

‘DANCING WITH THE DEVIL’: CAN THE MEDIA REALLY BE ENCOURAGED TO REPLACE STEREOTYPING, MISINFORMATION AND SCARE TACTICS WITH POSITIVE IDENTITIES, HEALTH EDUCATION AND RISK AWARENESS?

Matthew Southwell

Dance Drugs Alliance, UK

What I am going to be talking about today is ‘Dancing with the Devil’, the idea of how we can start to engage with the media. In many ways some of the things that Nicky talks about are feelings I share quite deeply. I first took ecstasy back in 1989 in New York, and had come previously out of the northern soul scenes and the skin head scenes, and had been involved in those youth subcultures in my teenage years, and then I came through those into the new energy, souped-up gay disco scenes that preceded house. And in many ways I look on the commercialisation of the club scene with quite some disappointment and frustration, and seeing my own club Trade, that was something I held with quite great cherish for many years, being destroyed by commercialisation.

But on the other hand I think what we have tried to do in the Dance Drug Alliance is to actually say: “It’s too easy for us to become really sad old critics, who sit on the side lines, moaning about the days when things were better”. Actually, one of the things that is very rejuvenating for me is that I go to Ibiza every year and spend three weeks there. For me, that is a time when I am actually forced to socialise with teenagers and younger people. This provokes within me a degree of compassion, because those young people are people who are not selling out on the scene, they are people who are actually choosing to be part of a scene, and in many ways are quite lost in that scene. I think that there is a responsibility that we have, as older clubbers, to actually look out for those people who are faced with absolute rampant exploitation from club owners.

I am really disappointed that *Cream* keeps being sighted as a club that somehow we should be proud of. It is one of the most downright exploitative clubs I have ever been to in my life; it is routinely overcrowded and the reason it is no longer in operation in Liverpool is because Liverpoolian clubbers got wise of it, and it can only now operate around the world, far away from its home base. But I think, nonetheless, that we have a responsibility to begin trying to rebuild, within our own community, the sense of spirit that we first started out with.

In fact, the Dance Drugs Alliance formed around the same time as the first Club Health conference. We are a very different type of clubbers rights organisation, we are not a club health outfit, we do not make any pretence to be a club health outfit; we are a coalition of DJs, health educators, VJs, club owners, drug dealers - a whole range of people who are stakeholders within our scene. We come together to try to bring some sense of unity and shared vision towards our scene. So people like MixMag music magazine are also members of the Dance Drugs Alliance, and I think it is an important coalition – sometimes quite a difficult coalition to hold together when you have got everybody from drug dealers on one side through to quite commercial interests on the other – but I think it is by embracing a whole spectrum of engagement that you can start to do something meaningful about peoples lives.

So, at the last conference I put forward a paper, which said outlined my belief that we had to recognise that, particularly within the UK, the culture had become so diffused that actually the idea of peer outreach workers had very little meaning in the UK club culture at that point. We were now talking about a scene that was so heavily diffused that you would need so many peer education outfits, that really it was never viable to meaningfully impact upon the majority of clubbers' lives in the hundreds of different club nights that might be taking place in London alone back in the UK.

What we felt was that it would be important to try to actually engage the mainstream systems or the mainstream media, and also the specialist sub-genres like MixMag and music magazines, to actually embrace those organisations and try to turn them into something meaningful that was doing something worthwhile for our community.

So, what I am going to do is just look at what has happened in the last two years; about how we have tried to turn that from a theoretical concept into an actual reality; where, as we talk about maximum pleasure with minimum risk, we are actually explicitly saying that we believe in positive drugs culture; that we are not ashamed of what we do, but we recognise there is inherent risk in what we do, which is something we need to minimise. But the best way to minimise the risk is actually to maximise the pleasure. So we should not just sit there and tell people how to avoid risk all the time, we should eventually teach people how to do it safely and enjoyably.

I am going to talk initially about research and the media and then policy and the media, and then look at some of the lessons from the Dance Drug Alliance approach, and finally look at four case studies that I think have some merit.

This first quote is from Melissa Sweet from her chapter in a book called 'Promoting healthier journalism' (refers to screen), and what she highlights is – and I think this is important in our work: It is very easy to blame the media for failing to present drugs issues in a coherent and informed way, but actually the media are not drugs specialists. I think it is important that we start to talk to the media in a meaningful way that understands that most of them are generic journalists who do not have a special interest in drugs, and that we, in many ways, need to guide them through that labyrinth in terms of actually presenting effectively on the areas that we are maybe more specialist in. And I think one of the things that is most important about what Melissa is saying here in her book is that actually, the key factor here is the issue of research. That actually, what journalists often do quite simplistically, is take core research messages and then amplify them and simplify them, and I think most notably we can see that around the whole issue of MDMA toxicity, for example:

“One pill and your going to end up damaging your brain”

This is put forward as a very cold, simple, piece of research. What we know of course, from Ricaurte's very unfortunate experience, is that researchers do not always get it right, even when they have had huge amounts of money chucked behind them. I meet many researchers in the UK who complain to me about how hard it is to even get research funded that does not stick to the anti-drugs line. So we are starting off asking the media to present something, which from the very start is not balanced. The U.S.A. funds over 85% of all research into drugs-health behaviour. So you have the biggest

anti-drugs country in the world funding the majority of research into drugs. And they do not do it on an equal basis, it is not saying: “let’s have a really balanced approach here” - you pay the piper, the piper plays the tune.

So what we are seeing here is George Ricaurte himself, with that one piece of research where he could not even manage to inject the monkeys with the right drug, has still managed to be paid US\$1.3 million – can you imagine the health education we could do with that money? That man wasted \$1.3 million, by not even being able to manage to pick up the right bottle, with the right label on it – fantastic. And this man, for being such a credible researcher, has actually been given \$10 million throughout the whole history of his career. And you can imagine the type of research and the health education we could do with that type of money, but of course that is not the interest of the U.S Government; the U.S Government wants to prove a point. As Peter Cohen says, the line between any rational discussions on drugs research just does not exist. There is no such thing as neutral science - science is there to prove a point. We know this and we know the way that the research is being presented – if you try to present anything that shows that ecstasy does not damage your brain you just will not get your research funded. And I think it is a very important issue to address when we start to talk to journalists about this. The journalists rely on the research, but the research is flawed before we even start.

In terms of looking at policy, I think it is equally hard for journalists because if we are looking here from the policy context, this is from the now defunct, but not so recently defunct, Independent Television Council (refers to screen). And it is fascinating that these are the guidelines that TV producers have to work under. Far be it for the television companies to be expected to somehow provide balance - not at all, the Television Council have explicitly stated that they should in no way show that drugs can be seen as problem free or glamorous - despite the fact that for over 80% of people who use class A drugs, that is exactly what they are – glamorous and problem free. And as Nicholas Sanders said, the reality is that balance is actually nothing like balance, and what actually balance is taken to mean is exaggerating the negative aspects while ignoring the positives.

So, I think what I would always start with in terms of working with the media is some compassion with the media. I think it is a very difficult subject to actually report on. Their core source of information is distorted and the policy environment they work within is incredibly fragmented and difficult. The number of journalists I have actually worked with who have then been sent back to re-edit their programmes by lawyers is incredibly frustrating. I have had whole programmes completely re-edited at the request of lawyers because of the ITC guidelines, not because of what journalists actually want to do, but because their told by their lawyers they have got to go back and re-edit otherwise they will be in breach of the ITC guidelines.

So, what is my experience of the last two years? Firstly, I work as a consultant to the media, so I consult to a number of different TV programmes. I speak on behalf of the Dance Drugs Alliance, publicly, as an open drugs user; and I am also the press officer for the hard drug users’ movement. There are also press officers for the Cannabis movement, and we work collaboratively together. I also act as a specialist commentator, regularly speaking for MixMag but also for a number of other programmes, talking about different types of drugs. We run demonstration projects,

but because the Dance Drug Alliance has no funding whatsoever – we are a completely voluntary organisation - we do what we can in terms of just trying to run demonstration projects to show models of best practice.

I have talked at this conference about the GM club safe scheme, and they are an absolutely excellent police-led initiative in Manchester, which we have been very proud to work with - completely at the invitation of Sergeant Tim O'Neil who I think deserves huge credit for his work; it was actually through meeting at this conference that we were able to set up that scheme, which I think is another positive benefit of why this conference is worthwhile and valid. Also, I work as a drugs expert for Radio 1 – there is an agony aunt-type show and I act as a drugs expert, and also do 'live from Ibiza' shows every summer.

So, why should we be listened to? What do we have to offer? Because I think that for every piece of work you do with the private sector, you have got to be clear – they have no reason why they should involve us unless it is worthwhile, this is not some sort of romantic process – they have to think that we are somehow worthwhile to engage.

Well, the first thing I think we offer is the issue of 'knowledge is power'. As Nicky was saying, we operate within a scene, which, for many people is very invisible, you do not see it – it is hard to know. And what we can offer is both an authentic voice, privileged access, and also an understanding – which I think, for many journalists is incredibly refreshing, to actually have someone who will sit there and explain to them simply and clearly what the issues actually are.

I think also, importantly, one of the things that has made us so successful in our work is that we act as the 'experts expert', so we do not just sit there and promote our own views, we will actually sit down with journalists and go through and explain to them who all the experts are on the different subjects - even actually putting forward the experts who oppose our position. And I think that is important because it means the media will always come to us first, because what they recognise is that it will save them a huge amount of time in terms of research. They can either research for hours on the Internet, or they can come and talk to us and we can tell them who all the key experts are, both for and against our position. And we have to recognise that it is a journalistic responsibility to be balanced in their presentation.

I think also – this final quote is actually a quote from a previous paper I presented about being 'Joyful junkies, not pharmaceutical fuck ups' – and I think the fact that we are the very antithesis of what we are meant to be, in itself has currency. I think that we are not messed up junkies is actually newsworthy in its own right. The fact that we are able to stand up and talk coherently as drug users, what it actually allows us to do is invert and subvert that stereotype, and that in itself is very newsworthy. Having people who are prepared to stand up and say: "look, I am a crack user, I am an ecstasy user", or whatever else, and: "I'm not two headed and demonic", I think is actually quite powerful.

So, what is our strategic approach? Firstly, I think we have very clear objectives. I think it is really important in this work that you do not work with anybody for the sake of it. Be clear about why you are engaging. And what we are always clear about

is that it has to be in the interests of our community – why it is in our interests as a community to work with you as a journalist. And I will sit there and have this conversation – I had the Daily Mail ring me up when Prince Harry was caught using Ecstasy, and they were saying to me that we ought to speak out against it, because it was unfair that he was getting away with it while we were not. But we just really did not see why it was valuable to demonise one member of our community, whether he was a prince or not, and that actually at the end of the day demonisation is demonisation and we did not want any part of it. They had quite some problems understanding that, and I think the Daily Mail have eventually, after having asked me about 20 times, realised that we are just not going to work with them.

The other important thing is also to be clear when you just do need to say no. There are sometimes journalists you just do not want to work with, and there are also people who actually you give a fair warning to, and if they cannot play fairly by the rules then you need to blank them and not work with them anymore. I would say that I probably turn down at least 50% of requests to work with the media that we get.

I think the other thing is about being media savvy. You need to actually learn how to speak to the media. The media need people who can speak in crisp, concise, bite-sized information pieces that will go well on news programmes. And I think it is not good enough just to be good at your subject, you have also got to learn how to present that subject to the media in a way that they can understand. And I think there is a real need for media training among clubbers to actually help us present our information in a way that is accessible and meaningful. I think one of the reasons the media come back to us again and again is that we actually know now how to self edit, and that we have done it so many times that we have those kind of catchphrases that sound very spontaneous, but they are spontaneous because we have actually practiced them lots of times.

Another issue is actually about the voice of reason. If we just end up as being as rabid as the anti-drugs people, and just end up putting a completely pro-drug position without any balance, then the media will quickly become bored of us. And I think it is important, for example, around MDMA toxicity, that our position has been very clear from the start; we have said: “the jury’s out, we don’t know the answer, but what we should all be doing at this point is taking a cautionary approach.” I think that approach has earned us quite a lot of credit with the media in terms of not actually getting lost into the repartee of: “it is all terrible, it is all devastating”, but equally not getting lost into glamorising drugs and saying that somehow there are no problems with drugs. Because we actually do not know and I think we have to be honest about it, and one of my lines often with the media is to say: “look, actually, if I am damaging my brain, I would like to know about it”.

The other thing I think is helpful is the personal touch. It is about building relationships with journalists. I have now got a whole series of journalists who I work with on a regular basis, and I think it is very important that you start to foster and build relationships so they feel trusting of you, that they can come back to you and talk to you confidentially. A lot of the time, media journalists may use me and never actually quote me, and I would probably say about 60% of the time now, media are just using us as a resource and not actually quoting us, because they realise that if they quoted us all the time it would just look unbalanced. But actually, what they find is, it

is very helpful to talk to us, because they can then talk through the stories and sometimes we then put up other sources for them to use, so they are not always using the same people.

You have to take the risk, which means you have to be visible. My mobile phone number is actually on the Internet and you have to be that visible. Basically my understanding is, that it is common knowledge among the media journalists, if you search for “drugs spokesperson UK” on the Internet, my number comes up in the top ten searches – and I think you have just got to be able to put yourself out in the open that visibly. Which can be a nuisance I have to tell you, when you are being rung when you are out partying and someone says: “can you come and do an interview?” And you just sort of say “well, possibly”. Clinique make-up is fantastic by the way, just in case anyone else wants a tip around that, just get rid of those little black marks under your eyes.

So, I think the other thing is that there are many people in the media who are actually clubbers as well, and I think one of our key strategies has been to reach out to our friends in the media. I think one of the most notable events for me, when I was debating on Newsnight - which is a mainstream, hardcore media programme in the UK - and I had a whole series of clubbing researchers applauding me from the wings. And I think there is a sort of sense of which satisfaction in knowing that that is why we were getting invited back, because these were actually our peers who were bringing us onto the TV programme. You also have to recognise that the media will do you over several times. The key thing is how you deal with this; that is the reality of how to work with the press.

When things go wrong, or Pete Tong as we say in the media culture, I think the issue is to go back and talk to the press about it. It is too easy to complain and throw tantrums. I think the issue is to actually go back to the media and say “Look, why did it go wrong? Why did we misreport this? Why did it not work out?” And I have had some very helpful meetings with some of the top development people within the BBC to talk about why they misreported things. And people have been very impressed by the fact that we are not just throwing complaints at them, but that we are saying to them that if they will not meet us, we will throw complaints at them, but we are prepared to talk things through and try and work to get things right the next time. What that is now leading to is development people from the different TV companies coming back to us and saying “could you tell us whether you have got any ideas you would like us to talk through with you? Are there any new things that are happening that you would like us to report on?”

I think what is important for all of us is that media work is only one PR strategy. We are trying to promote human rights strategies here, and we should always see media work as one strategy within that wider PR culture; if you just do the PR work, and just so that you are getting on TV, as the only answer, then your missing a huge sway of what this work is all about.

So, beware the risks. I think it is important that we do not enter this work naively. You are sticking your head in a lion’s mouth, and I think you have to recognise that these people will sometimes toy with you and absolutely tell you everything you want to hear to entice you into working with them. My policy with the media is “you’ll con

me once, but you'll never con me twice", and I think that is the strategy I have always said to people – "If you want to work with us again, don't mess us about". And I think the media often do respect that. I think that is also partly because we are so credible, and that we actually do give them such a wide range of other resources. But we have to recognise that sometimes we have such privileged access into our communities that we can actually expose things that sometimes are best kept quiet. I think we have to learn what we want to expose, and what we want to keep quiet. So for example, many of our dealer members do not necessarily want to be publicly exposed and put in the media, but sometimes being able to talk positively about dealers and what they do in terms of promoting health and safety within our communities, I think is actually something worthwhile.

There is also a real issue of personal exposure. I lost a £30,000 contract (which is about \$75,000) overnight for speaking up publicly as an ecstasy user. I lost a contract I had held with our national probation service for 10 years as a trainer overnight - lost it for saying I was an ecstasy user on television. So you have to watch out. This is not a risk free environment. And also for your friends and family – my partner is a primary school teacher and we have to work very carefully – I am not allowed in her school; we do not share the same surname; we have to work very carefully to keep our lives encapsulated so that I do not bring fire onto her or my daughter for actually standing up publicly as a drug user.

Also, there are times we choose the wrong media partners. Sometimes there are people out there, who are completely corrupt, and you pick the wrong people - they say the right things, but they are the wrong people and you make mistakes. You just have to learn from your mistakes and work out what to do.

There are other times you choose the wrong stories. We flogged on with MDMA toxicity for a long time before we realised that it was actually much better for scientists to fight that case, rather than for us as clubbers to fight it. Because actually it just sounded like we were rationalising our desire to use drugs, and we actually now put forward a whole series of psychopharmacologists who argue against Ricaurte and co. rather than us doing that argument. So I think it is about choosing what story you want to fight and what stories it is better to bring other people in to fight for you.

The other thing is, we talk about being cut to bits in terms of drugs, but it also happens in media work as well. You can end up having great stories – I did a fantastic story on Ketamine, only for the lawyer to turn around and say it was far too positive, for it to be re-edited. And I ended up saying completely the opposite of what I actually said – through editing. Needless to say, we do not work with them any more.

So, let me finally just go through four case studies. These are four models I am presenting in terms of different frameworks for understanding media work. This is the first one, which I am calling 'short term reactive work'. So this basically means that you have got to be available to the media pretty much straight away, as is required by rolling news programmes these days. This means that I can leave my mobile phone on almost all the time. The only time I do not have my mobile phone on is actually when I am partying, and then I pass my mobile phone on to someone else to carry for me. Even then I have been known to do media interviews in the middle of parties, which is really quite fun – live from Ibiza was a bit scary on one occasion.

Here is one case I think is a good example of short-term reactive work. There were two club deaths at a club called 'Raindance', which was at the SE1 club in London, and the police came out and said very openly: "watch out, killer pills, yet again" – the old 'killer-pill' mythology came out and they began saying things like: "These two guys died of these killer pills, everybody hand your pills in, it's very dangerous, don't take them". Huge scare tactics from the press, and luckily we had very good contacts with that group of media. The media pulled us in and we challenged the police publicly on live radio and challenged them to produce a photo-fit of the pill, which they actually did – and if you search on the Internet you will find this fantastic photo-fit of an ecstasy pill, which I thought was highly amusing. What it showed was that the pill was a very well known brand that had been around for a long period of time that many of us had actually taken. Far from being the pill that was actually causing the problem, what had happened was that this club was incredibly overcrowded, and we knew it was overcrowded because one of our members was in the club on the night; it was a club that had no air-conditioning, and the local licensing authority had turned up complaining that the music was too loud and asking the club to shut the doors. The club shut the doors and two people then died of overheating.

So what actually started out as a story of "killer-pills, clubbers watch out for ecstasy", we actually managed to turn round into a whole issue about licensing, air conditioning, policing, licensing authorities. And as a result, when the actual autopsy came out, the police had to publicly retract their story – and again, if you look on the BBC Internet sites you will see the story being retracted by them. We were then invited back to do a 15-minute live interview on radio because the media recognised that we had been right all along. And I think it was important that we did not lay into the police as a result of it, we were very rational about the way we handled it, we understood the pressures the police were under, we accepted that they were trying to operate within in a fair and reasonable way, and we asked then for the police to meet with us. We actually then went on to have a very helpful meeting with the head of the clubs and vice unit at the metropolitan police and that has led on to collaborative working. So this is about how you take media stories and run with them, that you do not say "Ha, we beat the police on that story". It is about how you use it constructively, how do you use that to your benefit. So what we had then was the media saying "Can you come back and tell us in a month's time whether you have actually met with the police?" and we could then use that as pressure on the police to actually meet with us.

The next one is what I talk about as 'short-term proactive work' - this is where we go out and actually make something happen. So, this is my 'beef' with Cream, having been to their night in Ibiza several times. For one, there is hugely dangerous overcrowding in Amnesia in Ibiza, and the overcrowding was so severe that people were queuing ten deep to get onto the dance floor. If there had been any incident in that club, people would have been trampled to death and killed. I went out and complained to the staff on the door as we were leaving. Having paid £30 to get into this club, I left after an hour because I just was not prepared to put my friends and family through that type of risk. I walked out and was told that another 2,000 people could get into that club, which I pointed out could only happen if they stacked us all up.

The next day we rang up the press office and said: “this is outrageous, we think this needs to be dealt with, what are you going to do about it? Or we’ll go to the press”. They thought I was just going to write a letter to MixMag and to be honest the press officer was incredibly rude and just dismissed us. Within 10 minutes I had the news editor of ‘Big Issue’ on the phone to her, at which point she was back to me within 20 minutes saying “Matt, it’s really nice to speak to you, thank you for ringing us up, can we talk to you more clearly about it?” And that is why developing relationships with journalists is so important. Having a series of freelance journalists who will just ring up on your behalf, and the fact that the editor of Big Issue wrote one of the famous histories on Acid House. He basically gave us one of his major journalists to work with us to help do this type of investigative journalism, and Max Daley has been a really key ally for us and is actually now the editor for Druglink magazine, and he has been a key figure for us.

When I am faced with people who will not work with me, I can get Max on the phone to them within 10 minutes, and that puts the fear of god into them and then they come back to us and start to work constructively. What happened as a result of that was that other clubbers then saw the story when it went out, and they also said “it wasn’t just like that on that night, it was also like it on many other nights as well”. Other clubbers then joined the Dance Drug Alliance, and in fact that then led to us working with MixMag on a regular basis. What was interesting was that MixMag were not prepared to challenge Cream, because Cream used to take out about eight pages of adverts in MixMag magazine, and at that point they just could not risk losing the advertising.

The other one was, and I think perhaps more importantly in terms of the GHB that have been discussed here, the BBC 4 x 4 documentary series did a story on overdoses in Ibiza. There were two overdoses a night going on throughout the summer on GHB, and the BBC just did not understand what was actually going on – and frankly, we did not understand what was going on either. This was one of my favourite media stories because I got flown out to Ibiza for a weekend, which was fantastic, and what was even better was that we found out what had actually happened within the first hour of arriving, so therefore we had the rest of the weekend to go partying - which of course we put down as ‘outreach’ and had all our cab fares paid to all the clubs. But it does show that media work can sometimes pay off as well.

What happened was that we were able to go out and because we had privileged access into the scene, and we knew the Ibiza scene, we were able to go and talk to the dealers, the club-flier distributors, to the people on the sunset strips, and we found immediately what was happening – it was UK clubbers, taking GHB out, sharing it with their friends, and some - I do not think it was date-rape, but it was more sort of loosening people up a little bit, that sort of bad thinking, but it was not so overtly date rape – but we very quickly spotted what was going on, and I think pivotally that led to a lot of press coverage for other people going to Ibiza saying “look, these are the risks of taking GHB, do not take GHB for the first time when your in Ibiza, it is not the right place to do it, particularly when your drinking very heavily at the same time”.

It was a very important message that we were able to get out, and it has been pivotal for us now. There are big problems of GHB in the gay scene in London, and I was not actually able to go to any of the meetings about it, but we were able to send our videos along which was great, and we are now meeting with the QX magazine, who

are the big gay magazine in London, talking about running a GHB campaign. And just to be clear, I think there is a possibility to educate people how to use GHB safely. I do not think it is right to say that GHB is not possible to use safely, I think it is a very difficult drug to use safely, but I think there is a window of opportunity for using it in a reasonable way.

Finally, I think this is something positive about this conference, when I presented my paper two years ago, Dr. Mark Hamilton from *Sunday Surgery* was actually in the audience, and invited me then to come on Radio 1, where I have now become a regular presenter; in fact now every year when I am in Ibiza we do a round up from Ibiza. And what it has importantly done is given us credibility as peer educators to actually then go and do a whole series of Channel 4 education programmes for schools. So we are now part of this fantastic programme called the A-Z of drugs, and I really recommend people to read it, I think it is one of the best drugs education programmes that has ever been produced, called 'The A-Z of drugs' by Lambert productions, produced as part of the Channel 4 series. And the only reason we as clubbers were accepted as being one of only two expert voices on that video was because we were working on 'Sunday Surgery' on Radio 1.

And I think again that is a testament to this type of conference, is that we can meet and collaborate across these types of events. And what is important is that we have also then taken that video and worked with 'Sunday Surgery' to turn it into a drugs education programme. So you can see that now, suddenly as clubbers, we are no longer seen as deviant drug-addicts, but we are actually people who can provide health education to our peers and also to younger people coming through.

So I am very frustrated with the scene, I think the scene has lost a lot of its heart and spirit, but I think that is something that we should not give up on young people around. I think it is the scene that has messed up, not the young people, and I think we need to support them and help them to live enjoyable lives, and to celebrate the culture that we have all had the benefit of being part of.

Thank you.