

*I started off my research by looking through the site of Erowid and searching for things to ask the contributors and staff members. I found that there were not emails attached to individual contributors or crewmembers and only one email for questions: sage@erowid.org. I wasn't sure what to expect, who would answer or even when. But mere hours later, I received a reply with all my questions answered and not only did one person reply, but the email thread turned into dialogue of several people.*

**G: When creating researched articles for Erowid, do you double-check the sources for the research?**

**Earth:** Yes. The level of review depends on what type of article you're talking about and when the article was published, but our review standards are higher than most peer reviewed medical research journals.

**G: When you post any type of article, do you state how or who reviewed it?**

**Earth:** We do not currently have a consistent way to present review history, no. That's something we've discussed for a decade now, but it's expensive and it would be hard to implement. I would note that the medical journals also don't do this. It's a surprisingly hard problem given that the field of experts for any given micro niche of data is very small. Everyone knows each other and the tradition in science is that reviews are mostly anonymous, though the 'blind' is often broken because one gets to know the types of criticism that different people will level.

We don't post much creative fiction stuff, the main thing I can think of is our columns: <http://www.erowid.org/columns/>

They are pretty easy to see as a different type of content which doesn't really come off as factual.

**G: Reading through the information you provide online, it is apparent you trust in the self-sustaining merits of articles and experiences and that you strive for an un-biased compilation of information. When choosing articles and reviewing experiences, do you reject any, and if so, why?**

**Earth:** We have a couple of articles about our experience report review system. Please check all of the article under this section:

<http://www.erowid.org/experiences/#articles>

*Fire Erowid enters the conversation:*

**Fire:** I (Fire) just wanted to follow-up on this specific point. We reject approximately 50% of all experience reports submitted for a variety of reasons, as described by Earth in his email.

We also receive a wide variety of article submissions, which we selectively pick from for publication. Some of these are articles that have previously been published in a quality reviewed publication, and which we will archive a copy of on Erowid.org. Others are original pieces never previously published. I don't think we have a record of what percentage of the later group we publish, but it is quite small.

**G: How do you manage/control content for Erowid to keep ideals and mission present with so many different volunteers?**

**Earth:** We have a very small senior review staff. Sylvia has been working on the project for 10 years and came over from working as an editor on the MAPS newsletter. Jon Hanna has been working with us for a few years and worked as an editor for other publications. Only Fire, Sylvia, and Earth have the ability to publish new content to the site other than in the Experience Vaults. The articles about the Experience Vaults discuss how "Reviewers" are trained, generally only those with years of experience are given that permission.

**G: How do you know users who submit experiences are being honest?**

**Earth:** There is always the possibility that someone is fabricating their experience report and that's part of the reason for the review system as it stands. The main reason for the review is that much of the content people produce is poorly written, somewhat incoherent, and of dubious value as data. We take the issue of faked reports very seriously. The three main types of faked reports are 1) jokers, 2) vendors, 3) data scramblers. Jokers are ones who try to write something that is mostly believable but contains faked elements to try to fool our reviewers into publishing amusingly fake garbage. The vendors of various new drugs will also write reports that glowingly describe a new substance to try to increase buzz about and interest in their commercial products. The data scramblers are people who intentionally write things that have all of the hallmarks of being true, but with intentionally false information thrown in. This is the hardest type to deal with and there is no way to exclude reports by people who carefully and intentionally include false information. Our best theory is to have a trained review staff who is aware of the problem and makes judgment calls based on their experience. If you have another proposal, you should feel encouraged to suggest it 😊

The total percentage of faked reports is very low.

How do you know I'm not a robot replying with canned responses?

**G: You are based in California, but there are a lot of crewmembers from non-U.S. countries, and no doubt, a lot of people who use and visit Erowid are from various backgrounds. How do you plan for and work with issues that arise from varying cultures and different countries' drug laws? Do you target any one nation more than another?**

**Earth:** We try to keep track of the drug laws in every country, but generally they are pretty standard. Edge cases and novel psychoactives are the main issues.

I don't know what we do to handle different cultural issues. Earth's (my) undergrad background was in cultural anthropology and as a crew we speak German, French, and English fluently. We have crew who speak Spanish and Japanese and a smattering of Portuguese. Perhaps if you had a more specific question...

**G: Do you keep tabs on the history of site users and contributors and what they post? What would you do if you noticed that it appeared if someone was endangering their life because of drug use?**

**Earth:** We include a way for our triagers to flag incoming material for administrator attention, but we do not have the capacity to note whether people are posting cries for help to our web forms in a reliable way.

If we noticed someone was "endangering their life because of drug use", we would try to take what action we could. Much of the content we receive comes with no contact information, so nothing is really practically possible. It is more often the case that someone contacts us about a friend or family member after an accident, injury, or death occurs.

We get a few contacts per year from family members describing serious injuries or deaths.

**G: Has anyone ever contacted you with the concern that the content on Erowid was causing another to make bad choices about drug use?**

**Earth:** Yes, although perhaps not as often as one might think. We get a few contacts per year with critical comments of that nature.

**G: How do you deal with people who claim your site and actions are indeed illegal?**

**Earth:** We live in the United States, the First Amendment provides deep and broad protection for publishers and authors. We do not intend to break the law and have publishing policies in place to stop Erowid from being used to break the law. If anyone points out things that might constitute illegal activity, we take it seriously. As far as we're aware, there is nothing we do that resembles illegal activity in the United States. It is probably true that there are countries around the world that would censor our material at the governmental level, but we don't know of any country specifically that holds that policy.

There are a number of web filtering systems that block Erowid entirely. These systems also block Erowid from being used by poison control centers in hospitals, something our colleagues in the clinical toxicology field complain about.

Note that part of the design of the site is to be available for law enforcement and parents as well as psychoactive users. We want everyone working from the same set of information.

**G: Have you ever been approached by the U.S. DEA and asked to give up names of crewmembers and/or experience contributors (as this could often be proof of illegal drug activity)?**

**Earth:** Nope. Not once.

*Along with general questions, I had sent in more specific ones for crew members and volunteers whom I thought would be able to answer the most fittingly as I tailored the questions to the specifics they detailed in their mini bios on the Erowid Crew Page. Here is what I received as a response to those:*

Hello Gayle,

I've replied to your questions addressed to me below.

As is common with many non-profit organization volunteer programs (and most Erowid crew members are volunteers), participation by volunteers waxes and wanes depending on the demands of work, school (in the case of Erowid volunteers this would be college or graduate school), and family/personal life obligations. So while we have a large number of crewmembers who have contributed to Erowid projects over the years, they are not all active at the same time. Your deadline will have a much better chance of being met if I pose your other questions (addressed to Lizard, Dreamstudy, Kernel and Ben) generally to our active volunteers and get replies from those who can take time to do so, so that's what I'm going to go ahead and do.

Best wishes,  
Sylvia

**G: How does Erowid fulfill your thoughts and ideals about the discussion of drugs?**

**Sylvia:** When I look online or elsewhere for information of any sort, I look for a good signal-to-noise ratio ("noise" would be primarily unfiltered content or advertising, neither of which is present on Erowid.org or EcstasyData.org, another project of Erowid Center). I also look for content sources with a good reputation for fair reporting, preferably ones with non-profit missions dedicated to the public good. For a topic like psychoactive chemicals and plants, in which many types of people have a stake, and which historically has been muddled by decades of hysterical hand-wringing and polarization and insufficient research,

these standards are particularly important, and they are standards which I believe Erowid fulfills.

**G: What kind of discussion happens between crewmembers? Do the people behind the scenes have to deal with a lot of backlash about the goals and motives of Erowid?**

**Sylvia:** Crewmembers work collaboratively primarily in online contexts (email, IRC channels, wikis, other web-based software), and less frequently via the phone, to develop new content, handle incoming submissions from many sources, and answer inquiries. To my knowledge crew members have not had to deal with backlash about Erowid's mission, aside from what Earth has mentioned, where we get a couple of complaints via email in a year.

*After receiving such wonderful responses from multiple members of the Erowid crew, I followed up with more questions. Some focused again on the interworking of maintaining the website while others reached out to try to understand how the behind-the-scenes Erowid community members function and interact with each other. Earth once again started off.*

**G: Do you ever worry about unethical *usage* of Erowid that would taint the positive mission of the site?**

**Earth:** Could you provide some examples we could work from?

There's no question that any tool can be misused. It is a common humorous statement that "all chemists started out because they were interested in explosives or drugs or both" and that's not too far from the truth. The same tools and knowledge that can save people can be used to kill them.

It seems like hyperbole, but it's very important to keep in mind water is a deadly poison. To paraphrase the cliché comment by Paracelsus: the dose makes the poison.

I think it's a testament to human goodness that so few people use the massive amount of information and widely available injury-causing tools (guns, poisons, power tools) to harm each other. Generally speaking, people are good. But, feel free to propose unethical uses we should consider.

There's no question that our "positive mission" is tainted in the mainstream view because of the misdeeds of a small number of people.

Have you seen the CBS news bit about Erowid from 2003?

[http://www.erowid.org/general/mentions/mentions\\_2003-05\\_cbsnews1.shtml](http://www.erowid.org/general/mentions/mentions_2003-05_cbsnews1.shtml)

The CBS piece has a strange juxtaposition that HTML page points out: a strong

anti-Erowid tone in the presentation, with the explicit message that Erowid is the cause of this young man's injury (he recovered completely), but with the background message that Erowid is also responsible for the doctors and police understanding what happened to him.

A couple of years after that aired, we were invited (through the poison control toxicologist Edward Boyer) to speak at the annual meeting of the North American Association of Clinical Toxicologists.

[http://www.erowid.org/general/conferences/conference\\_2006\\_nacct.shtml](http://www.erowid.org/general/conferences/conference_2006_nacct.shtml)

**G: Fire mentioned that you guys generally reject 50% of experience submissions, and Earth listed several reasons why. Would any of you be willing to elaborate a bit more about the qualifications a submission must have in order to be published within the vaults of Erowid?**

**Earth:** Please see:

[http://www.erowid.org/experiences/exp\\_info1.shtml](http://www.erowid.org/experiences/exp_info1.shtml)

Check "most common reasons reports are deleted". Also read the section about the "cellar".

For other types of submissions, we have a very rigorous review process, most original documents people send us for publication we just reject without putting it to any other reviewers. The most common type is an opinion piece that is stated as factual information without references or tediously long, rambling articles that are difficult or impossible to corroborate or review.

I assume you've read web forums. Imagine the extremely long forum posts people make, stated as if they are a final, authoritative opinion. That's a common type of original article that we reject.

Occasionally we'll get something particularly good by someone who really is an expert in the topic they're writing about.

*Once again, Fire steps in:*

**Fire:** Ok, I'm taking a few of the questions that I know Earth isn't answering. His reply will be along shortly.

**G: What is the interpersonal dynamic of Erowid? Sylvia mentioned that a lot of correspondence is done electronically. How well do people get to know each other and are there instances of organizing face-to-face meetings? What sorts of things really bring the crewmembers together?**

**Fire:** The main crew (4-6 of us) communicates on a daily basis by email, IRC, and phone. We're in close contact, have weekly phone meetings, and are

planning and working on ongoing projects together. We all know each other very well and most of us meet face to face once or twice a year, as possible. We live in different parts of the country/world, but "talking" electronically every day can bring people quite close.

Communications with volunteers are more loose. Some volunteers really throw themselves into the project and over the course of months and/or years...we get to know them well. Others are mostly just peripheral characters doing the tasks they have been asked to do.

**G: There is a forum on Erowid, but have you ever considered adding a chat feature that would allow for a more immediate interactive portion of the website?**

**Fire:** There are no public forums on Erowid. There is no way for a stranger to post something, un-reviewed that gets published on the site. We regularly revisit the question of forums or chat features, but there are so many reasons to avoid it that the answer has always been no. It's difficult enough to manage the quality of information when fully reviewed by Erowid crew...we don't want to provide a space where people can speak with an Erowid Voice, providing suspect info. An Erowid forum or chat could also easily be used by law enforcement to entrap others. We don't have any interest in that.

Perhaps if we had a lot more funding and could dedicate multiple people to ensuring the quality of such a forum...we might consider it. But the amount of work we think it would take to do right is impossible given the size of our organization.

Since we started Erowid, there have always been several well-moderated forums elsewhere on the web that takes on this difficult and time-consuming task. So we provide a service that is useful to the moderators of those forums...and leave the forums to them. :)

**G: I really enjoyed looking at the art vaults. Do you generally ask artists for permission to publish art, or do the artists come to you (I noticed you're currently looking for a new curator, so this question may be slightly outdated)?**

**Fire:** In the past, artists of particular interest have been contacted by the Erowid curator while others submit their art for consideration through our submission form. I'd say generally it's submissions from the artists. The small size of our staff has limited our ability to update the Visionary Art section of the site to make it user-friendly to a curator without a fairly high level of skill in web design and image editing. So for now...we're holding off on reinstating that area...but will get to it sooner...if not later.

Project prioritization is the key to small organization management. Not everything one wants to accomplish can be done today. :)

*And then Earth takes over:*

**G: How do you approach the cases in which family members and friends email you details about drug-related injuries or deaths?**

**Earth:** big question

**G: Has Erowid ever been accused of being a factor in those injuries?**

**Earth:** Yes.

**G: If applicable, how have you dealt with such accusations?**

**Earth:** We take all such accusations very seriously and try to gently address the concerns and accusations raised by the family members.

Most of these situations are very tricky, since the person who contacts us is usually in an emotional and reactive state.

In perhaps 1/3 of the cases where people blame us, after discussion they seem to accept that we are trying to help reduce such harms, while perhaps 2/3 continue to believe we are responsible for the injury or death. We don't have statistics and the total number of cases is quite small (a handful over 15 years), so this is really just off the cuff.

We have always had a policy of being polite and serious whenever anyone contacts us in anger. A couple of psychoactive-drug related sites (and Usenet alt.drugs) in the mid 1990s were known for irreverent, snide, bitter, and often intentionally mean responses to people they considered less informed. Erowid's policy of being nice to people is partially a response to some of the awfulness that came out of that and mostly just a reflection of our view that communication is difficult and we are trying to help -- not beat people over the head with our unilateral view of the truth.

In a typical Blame Erowid case, a father/mother/uncle/aunt contacts us to say that their family member has "nearly" or actually died and tells us that they discovered Erowid URLs in the person's browser history. We respond as supportively as we can. We don't accept responsibility, but we acknowledge it is all very complex. We always invite the person to write up a description of the injury or death that occurred for publication, and we encourage people to publish about the injury or death in some context, even if they would not want Erowid to publish it (because they consider us part of the problem).

We try to collect and publish to our members most or all of the negative feedback we receive. Our members' newsletter "Erowid Extracts" includes a "Letters and Feedback" page in each issue that includes essentially all of the

serious negative feedback we receive. We get 50 or 100 to 1 positive to negative feedback (50 to 100 positive emails for each negative one we receive). Skim a few of these Letters and Feedback pages to get a sense (PDF only):

[http://www.erowid.org/general/about/about\\_newsletter.shtml](http://www.erowid.org/general/about/about_newsletter.shtml)

[http://www.erowid.org/general/newsletter/erowid\\_newsletter16.pdf](http://www.erowid.org/general/newsletter/erowid_newsletter16.pdf)

[http://www.erowid.org/general/newsletter/erowid\\_newsletter17.pdf](http://www.erowid.org/general/newsletter/erowid_newsletter17.pdf)

[http://www.erowid.org/general/newsletter/erowid\\_newsletter15.pdf](http://www.erowid.org/general/newsletter/erowid_newsletter15.pdf)

(The "letters & feedback" page is currently on the inside front cover, but used to be on page 2 or 3. Search the PDF for "letters" if you have trouble finding them.)

In a small number of cases, the person reads our response and we are able to come to some level of mutual agreement about the events.

In most "Blame Erowid" cases, the person communicating is looking more to vent and blame than they are to try to improve the situation for others.

Rhetorically: Why would anyone who doesn't encourage people to take Dextromethorphan-containing products provide descriptions of how it is used? Why would there be a list of safer products to choose from?

It's hard to answer those questions for someone who isn't interested in delving deeply into the recursive problems of medical information available in the Communication Age.

The general answer is that we encourage anyone who has a family member hurt or killed through their use or misuse of some psychoactive drug to make as much information and as many details as can be provided available to the web so that there is an opportunity for the wider population to learn from their tragedy.

It is, in our view, the only path forward. While "more information" is not always the solution (and the last 10 years of the world wide web are a stark proof that "more information" can create a cacophony of intellectually isolationist mirrored bubbles), what is also clear is that a large amount of ubiquitously available BAD information is the worst-case scenario. The age cohort around age 50 in the United States has an incredible (and most people find it hard to believe) nearly 90% lifetime use of illegal drugs. Yes, 9 out of 10 have used cannabis. (According to the best longitudinal study, funded by the US government, the 'monitoring the future' study) See the "maturity recanting effect" section:

[http://www.erowid.org/psychoactives/statistics/statistics\\_article2.shtml](http://www.erowid.org/psychoactives/statistics/statistics_article2.shtml)

The last 100 years of anti-"drug" prohibition has lead us to a situation where the social and legal penalties are large and the total amount of well-collected data is small. What we, as a society, do not know is whether those who smoked

cannabis are actually harmed by their use in their 20s, whether the use of LSD or psilocybin leads to people more or less likely to have personal problems or mental health disturbances. What are more health or less healthy ways of using these substances? How does one convince a bored, disenfranchised 15-year-old with emotional trouble not to use whatever available intoxicant they can? Is it a good idea to try?

In an FDA hearing about the legal status of DXM-containing products, literally no one spoke in favor of stricter legal controls and national anti-drug people argued to keep anti-cough syrup-use messages out of the anti-drug campaigns because the evidence is that talking about it much actually increases use. Such issues are very complicated. It's a lot of entangled, difficult, socio-medical-legal problems.

And how do these questions interact with the truly endemic use of psychoactive drugs OTHER than recreational substances? It is our long held view that the types of skills modern humans need to develop to make good choices around the use of pharmaceutical psychoactives (anti depressants, sleep aids, work-focus stimulants, etc.) are similar to the skills necessary to make reasonable decisions about the use of recreational stimulants, psychedelics, and the like.

Whenever someone contacts us with a story about an injury or death, we review the Erowid-authored and published documents related to the substance that was discussed and try to think of how they might be misread and ways they might be improved. We have a very limited budget and total staff time, but we try make sure we are continually evolving the information towards more accurate, more useful, and less likely to be misused or misunderstood.

Anyway, I'll give this a rest here, but my bullet pointed thoughts about how to handle people blaming Erowid for all of the unhealthy drug use in the world are:

- 0) Always be polite and presume good faith in communications
- 1) People who are upset probably won't be open to hearing new ideas or having theories challenged, be gentle and empathetic
- 2) Psychoactive drug use and associated health problems are not new
- 3) Psychoactive drug use is ubiquitous; drugs are everywhere
- 4) All drug use and activity has risk, water is a deadly poison
- 5) Size of risk is determined primarily by drug, dose, frequency, and individual idiosyncratic reaction
- 6) Psychoactive drugs are particularly complex because they alter the decision-making systems that choose when and how to take more
- 7) The world is absurdly complicated, really. really really. You can't actually be certain of everything, stay open to being wrong
- 8) Easy answers are usually wrong answers
- 9) Ask, don't tell

- 10) Let others have the last word, often a parting shot is what someone is looking to get in, rather than engaging in dialog
- 11) People are often wrong

Hope some of this is useful,  
Earth

*And after that thorough response, a new voice is added to the mix: Jon Hanna.*

Hi Gayle,

I wanted to chime in on this conversation. Although I feel that Earth, Fire, and Sylvia are generally better at addressing many of the sorts of questions that you asked about, there is one interaction with Erowid users that I may have had more often than they have. That is, I am frequently the person who staffs (with other volunteers) the "Erowid Booth" at events geared--at least in part--to people who use psychoactive substances. Over the years, this has been conferences, seminars, rave-type music events, festivals, etc.

As someone who grew up in those days before the Internet was widely available, there was a dearth of reliable, factual, information available about psychoactive drugs when I was a child and young adult. In university libraries, trying to find out more about the real effect of such substances, I was not the only person I know of who came across books that had gone entirely missing from the collection, or which had had the relevant contents removed via razor-blade by some enthusiastic drug user who apparently didn't have the funds to make a photocopy. It was a tough time for those wanting to obtain reliable, accurate, information.

Of course, the Internet is a sea of bad data. But I think that all of the primary staff at Erowid have a strong dedication to doing our best to provide quality data, as well as a desire to correct bad data--regardless of where such data originated.

What I wanted to describe to you was the sort of personal interaction that I have had, repeatedly (so many times) with people half my age (I am 43) who have come to the information booths that I have staffed at assorted events. The general idea that I have heard over and over again, from enthusiastic users of the web site, is a statement along the lines of: "Erowid saved my life." That is, that site users sincerely believe that the information we provide has been of SUCH value, that they have avoided accidentally killing themselves when using drugs. I have heard this so much that it has become a bit "old hat." One can hear such things, and think that someone is just damning with faint praise or being overly enthusiastic. And yet, I am aware of at least a few instances where I feel that this idea is unquestionably true. For example, there was a time when some misidentified research chemicals

were being sold, and Erowid issued a warning about this, that resulted in someone who had overdosed on material heading to a hospital to make sure that he stayed alive in the wake of consuming an incorrectly IDed research chemical.

I have overwhelmingly been in contact--first hand--with people who feel that the site has provided them with dramatically beneficial information allowing them to use (or not use) psychoactive drugs in ways that are less dangerous and more healthy, and less likely to have negative results. There will always be some contingent of people who use psychoactive drugs in negative or less healthy ways. But it seems to me that providing accurate information, to the degree that this is possible in a world of varied opinion and shifting knowledge, is the best thing to TRY to do. My hope is that such an approach may have better results than the void/vacuum of knowledge that was "available" to me when I was young--not to mention the outright lies of some prohibitionist organizations. Erowid is in no way "pro-drug"; we are "pro-information."

-- Jon Hanna

*And from there I was temporarily out of questions and decided to take the time to absorb everything that had been said and also to look at all the links provided. If you would like more information, feel free to contact the crew yourself or visit [www.erowid.org](http://www.erowid.org) and explore the vast amount of information the vaults have to share. ♦*