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ANTHONY KILLICK
The British University in Egypt

LEE SALTER
Independent Researcher and Filmmaker

Breaking the link: Film pedagogy and drug policy in the United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Fifty-one years ago the UK government passed the Misuse of Drugs Act, establishing the three-tier drugs classification system that remains largely unchanged to this day. Since that time, representations of drugs and drug users in the media have fuelled (if not entirely fabricated) moral panics to which political actors are happy to respond, rather than engaging with more evidence-based yet publicly controversial solutions. The result is a link between drug policy and media representation that is characterized by 'moral panic' public outrage and knee-jerk government responses that are resistant to scientific evidence and the testimony of drug users. This article focuses on the ways in which some filmmakers have developed practices that aim to undermine the dominant hegemonic representation of drugs and drug users through airing discourses that are grounded in harm reduction, rather than criminality. We highlight the ways in which harm reduction discourses can be represented to verify and justify normalized policy positions centred on crime and punishment, or can be promoted through a selection of pedagogical filmmaking strategies that facilitate the testimony of drug users. We argue that certain filmmaking strategies confer possibilities for breaking the link between harmful drugs policy and simplified media representations of drugs and drug users.

KEYWORDS

film
pedagogy
drugs policy
representation
criminality
harm reduction

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INTRODUCTION

Fifty-one years ago the UK government passed the Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA) (1971), establishing the three-tier drugs classification system that remains largely unchanged to this day. Civil servants, medical practitioners and scholars working across multiple disciplines criticize 'The Act', with many arguing that its focus on punitive measures and moral arguments are detrimental to the goal of reducing public harm (Rolles 2010; Wodak 2014; Morrison 2015; Nutt 2020). Concurrently, representations of drugs and drug users in the media have fuelled (if not entirely fabricated) moral panics to which political actors are happy to respond, rather than engaging with more evidence-based yet publicly controversial solutions (UK Drug Policy Commission 2012). As David Nutt notes 'in both the US and the UK drugs have always been useful political tools to give the voters an impression that the government is making their lives safer whereas in fact it is doing exactly the opposite' (2020: 325). The Psychoactive Substances Act (2016), which places a blanket ban on all new psychoactive substances, coincides with media depictions of 'spice zombies', particularly harrowing images of homeless and working-class people heavily intoxicated in busy high streets (Alexandrescu 2020). Repeated media use of such spectacularized images brackets out the world as a totality of interacting social, cultural and economic spheres, in particular the effects of austerity policies on working-class people and drug users. This is to continue to frame a public health issue in terms of criminality and personal-individual failure.

The result is a link between drug policy and media representation that is characterized by 'moral panic' (Windle and Murphy 2021) public outrage and knee-jerk governmental responses that are resistant to scientific evidence and the testimony of drug users. Insofar as media representations are echoed in government discourse a link is established that stymies the development of sensible drug policies. As Stuart Taylor argues,

> media coverage and policy direction are disproportionately aimed at specific stereotypes of drug users and drug-using offenders, to the point whereby simplistic notions have developed at the expense of a much wider and more complex discussion to the detriment of a holistic drugs discourse.
>
> (2008: 369)

A good amount of work has been carried out on media representations of drugs and drug users, much of it pointing out the ways in which texts sustain this representation-policy link through simplification and sensationalism (Lloyd 2013; Atkinson et al. 2019). In contrast, this article focuses on the ways in which some filmmakers have developed production practices that undermine the dominant 'medico-penal policy constellation' (Stevens and Zampini 2018) through airing discourses that are grounded in harm reduction, rather than criminality. Broadly speaking, harm reduction is an approach to drugs policy that primarily aims to minimize harm to public health that may be caused by drugs. It does so through pushing measures such as drug testing (e.g. at music festivals) (Measham 2019) and the establishment of drug consumption rooms (Atkinson et al. 2019), both of which have been widely attacked within the media. Harm reduction can be contrasted with the dominant drugs policy position in the United Kingdom,

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which foregrounds prohibition and criminalization, both of which have been shown to actually increase harms to the public (Rolles 2010; Wodak 2014; Morrison 2015).

In the same way that Lee Salter (2020) posits an alternative to 'prison porn' in the context of media representations of prisons, media practitioners should seek to accurately represent social groups, including drug users. This article identifies the ways in which harm reduction discourses:

- Can be represented in ways that verify and justify normalized policy positions centred on crime and punishment.
- Can be promoted through a selection of filmmaking strategies that facilitate the testimony of drug users.
- Confer possibilities for breaking the link between harmful drugs policy and simplified media representations of drugs and drug users.

The framing of harm reduction practices as a set of weak and unsustainable solutions to harm caused by drugs can be seen in the BBC Three short documentary, 'Newcastle: Super Strength Ecstasy' (2016) that was part of the *Drugs Map of Britain* series (2016–17). In this film, drug testing (a policy advocated by many harm reductionists) is framed as well intentioned but unlikely to have a significant positive impact. This occludes the large amount of scientific evidence (Measham 2019; Palmar et al. 2020) and personal testimony (Dancesafe 2022) that state the efficacy of drug testing in reducing harm. Conversely, a film produced by some academics and an independent filmmaker as part of the People and Dancefloors project (Zampini et al. 2021) foregrounds the testimony of drug users in rave spaces, without the use of spectacle (as in the BBC documentary). In this film, drug users are represented as largely happy, stable, functioning people, while normalized drug policy discourse is critiqued, particularly for its stance on one of the most dangerous yet culturally accommodated drugs – alcohol.

One of this article's authors (Salter) was involved in the production of the *People and Dancefloors* film, and one of the aims of this article is to explore the process of documentary filmmaking from this lived experience/participatory perspective. As such, the key findings presented here are about production processes and the ways in which these impact filmic discourse and representation. Alongside this, our analysis of the BBC film considers the form and content of less participatory, mainstream films about drug use. In this way, it provides a backdrop for our analysis of production processes through outlining some significant yet common problems with films about drugs.

Where the BBC film simultaneously presents and dismisses harm reduction through its mode of representation, *People and Dancefloors* presents a harm reduction discourse that is derived from lived experiences that are framed by social positions. In this way, it can be seen as an example of film as a 'radical pedagogical tool' (O'Neill 2018). This type of pedagogical film and media practice could lead to what Mark Monaghan et al. have called an 'opening up' of the policy landscape, bringing 'different types of experientially-derived evidence to the policy process, resulting in improved drug policy through understanding the breadth and depth of experiences, knowledge and beliefs surrounding drug use' (Monaghan et al. 2018: 423). Filmmakers and policy advocates can continue to develop pedagogical practices that advance the representation of harm reduction positions so as to break, or at least undermine, the unhealthy link between media representation of drug users and government policy.

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CREATING 'WAR ON DRUGS' POLICY

The development of UK drugs policy and the media discourses surrounding it needs to be placed within its geopolitical context. For example, it is widely agreed that the MDA (1971) enshrines international treaty obligations set out by the UN's Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961), which sought to limit supply and distribution through forms of international cooperation by its signatories (currently 186 states). Yet the precise nature of the relationship between the UN convention and contemporary prohibitionist policies such as the MDA and Richard Nixon's War on Drugs (also launched in 1971) is misunderstood. As John Collins argues, the single convention did not *in itself* constitute a 'prohibitionist regime', and the War on Drugs 'is far from a direct by-product of UN conventions' (Collins 2016: 9). The War on Drugs was not derived from the single convention, but sought to resituate the convention within a prohibitionist framework, establishing a particular series of objectives and solutions to drug issues, which were coupled with prohibitionist symbolic frameworks, particularly in the US media (Manning 2014).

As a result, there is widespread misunderstanding about the relationship between the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs and prohibitionist incentives and practices that are encompassed within the MDA and the War on Drugs. Indeed, the conventions are often mistakenly interpreted as mandates for prohibition policies and principles. As Collins notes, 'this interpretation usually begins with the current policy framework as the logical outcome of the treaties and thereby reads the history backwards from the current approach. The treaties preceded the war on drugs, and therefore must have mandated it' (Collins 2016: 10).

Prior to the War on Drugs, prohibition was seen as just one (relatively minor) aspect of a broader international drugs regulation and trading system. Conventions were purposefully flexible in their interpretation, since it was understood that implementing them was dependent on highly localized factors such as resource constraints, local economic development and political stability. Nation states' adherence to principles was not, therefore, an absolute obligation to enact counterproductive policies. Instead, a more holistic approach was taken towards drug issues that took into consideration broader public health and welfare concerns, as well as security and developmental issues. The assumption of the convention's architects was, according to Collins 'that a functioning regulatory system would absorb most licit production, lessen the illicit market, and thereby help lessen non-medial and non-scientific consumption' (Collins 2016: 12).

Arguments within the UN for a more militarized approach (later constituted by the War on Drugs), started to form a new consensus. The United States in particular began a process of 'aggressive bilateral diplomacy, funding efforts and ensuring regulatory capture of international bodies such as INCB [International Narcotics Control Board], the UN drug secretariats, and exerting significant political capital at CND [Commission on Narcotic Drugs]' (Collins 2016: 12). The combined effect of US media power and bilateral diplomacy has been to advance prohibitionist regimes to the detriment of other solutions. Prohibition now dominates drug policy discourse in the United States and United Kingdom. Yet a brief examination of the history shows that this is neither a 'natural' occurrence, or the best way to proceed.

For example, more recently in the United Kingdom, scholars such as David Nutt et al. (2007) have argued that the MDA is unfit for purpose, as it is based

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on 'a classification system [that] has evolved in an unsystematic way, from somewhat arbitrary foundations, with seemingly little scientific basis' (Nutt et al. 2007: 1047). There is an increasing trend amongst IGOs to move away from prohibition and the War on Drugs, towards policies around decriminalization. A report by the London School of Economics expert group on the economics of drug policy (2016) argues that we have now entered a new, post-War on Drugs era, and that nation states must move away from these policies so that solutions to drug issues can be recast in-line with the UN's sustainable development goals. This includes the expansion of public health approaches, including harm reduction policies, as well as applying 'the principles of harm reduction to supply-side policies and management of illicit markets' (London School of Economics 2016: 6). To our minds, this entails the development of a new policy constellation that values (rather than maligns) the testimony of drug users.

MEDIA AND DRUGS DISCOURSE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

The political-aesthetic characteristics of mass-mediated drugs messaging have developed in different ways in the United Kingdom and United States (Manning 2014). In the latter, enforcement, prohibition and moral arguments have been the dominant motives underlying representational strategies since the early twentieth century. In the former, however, drugs discourses between 1926 up until the mid-1960s were largely anchored in the 'British system' of medical treatment, which permitted less room for the circulation of discourses centred on moralizing and enforcement. As this regulatory consensus broke down in the United Kingdom, mass-mediated drugs messaging began to emerge. Paul Manning highlights the distinctions between US and UK drugs discourse when he writes that:

> Whereas the film *Human Wreckage* (1923) signals the era of mass-mediated drugs messages in the US, in Britain there appears to be no evidence of a sustained mediated campaign until the beginning of the 1970s, almost fifty years later, and the first central government sponsored film about substance abuse was not produced until 1983.
>
> (2014: 91)

Although the United Kingdom – in-line with commitments to the UN Single Convention – began to develop a tougher control regime via the Dangerous Drugs Act (1967) and later the MDA (1971), government and civil servants were initially reluctant to deploy mass media for the purposes of drugs education, due to worries about its sheer power of influence and unpredictable effects. Unlike in the United States, when UK local authorities finally began producing drugs education material in the 1970s the material created did not reflect moral absolutism, but 'drew more from the "social realist" traditions that were shaping both documentary and drama during the 1960s, and most importantly gave a voice to drug users themselves, rather than exclusively insisting upon an abstinence message' (Manning 2014: 100).

US drug policy and discourse only really began to have significant influence in the United Kingdom during the early 1980s via Margaret Thatcher's support for Ronald Reagan's 'Just Say No' abstinence campaign. Also, the Conservative government's desire to present itself to the public as 'doing something' about drugs went against advice from the government's own Advisory Committee

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on the Misuse of Drugs that they should not initiate a national media publicity campaign against drugs, due to the potential for alienating young people and further increasing mistrust in the government. The material eventually produced was aimed at dissuading young people from trying heroin, and drew heavily on fear arousal, in particular by associating the drug with images of White working-class people as poverty-stricken, physically ugly and socially hopeless drug abusers. The broader Conservative motive of maligning the working class (Hall 1988) at the cultural as well as economic level found a useful vehicle in media anti-drugs campaigns.

As we will show, such motives remain evident in the contemporary drugs education programming of the BBC. 'Newcastle: Super Strength Ecstasy' reflects the renewed status of harm reduction discourse as novel but naïve – interesting but unlikely to have any positive sustainable outcomes. Although drugs education videos have proliferated massively with the advent of social media sites such as YouTube (Manning 2014; Jiménez and Vozmediano 2020), the working class, young people and rave spaces in particular are still represented for the most part as stupid and dangerous, as can be seen in recent media coverage of 'plague raves' (Reicher and Drury 2021).

Yet there are many different ways in which drug discourses overlap, interact and influence each other. In considering how multiple prohibition and harm reduction discourses negotiate, it is helpful to conceptualize drug policy as a system of constellations made up of actors in different social and political fields. This is also a useful tool for examining the deeper relation between media representation and government policy.

DRUG POLICY CONSTELLATIONS

The term was introduced to the field of drug policy studies by Giulia Zampini and Alex Stevens (2018), who draw on Habermas's (1986) theories around the systematic distortion of rational deliberation by dominant interests. Habermas argued that laws are not made objectively, but reflect the morality and principles of powerful people within society. Human actors move strategically in different fields to protect their interests and exert influence over the development of social regulation. 'In these terms a policy constellation is a set of social actors (individuals within organisations) who come together in deploying various forms of socially structured power to pursue the institutionalisation in policy of shared moral preferences and material interests'(Stevens and Zampini 2018: 62). This is not to say that constellations are fixed or permanent groups of people with rigid codes and conventions. Constellations are changeable and porous. Actors within them can align their actions through creating connections of mutual recognition and support (Stevens and Zampini 2018: 62), and these connections amplify the influence of individual members within the constellation. Long-term, durable social inequalities can be maintained by 'insiders' with greater resources and access to the fields of policy-making and development. Through deploying forms of 'political, economic and media power' constellations can assert 'a heavy influence on what kinds of evidence will be produced, disseminated, and given the status of authoritative, legitimate knowledge' (Stevens and Zampini 2018: 62). Stevens and Zampini argue that the 'medico-penal' constellation dominates the formation of drugs policy in England, particularly through support of the MDA by medical and law enforcement institutions, and the ongoing criminalization of people who use drugs.

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> This includes people who are concerned with both individual and public health, such as doctors, psychiatrists and civil servants in the Department of Health. However, the more powerful supporters of criminalisation have come from the institutions that focus on social control; Home Office ministers and civil servants, as well as the police. In contrast, the principal targets of criminalisation have always been people who could be constructed as 'outsiders' to the mainstream of English society.
>
> (Stevens and Zampini 2018: 63)

The link between English drugs policy and media representations of drugs and drug users is a good example of how actors across different fields constitute a particular policy constellation. Although the role of the media is acknowledged in their article, Stevens and Zampini focus less on media actors within the medico-penal constellation. Yet their role is crucial here, since it is the prism through which information is disseminated into the public sphere, and thereby the means of potentially distorting rational deliberation. This is to argue the importance and possible impact of film and filmmaking in influencing policy discussions, in particular through facilitating discourses around decriminalization and harm reduction within dominant policy constellations, as well as the public sphere in general. While there is some degree of 'overlap' between the medico-penal and harm reduction policy constellations, 'the ability to be responsive and to exploit policy windows will depend on an actor's position within a constellation of connections, interests and resources' (Stevens and Zampini 2018: 65). Such connections could potentially be established through the multifarious, pedagogical processes involved with producing and exhibiting films, thereby contributing to the development of a stronger harm reduction constellation, and the interactions between overlapping constellations.

However, it is not the case that interaction between new voices in drug policy debates (as facilitated through the production and exhibition of films) and actors within the dominant medico-penal constellations would *necessarily* lead to significant and long-lasting policy changes. Social, economic and political structures remain largely unchanged, and harm reduction discourses can be distorted to serve dominant interests (as we will see is the case in the BBC documentary). As Zampini and Stevens note 'the deliberative potential of these communicative processes is short circuited through the strategic deployment of socially structured power' (Stevens and Zampini 2018: 66). While the communicative processes referred to here are, broadly speaking, not concerned with the media, but the interaction between two distinct policy constellations, it is useful to consider the role that film might play as a pedagogical tool that is concerned with resisting forms of deliberative distortion.

MODALITIES OF REPRESENTATION, METHODS OF ANALYSIS

As noted above, mass-mediated drugs education in the United Kingdom has taken many forms, at different times adopting social realist aesthetics, fear-arousal techniques and modes of representation that try to 'speak' to young people in particular. The proliferation of 'new' media technologies means that drug users themselves are now able to participate in, and shape, their own discourses around drug use in ways that have not been possible previously. However, whereas both the BBC and People and Dancefloors films allow drug users to speak, the former constricts harm reduction discourses through

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particular framings of drug users, while the latter is made by drug users themselves (Zampini et al. 2021). This allows a less spectacularized and fear-based image of drug users to emerge, as people existing within a totality of social, economic and cultural relations. In this way, the People and Dancefloors project displays an example of how film can be used not only as an example of media 'activism', a term that can easily be co-opted by any kind of issue group or political purpose across the whole spectrum (Killick 2020), but as a 'radical pedagogical tool' (O'Neill 2018), that specifically harnesses a deeper a critical engagement with the structures of neo-liberal society, and is concerned with 'dismantling the ideological construction of the dominant visual and discursive imagery peddled by the liberal elites who dominate the "creative" and media professions' (O'Neill 2018: 33).

O'Neill's explanation of film as a radical pedagogical tool (2018) provides the analytical framework for this article. There are a number of reasons for this. The first is that O'Neill views film as a strategically deployable tool that working-class subjects can use to produce narratives that challenge and subvert dominant representations of the working class. As noted above, the classed positioning of drug users has largely taken place within 'traditional' or 'mainstream' media channels. Drug users themselves might be allowed to 'speak', but this posits the very limited extent to which they have, historically, been involved with the production of their media representation/s. In our analysis we look at the ways in which drug users themselves have attempted to strategically use film as a means of influencing drug policy and discourse, thereby undermining dominant representations.

Secondly, this article questions the extent to which filmic texts on drug use acknowledge social totalities, rather than simply making a spectacle of their subjects. As noted at the beginning of this article, media representations of 'spice zombies' bracket outlived experiences of this totality, choosing instead to focus on the superficial and spectacular. In this way, such images deny the effects of neo-liberalism and, in particular, austerity policies in the United Kingdom. This focus on appearances rather than determinants, as O'Neill puts it 'creates a politically calculated ideological separation between a specular reality and working-class experience, the outcome of which is a constant and consistent misrecognition of the totality of social relations' (O'Neill 2018: 23).

In contrast, using film as a radical pedagogical tool enables a critical examination of the social, economic and ideological structures that underpin media representations. Whereas O'Neill applies this critique to the construction of the working class, we use it to inform our analysis of films about drugs and drug users in particular. Of course, we do not wish to suggest that 'drug users' and 'the working class' are synonymous, despite dominant media representations that suggest just that. Instead, we try to show how some media uncritically rehash this viewpoint, whereas others harness the lived experience of drug users to undermine and problematize hegemonic representational practices.

Our concern with these different modalities of representation entails a method of analysis that, on the one hand, interprets a text in its own right, and on the other, integrates the context of production within textual analysis. As stated above, our aim here is to outline some of the key limitations in films about drugs, before looking at a range of production practices that might serve to alleviate these problems. To that end, the BBC film is analysed largely to reveal its underlying ideological and cultural assumptions, while *People and*

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Dancefloors is analysed mainly for its counter-narrative filmmaking strategies. Whereas the former reveals a dominant hegemonic position, the latter is explained in terms of its process, practice and production, as intended to disrupt and/or problematize this position. As such, we do not wish to present a simple discourse analysis of two films, but an analysis that is, instead, informed by an idea of film praxis (a combination of filmmaking theory and practice) that features in O'Neill's conception of film as a radical pedagogic tool. Engaging in praxis allows filmmakers and audiences to:

> Develop ways of thinking that begin to engage with the contradictory double-bind of acknowledging the total failure of capitalism and the ways in which we are integrated into that system, while, at the same time, leaving it unquestioned. It is through praxis that we are able to combine the way we actively live our lives on a daily basis with the ability to reflect upon why we live them in the way we do.
>
> (O'Neill 2018: 15)

In this sense, it is possible to analyse the ways in which texts engage in praxis or more simply engage in filmmaking practices that uncritically repeat dominant representations of drugs and drug users. For the sake of structure and coherence, our discussion of short films about drugs is situated within three distinct categories:

- use of spectacular images vs. acknowledgment of a social totality
- degree and type of participation in each project by drug users
- the extent to which film praxis has been utilized.

To reiterate our concern with drugs discourse in particular, the purpose here is to identify the ways in which harm reduction strategies:

- can be represented in ways that verify and justify normalized policy positions centred on crime and punishment
- can be promoted through a selection of filmmaking strategies that facilitate the testimony of drug users
- confer possibilities for breaking the deadlock between harmful drugs policy and simplified media representations of drugs and drug users.

THE *DRUGS MAP OF BRITAIN* SERIES: PROBLEMS WITHIN DISCOURSE AND REPRESENTATION

First broadcast in 2016 on BBC Three, the programme comprises nine episodes, each focusing on a different area of the United Kingdom and a particular drug that is causing harm to the public. Episodes cover ecstasy, cannabis, heroin, fentanyl and synthetic cannabis (spice). There are two episodes on the misuse of prescription medication (focusing mostly on Valium) and one episode on blood borne viruses resulting from people injecting drugs. The seventh episode, which focuses on alcohol, is no longer available on BBC iPlayer, but the rest of them are, and were viewed by the authors on this platform.

Aimed primarily at students and younger people, the series can be seen as an effort to capture some of the viewership of new media platforms such as VICE, which has often sought to engage younger viewers through controversial, unusual and politically charged subjects. *Drugs Map of Britain* has

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been given some praise by harm reduction advocacy groups such as Volteface, who describe the show as 'a more constructive documentation [than that produced by Vice] of drug consumption gone awry' (Volteface 2022: n.pag.). Overall, however, the series largely reflects the tendency of existing 'discursive and visual news media representations of substance use [which] predominantly focus on detrimental anti-social, criminal, economic and health-related outcomes' (Ayres and Taylor 2020: 241).

DRUG USERS AS SPECTACLE

Primarily, the series does this through propagating an image of drugs as a specifically working-class problem, and the working class themselves as a spectacle. Throughout each episode viewers are shown footage of working-class suffering, homeless people, hostels, extreme violence, criminality and drug misuse. These are contextualized through footage of council estates, the interiors of working-class homes and the daily lives of working-class people. For example, in episode eight we see two young men dressed in hoodies and tracksuits, who appear to be no more than teenagers, walking around an estate while talking to the camera crew. The scene cuts to both the men lounging on a bridge in a woodland area, with one of them now highly intoxicated and semi-conscious, having ingested a large amount of Pregabalin (a prescription drug used to treat anxiety disorders). As is common throughout the series, the camera treats this as a form of spectacle, with a long close-up on the young man's face while he is semi-conscious.

This filmmaking strategy is taken to an extreme in episode three, which focuses almost entirely on a single adult male who is addicted to Valium. The bulk of the episode shows a working-class male in a messy room in his home, curled up and barely able to speak, having taken a dangerously high amount of pills. At no point, in any episode throughout the series, do we see middle- or upper-class people. A 'drugs map of Britain' is in this way made indistinguishable from a map of working-class Britain (apparently upper-class people do not exist in Britain, or they simply do not have any issues with drug misuse). One wonders how this image may have been altered by including an episode on cocaine (usually a much more expensive drug).

This trend of treating drug users in a superficial and spectacled manner is continued in particular through the particular episode of the series that focuses on ecstasy.

Representations of ecstasy use in the media primarily focus on the deaths of young people. Although MDMA/ecstasy is one of the least dangerous drugs in terms of both individual and social harm (Nutt 2020) persistent media tropes comprise fear, tragedy and the personal irresponsibility of both dealers and consumers. The *Drugs Map of Britain* episode titled 'Newcastle: Super Strength Ecstasy' follows up on these themes, revealing the ways in which harm reduction measures and discourse can be folded into this standardized mode of representation.

PARTICIPATION BY DRUG USERS AND DRUG-AWARE GROUPS

The authors paid particular attention to the episode's treatment of Students for a Sensible Drug Policy (SSDP) a student advocacy organization whose primary aim is to bring about reform to drug policy in the United States and internationally, thereby 'replacing the disastrous War on Drugs with policies rooted in evidence, compassion and human rights' (Students for a Sensible

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Drug Policy 2021: n.pag.). SSDP was founded in 1998, and has chapters on university campuses in the United States, Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

Our focus on this particular aspect of the episode exemplifies our interest in the interaction between different drug policy constellations (in this case the dominant medico-penal constellation and the harm reduction constellation). The interaction between these two discourses is contextualized here by the familiar sounds and images of a documentary about drugs. For example, the episode begins with night-time shots of a busy high street, interior shots of nightclubs and shots of MDMA being handled and consumed. The narrator tells us that 'what started as a club drug has *broken through the darkness* into streets, pubs and *homes* across the UK […] with 57 ecstasy related deaths last year alone, is this the most dangerous time to be taking the drug?' (*Drugs Map of Britain* 2016–17, emphases added). Setting the rhetorical question aside, the wording here frames ecstasy as an imminent threat that exists *in people's homes*, having broken out of its dark origins. Within 60 seconds, we are informed of 57 'ecstasy-related deaths *last year alone*' (*Drugs Map of Britain* 2016–17, emphases added), while the viewer is offered no explanation of the term 'ecstasy-related'. Presenting statistics in this way only serves to facilitate the kinds of knee-jerk, emotionally driven responses that help to maintain the deadlock between government policy and media representation.

Similarly, drug consumption as spectacle is key to eliciting responses of this nature, as well as drawing viewers in and keeping their attention. To this end, the episode shows Mark, a music student, consuming an ecstasy pill while talking to the presenter on camera. Later, we are shown footage of Mark and his friends, visibly high, offering their thoughts on drug consumption and playing around in the street at night. As we have argued above, it is important and necessary for drug users to participate in conversations about drug use. The value of this particular segment in the episode lies in its showing this type of conversation taking place (not to mention the value this discussion may have for the participants themselves). In doing so, the episode pushes a boundary within dominant drugs policy discourse by allowing drug users to speak. Here, however, people are shown taking drugs and visibly intoxicated in the dark streets, a familiar form of representation that draws upon themes of danger and darkness, thereby re-positing a limit on the credibility of the subjects.

This limitation is solidified in the structured social positions between Mark and his friends, and the episode's presenter, who goes on to frame their discussion in standardized moralistic judgements.

> [Piece to camera] I was surprised by just how many students were on it, on MDMA, on pills. I walked past this one girl and she was sitting down with her friends on the floor, there was like ten of them. She gets her little baggy out, a baggy of MD, gets her little spoon and just, like, snorts it, just like that. And, you know, it's a public road. People are walking up and down. She just didn't care.
>
> (*Drugs Map of Britain* 2016–17)

Following the discussion, the presenter concludes the segment with a similarly judgement-declaring piece to camera describing the amount of ecstasy/MDMA being consumed ('some of his friends had been snorting MD throughout the *whole night*') and the location of consumption ('Mark and his friends were just in a regular bar') (*Drugs Map of Britain* 2016–17, original

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emphasis). In this way, the participation of drug users is limited. They are simply shown taking drugs on camera and playing around in the dark streets while intoxicated.

The segment highlights how discursive practices related to harm reduction (in this case, allowing drug users to speak) can be framed in a way that justifies normalized policy positions centred on crime and punishment. Drug users are allowed to speak, but only within the hegemonic moral framework, as established by the standard representational practices and the language of the presenter. In this case, the moral judgement covers both the consumption of the drug, and the physical space of consumption ('it's a public road' and 'just in a regular bar'), advancing a geography that is based on particular beliefs on the appropriate use of space (drinking alcohol is okay, taking MDMA is not).

USE OF FILM AS PRAXIS

Performing a similar function, the episode's representation of SSDP and drug testing kits maligns harm reduction messages by casting drug testing in a particular light. We see members of SSDP preparing and distributing harm reduction packs (including drug testing kits). This would be a useful point for the episode to ground drug testing as a sensible, helpful policy that could easily be rolled out by the government. The episode might have also discussed the ways in which government policy is linked to drug use in the United Kingdom. In this way, the programme could at least attempt to exert some influence over a discussion on drugs policy. Instead the issue of drug testing is overwhelmed by a series of comments on how people may not know what they are taking when they use ecstasy/MDMA. In this way, the episode shows harm reduction practices in ways that advance typical tropes of fear, personal irresponsibility and prohibition, while casting drug users as irresponsible and powerless. The opportunity to discuss drugs policy, as well as to allow participants in the project to reflect on the way they actively live their daily lives and question why they do (O'Neill 2018), is sidestepped in favour of concerns that reflect the dominant medico-penal constellation.

PEOPLE AND DANCEFLOORS: PRODUCTION AND PARTICIPATION

Whereas the BBC documentary limits opportunities for drug users to speak and reflect, *People and Dancefloors* engages film praxis to enable drug users to speak. Indeed, the first filming for People and Dancefloors took place at a network meeting that the lead researcher on the project had organized in London for volunteer participants to discuss their experiences of drugs and dance floors.

PARTICIPATION BY DRUG USERS

The meeting consisted of a range of people who had volunteered to talk about their experiences of drugs and dance floors. Participants included a schoolteacher, a GP, academics, music producers and a range of others. A freewheeling discussion took place for two hours, which was filmed.

Beginning with listening to participants in the meeting talk to each other raised a number of issues about the aesthetics of the film itself. Despite the filmmaker and researchers being life-long drug users, the filmmaker was surprised at the diversity of the participants, especially the weighting in favour

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On: Thu, 22 Dec 2022 13:36:39

of professionals. Of course it was clear that this reflected the self-selecting nature of participants in an activist-academic network, but it led to an interesting reflection on a shared and inclusive discursive space, in which communicative freedom allowed participants to speak on terms of equal recognition, fulfilling aspects of Habermas's (1989) public sphere.

Another significant aesthetic lesson related to the ways in which participants discussed the symbolic framework of media representation in relation to drug users. They each shared a disdain for mainstream imagery of the 'sweaty gurning mess' that is too often used (as in the BBC film described above). There was also a strong discourse about the nature of dance floors as a shared space, experienced by a therapeutic, solidaristic, happy, friendly and loving community. The overwhelming strength of this sentiment is reflected in the imagery of the film.

SPECTACLE VS. SOCIAL TOTALITY

In understanding the normality of drugs and dance floors, rather than its threatening, dark or risky portrayal, the film reminds the viewer of previous moments of ostracization or malevolent representation of drugs and drug users. From jazz to rock and roll, punk and most other youth movements or alternative cultural expressions, the story is repeated again and again – the narrative moves from a threat to the social order to, after many years, normalization.

To reflect this, the film is animated with footage of dance from the late nineteenth century onwards, including 'calypso', jazz and ballet-type footage. In this sense, the visual narrative positions 'raves' in a longer tradition of dancing. Where the film moves to the particular subject of modern dance floors, the filmmaker had captured footage inside venues. The small size of the sorts of venues we visited lent themselves to intimacy. Instead of the 'sweaty gurning messes', we see smiles and happy engagement, a couple dancing hand in hand. The images are a far cry from those of mainstream representations.

The spoken narratives of drugs and dance floors contained within the film come from two sources. The first is face-to-face, on-camera interviews, or discussions with the filmmaker and lead researcher, based around a broad set of issues, topics and themes devised through the workshops and research meetings. The conversational manner of the interviews gives the interviewees range to influence the direction of the discussion. The interviews take place at locations selected by the interviewees, where practicable – which largely became domestic settings, allowing the *mise en scène* to reflect the character of the interviewees. The camera is to the side of the interviewee, moving between mid- and close-shot, with the interviewee looking at the interviewer, positioning the camera as a second person. The only voice heard is that of the interviewee.

The second form of spoken narrative is audio-only contributions, usually from people who were not in a position to be identified. These contributions were a mix of phone interviews and recorded spoken narrative about the individual's experiences. As audio submissions, the question arises as to the visual elements that could accompany the audio. The selections were not re-planned but were drawn from the contributions themselves. Having listened to each several times while editing, it appeared sensible to use pop-up phrases and keywords drawn from the audio. This served two purposes: to emphasize key points and to clarify audio that was less clear.

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As the overarching context and narratives of the audio contributions became clear, so visual elements began to suggest themselves, all of which were captured as incidental footage – DJ decks, dancing in a bar, a shop front advertising a newspaper and crowds walking on a London street. All of these constituted a subtle reflection of the overall narrative of each speaker.

Accompanying the audio cutaways are short video clips, adverts and public service announcements that often point to the absurdity of legality and normality. For example, an advert for a supermarket accompanies an audio submission that reflects on the anonymous speaker's mother's disdain for drugs. Most speakers and interviewees compare their own experiences with the outcome of people drinking on weekends in English towns – especially in terms of aggression and violence. The anonymous speaker points to the contradiction between her mother's disdain for drugs, while being a daily drinker.

The visualization of this narrative is complicated by decisions made about showing ravers as 'sweaty gurning messes'. Having rejected stereotyped images of ravers, showing CCTV-style footage of weekend drunken debauchery would perhaps set up a false dichotomy. The subtlety of the anonymous speaker's point was more pertinent than the 'extraordinary-ordinariness' of weekend drunken debauchery. Instead, the acceptable and simple ordinariness of the everyday drinker is reflected in a supermarket advert, where an old woman reflects on the good value of its products for her husband, before making the joke that she prefers gin and then drinking from a glass that was previously off camera.

This approach is repeated throughout the film, with audio, on-camera interviews and video clips complementing each other. The structure of the whole film is drawn from the common elements of each interviewee's narratives. It is roughly divided into chapters – 'Dance', 'Drugs', 'Taboo', 'Identities', 'Media' and the final chapter introduces the question of what to do, with images of the London People and Dancefloors workshop from which the whole idea of the film was derived.

The London workshop the film began with was in part reassembled for its premiere at the University of Greenwich, at which there was a panel and lengthy open discussion. All screenings of the film have been set in the context of open discussions and, most importantly, plans for expansion of the network and how to affect change in social attitudes, practices and policies. Continual reflection on the mediation itself has supported the continuation of the communicative aspects of the project. A website and social media accounts were set up to facilitate and promote blog articles and podcasts on topics grown out of the film and broader research project. The audio submissions included in the film were extracted and turned into social media snippets to promote the film and raise awareness of the issues therein. As of writing, the project continues to develop and grow, with weekly podcasts broadening participation and further developing insights and understanding, research papers developing academic analysis, occasional blog articles again broadening participation and providing information to a more general audience. Most recently plans are afoot to produce a range of shorter films that investigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on drugs and dance floors.

CONCLUSION

In these ways, *People and Dancefloors* aims to make some contribution to breaking the link between media representations of drugs and government

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drugs policy, developing film production strategies that allow for drug users themselves to be heard, while simultaneously negating the discursive parameters evident, for example, in the *Drugs Map of Britain* episode, as illustrated above. Prohibitionist principles such as those enshrined in the MDA and War on Drugs continue to be upheld through particular media discourses and framings.

Although not directly confronting policy and legal aspects, projects such as *People and Dancefloors* represent, for the time being at least, a position on drugs and drug policy that is radically different from the prohibitionist approach of the dominant medico-penal constellation. While smaller film projects such as *People and Dancefloors* may serve some purpose in chipping away at the dominance of this constellation, they lack the kinds of funding, resources and institutional backing of international media organizations. This means that the prohibitionist voice continues to be the loudest.

With that said, prohibitionist policies continue to be critiqued in some parts of the media. VICE, for example, has opened up to new representations of first-person accounts along with critical films on the War on Drugs (VICE 2021). At the same time, the International Movement of People who Use Drugs (INPUD) has produced a film series about the history of the drug user movement told from the perspectives of drug users in different parts of the world (Drug Reporter 2022).

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Anthony Killick is a lecturer in communication and mass media at The British University in Egypt. With a background in film, politics and urban development, his previous work has analysed the tension between radical/independent arts spaces and the neo-liberal city. More recently, his research at the Centre for Understanding Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP) focused on cultural industries and the environmental crisis. He is currently a researcher for the People and Dancefloors project.

Contact: The British University in Egypt, Al-Shorouk, Cairo, Egypt.
E-mail: anthony.killick@bue.edu.eg

Lee Salter is a researcher and filmmaker focusing on the representation of marginalized groups and issues. He has published widely on new technologies and radical politics, and most recently has investigated and written on the prison system and its impacts, as well as recreational drug use as part of the People and Dancefloors project.

E-mail: salter.lee@gmail.com

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