

UPHNS HUB Video Call Minutes November 4, 2021

Topic:

Drugs and the Dark Web: A Conversation with Bluelight

Attendance: 42

Presenters:

- Dr. Monica Barratt, Executive Director, Bluelight
- Alex McVean, Social Media and Communications Manager, Bluelight

Welcome & Introduction:

- Welcome and land acknowledgement facilitated by Clem and Matt
- Simultaneous translation description by Gabriel-le
- Monica Barratt – also a senior research fellow at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, RMIT. She has been working on the intersections between digital technologies and drugs with interest in how the internet and mobile phones and other digital communication devices have been changing the landscape of how drugs are used over the past few decades, as well as how they have been traded and sold. Looking at the possibilities of harm reduction and safer drug use through digital technology.
- Alex McVean – in charge of the social media accounts of Bluelight. He is a beneficiary of the website

Presentation:

Bluelight

It was established since October 1999 as a non-profit organization. An International online harm reduction community committed to reducing the harms associated with drug use. The forum serves as a place where information about the risks associated with drug use. Majority of the website hits come from the United States. It began more as an MDMA focused message board in the in the late 90s, early 2000s. It started off in a more focused fashion at that time and since then, the number of drugs talked about has increased. Quite a lot of young folks use the site. It is volunteer-run and global, it utilizes the 503501 C three status in the US of the body disciplinary association for Psychedelic Studies on maps. Its mission is essentially to reduce harm from drugs. Its philosophy is to meet people where they are, encourage dialogue and allow people use and talk about their drugs in a safe way, ensuring that people are aware of the risks that can happen when drugs are used. Based on google analytics, majority of the hits on the website come from the United States, 5% from Canada and 5% from Australia. Its about 5% from all the other countries. The forum statistics includes over 8 million messages over a period of 22 years, half a million users of the site over the last 90 days, and an average session length of about 5 minutes. 76% of traffic on the website is now on mobile phones- this has changed over the last 20 years from desktop to phones. A survey conducted on the website 3 years ago shows that the median age of people on the website is 20 years.

People who newly join the website are tagged as green lighters, after passing the threshold of posts they become blue lighters. As a blue lighter you have full access to the website. There are volunteer staff, moderators, former staff members who have become members again.

There's a lot of channels on the website. One is the lounge; another is the shrine which was created when one of the members died in 2001 due to overdose. The platform is used to remember individuals who have died. In

drugs use there is the dark side where people talk about all sorts of stuff- including being suicidal. Alex says the platform has really changed his life and made him come of age.

Research at Bluelight

Bluelight collaborates with academic researchers whose project aligns with their mission. Bluelight intends to amplify the voices of consumers, people who use drugs community, who might be affected by the research of the policies in place by providing the drug studies forum on blue light as a place where there could be dialogue between researchers, many of whom may not be really talking with community as they should. There s a research portal on the website, for those looking to collaborate on a project. Bluelight has social media presence on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

Research Component: Digitally facilitated drug distribution

- In the 60's, 70's it was mainly street dealing to access drugs.
- Crypto markets- dark net markets examples of crypto market is Supro which has been in existence for over 10 years
- There is street level selling and then there is darknet selling where technology has sort of changed the way people trade in drugs. People now use tor or bitcoins to facilitate trade. In the past people used eBay and you could view ratings online.
- There are 3 types of drug markets - Open (street market), closed (friends/ private dealers) and crypto market.
- With crypto market size, you need a bit of technical expertise to do that. Unlike a street market where you could literally just turn up and the location of the money drive exchange. You need a delivery address for it to go.
- This is tricky because that that takes time and can take days maybe weeks if you're in Australia.
- Many sites have been seized by the government and so many sites have opened.
- Some sites like White House closed when it reached its goal.
- The pandemic may have affected the use of dark webs, especially because of deliveries.
- Some vendors use escrow listings or FE (Finalize early) listings.
- In Australia, drugs on the darknet have quite ridiculous price variations. This could be because drugs are generally expensive.
- Most sites have rules for buyers and for sellers
- Encrypted chats via social media like Instagram and snapchat, telegram was used as market during the pandemic.
- Televend describes itself as a direct deal platform - combines features from the darknet market and then buy using telegram. Its quite similar to White House market.
- People less often buy Cannabis from the dark market, its often opioid, benzos, cocaine, MDMA, etc.
- Trends show that the younger group uses the social media apps to get their drugs.
- Last month there was news that Televend was compromised.

Question & Answer:

- How does moderation work in terms of posting about different drug experiences regarding interactions?
 - There is a user agreement, so editors can take away/ edit comments that are not appropriate like racial stuff or misinformation. It is a work in progress. There are different levels of discussion on the website and moderation across the site is not the same.
- Do you have to sign up on the site?
 - There is no requirement to sign up. Some people just come on it without necessarily signing up. So that we don't place barriers to access.

- How much does it cost to advertise research on the banner?
 - Not a fixed amount. Goes all the way from free to many thousands, depending on the organization. We suggest a price we think is appropriate. Whatever we get is seen as a donation since we are not really set up to issue a proper invoice. There are instances where we have said no, when it does not align with our mission.
- Do you have any understanding of the overall online market and is it possible to track who is purchasing drugs online?
 - Some countries would not allow it. But it is difficult to shut down an overseas based website. In terms of tracking, if there's something being purchased, that is illegal in your country, and you know, your name and addresses involved, it is possible. And I think that is one of the reasons why some people won't use it.
- How is safe supplies side of things and how can we use the dark web to increase compassion clubs?
 - In the next period of time, there might be a configuration of digital infrastructure which will suit more people and deliver benefits. A few days ago in Australia, the Commonwealth Government has announced an inquiry to the current risks of online drug trading in Australia.

Other Comments

- The average age of blue lighters is 20's. There are some over 40, one of our moderators is in his 80s
- Advertisement of research they participate in is on the website. One is funded by Health Canada
- The right top-corner of the front page is a banner space which advertises the research we have collaborated with people on.
- One of the projects advertised was sponsored by Health Canada- its an ongoing study around the use of novel psychoactive substances in Canada.
- We have a large archive of information about 8 million posts- after filtering we have up to 5 million posts.

Closing:

Let us take a moment of silence to think about those who we have lost due to the overdose crisis. Thank you for joining the call and enjoy the rest of the evening.