

‘Ethnobotanicals’ and ‘Spice Zombies’: New Psychoactive Substances in the Mainstream Media

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Abstract

This paper observes and compares discursive framings of new psychoactive substances (NPS) in parts of the mainstream media in Romania and the United Kingdom. It assembles a corpus of about 800 news items and looks into samples of reporting from 2009 to 2017. In Romania, NPS or more generally ‘ethnobotanicals’ were first associated with gullible youths experimenting with what appeared to be synthetic cannabinoids only for public attention to briefly move on to stimulant powders displacing heroin among injecting users, later on. In the UK, the synthetic cathinone mephedrone was presented by tabloids as a ‘menace’ to teenagers and other young users, only for synthetic cannabinoids to eventually be linked with rough sleepers and other vulnerable groups. Through this, qualitative distinctions are shown in the portraying of a middle-class notion of naïve but ‘clean’ youth, valuable in itself, and the portraying of abject underclass users, mostly as a threatening and contagious presence. Beyond alarmism and exaggeration, drug news reporting thus also appears rooted in class politics and structural inequalities where NPS meet with the lived conditions and spoiled identities of disadvantaged groups.

Introduction

The modern history of drugs is often described as one of cyclical bouts of public anxiety. Intoxication is as recurrent an object of ‘panic’ episodes as child abuse, immigration or street crime (Critcher, 2015). A belligerent language to prop the ideal of the ‘drug-free world’ was promoted to de facto global policy with the formal declaration of the US-led ‘war on drugs’ in the 1970s. Still, much earlier fears of moral and racial degeneration relating to substance ‘enslavement’ could be observed in the English-speaking world (Kohn, 1992; Hickman, 2007; Zieger, 2008; Berridge, 2013). Closer to our times, public indignation has met with psychedelics (Goode, 2008), cannabis (Young, 1971), heroin and crack-cocaine (Chiricos, 2006; Taylor, 2009), ecstasy/MDMA (Critcher, 2000; Forsyth, 2001), alcohol (Nicholls, 2009) or crystal methamphetamine (Ayles & Jewkes, 2012; Linnemann, 2016).

In the later years of the past decade the drug policy agenda has shifted towards NPS – new or revived laboratory-made or naturally-occurring psychoactive compounds (D’Agnone, 2015; EMCDDA, 2017; Measham & Newcombe, 2017), hard to track and control (Stevens & Measham, 2014) as they passed through global commodity chains and ‘cryptomarkets’ (Power, 2013; Aldridge & Décary-Héту, 2016). By 2012 there were more newly identified NPS than traditional substances monitored through international conventions (UNODC, 2013). In Europe, most were synthetic cannabinoids (smoking blends) and synthetic cathinones (stimulant powders) often made in laboratories in the Far East, mainly in India and China (EMCDDA, 2012). Later on, synthetic opioids sold via NPS retail platforms have been raising concerns over their abuse and overdosing potential (EMCDDA, 2016; 2017).

Beyond the ecologies of harm and policy landscapes these will have set in motion a gap remains in understanding the discursive framings of NPS. This paper attempts to map out some patterns in the mainstream media reporting of NPS use in Romania and the United Kingdom. Looking into three sets of data that add to a total corpus of almost 800 news items collected from publications in both countries, it aims to identify some of the wider connotations that surround emerging substances and trends of use in the public imagination. It does so by trying to capture a continental, cross-cultural view bridging East and West but also by studying reactions to new drug phenomena in different political contexts, from a post-communist to a more traditional liberal democracy.

In Romania a drug news cycle focusing on NPS began with a notion of problematic use among ‘good youths’ harming themselves with synthetic cannabinoids and moved on, rather shyly, towards underclass injecting users transitioning from opiates to synthetic cathinones and other amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS). The former were depicted as valuable in themselves, the latter as a threatening, contagious presence. Similar patterns were also observable in the British media, but with classes of ‘legal highs’ changing roles. Mephedrone and other ATS were first seen as a threat to experimenting, young users, only for the synthetic cannabinoids grouped under the ‘Spice’ umbrella-term to later intersect with, and appear to alter the condition of, lower class groups such as rough sleepers or prison inmates.

Following this, the paper imagines three main directions of drug news analysis. The first, ‘time’, deals with the symbolic disruption of clean or valuable youth that in a metaphorical register threatens the future and continuity of the social body itself. The second, ‘space’, refers to the visibility of marginal groups e.g. the redundant poor, within public spaces and to the destructive agency of drugs as the catalyser of uncontained bad behaviour disturbing order. The third, ‘institutional assemblages’, codes issues relating to markets and regulation, policy responses and new legal frameworks.

The scoping of drug news discourse illustrated here points to the need of fine-tuning and adapting models of cultural critique to transnational arenas where new drugs themselves seem to evade “top down, state-centric and law-focused” (Seddon, 2014, p.1022) models of control. Critical analysis can inspire new and more flexible moral and political imaginaries where stigmatising ways of talking about old and new drugs can leave room for more collaborative and sensitive strategies of regulation and representation of substance use and users. Encouraging accurate reporting emerges as a pressing matter weighed against the goal of developing more efficient education and prevention, as well as more rational policy.

NPS and the drug news cycle(s)

To date, academic literature suggests that mainstream media depictions of NPS markets impacted on trends in use and policy turns in various ways. Forsyth (2012) was able to show that the inaccurate reporting of mephedrone use and the fatalities associated with it in the UK anticipated increased online interest for the drug, potentially adding to its popularisation. Alexandrescu’s (2014) study of British tabloid media coverage of mephedrone captured the

image of an attack on the country's youth to push for control measures (see also Silverman, 2012). Pelbat et al. (2017) surveyed Hungarian online media to learn that NPS were mostly discussed in terms of law breaking and bad behaviour of (often marginalised) users. In the US, Miller et al. (2015) suggest that intense coverage may have hastened the adoption of federal bans on 'bath salts' and synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists (SCRAs).

The 'who', 'what' and 'how' of drug taking shape the tones of drug reporting. Cultural schemas and class politics explain how moral signifiers might differ. Some drugs become normalised in some contexts (Pennay & Measham, 2016) whereas others remain markers of marginality in others. In the latter sense, the 'problematic' drug user sits in the category of "objects marked for death" (Butler, 1997, p.27). His/her abjection speaks of a refusal to hold together, to maintain clear boundaries, to be ordered and retain solidity of flesh and reason (Alexandrescu, 2016). The 'drug' concept itself points to the genealogy of a modern state geared to a 'social defence' component directed not only at external enemies but also at classed, racialised or gendered groups typecast as 'enemies within' (Seddon, 2016).

Trends in drug use able to crack fissures in normative boundaries that media outlets can respond to with 'panic' discourse might be sought in what Lawler refers to as "the normalcy of middle-classness" (Lawler, 2005, p.443). This points to a bourgeois monopolisation of taste evaluation that enforces and polices class hierarchies (Sayer, 2005). A dominant middle-class 'habitus' – internalised dispositions and interpretative reflexes (Bourdieu, 1977; 1984) – indicates "excess, waste and artifice" (Skeggs, 2004, p.105) as the abject coordinates of lower-class bodies (and cultures). These are contrasted with constraint as the staple of middle-class tastes and identities.

The historical hegemony of bourgeois values in the West frames normative discourses of thrift, moderation and reason. These morph into late modern notions of risk governance and adversity (O'Malley, 2010; Lupton, 2013) sitting on liberal ideals of rational self-autonomy that pleasurable experimentation with (unknown) drugs seems incompatible with (Seddon, 2010). Media language seeks to direct public contempt at the 'lazy' poor, benefits claimants and other redundant populations whose lifeworlds often intersect with drugs and addiction (see Tyler 2013; Jensen 2014; Warner 2015). In such perpetual dialectics of solids and fluids, of the rational and hygienic standing against the chaotic and polluting there solidifies a matrix of prohibition and typifying depictions of lower order drug using bodies.

It is one of the main goals of this paper to look into the nuances of drug news coverage in the context of emerging NPS markets. It thus seeks to operate in a theoretical framework more attuned to qualitative distinctions of who (and how) the victims and perpetrators of the drugs game are shown to be rather than to quantification and disproportionality. It moves towards a discourse analytical approach which not only acknowledges that what is being said about NPS draws boundaries of possible action on how to respond to NPS but also that the language describing the problem is rooted in lived conditions of harm and suffering, as well as structural inequalities.

Scope and method

The comparative points put forward here bridge the experiences of two countries at opposite ends of the continent, finding themselves at significantly different points of their historical trajectories. One in a generational transition to liberal democracy underpinned by the repudiation of its communist past, the other, more firmly established among the traditional (post)industrial democracies of the West, now redefining its place on the continental stage. Both following similar paths in responding to NPS that eventually led to the adoption of ‘blanket ban’ legislation.

Romania first updated its list of controlled substances in 2010 with 44 active agents sold by local head shops at the time. A year later it adopted a legal framework that defined and effectively controlled ‘substitutes’ as “any natural or synthetic substances or mixtures of natural and synthetic substances, in any physical form, or any product, plant, mushrooms or fragments, whose use is not regulated by other legal provisions and is likely to yield psychoactive effects and, which can be used instead of a controlled drug” (The NPS Review Expert Panel – NPSREP, 2014, p.33). The UK banned cathinones in 2010, followed successively by other classes of NPS (piperidines, SCRAs, benzofurans, tryptamines) and finally by a ‘blanket ban’ through the Psychoactive Substance Act of 2016, criticised for its legal and terminological ambiguities (Stevens et al., 2015; Measham & Newcombe, 2017).

The data used in this paper come from three separate sets (one for Romania and two for the UK) collected at, and covering, distinct periods of time. They were also coded at separate times, for different purposes – the first for the author’s doctoral dissertation, the second for a separate study and the third for the purposes of this paper.

For Romania, a total of 575 digital news items covering the period 2009-2013 were retrieved from the websites of four national dailies, using the key-term ‘ethnobotanicals’ which had become congruent with NPS references in the mainstream media. Of these, 319 items came from the tabloids *Cancan* (202) and *Libertatea* (117), and the other 256 from the broadsheets *Jurnalul Național* (100) and *România Liberă* (156). *Libertatea* and *Cancan* were the second and fourth best sold dailies in 2010, when NPS coverage was at its peak, selling an average of 153,000, and 68,000 copies per edition in the first half of the year. *Jurnalul Național* and *România Liberă* were the fifth and seventh most sold daily newspapers, with about 61,000 and 43,000 copies sold per edition during the same reference period. This added to online readerships varying from at least 0.9 million unique monthly browsers (*Jurnalul Național* – February 2011) to 3.1 million (*Cancan* – February 2012).¹

For the United Kingdom, a second set of 110 news items looked into the reporting of mephedrone between November 2009 and November 2011 in four British tabloids: *Sun* (12), *Daily Mail* (24), *Daily Mirror* (37) and *Daily Star* (37). ‘Mephedrone’ and its street name ‘meow meow’ were used as search terms on the newspapers’ websites. The data were also discussed in Alexandrescu (2014), along with audience figures – in the spring of 2012, the *Sun* was the most successful UK print media brand (an estimated 17.8 million print and online monthly readers), followed by the *Daily Mail* (16.4 million) and the *Daily Mirror* (10.6 million) with the *Daily Star* appealing to a less consistent reader base (4.6 million).²

A third news corpus aimed at the even more specific campaigning of one regional newspaper, the *Manchester Evening News*, for a coherent response to ‘Spice’ use in the Manchester area, most specifically among rough sleepers in the city. For this case study, a number of 99 published items stretching from August 2016 to July 2017 were accessed through the LexisNexis newspaper library by searching for the term ‘Spice’, repeatedly used to refer to a wide range of SCRAAs sold and used locally throughout the period. Audience figures showed the *Manchester Evening News* to have the most accessed regional press website in the country, with more than 650,000 unique browsers per day at the beginning of 2017.³

In the Romanian set, the two tabloids sit at the sensationalist, conservative (but maybe less politically committed) end of the media spectrum, whereas the broadsheets move towards right-centrist (more nationalist-flavoured for *Jurnalul Național*, more liberal pro-European for *România Liberă*) positions. In the UK, the first set looks at mainly right-wing conservative and populist outlets all primarily targeting lowbrow readerships – the *Daily Star* with less of a

political agenda than the *Daily Mail* and *Sun*, nevertheless. An exception is the *Daily Mirror*, traditionally closer to the Labour party and the British left, but still a tabloid in format and market reach. In the third set, the *Manchester Evening News*'s political allegiance to the centre-left, in one of Labour's heartlands in the North of England, should also be noted.

The three sets were processed at different times (RO1 – 2015; UK2 – 2013; UK3 – 2017), mostly through codes meant to capture the principal and background topics of the news stories they contained e.g. 'harm to self', 'harm to others', 'regulation', 'policing', 'fatality' etc. They were all then analysed through a combination of content categorisation and discourse analysis (see Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Altheide and Schneider, 2013) that will be used here to identify and illustrate the main semantic directions, leaving aside quantitative-analytical (frequency) components.

The codes were clustered around emerging sets of themes which hinted at semantic underpinnings of NPS as objects of public concern: 'NPS-as-risk', 'NPS-as-antisocial-behaviour', 'NPS-as-legal-loophole' etc. These were further refined through the theoretical lens of interest for a more detailed categorisation of characters, actions, causes and effects that produced the final three frames. Detailed analysis was only performed on the chosen samples. Though at times looking into elements of form and style specific to critical discourse analysis (CDA), the approach deployed here draws closer to a Foucauldian (genealogical) strand of discourse analysis (Foucault, 1972) where discursive and material realms are taken to co-instantiate the realities of drugs and other social phenomena (Dunn and Neumann, 2016).

The Romanian-language extracts have been translated into English, often in almost *ad litteram* form with minimal adaptation of style, in order to capture original lexical choices, modalities and rhetorical tropes, even at the expense of jeopardising textual coherence and losing cultural subtleties in translation. The overall, resulting corpus of about 800 items cannot be taken as a systematic or fully representative extraction of NPS-related content/coverage within the two national mediascapes addressed. The samples analysed do not piece together an exhaustive picture of all relevant themes but aim to describe various lines of discourse emerging from the corpus approached.

NPS reporting: themes and frames

The dominant themes identified in the data described above are grouped into three main directions: time, space and institutional assemblages. ‘Time’ looks at the vital threat of NPS to young users as a symbolic disruption of the future, ‘space’ looks at NPS use as social disorder and antisocial behaviour, whereas ‘institutional assemblages’ brings together issues relating to NPS markets, regulation and policing.

Romania: High on ‘ethnobotanicals’

In Romania, the period under study (2009-2013) shows two intense phases of coverage: early (January-February) 2010, when the first bans were announced and the first purported NPS-induced fatalities reported, and October 2010 – January 2011, when retailers were back in business with new lines of products and local efforts (council ban orders, civic campaigns) pushed for more efficient responses. The media here preferred to use general terms like ‘ethnobotanicals’, ‘ethnobotanical plants’ or ‘ethnobotanical substances’, picking up on the promotional strategies developed by NPS entrepreneurs to avoid suspicion by pretending, for example, to sell rare ‘plants’ of sole potential interest to botanists and other researchers.

No consistent discussion of the pharmacological nature of ‘ethnobotanicals’ provided background to the reporting of the issue, although general references to casual episodes among youth groups in various cycles of education, often via smoking, generally hinted at the presence of synthetic cannabinoids and experimental, recreational patterns of use. University and high school students being treated for intoxication with unknown substances, sometimes hallucinating and displaying aggressive behaviour set familiar news templates throughout the years.

In one extreme instance, *Libertatea* (20/6/11) looked at a case of two boys aged four and seven who had “consumed ethnobotanicals” taken to an accident and emergency (A&E) department by their parents in a state “similar to that of severe alcohol intoxication”. The article drew the association between NPS and the children’s reception into emergency care on the ‘evidence’ that traces of methamphetamines and opiates had been found in their bodies, indicating a rather loose understanding of NPS and an eagerness to manoeuvre even known and controlled classes of substances into it.

Dubious claims like those suggesting 500,000 Romanians aged 14-23 (*Libertatea* 15/1/10) or later 55 per cent of Romanian youths (ages undefined) (*Jurnalul Național* 3/12/10) to have tried ‘ethnobotanicals’ advanced by third sector organisations and other ‘moral entrepreneurs’ passed unchallenged by news editors. Military metaphors were used to illustrate the severity of the threat head shops posed as claims for the issue to be dealt with as a matter of national security were put forward (*România Liberă* 9/4/11; *Libertatea* 17/8/12). *România Liberă* (22/4/11) ultimately referred to a “guerrilla war in the hospitals” that medics were fighting.

Tens of children ended up in the hospital intoxicated with ethnobotanical plants. At the ‘Grigore Alexandrescu’ [pediatric] Hospital in the Capital alone, in the past two months 16 teenagers aged between 12 and 17 were checked in experiencing symptoms such as dizziness, drowsiness, cephalalgia, vertigo, visual hallucinations, nausea and vomiting. Medical tests revealed that they had been intoxicated after using cigarettes that contained ethnobotanical substances. (*România Liberă* 10/2/10)

Stringing numbers and pathological terms together under the semantic cover of medical authority suggested a sense of factuality around the toxic effects of NPS, identified here twice (opening and closing of the paragraph) as the culprit for a potentially damaging condition that could spread from one front (one hospital alone) to a larger social body. Headlines of innocent and naïve youth harming itself acquire meaning through what Vitellone (2008) refers to as the futurity of adolescence – the imagined projection into the future of a dominant notion of good or valuable youth e.g. of white, middle-class morality. Cultural artefacts like drugs can be objects of non-futurity and stagnation ascribed to decivilising ethnic, class or sexual ‘Others’ that can pull ‘good youth’ into the lower orders where drug economies take root.

The threat of drugs and non-futurity that defines the time dimension of reporting sits between youth’s symbolic potential for growth and renewal and its inherent frailty. This was also the story of the “first Romanian ‘eaten’ by the ‘crocodile-drug’” (*Libertatea* 28/1/12). The 20-year-old, initially believed to be “just another young man severely affected by ethnobotanicals” was named as the first victim of ‘krokodil’ (see Grund et al. 2013), the drug that “makes the skin and flesh fall off the bones”. Desomorphine use (the active ingredient in ‘krokodil’) was never formally identified in the country nor officially confirmed in Alexandru’s case. He was said to have lived in the sewers after disappearing from home for a year before a compassionate pensioner who had “fed him like a dog” alerted the authorities seeing his body “had turned to living flesh” (*Cancan* 11/10/12).

Alexandru is a young man with a cursed past, who is now agonising on a shabby sofa, trying to remember who he was, what he did and what the future will hold for him if he's not even going to be able to walk on his own two feet again. To become a normal human being. (*Cancan* 13/12/12)

The lexical chain of adjectives in this fragment – “young”, “cursed”, “shabby” and “normal” – also dotted the chain of sequences that saw the degradation and reduction of the young man as a victim of his poor choices and feeble sense of self-preservation to a subhuman state, drained of lucid personhood. The drug or drugs that had done this to him marked the cut-off point between the health and vitality of youth and the open future it could no longer project itself in – further on, into any condition of ‘normality’ or ‘humanity’. Dangerous encounters with unknown drugs could cause irreparable damage.

Another semantic direction pointed to the geographies of anxiety that head shops would punctuate in their occupation of public space. The drug users they attracted would themselves appear as unpredictable presences engaged in chaotic, potentially threatening movement. A sense of anxiety would emanate from stories like those of ‘ethnobotanicals’ users who were thought to have set a building on fire on Christmas day (*Libertatea* 25/12/10) or of a young man turning into a “public menace” after using and attacking passersby “out of the blue” (*Cancan* 13/12/10). In this ‘space’ dimension NPS often intersected with spoiled ‘moral careers’ and abject identities such as those of offenders, drug dealers or sex workers.

Scenes that seemed cut out of a fiction film took place on Monday night in [the residential area of] Berceni. With her mind astray on ethnobotanicals, a 26-year-old prostitute tried to set herself on fire in a petrol station at Piața Sudului [square]. Flames caught on at one of the pumps and rose six meters high putting the whole area at risk, as the station could have blown up at any moment. (*Cancan* 23/11/10)

Dramatic scenes unfolding in an almost dreamlike cinematic sequence punctuated NPS as a menace that could disturb the order of a world caught off guard. The spilling of destructive impulses from individuals out of control onto collective spaces, the unpredictable actions of shady characters (sex workers and others) would threaten everyone's safety if unleashed in their full caustic potential. Ever more visible head shops planted at street corners, selling drugs in the open and pulling underworlds and their inhabitants out on the surface endangered the safety and stability of life in the city.

A link between injecting ATS/NPS use and worrying statistics showing soaring HIV-infection rates among former heroin users surfaced later into the corpus (late 2011 to early 2012). Young mothers bringing “the first generation of newborns high on ethnobotanicals” into the world (*Jurnalul Național* 5/8/11; also in *România Liberă* 15/11/11) and warnings of epidemiological risks among substance injectors (*România Liberă* 30/11/11; *Libertatea* 23/4/12; *Jurnalul Național* 13/11/12) were some of the headlines hinting at it but this new angle never fully took off despite significant harms being documented on the ground (Sarosi, 2014; Alexandrescu, 2017). ATS use was indicated as the cause of violence, degradation and danger to others.

“[...] All that I could hear felt like some vile ranting against me”, remembers Alin. This is how, following a quarrel over a song, as chief-commissioner Christian Ciocan tells us, he ended up getting a knife from the kitchen and sticking it into his friend’s abdomen, who was just as high as he was. “Luca [the victim] was laughing at me. As if I didn’t even exist”, remembers the 22-year-old young man. (*Jurnalul Național* 18/10/10)

A NPS referred to as ‘PM’ – most likely *Pure by Magic* (a mephedrone label) – would blur senses and reason, collapsing boundaries of reality and hallucination. The alternation of voices, the distorted (first person, direct speech) subjectivity of the substance user and the neutral (third person, indirect speech) tone of authority (the police spokesman as impartial but factual *raisonneur*) further underlined this gap in perception, to the point where self-awareness collapsed along with the physical coordinates anchoring it into reality – “as I didn’t even exist”. This also speaks of moral disintegration and corrosive ‘liminality’ (Turner, 1969) – historical discourses of prohibition and ‘drugs’ as the path to destruction framed yet another cautionary tale and helped stabilise the fluid, loose category of NPS into ‘other drugs’ knowable by their toxic effects and ontological disorder.

Violent crime further made NPS-inspired headlines: a 18-year-old beaten with a crowbar and left to agonise to death in bed by her 38-year-old boyfriend and head shop owner who had confessed to using NPS and alcohol before committing the murder (*Cancan* 31/7/12); a 29-year-old man stabbed in the heart by the brother of a woman he had asked to have sex with him in exchange for a packet of ‘ethnobotanicals’ (*Libertatea* 2/12/12; *Jurnalul Național* 3/12/12); or two burnt bodies in a car traced back to a botched NPS transaction, the buyers having tried to dispose of their victims’ corpses (*România Liberă* 31/5/13). In ‘time’ NPS

users as self-destructing ‘good youth’ were valuable in itself and problematised through their future absence, in ‘space’ they became a threatening and immediate presence.

A third direction of ‘institutional assemblages’ captured policy debates but also stories and voices calling for the criminalisation of the legal drugs market. Before wider national ‘blanket’ legislation was passed, numerous media campaigns reflected or complemented civic and political efforts. Residents of a block of flats in the capital Bucharest threatening to set a local head shop on fire for fear of “children seeing drugs outside their windows” (*Libertatea* 29/11/10); local council bans and police closures of shops “for the protection of our children” (*Libertatea* 8/12/10); local authorities compiling lists of users to monitor them in a small town (*Cancan* 2/3/11); or reporters negotiating bulk buys for National Day celebrations (*România Liberă* 1/12/10) and trying out NPS themselves to describe the ‘gruesome state’ they experienced (*România Liberă* 20/9/10) were some narrative instances.

A former narcotics officer told us that China currently has 400 tons of such substances ready to be shipped solely to Romania. The same source mentioned that three weeks ago in Constanța [Black Sea port] a container full of ethnobotanical plants originating from China tried to make its way through customs. “[...] They seized them, analysed them, interrogated the recipient and were told straight away that he wanted to set up an ethnobotanicals shop. They gave them back to him because they didn’t contain any substances on the Government ban list”. (*Jurnalul Național* 1/12/10)

In this fragment, the presumed knowledgeable but anonymous source would draw a sense of proximity in singling out the country as one of the primary targets in a larger destabilising effort targeting Europe, not holding back on the estimated size of the ongoing operation. Military metaphors would intersect with orientalist (Said, 1978) anxieties to evoke the spectrum of a silent faraway enemy engaging in almost overt manoeuvres to attack the homeland by working with enemies within, NPS entrepreneurs seizing business opportunities at any human cost. The first signs of infiltration and the imaginary scale of impending threat invoked (in the order of hundreds of tons of NPS) called for an immediate defensive reaction that the absence of a more robust legal framework made impossible.

The military and medical language of aggression, contagion and containment that surrounds drugs in popular culture and the political imagination tied NPS as an extension of ‘drugs’ before (see Seddon, 2016 for the genealogy of the concept), flattening them into a matrix of

meaning-making, morality and control that would prove too narrow for the legal, chemical and economic complexities of new substance markets, global dynamics and cultural scenes.

In the Romanian context, the thematic and rhetorical nuances of NPS-focused media discourse also potentially cascade from response schemas rooted in old forms of authoritarian political control. Clashing liberal notions of substance use as individual choice and larger cultural reflexes of reliance on strong authority and its sanitisation of public space rooted in the country's communist past possibly played out in the alarmist tones of drug news reporting. These also passed through larger economic flows that determined local drug market configurations and that saw synthetic cannabinoids permeating deeply into youth cultures and synthetic stimulant powders displacing heroin among injecting drug users. Through such intersections symbolic frames of concern for the former largely ignored the plight of the latter.

UK: 'Meow-meow' and 'Spice zombies'

In the United Kingdom, two distinct peaks of interest coagulate around the emergence and banning of mephedrone and, later on, around SCRA within specific settings such as prisons or pockets of chronic poverty and homelessness in Northern England and other areas. The first, stretching from late 2009 well into 2011 and beyond, mainly looks at the presumed casualties of mephedrone ('M-Cat' or 'meow meow' by its street names) making its way into teenagers' partying repertoires. In this phase, the metaphorical language of the 'Russian Roulette' pointed to the perils of experimenting with unpredictable drugs, though the factual link between mephedrone and its presumed fatal agency was oftentimes not established convincingly enough.

Meow meow should be accompanied by a picture of a revolver with a single bullet in the chamber – for those who snort it or take it in tablet form are playing a game of Russian Roulette with their lives. Sometimes they will experience feelings of euphoria but, more often than not, side-effects will include convulsions, breathing problems, nose bleeds, depression, psychosis – or even worse. (*Daily Mail* 17/3/10)

The imagery of the 'Russian Roulette' served as a warning flag to curious users but also as a strategy of contextualising calls for immediate measures to neutralise the risks that the drug could pose for 'good youth' tantalised by NPS e.g. understanding 'legal' as 'safe'. In this

sense, the ‘roulette’ cohabits in public arenas with what on the regulatory front Stevens and Measham (2014) refer to as the ‘drug policy ratchet’, or governments’ tendencies to react to emerging drugs with tighter rather than looser controls. An historical thread links new drugs with ‘older’ ones to pre-assign ‘guilt’ and dangerous properties to the newcomers. The vertigo of the roulette is the scene of ambiguity, where pleasure and danger are hard to pull apart, whereas the repeated adjustments of the ratchet are the scene of precautionary measures.

Tabloids warned of a ‘mephedrone menace’, that liberal commentators dismissed as a ‘moral panic’ pushing authorities to adopt ‘knee-jerk reactions’ (Measham et al., 2011). A string of stories kicked off with the now famous headline of the ‘legal drug teen’ who had ‘ripped his scrotum off’ (*Sun* 26/11/ 09) and continued well beyond the April 2010 ban. Two teenagers dying within hours of each other following a pub crawl that involved the drug (*Daily Mirror* 17/3/10), a detail later infirmed by toxicology tests, an aspiring soldier 18 years of age hanging himself hours after presumably using (*Daily Mail* 9/4/10) or a young woman believed to have had her drink spiked with it just before her 21st birthday (*Daily Star* 20/8/10) were among the victims.

Banned drug meow meow has claimed its youngest victim – Rebecca Cardwell, aged just 19. She collapsed and died of liver failure three days after trying the plant fertiliser with friends. Tests showed it was mixed with amphetamine and two other drugs to form a lethal cocktail. (*Daily Star* 14/10/2010)

The futurity of young users clashed with the antagonistic force of the drug, even if diluted into a larger amalgamation of substances of which the ‘plant fertiliser’ was singled out as the catalysing, fatal element. In this dominant ‘time’ dimension, the destructive agencies attributed to the drug and their presumed interlacing with the life paths of “carefree”, “innocent”, “fun-loving” youth not only appeared to mark disruption points that threatened its safety and vitality, but also ate into its moral fibre. The unverified story of the 180 pupils missing classes off sick after a “craze for the ‘miaow-miaow’ party drug” had swept their secondary school in Leicestershire (*Daily Star* 9/3/10), or those of a head teacher calling for a ban after witnessing one of his sixth-form pupils collapse (*Daily Mirror* 18/1/10) and of two 15-year-old girls getting suspended after taking mephedrone at school (*Daily Mirror* 31/3/10) crystallised this thematic line.

Children as young as 11 are taking the killer drug meow meow following an "explosion" in its use, experts warned yesterday. [...] An estimated million grams of the substance, sold as plant food, is being imported into the UK as detectives believe pushers are stockpiling it ahead of a ban. (*Daily Mirror* 2/4/2010)

Quoting police experts, tabloid editors could tie together and contrast numbers to point readers to the imminent dangers of inertia in government responses and law enforcement, coupled with an increase in use attributed to the ambiguous legal status of mephedrone even in anticipation of the ban. The tender ages of users contrasted with the ever more poignant risks venal retailers would subject them to, here suggested by a hyperbolising choice in units of measure (grams instead of kilograms or tons) that could augment the envisaged dangers posed by the soon-to-be illegal NPS trade.

A larger 'institutional assemblages' dimension was discernible through repeated calls for regulation, most often by forcing cause and effect between availability and hazardous use, but also by tracing back supply chains to "ruthless" Chinese (*Daily Mirror* 21/3/10) or Eastern European dealers (*Sun* 21/3/10) that customs agents were powerless to stop.

A 'space' dimension hinting at elements of threat and disorder was also visible in the numerous stories of antisocial behaviour picked up by the tabloids, more so after the ban came into force. A teenager who killed his father and wounded his mother in a knife attack high on the drug (*Sun* 17/11/11), another threatening to shoot a 77-year-old woman for £10 (*Daily Star* 19/11/10), a "brilliant" medical student ending up dead after starting to deal (*Daily Mail* 12/1/11) or a gang beating a man unconscious and dousing him in petrol (*Daily Mirror* 17/6/10) were some examples. This line was more clearly reignited a few years later, quite notably in the pages of the regional press in some of the areas where following the Psychoactive Substances Act of 2016, NPS were pushed from head shops onto street markets or prisons where they offered as an escape route from misery and destitution.

A case study in point is the *Manchester Evening News*'s 2016/2017 coverage of the city's rough sleeping population's en masse transition to synthetic cannabinoids, and the presence of what it named 'Spice zombies' disturbing the order and hygiene of public spaces. In the build-up, stories about rough sleepers burning another homeless man alive in his tent when high on a 'spice' drug (*M.E.N.* 12/8/16), smuggling rings pushing synthetic cannabinoids into local prisons resulting in chaos (*M.E.N.* 5/11/16; 31/1/16; 16/2/16) only preceded what editors

referred to as “spicephrenia” (*M.E.N.* 11/4/17), a “drug epidemic” turning the city’s homeless into “the walking dead” (*M.E.N.* 6/3/17). Succeeding “strings of casualties” (*M.E.N.* 31/3/17) “laid low” by ‘spice’ (*M.E.N.* 8/4/17), “frozen either standing, lying slumped or squatting” (*M.E.N.* 5/4/17) announced a peak in reporting during Easter Week 2017.

One friend who works nearby tells me of finding human faeces in a phone box on her lunch hour. Even a public official mentions in passing that she has seen someone defecating in the middle of the day in the gardens, as children play on the slides. [...] As I walk to meet him [the newspaper’s photographer], between the now-closed food market stalls I see a small old man swaying about like a zombie accompanied by a woman wrapped in a duvet. Suddenly everywhere I look, there are pale, wasted people. It’s dystopian, like a horror movie. (*Manchester Evening News* 10/4/17)

Local news stories in this period emphasised the blatant visibility and manifestation of abject behaviours disrupting the cleanliness and regular metabolism of life in the city. First-person accounts and reportage stylistics created a sense of proximity and immersion into ‘dystopian’ scenes such as the above. The dehumanisation of ‘spice’ users slipping into bestial instincts transpired through the use of pop culture ‘zombie’ mythology. Though the newspaper did not shy away from interrogating the structural conditions and drug policies that had made SCRA use rife among the region’s most vulnerable groups (*M.E.N.* 12/4/17), their de-subjectivisation and symbolic reduction to carcasses emptied of rationality, incapacitated of self-restraint signalled them as unpredictable, polluting presences.

The contamination of space, the visceral disturbance of lifeworlds, the traces and eruption of decivilising impulses (faeces in the phone box at lunchtime, defecation in broad daylight) added to a script of dissolving place, of the familiar regressing into the revolting and uncanny. The storyteller’s witnessing of sights and brutal realisations would call readers into the scene, guiding them from gruesome details of characters and grotesque traits (“small old man swaying about” and “woman wrapped in a duvet”) to a larger overwhelming sense of dissolution and anxiety (“pale, wasted” figures approaching from everywhere). Disorder experienced as the banalisation of chaos disturbing everyday life in the heart of the city.

The sight of a person stumbling around in a zombie-like state is as common in parts of the city centre as someone selling coffee according to workers around Piccadilly. Many said very few people even bat an eyelid anymore. (*Manchester Evening News* 10/4/17)

A narrative thread of ‘spice’ perverting familiar scenes and places would later run through stories such as that of ‘drug den’ phone booths being used for dealing and taking to further be removed by local authorities (*M.E.N.* 19/5/17), a ‘dealer dad’ stashing it in the family fruit bowl at home (*M.E.N.* 28/6/17) or an autistic 13-year-old boy tricked by ‘yobs’ into smoking it only to be left paralysed for hours before recovering in the hospital (*M.E.N.* 5/7/17). Austerity policies had already aggravated homelessness and intensified structural violence against the homeless in the city, in previous years (Speed, 2017). Synthetic cannabinoids would meet with the dehumanising conditions of chronic poverty to further harm them but also to further sink them into marginality and abjection in the eyes of the public.

Discussion

The data discussed in this paper do not paint a systematic and comprehensive picture of NPS reporting in the two countries observed. Far from any claims of objectivity, they work to build, sustain and illustrate insights that the researcher has acquired as an intimate observer embedded in both national contexts and further on into more local scenes, splitting his time and attention from Romania to the United Kingdom, from his native Bucharest, the Romanian capital, to Manchester and Northern England where he has been based in recent years.

A ‘time-space-institutional assemblages’ nexus revealed some contours in social reactions to NPS markets. A ‘time’ dimension was prominent in both media spheres, though coalescing mainly around synthetic cannabinoids in Romania and around mephedrone in the UK. A ‘space’ dimension of underclass NPS use emerged in Romania around marginal identities and a vague notion of unspecified ‘ethnobotanicals’ causing antisocial deeds, only quite late and inconsistently looking at injecting ATS use. A ‘space’ dimension in the UK was most visible later on, in relation to ‘Spice’ use among underclass users such as rough sleepers. A third ‘institutional assemblages’ dimension followed issues relating to the supply and availability of NPS but also to successive attempts at effective regulation.

Research has suggested that media coverage of issues related to alcohol and other drug (AOD) use can set the public agenda and funnel interest towards traditional and emerging substances often in selective, biased ways, influencing individual and collective attitudes to risk, further on shaping political debates and policy-making decisions (Lancaster et al., 2011). Oversimplifying media narratives of danger conveying complexity-flattening definitions of

impending harm, fatality, decadence and addiction can stimulate interest and increase prevalence of substance use – more so when coupled with unbalanced and inaccurate information disseminated by media organisations subject to no quality control mechanisms (Coomber et al., 2000). This appears to have also been the case with the reporting of NPS in the publications under study in anticipating strings of bans and new cycles of legislative controls without advancing deeper structural explorations of the issue.

Shades of a more robust and informed discourse were visible along the way. These remained rather rare instances such as those when deconstructions of the very term ‘ethnobotanicals’ were attempted by *Jurnalul Național* (4/10/11) as a poster campaign designed by city council authorities in Bucharest compared NPS users with cows who “know what kind of grass to consume”, not only ridiculing users but falsely perpetuating the notion of NPS as natural (safe-to-use) ‘herbs’. The *Manchester Evening News* (12/4/17) gave a voice to homeless and youth charities operating in the city to suggest that bans had only pushed SCRA from street shops into underground supply chains, where they would be mixed with MDMA, opiates and other controlled substances to further expose users to overdosing and fuel street aggression.

Developing, refining and promoting guidelines for journalists on AOD reporting remains a necessity. Existing ones warn against the stigmatisation of people who use drugs through outdated, moralising language (UK Drug Policy Commission – UKDPC, 2012), as well as promote accuracy through the consultation of experts and the inclusion of diverse points of view on addiction and policy; they also acknowledge the emotional needs of users approached for media appearances, who should be given a voice but also allowed to make decisions in their own terms and time (AOD Media Watch, 2017). More specific guidelines on NPS reporting would also have to provide advice on distinguishing between the properties of, and risks carried by, various waves of emerging substances but avoid popularising them along with the toxic identities and stigma attached to other drug cultures before.

Conclusions

With the size, dynamics and interconnectedness of new drug markets being the elements of novelty, researchers are right to point out that “we have been here before” (D’Agnone, 2015, p.28). Fits of anxiety around ‘designer drugs’, ‘research chemicals’, ‘legal highs’ and ‘smart drugs’ have come and gone cyclically in the past few decades, but the general blueprint of

public discussion and submission of its object to scrutiny on behalf of politicians, policy makers and news editors has largely stayed the same. This is quite evident in the case of an established liberal democracy such as the UK that has had its historical fair share of ‘drug scares’ and ‘yellow press’ but also in the case of a younger one such as Romania that only came out of totalitarian insulation less than three decades ago.

What also infuses this and previous drug news cycles are the structural inequalities and social distinctions that ‘drugs’ as a regulatory concept underline and further sediment. Through old and new psychoactive substances, symbolic frames mark collective identities and shape hierarchies of moral worth that are also rooted in material conditions and asymmetries of power. Dominant notions of risk-aversion and self-discipline separate victim and perpetrator roles along class lines, with otherwise good, sober and educated youth tempted by drugs foreseeing collective existential unease, whereas vulnerable users and places where drugs tap into deep poverty and desperation appearing as threat and pollution. Through this, NPS will have met with the residual conservatism of authoritarian rule in former communist Romania and with the brutality of austerity politics and class stigma in the UK.

Less bombastic and more consistent and contextualised reporting of drug phenomena can serve to enhance better education and prevention platforms, as well as support harm-reduction and other more pragmatic efforts on the ground. It can also pave the way to meaningful debates on what possible avenues of reforming drug laws and policy might be, the more the failures and inadequacies of the current global control system are evidenced. All these directions, however, are futile without a more systemic interrogation of the gaps and immense inequalities that, with the help of some of the most powerful media, we have also come to take for granted.

Notes

¹ Figures based on Obae (2011) citing data provided by the Romanian Joint Industry Committee for Print and Internet and the online audience auditor website www.traffic.ro.

² The combined digital and print readership data are discussed by the Guardian (2012) Datablog based on the National Readership Survey.

³ According to Chapman (2017) citing ABC circulation figures.

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