

Editorial

Librarians and other subversives: truth can be a casualty of drug wars, too

As a drug and alcohol scholar I feel a great debt to the librarians in the field. Those of us who are not librarians spend our days either searching for information we cannot find or drowning in a sea of information we cannot navigate. Having the help of professionals in locating and sifting the information I need for my research has been a great blessing to me. But having lived through several drug wars, my appreciation runs deeper than that.

Librarians preserve the past and thereby engage in an essential aspect of history making. Only when information is under democratic control, i.e., available to public view, can it serve as the lifeblood of civil society and democratic culture, which in turn are the only antidotes to absolute power and its corruptions. Public information on the workings of government, and laws such as the Freedom of Information Act that help preserve access to it, distinguish democratic societies from, say, Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union, Mugabe's Zimbabwe, or various other dictatorships.

If publicly available information insulates citizens against abuse of power, then librarians are potential subversives. This can be seen, for example, in the fierce opposition by many librarians and professional librarian associations to the incursions of former U.S. Attorney General Ashcroft under the so-called Patriot Act, which among other things requires librarians to report what library users are reading whenever asked by law enforcement agents. This may seem a bit removed from the day to day work of librarians in the drug field, but perhaps less than you think.

Librarians are subversive of all orthodoxy and all ideology simply because they preserve the past. Knowledge and documentary evidence of the past insulate us from the tendency to revise history in light of present views or interests. Documents provide the intellectual infrastructure of social constructionism, now the dominant framework in the social sciences and cultural studies for understanding social problems. Social constructionist analysis is designed to find out

what institutional and individual actors with what interests and ideologies, engaged in what sorts of practices to get certain behaviors officially defined and responded to as a social problem. That is, reality as it appears to us is not just naturally occurring; rather, it is in important ways socially constructed.

For example, 19th century Victorians defined masturbation as pathological and invented all manner of mechanical and psychological "cures" which now seem strange. At the time of the American Civil War, leading U.S. medical journals reported the "discovery" that slaves who ran away from their masters did so because they suffered from a disease called "drapedomania." Heresy, witchcraft, premarital sex, illegitimacy, and, let us not forget, merely consuming alcoholic beverages, were all at some point made to seem deeply threatening and problematic by moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 1963).

A constructionist sensibility, in short, makes it possible to see how things come to be understood as they are, and how those understandings shift historically. A constructionist sensibility makes it possible to see that people in other cultures see things differently, that we ourselves once saw things differently, and that the official truth at any given moment is not necessarily the same thing as the truth, and is virtually never the only truth. All this, of course, can be subversive of the dominant version of events at a particular moment, and all of it depends on documents being preserved from the past.

Here are just a few examples from the drug and alcohol arena over the past 25 years.

- After the re-election of George W. Bush in 2004, a series of meetings took place in Washington, DC, and Vienna. One result of these meetings was that the United Nations Office of Drug Control was invited, if that is the right word, to change their language and their website or risk losing their ample US funding. An edict was subsequently sent out to UNODC staff by a high-ranking official: "UNODC

policy on needle exchange is reflected in the statement of the Executive Director, ‘Nevertheless, and again taking our guidance from the conventions, CND and INCB, we neither endorse needle exchange as a solution for drug abuse, nor support public statements advocating such practices.’” The memo went on to note that a meeting earlier that year had resulted in a “request” for “changes to the language of (some) projects to eliminate references to harm reduction and needle/syringe exchange. Please ensure that this policy is observed in our projects and programmes. Please also ensure that references to harm reduction and needle/syringe exchange are avoided in UNODC documents, publications and statements.”

This is a curious and telling elision given the unequivocal evidence that syringe exchanges have prevented thousands of AIDS deaths. But it is clear that such purging of words and ideas defined as heretical by the powers that be blurs the line that democratic states like to believe distinguishes them from totalitarian or theocratic ones. We know about this blackmail-induced censorship only because the document was saved.

- In the mid-1990s, the U.S. State Department issued a similar memorandum warning all agencies to avoid speaking positively about harm reduction because, they claimed, it was only code for legalization. This resulted in the U.S. withdrawing its support for the Congress of the International Council on Alcohol and Addictions to punish that organization for taking a very mild position in favor of policies that reduce the harms associated with alcohol and addictions. The U.S. delegate to the U.N.’s Commission on Narcotic Drugs said, “the U.S. cannot embrace ‘harm reduction’ as a goal. It connotes a tacit acceptance of drug abuse, and becomes a de facto decriminalization” (cited in Room, 1999).

This last claim was never true, of course, even though there are surely many who consider themselves harm reductionists who oppose prohibition and would favor some forms of decriminalization. But harm reduction policies have continued to spread around the world and even in the U.S. because they have succeeded where punitive prohibition has failed. Now governments that once tried to prohibit the very words “harm reduction” are busily re-defining the phrase so that it means what they have been doing all along. The point is not to state the obvious fact that drug control rhetoric often distorts the truth in self-interested ways, but rather to note that only the preservation of such documents allows us to understand, in the cool clear light of retrospect, how official truth got constructed.

- In May, 2004, ABC News broadcast a “Special Report” on ecstasy (MDMA) which provides a different sort of example. Unlike the scare stories about drugs so often found in the media, this documentary was occasioned by a retraction in the journal *Science* (Ricaurte et al., 2003). An earlier study funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) and published in *Science* 15 months earlier

(Ricaurte et al., 2002), purported to show that as little as a single dose of ecstasy causes “severe” and “profound” brain damage, including symptoms like those of Parkinson’s disease. Turns out this finding was false. Leaving aside the many problems with inter-species extrapolation, the 5 monkeys and 5 baboons used in the study had not been given “a common recreational dose” of ecstasy, but rather doses many times greater than those ecstasy users typically ingest. Further, the doses were *injected* into the animals rather than swallowed in tablet form like nearly all human users do. But more importantly, the researchers admitted in their retraction that the drug they (mistakenly) administered to the animals was not ecstasy at all but rather methamphetamine.

The notion that a single recreational dose of MDMA does *not* cause brain damage should not have been news. The retraction became worthy of a one-hour, prime-time documentary precisely because the original, erroneous study was so widely hyped by the drug control industry and the media. It would have taken about ten minutes worth of journalistic digging to figure out that the original study was wrong. The Monitoring the Future surveys of high school students as well as the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, both also funded by NIDA, show that millions of young people (c. 10% of U.S. adults under 25) have taken many millions of doses of ecstasy. While 2 of the 10 animals died of heat stroke (20%), the Drug Abuse Warning Network data consistently show that even emergency room visits are rare (3 to 11 per 10,000 use occasions or .03% to .11%), nevermind deaths. Remarkably, even after ABC News documented all this, a Drug Enforcement Administration agent looked straight into the eye of the camera and parroted the official line: “even a single dose of ecstasy causes brain damage.”

Drug war ideology tends to be data-proof, of course, but in this case the exposure of the accidental substitution of one drug for another required a retraction in a top-ranked journal, and this smelled sufficiently of scientific scandal to become newsworthy. Unfortunately, news reports like this are very rare. Most of the time, the media merely report this or that study showing this or that substance to be the dangerous drug *du jour*. The lead researcher in this case had built his career on over ten million dollars of research grants from NIDA, virtually all of which somehow found that illicit drugs cause neurotoxicity (McNeil, 2002, 2003). Such scandals and accidents give glimpses into how drug war ideology infiltrates science, allowing us to peek behind the curtain of power, as in *The Wizard of Oz*, to see how things come to appear as they do (Molotch and Lester, 1974).

- *Fahrenheit 451* is a frightening science fiction film (1966) based on a novel by Ray Bradbury in which books deemed dangerous by state officials were burned in the streets. The drug war has not yet led to this, but it is not as far-fetched as one might imagine. During the Reagan era (1980–1988),

NIDA issued a directive to all research centers instructing librarians to destroy certain of NIDA's own Research Reports because their findings had become "outdated," "misleading," and even "dangerous." Their list included some reports whose findings had indeed been supplanted by subsequent studies (not that this should detract from their historical value or warrant their destruction). But it also included publications whose findings remained sound, for example, studies showing that most marijuana use was occasional, not particularly harmful, and by itself almost never led to heroin addiction or other drug problems. The worst that could be said of many of these now-dangerous documents was that their tone displayed insufficient anti-drug zeal. Others were to be sent to the shredder not because their findings were no longer valid but because they contained what Howard Becker has called "politically inconvenient scientific knowledge." We know that the U.S. government did this only because a librarian, drop-jawed in astonishment, showed the NIDA directive to her research colleagues.

- Also during the Reagan era, NIDA issued what might be called a *nomenclature memorandum*. This memorandum provided a column of terms that were henceforth forbidden in NIDA proposals, reports, and publications based on NIDA-funded research, and a corresponding column of officially approved "right" words. One of the forbidden terms was "illicit drug use." The NIDA nomenclature that was to be used instead was "illicit drug abuse," for as the memo helpfully explained, there could be no such thing as "use" of an illicit substance. If a substance was illicit, they reasoned, then any ingestion of it was abuse by definition.

Year after year, the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse in the U.S. and similar surveys in most other developed nations all report that while some people get into great trouble with illicit drugs, the great majority who ingest them do not. They are citizens, parents, workers, and neighbors who periodically consume intoxicating substances (overwhelmingly marijuana), but precious few either cause or suffer significant harm as a result. That is, by any ordinary meaning of the words, most people who ingest illicit drugs *use* them rather than *abuse* them, just as with alcoholic beverages. The legal status of substances to which the word "abuse" is attached has no part in its definition. The new "correct" words were not based on new scientific findings but on new political preferences. Scholars can understand this only because the NIDA nomenclature memorandum was saved by a librarian as an important document – an artifact that showed how a government thought and acted at a particular juncture in history.

The right word for the process in which a government demands that the scientists they fund use the *wrong* word is "Orwellian." George Orwell's classic essay "On Political Language" (1946:156–171) concludes that "political language... is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder

respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." But the modifier "Orwellian" stems mostly from Orwell's famous futuristic novel, *1984*, (Orwell, 1949) in which he describes a society called Oceania that is always at war and run by an all-seeing, all-knowing "party" and its infallible leader, "Big Brother." Their slogan was "who controls the past, controls the future; who controls the present, controls the past."

Big Brother and The Party erected an elaborate information system in which "all records told the same tale" so that "the lie passed into history and became truth." All citizens of Oceania were monitored at all times by two-way televisions and they were required to cleanse their brains of all "thought crimes" – defined as anything other than the official truth from the Ministry of Truth. Citizens were required to chant official slogans such as "ignorance is strength," and "war is peace." They came to believe such things by means of "continuous alteration of the past" and a "protective stupidity" about that process which Orwell called "doublethink," which he defined this way:

"to know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the party was the guardian of democracy, to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again, and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself – that was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed." (1949:32–33)

All drugs have risks, legal or illegal, and none of the cases above are intended to suggest that all the scholarship done on drug issues is drug war propaganda. But all drug wars have risks, too, and if as is often said "truth is the first casualty of war," then we should remain alive to the possibility that in their zeal to combat this or that chemical "enemy," governments can behave in an Orwellian fashion. All the more reason to appreciate the librarians and other subversives who brave Big Brother's wrath and defy doublethink by preserving documents and making them publicly accessible.

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