amounts, 25 grams, 50 grams, even more, because they knew it was not going to be

3 Although it should be noted that TCDOs have been applied very rarely and to drugs that have not really featured in the mainstream press.
available and with that, harm reduction went out [of] the window. (Forum participant 2)

Switching to the riskier strategy of purchasing their NPS of choice from street dealers was another consequence of TCDOs reported by a few of our participants;

I used to use Methoxetamine every now and again, after the ban I attempted to obtain MXE on the black market, eventually finding a source which seemed to be much lower purity than what I had been receiving pre-ban from an online vendor. This could have been cut with anything ... (Survey user 3)

In general, the current strategy for dealing with NPS in the UK was viewed by the cyber-psychonauts as ineffective and counterproductive. The critical issue for our participants was that policy tools such as the TCDO have impeded their abilities to employ harm reduction strategies and have led to more risky practices, especially amongst less discerning NPS users. In the next section, we describe how our NPS users have adapted to these conditions and are attempting to employ harm reduction measures regardless. The primary method of achieving this is via their participation in the online NPS community.

DIY harm reduction

According to our participants, the NPS market has the potential to provide greater drug purity, more transparency and a less harmful route to altered states of intoxication than that provided by the illegal market. This was sometimes explained as a consequence of the close association of the NPS market with the Internet:

Since the NPS scene cannot be considered outside of the context of the Internet, I would argue that support and information are vastly increased. A lot of the members of the drugs community are increasingly well informed about medical issues, chemistry, botany etc. (Survey user 25)

Online forums represent a vital tool in the pursuit of responsible use of NPS and are used extensively by our participants as a means of acquiring and sharing NPS-related knowledge:

You can research the chemical’s effects and dosages online, compare experiences with particular vendors on user sites and then use your own mg scales to have more control over what you’re ingesting. (Survey user 61)

For some, efforts went even further. For example, one of our participants informed us that he used a portable blood pressure kit and one user described frequently titrating doses and using allergy tests to avoid accidental overdose (Survey user 66).

Our participants interacted with fellow NPS users online to post warnings based on first-hand experiences about potential harms associated with health-related side effects. They regularly posted recommendations about safe methods of drug administration, about mixing chemicals and advice relating to safe doses.

Tackling NPS: a view from the cyber-psychonauts.

Contrary to popular belief, a lot of NPS, or even illegal drug users, do care about our own safety and harm reduction, and we worry about the safety of those who may be ill-informed. With greater transparency, perhaps the number of ill-informed users can be reduced. (Survey user 20)

Our sample of NPS users were dissatisfied with the current responses to NPS, largely because of the many perceived harms caused to themselves as users. While some suggested that there was still a place for legislation that aimed to bring substances under control in the cases of genuinely harmful substances, there was a general desire to see a move away from attempts to bring ever increasing numbers of NPS under control and instead see the acceptance of safe chemicals (Survey user 65). About 89% of our survey participants agreed that relatively safe substances should be allowed to be traded as part of a regulated non-criminal market in NPS: if it is relatively safe then it should be allowed to be sold with restrictions such as that of age (Survey user 10).

In line with policy implemented in New Zealand, 70% of our survey sample wanted to see a form of regulated market in which the onus was on the manufacturers of NPS to prove their safety. Our participants were generally very knowledgeable about current NPS policy developments in New Zealand and many shared the perspective of this respondent;

Perhaps we could go the way of New Zealand and have companies prove that their products aren’t dangerous, before they would be allowed on sale (Survey user 92).

In an effort to directly address the indirect harm caused by prohibitive policies, there was also a desire to see more information available on recommended dosages, likely effects and possible harmful side-effects of individual NPS. One member of our participatory online research exercise specified the role that the internet could play in building these harm reduction strategies into existing NPS policy: regulation of these substances is the way to go, and information in the public domain, much like this forum, but run by a higher authority (Forum participant 8).

Our participants also saw an important role for the vendors of NPS in the overall regulation of the market, and specifically in the provision of publically available information about individual NPS. Under current control oriented legislative practices, there is a tendency for NPS to be marketed as “not fit for human consumption”, thus disallowing vendors the opportunity to provide accurate information about the safe consumption of their products. In the following extract, one of our NPS users provides a useful illustration of the consequences of current NPS labelling on NPS-related harms:

In the current grey market new and inexperienced users buy NPSs marked "not for human consumption", because this wink legally protects both vendor and purchaser. What it does though is remove any possibility of the vendor...
providing information such as recommended dosage, which puts the inexperienced user at enormous risk. For example, recent MDAI/MPA pills on sale were a mix of 50 mg MDAI and 100 g MPA whereas a year ago they were 100 mg MDAI to 50 mg MPA. If a user decided from a quick scan of the web that it was okay to neck two or three of these in a night, that’s a hell of a lot of MPA they’re ingesting from the new press compared to the old. (Forum participant 2)

Overall then, our participants offered a considerable amount of consensus in their recommendations for the future direction of policy responses to emerging NPS markets. They called for a move away from the automatic prohibition of substances in favour of the development of regulated markets, for at least some NPS, that had inbuilt harm reduction strategies (potentially borrowed from models currently operated in internet forums), and which ensured the greater availability of information on individual NPS in the public domain.

Discussion and conclusion

Given the negative light in which drug users, in general, and NPS users in particular, have sometimes been presented, our sample of cyber-psychonauts appear somewhat anomalous. They are knowledgeable about NPS in general, and describe themselves as responsible or controlled in their use of these substances. It is important to acknowledge here that there is motivation for NPS users to present themselves to researchers such as ourselves in this way, to avoid being written off as reckless and foolish. Nevertheless, the qualitative data we have presented in this article attest to the considerable knowledge about NPS and their effects present within the sample. The examples our participants offered of the specific strategies they employ to minimise the risk of use further support their credibility. In many respects, the ‘discovery’ of a distinct group of responsible NPS users should not come as a surprise: the existence of the responsible or rational drug user has long been documented (Decorte, 2001; Parker, Aldridge, & Measham, 1998). Nevertheless, as governments around the globe struggle with the formulation of NPS policy, there is little evidence that they are seeking to benefit from engaging valuable user perspectives in related debates and in the implementation of policy practices.

Our sample of cyber-psychonauts offered important insights into the development of NPS-related policy: primarily that, from their perspective, contemporary drug policy should recognise the importance of harm reduction to NPS users and seek to incorporate harm reduction as a guiding principle. This concern for their own health and plea for the greater value placed on harm reduction in responding to NPS is perhaps to be expected, and has been documented in relation to other drugs (Lenton et al., 1997) but they were also able to offer a detailed and contextualised understanding of the unintended consequences of policy change that can have such an impact on the lives of users themselves.

Above and beyond their ability to become involved in the debates about NPS policy, however, our study demonstrates that cyber-psychonauts themselves could be ideally placed to become involved in the actual implementation of innovative and non-control oriented responses to the increasing prominence of NPS markets. Seddon (2014, p.12), for example, encourages us to “rethink the contents of the drug policy toolbox” and view the existence of online fora, for disseminating information and experiences related to NPS, as a potential asset in dealing with emerging NPS markets: “it is hard to imagine a more efficient method for the rapid dissemination to consumers of new information about things like adverse effects of new products” (Seddon, 2014, p.11). Decorte (2001) has argued that knowledge gained from the sharing of drug-related experiences is an important driver of the development of “controlled” drug use. The cyber-psychonauts then, and the online forums in which they actively participate, could themselves become a valuable resource in the effort to disseminate emerging information about NPS-related harm and to educate potential users on the risks and/or benefits of NPS use.

In recent years, long dominant “war on drugs” drug policies have increasingly come under criticism (Caulkins, Reuter, Iguchi, & Chebea, 2008; Costa, 2008; Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2011; Reinarman, Cohen, & Kal, 2004). During this time, commitment to policies which reduce the harms caused by prohibition has increased (EMCDDA, 2010). The appetite for innovative responses to illegal drug markets has also grown – for example, the decriminalisation of all drugs in Portugal in 2001, the forthcoming legalisation of the cannabis market in Uruguay, the creation of regulated cannabis markets in some states of the US and the introduction of a system to test and license some “low risk” NPS in New Zealand. The advent of rising NPS markets can be conceptualised as providing a potentially brief window of opportunity (Lenton, 2004) to develop policy responses that are not dominated by prohibitory practices and which instead place the reduction of drug-related harm at the centre of policy developments. In the UK and arguably many other countries, however, we appear to be in danger of making the same reactionary, moralistic and non-evidence-based mistakes as previously developed towards existing drug markets. Engaging the cyber-psychonauts in the implementation of NPS-related policy could be one way to avoid this.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful and insightful comments on this paper.

Declaration of interest

Authors’ declare no conflicts of interest to this report.

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