

Dawn of the cybernauts

Max Daly on a new book that redefines the meaning of the super highway.

Reviews

DRUGS 2.0: THE WEB REVOLUTION THAT'S CHANGING HOW THE WORLD GETS HIGH

Mike Power
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In 2009, as Mike Power tells us, he found himself at the centre of a gathering storm. He wrote a news feature for this magazine about a new drug called mephedrone.

What made this drug particularly interesting was that it was cheap, available to buy over the internet, completely legal and unlike previous 'legal highs' that had been sold from head shops and festival stalls, it was potent.

With cocaine and ecstasy quality at an all time low – and illegal – here was a product that was assumed to be safe to buy and which offered good value for money. Mike knew this was a big story, that it may be nudging open a door to a whole new way of buying and selling drugs. But he could never have guessed the extent to which this drug, and what happened next, shook things up so profoundly.

This book is the story of how renegade chemistry and computing combined to whisk the traditional drug trade into the 21st century. It's about how a series of disparate events conspired to create the revolution to which the title of this book refers.

And while you would be excused for wondering how a book which is essentially about nerds, either sitting at computers or fiddling about with chemicals in a lab, can be entertaining, have no fear, because *Drugs 2.0* crackles along like magnesium on a Bunsen burner flame. With a chapter entitled 'Your Crack's in the Post', you know you're in good hands. Mike has the perfect mix of journalistic

nous, technical explanation and humour that make this book such an essential and enjoyable read.

We are transported from Alexander Shulgin's back garden laboratory in California in the 1960s to the offices of Eric, a chemical entrepreneur making big bucks in modern Beijing. We witness the creation of the internet in the 1970s and its roots in anarcho-counter culture and LSD use (the first thing that was ever bought and sold on the internet was marijuana in 1971) to the Silk Road, Bitcoins and the Dark Web of today. Who knew that some of the first online slang acronyms, such as IMHO (in my humble opinion) originated from drug forums on the fledgling days of the world wide web? Drugs and the internet, it transpires,

have been bedfellows for decades.

Power offers well-crafted explanations of the chemical history of drugs and a guide to the confusing alphabet soup of the modern drug world. We get insight into the inner workings of the internet, and how drug users and sellers are harnessing its power and freedom to get high, make money and steer clear of the authorities.

The story of mephedrone is one oft-repeated in the history of drugs; when a favourite drug is not available, then most regular users will opt for the next best thing.

So when 33 tonnes of safrole oil, earmarked for use by Dutch drug gangs to make 260 million ecstasy pills, was intercepted and burned by police in Cambodia in 2008, the quality of ecstasy pills nosedived. And up stepped mephedrone.

It was not just the internet that turned mephedrone into a mass market product. Newspaper stories discussing the new drug inadvertently became money spinning promotional vehicles for those selling it, with adverts for the drug popping up on Google links next to stories warning people of its dangers.

Since mephedrone, the internet and the chemists have not looked back. Now a slew of new research chemicals – and traditional illegal drugs such as heroin and cannabis – are available to anyone with a mouse and a credit card. The online drug trade is a complex but rapidly expanding industry.

And this is where the book really impresses. Power supplements well-written context with some old fashioned journalistic scoops. He manages to talk to the people at the heart of the online drug industry – the sellers, the producers, and the psychonauts.

It is clear that the law struggles to keep up. But more than that, Power believes that the current legal framework nudges people, especially the young, into a game of narco-russian roulette, where online mystery powders and pills can be more dangerous than their illegal counterparts.

"Through a long process of chemical and technical innovation, drug users and producers have beaten the laws made by a political system whose only response to increased drug use is a harmful, expensive, counterproductive and ultimately failed strategy of criminalization," says Power.

Ultimately, *Drugs 2.0* is not just a book about drugs. It's a book about how globalization and the internet are changing the way we live and trade. But it is also a stark warning to governments that the game has changed beyond recognition.

■ **Max Daly**, Journalist and author of *Narcomania: How Britain Got Hooked on Drugs*. Paperback edition is out in October 2013