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@Social Networking: Marijuana Movement

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FROM THE MAGAZINE

@Social Networking: Marijuana Movement

Among the various frontiers on which the battle for medical marijuana is being fought, the Internet is among the most — if not the most — active battleground.

BY JOE KLARE, THE420TIMES.COM

"We had 1.2 million website sessions to our medical marijuana website in 2009, and at our run rate for the first five months of 2010, we should have over 2.1 million sessions by year end — an increase of 80% over 2009," said Kamy Akhavan from ProCon.org, a website that presents a balanced view of opinions regarding a variety of issues including medical marijuana.

"Given our significant traffic, media exposure, and comments from our readers, it's pretty clear that our website has become a major facilitator on this issue," he continued.

The popularity of websites like ProCon.org, is telling of a larger trend. With so many people arguing passionately for medical cannabis on the Web, it's not hard to see that the Internet has turned into the domain of the stoner activist.

Another case in point: President Obama's Town Halls. When it was left to Internet users to vote on questions to ask the President, stoners on Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter combined forces to ensure that marijuana legalization topped the polls.

This is very telling of the sizeable — and motivated — population of stoner activists that has immersed itself in and exploited the Web to its advantage. In fact, the Internet has proved to be one of the most powerful tools used by activists in getting the word out.

The Early Days

When the Internet first began to gain widespread popularity, chat rooms and forums were the sites where most stoners congregated. Never before had people been able to so easily communicate over great distances. It was a crude beginning by today's standards of Twitter-updates-by-cellphone, but it laid a solid foundation for the future.

As the Y2K threat came and went without any major consequences, the popularity of the Internet continued to grow by leaps and bounds. Although social networks had yet to be introduced, groups like The National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML) and The Marijuana Policy Project (MPP) were already directing people to their websites in order to enlist supporters of their cause.

And while stoners were still trolling chat rooms, they were also now slowly gravitating towards activism. Fundraising online grew into a useful tool, and email became the weapon of choice with which to bombard representatives.

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Social Networking Arrives

Early on in the new century, the popularity of social networking grew tremendously with the advent of websites such as Friendster and Myspace. Stoners — already immersed into the Internet culture — flocked to these sites in droves. Myspace, with its various channels of networking and communication, connected stoners across the globe on a level never before imagined. Coordination on a large scale was now easier than ever.

Myspace grew exponentially after its launch in 2003, quickly becoming the world's largest social networking site in just 3 years. Millions of marijuana users gathered and conversed on a daily, hourly, and minute-by-minute basis.

If you weren't on Myspace, you weren't really plugged into the stoner world.

Marc Emery

Coinciding with the rise of Myspace was the arrest and subsequent extradition attempts of Marc Emery. A Canadian seed seller and proprietor of Cannabis Culture magazine, Marc was a legend among stoners.

His arrest in July of 2005 for selling seeds to buyers in the United States set off a firestorm of protest on the Internet. Overnight, Myspace groups formed and called for a halt to Marc's extradition. On the websites of hundreds of thousands of potheads, banners and widgets sprang up demanding "No Extradition."

In this way, activism entered a new phase. Stoners not involved in activism before saw Marc's case as a symbol of how the unjust War on Drugs was spiraling out of control. Pro-legalization efforts became more focused and intense.

"Facebook, Twitter, social media, what have you, has made organizing much, much easier," said Matt Mernagh, an activist and writer in Toronto and friend of Marc's. "We've seen tremendous growth at our rallies, beyond expectations really. Traditional media wondered at our last rally where all the people came from, how we have grown, it's all online."

"As for Marc, he's more popular than ever," he continued.

Social Networking Today

In 2008, Facebook overtook Myspace as the king of social networks. Its growth has been incredible, and the stoner culture has increasingly turned to Facebook and its smaller, yet equally influential rival, Twitter. Instant updates, event planning and promotion, and easy sharing of important stories have all contributed to the monumental strides that the marijuana movement has made over the last few years.

To date, NORML's Facebook fan page boasts over 160,000 members. One link to the NORML website can literally be shared with millions of people. That's an impressive reach for one organization—and a powerful political tool, as well.

It's worth mentioning that online activism comes with its risks. For several years now, law enforcement agencies have been using social networks to weed out potheads and target them for arrest.

"Finding potheads on the Internet is a growing priority, according to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP)," says Matt Mernagh. Thus, in the rush to gather friends to spread the good news about cannabis, it's best to be discreet in the information you share about yourself.

It's no coincidence that the explosion of social networking has coincided with the growing momentum of the pro-legalization movement. The two go hand-in-hand; they were made for each other.

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