

Remedies for Eco-Technological Catastrophe: Re-envisioning Psychedelics' Potential for Helping Solve Today's Challenges

Abstract

With the world presently facing an array of conflicting ecological and technological issues, works of psychedelic literature may offer alternative methods toward finding a sounder approach to dealing with the challenges. However, much of the global populace still appears to be in the dark regarding potential benefits of psychedelic experiences, partly resulting from social stigma associated with *psychotomimetic* use during the 1960s and reinforced by former U.S. president Richard Nixon's 1971 "War on Drugs," which politically legitimized their illegalization and misrepresentation in many countries. While clinical studies began to re-emerge during the 1990s and scholarly papers in the past decade have iterated positive results for psychedelic treatments of various health-related problems, deeper reflection on the subject can show how psychedelics could potentially do much more, offering greater insights that could (albeit indirectly) help to heal the entire planet.

The path toward realizing these perspectives involves re-imagining psychedelics grounded on empathy and *enjoyable* purpose, two human characteristics altered states have provided travelers when immersed in the right set and setting, and which have been repeatedly emphasized throughout much of the literature associated with altered states of consciousness. At a time when digital technologies are impacting youth and adults in unprecedented ways, psychedelic research can be a catalyst for drawing "users" out of their screen haze to recognize the fact that we are all connected to the planet as a whole and to each other beyond a digitally sampled reality.

For scholars who have actively engaged in the subject of psychedelics and psychedelic therapy, it comes as little surprise how these subjects have endured mixed opinions over the past eight decades, notably since Albert Hoffman's initial use of Lysergic Acid Diethylamide 25 (LSD) in 1943.¹ Pursuing research into related studies can often involve confusion on the part of readers as well as potentially negative media uproar, in part due to the illegalization of many psychedelics including LSD in the United States in 1966, followed by former U.S. President Richard Nixon's 1971 "War on Drug's" and the resulting classification of psychedelics as Schedule I substances by 1973, essentially declaring there was no specific medical use or purpose for these drugs.² As a result, investigations into psychedelic use have frequently been politically illegitimated while labeling the scientists, researchers, and users as merely left-leaning drug fanatics or irresponsible practitioners.

Since the re-emergence of clinical studies during the 1990s, however, there have been efforts toward not only decriminalizing psychedelic use in some countries, but of demonstrating an array of medicinal benefits some psychedelics have at helping patients in clinical settings suffering from issues ranging from terminal illness to depression, addiction, and anxiety. Moreover, there has been significant evidence that the use of certain psychedelics correlates with positive behavioral changes such as decreasing levels of criminal activity, suicide, and violence, while enhancing "pro-environmental" behavior.³ In short, the stigmatization allotted to psychedelics during the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st

¹ Chris Letheby covers some of the other initial discoveries and experiments of psychedelics in his book *Philosophy of Psychedelics* (2021) on p. 9. Complete source in the Bibliography.

² More details on these dates and the rationale for Schedule I substances can be found in the National Library of Medicine's online article, "Two Models of Legalization of Psychedelic Substances" (2022) as well as by visiting the United States Drug Enforcement Agency's website explaining "Drug Scheduling" at the following link: <https://www.dea.gov/drug-information/drug-scheduling#:~:text=Schedule%20I%20drugs%2C%20substances%2C%20or,a%20high%20potential%20for%20a%20buse.>

³ See Letheby (2021), p. 16.

century has reduced with the increase in clinical studies carried out which show evident benefits for their use.

This paper argues that while advancements in psychedelic therapy and research have shown positive results thus far, there are numerous other possibilities that can be explored toward improving the current stasis in the world, specifically regarding ecological responsibility to heal the planet and the elimination of incessant technological dependency threatening future generations' abilities to navigate conflicts and challenges. To be sure, this work does not discount the notable benefits computers have had on allowing scientists and medical practitioners to perform monumental operations in industries like healthcare, where more elegant data patterns and computational processing capabilities have provided optimistic perspectives for imagining a better future. However, to understand some of the current effects immersive digital technologies have on multiple global crises like climate change and digital pollution demands reassessing the role computer technologies ultimately play in day-to-day life and how they have also become a significant cause of human disparities and a potential risk to human prosperity.

The first part of this work focuses on outlining some of the most serious concerns pertaining to digital technologies today and provides a brief overview of specific behavioral conditions resulting from tech dependency. The second part of the work emphasizes psychedelic therapies discussed in Chris Letheby's *Philosophy of Psychedelics* (2021) and other similar studies to explain how the research, in conjunction with non-digitally dependent expressions and spaces, may offer solutions toward re-imagining a future devoid of ecological crises. By broadly observing both technology and psychedelics together, there may be evidence that the latter of these could be an answer to dealing with some of the world's problems, in part, the result of the former.

The past few years following the most severe spread of Covid have borne witness to a substantial degree of literature and articles that deal with technological effects on children, adolescents, and adults alike, albeit for different reasons. While Artificial Intelligence has instigated worries over rising unemployment levels for adults in the workforce, increasing evidence has shown that what was once only thought to be a correlation between smart phone use and declining health issues among adolescents and children is a demonstrable fact. Jonathan Haidt explains in his recent book, *The Anxious Generation* (2024) how multiple studies and experiments have been carried out confirming that social media “is a *cause* of anxiety, depression, and other ailments, not just a *correlate*” (Haidt, 148). More specifically, he defines the period between 2010 and 2015 as the “Great Rewiring,” whereby, beginning in the first part of the early 2010s, social media was “carried into schools... on smart phones in students’ pockets... [which] quickly changed the culture of everyone” (ibid). One of the repercussions of this development is that the level of distraction Haidt is referring to implies that less people are cognizant of their surroundings as well as more serious societal issues taking place outside of their algorithmically determined media appetites.

For younger, less developed minds, the risks of digital technologies like smart phones are even more profound. For example, the release of the first phones with front-facing cameras to enable *selfies*, accompanied by face *filters* to enhance superficial physical appearance while perfecting facial blemishes spelled psychological ruin for many preteens and teenagers, especially among girls, while addictive phone use for boys began to involve excessive screentime viewing pornography or being hooked on video games.⁴ Of the multiple problems that have resulted, depression and mental illness cases have skyrocketed and basic human to human interaction has been sacrificed in exchange for solitary, endless (and

⁴ See Haidt (2024), pp. 6 and 35 for new hardware development for smartphone cameras. Also, pp- 31 and 174.

mindless) scrolling which have torn apart abilities to feel ‘real’ community and intimate family and friend relationships.

In her book *Dopamine Nation* (2021), Anna Lembke discusses the increase in media relating to wellness and the pursuit of happiness, explaining how even “acts of kindness are framed as a strategy for personal happiness. Altruism no longer merely a good in itself has become a vehicle for our own “well-being”” (Lembke, 34). In other words, the ability for youth as well as adults to engage in congenial communication and meaningful kinship toward each other has been debilitated through compulsive screen time. Haidt (2024) argues that even though many parents would undoubtedly want their children to avoid becoming excessively immersed into a screen, another issue that is considerably concerning for those same parents is that their kids potentially become socially isolated by not having a phone *like their other friends*.⁵ For wealthier developed countries worldwide, the result of the prolific spread of mobile phones coupled with socio-economic pressure to use them to perform virtually all interpersonal and intrapersonal communication transactions does not help, especially when big tech companies, consciously deploy a ““social validation feedback loop”... [to] exploit “a vulnerability in human psychology”” (Haidt, 2024; 227). In short, it should come as little surprise why so many people today feel lost or disconnected from one another and their natural surroundings, which increasingly go unnoticed when so many people prefer gazing into their screens rather than looking out the window or acknowledging the world around them during their daily commutes.

One potential solution for curing some of these technologically influenced ailments is psychedelic therapy. Because of the cultural stigma that has traditionally surrounded psychedelics since the 1960s and 1970s, it may seem like a radical approach to adopt psychedelics as a primary catalyst for healing people and the planet. However, since the

⁵ See p. 223

reemergence of clinical research on psychedelics during the 1990s, there have been promising studies that have been carried out which demonstrate the power of different forms of psychedelics to help people suffering from behavioral issues. Chris Letheby's work in *Philosophy of Psychedelics* (2021) provides substantial insight into some of these developments. Citing other researchers in the field, Letheby explains, "Clinicians and researchers are becoming increasingly interested in a 'new' experimental treatment, with some suggesting it might herald a 'new paradigm' in treatment of disorders such as anxiety, depression, and addiction" (Letheby, 2021; 1, Nichols et al., 2017, Schenberg, 2018). While traditional forms of treatment have involved prescribing antidepressant medication, one of the main problems with these drugs is that they can lead to dependencies, often requiring patients to take them for lengthy durations of time. Despite the negative media messages surrounding psychedelics however, the fact is that as a drug treatment, "there is no daily dosing regimen of the kind familiar from existing antidepressant and antipsychotic medications" (Letheby, 2021; 1). For those who have actually experienced a psilocybin or LSD trip, they may have noticed that not only are they non-addictive in the sense of tobacco, alcohol, or opioid use, but the effects when attempting to ingest these drugs directly following an experience are extremely low, making it undesirable to try and achieve consecutively intense experiences. This is a critical detail when debating the safety of psychedelics and their impact on health.

Letheby (2021) engages quite extensively with the subject of psychedelics' health effects. For example, he highlights evidence that members of the Native American Church of Santo Daime were in good health both mentally and physically in comparison to the broader populace.⁶ The rationale for emphasizing this group is due to the fact that they regularly use peyote and ayahuasca in rituals. In term of negative media effects, Letheby also includes an excerpt of a 2008 study published in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, where the authors

⁶ See p. 14 from *Philosophy of Psychedelics* (2021)

address claims of chromosomal damage from LSD use and point out that not only is it untrue, but the claim was the result of an “anti-LSD media campaign by the USA government in the late 1960s” (Letheby, 2021; 14).

Although it can be understandable why the general public may, broadly speaking, negatively perceive psychedelics, individual ideologies relating to institutionalized religious views as well as certain medical experts have naïvely grouped psychedelics with other drugs like opioids and stimulants. An example of this can be found in Anna Lembke’s (M.D.) New York Times Bestseller *Dopamine Nation* (2021), where she lists LSD among other “gateway” drugs one of her patients used before eventually getting hooked on heroin.⁷ At another point in her work, she discusses psychedelics as being used for thousands of years and then refers to their popularity during the 1960s, stating that once “hallucinogens became popular and widely available as recreational drugs in the counterculture movement of the 1960s... harms multiplied, leading to LSD being made illegal in most parts of the world” (Lembke, 2021; 114). While it is true that bad actors were evident during the counterculture, the case Lembke makes is both potentially biased and overly reductive, notably because the general perception of LSD was, in fact, reinforced by negative media campaigns without presenting any significant data to clearly show that LSD was the indisputable cause of increased “harms.” Interestingly, Letheby’s research published the same year as Lembke’s book underscores the reality that “Political discourse and media coverage surrounding LSD, in particular, painted an alarming picture of a substance capable of causing instant and permanent insanity, genetic defects, and moral corruption” (Letheby, 2021; 13, citing Masters and Houston 1966, Dyck 2010, Mangini 1998). He emphasizes that while psychedelics “are no more risk-free than any other intervention, the danger of psychedelics seem to have been greatly exaggerated” (ibid). These considerations are important for realizing the flawed, negative hype overshadowing the

⁷ See p. 22 from *Dopamine Nation* (2021). Complete source in Bibliography.

benefits psychedelics have provided therapists and clinicians carrying out actual research into health effects.

Given the increasing evidence from clinical studies demonstrating positive impacts of psychedelic therapy, it is worth questioning how psychedelics may serve to improve human conditions and help usher in a future where more people can feel an interconnectedness between all humans and planetary species. Returning to Letheby's (2021) research, he cites further studies that have shown correlations between the use of psychedelics and heightened levels of "pro-environmental behavior" (16). In one excerpt, a man describes how using psilocybin allowed him to take notice of clouds in the sky.⁸ In another study, Benny Shanon reports that he could feel as if he were "actually seeing the nurturing sustenance of the solar light" (Letheby, 2021; 185) as it glared on the plants and vegetation in his surroundings.

Perhaps, of equal importance to one's abilities to be more attentive to the natural world are the numerous reports involving ego dissolution and reduced anxiety. One study carried out with psilocybin showed that it "induced positively valenced experiences of ego dissolution and oceanic boundlessness, with low levels of anxiety" (Letheby, 2021; 92). When considering how social media has caused so many *Generation Zers* and *Millennials* (among other generations) to become self-absorbed with filtered faces and selfies, the prospects that psilocybin experiences could bring them out of their digital fog is a compelling thought. The big idea here is that the damage smart phones have caused by creating massive disconnect and distraction from the physical world is likely going to require radical measures to benevolently counteract. By exposing more people to psychedelic therapy, it could be possible to develop a culture that can, in Letheby's (2021) terms, access "new knowledge of old facts" (188), a phenomenon that would imply reestablishing the natural environment as a principal priority,

⁸ See p. 178

enabling more people have a firmer grasp on the ecologically disastrous effects caused by a compulsive dependency on digital technologies.

To conclude, it is important to note that while technological addiction, ecological crises, and psychedelics may all be separate subjects with no apparent connection to each other, the hope is that this work sheds some light on their relationship. Regardless of the notable advantages technology offers, big tech has massively contributed to dismantling present generations' mental faculties, leading many to experience lack of self-worth, depression, anxiety, and even some semblance of cognitive dissonance, by believing that the solution to all of life's problems can be achieved by continued reliance on digital technologies to manage every single interpersonal, intrapersonal, and professional human transaction. This dependency has costly ecological impacts in terms of mining, carbon emissions, and digital pollution from hyper connectivity.

While psychedelics, as catalysts for expanding minds, may seem reckless to an increasingly predictable society (thanks in large part to big data collection by tech firms) content on the status quo and influenced by government media campaigns once aimed at demonizing their use, evidence continues to emerge regarding their profound, transformative benefits at a time when mental illness, depression, and anxiety among youth are higher than ever. A new direction needs to be taken that can encourage these broken hearts and minds to recognize that their lives have greater meaning and are critical to helping establish a more balanced planet. With psychedelics, according to Letheby (2021), "profoundly positive emotions such as forgiveness, peace, joy, and love can feature centrally too, and often follow the acceptance of difficult or painful feelings" (59). Psychedelic therapy has the potential to redirect empathy and energy into the complex challenges facing the world while repairing algorithmic discord among populations that have experienced extreme polarization as a result of social media. There is a life outside of the smart phone that is in dire need of being nurtured

and these recent developments in psychedelic studies show positive signs for a regenerative, healthier way to live.

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