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VISION, KNOWLEDGE, POWER: EROWID.ORG AND THE “TRIP REPORT”

John James Witte
University of Iowa

The invention of LSD in 1938, and its eventual discovery as a psychoactive agent in 1943, spawned decades of debate and experimentation among intellectual dissidents in America and Europe. Despite this proliferation of talk, media scholar, Diana Slattery aptly describes the discursive history of LSD in her essay “Psychadelics: My Problem Discourse,” as a discourse “of the unmentionable by the disreputable about the unspeakable”. These formidable obstacles don’t seem to have stopped anyone from discussing the substance. It’s spawned at least one literary genre: the “trip report”. From Albert Hoffman’s first account of his legendary bicycle ride, to the writings of drug luminaries like Timothy Leary and Aldous Huxley, trip reports have striven to describe the indescribable. They’ve provided guidance to those curious about psychedelia, and they’ve provided a forum for drug users to document their personal revelations. The genre has, in fact, become one of the sturdiest and most common types of writing on the Internet. Whole sections of older communities like WELL and Usenet are dedicated to the posting of trip reports, and the tradition has continued onto newer forums like Reddit and 4chan.

Both LSD and the Internet have rather ignominious beginnings as military technologies. Friedrich Kittler’s injunction that all media is just “the misuse of military technology” forms an enormous part of the narratives around both entities. Yet, I would like to resist the narrative of military invention, here, to show the shared history that both hallucinogens and digital media share in the American counterculture of the 1960’s and 70’s. The geographical and cultural connections between this centralized northern California drug scene and the birth of the American tech industry have been well documented. That San Francisco simultaneously spawned Silicon Valley and, until 2003 produced 95% of the nation’s LSD is more than mere coincidence. Fredrich Turner’s 2006 history of the Bay Area underground, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, tracks the techno-utopianist and former “Merry Prankster”, Stewart Brand, and the foundation of his *Whole Earth Catalogue*. The catalogue was inspired by NASA’s 1966 release of history’s first photo of Earth from outer space, which Brand hoped would inspire a sense of unity and cybernetic connection among humanity as a whole. It would go on to form an important cultural role in the birth of popular computing.

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It's from this discursive context that the website Erowid.org emerged. Referred to as "the Wikipedia of drugs", Erowid stepped in to the role of the *medical expert* by providing reliable medical and legal advice to those interested in mind-altering substances. Although the website is clearly oriented primarily toward hallucinogens, it includes sections on wide variety of "psychoactives", broadly defined. This means there are entries on "legal highs" like kratom, datura, and nutmeg, as well as unexpected entries on coffee, alcohol, lucid dreaming, meditation, honey, and even an account of a black widow spider bite. There's a clear argumentative edge to the inclusion of these entries: demystifying the complicated relationship between perception and the processes that might alter that perception. In the legal context created by the discursive history of mind altering substances, this means troubling the definition of a "drug".

The site's founders have claimed that they see their role primarily as librarians, although their role in managing the medical information appears to be more active than that title would suggest. They've arranged toxicology reports for many substances themselves, as well as organizing pre-existing information, making them more agential in their curatorial duties. Most of this work is invisible to users of the website, though, with the "vaults" appearing as a unified collection of documents. Many of these vaults include articles, media clippings, and, of course, trip reports.

So, why include trip reports on this website? During the 1966 Senate hearing, Dr. Stanley Yolles spoke of the need for LSD-related education, but claims that the possibility of widespread education is precluded because the dangers associated with LSD are too "esoteric". Trip reports are an attempt at creating that esoteric education. In many ways, trip reports are an unusual epistemological situation. These aren't "real" experiences, they're internal states. But they're internal states that come from a common catalyst for those involved: one isn't simply looking out the same window at the same time as one's compatriot; the similarities are both internal and biological. So, how much do psychonauts have in common with one another? Is it possible to communicate the hallucinogenic experience? J.L Austin tells us that knowledge arises from a combination of acumen and opportunity, or the exercise of our judgment in "propitious" circumstances. Knowledge, in other words, is contingent but not non-existent. So what can we "know" when we're in altered states? When we're neither in a propitious situation, nor in full control of our ordinary judgment, can we still know anything? And more importantly, can we communicate that knowledge?

The kind of expertise in which Erowid traffics is knowledge of the interior. Trip reports are linguistic acts meant to delineate experiential data, and are therefore a function of Austinean judgment. It's in the trip reports where the ultimate politics of the site are determined. While it may be tempting to see Erowid as a defacto anti-authoritarian project, given its discursive context, its politics are perhaps harder to parse. In his lectures at the College de France, Michel Foucault describes the ubiquity of hashish and opium among psychiatrists after the 1840's. For him, this drug use served two authoritarian purposes: one was Austinean, in that it allowed psychiatrists to determine sincere madness from its simulation. The other was transcendental. "The psychiatrist will be able to say: I know the law of your madness, I recognize it precisely because I can reconstitute it in myself" (Foucault 213). Trip reports, then, can play a potentially authoritarian role, as what Foucault calls "pastoral power".

The Erowid archive represents an underanalyzed area of media research for a number of reasons. While participation is a given in most theories of new media, many authors seem to have returned to a one step media flow when the effectiveness of the Internet's organizational properties is under discussion. Rather than assuming a passive audience of media consumers, we should be looking at technological and rhetorical circuits that constitute the interior world as well, the discursive exterior. Through a close reading of this singular genre of new media cultural production, and, specifically, the archive accessible through erowid.org, I hope to theorize some of the peculiarities of writing on the Internet, writ large.

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