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February 23, 2007

Starfish, Spiders, and Drug Policy Reform

I recently read Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom's book [The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations](#), which is all about decentralized organizational models and the challenges they pose to top-down, hierarchical models of organization.

It's an interesting book that maps onto a lot of contemporary political movements like al Qaeda and the ELF in addition to being relevant to organizations like Wikipedia and Napster. I was reminded of it this week by two stories in the drug policy reform arena.

The first was [ASA's suit against the federal government under the Data Quality Act](#). It's a challenge to the way the government has represented the science around medical marijuana. The government persistently denies that marijuana has any medicinal value, and ASA is suggesting that this is an intentional distortion of empirical evidence -- a move that is both ingenious from a legal standpoint and brilliant from a PR point of view, since it generates a considerable amount of press about the possibility that the federal government is warping the facts.

The second was [the critique that John Holowatch created of the ONDCP anti-drug ad called "Pete's Couch."](#) It's a video that can't be posted as a "comment" to the ONDCP videos on YouTube, because the ONDCP doesn't allow comments or ratings of any sort. But Holloway's video is already spreading quickly through the blogosphere, and there's little that the ONDCP can do to prevent it.

These are quintessentially starfish approaches to policy work, as Brafman and Beckstrom use that term. In other words, they were generated autonomously by ASA and Holowatch, respectively. There was no order from any "director" of the drug reform movement, because there *isn't*

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any director of the drug reform movement. Also, they were flanking maneuvers that compensated for obstacles put up by the federal government. Legal challenges to medical marijuana based on federalism have failed, so ASA is turning to a new approach. The ONDCP doesn't allow comments on its ads, so Holowatch created an independent commentary that includes the ad *inside itself*.

It's smart. It's slippery. And if these strategies don't work, others will be forthcoming.

The movement around drug policy reform is very starfishy. Nobody pays them to write for Daily Kos. Nobody funds Pete at Drug WarRant except through his tip jar. Nobody tells ASA what its priorities ought to be. Nobody tells Students for Sensible Drug Policy or the Drug Policy Alliance what they have to focus on this year, or next. Moreover, there are certainly splits in the movement between people who come at this question from a very libertarian perspective and people who have more of a public health or criminal justice-reform orientation. It's a diverse, scattered group of people. And yet, there is a sense, broadly speaking, of a shared mission.

For the most part, drug policy reformers have had only limited success so far. Medical marijuana laws in 11 states, yes. Prop. 36 in California, yes. But many other goals are still out of reach. And yet, as the Internet becomes more of a ubiquitous presence in contemporary life, the starfishy qualities of drug policy work become more and more effective at challenging a position asserted by centralized government authority. The ASA suit and the Holowatch commentary work so well precisely because they call into question the authority and legitimacy of this centralized position.

This is why the ONDCP chose the "victim"-oriented name "[Pushing Back](#)" for its blog. That agency, which has massive institutional advantages on its side, including the weight of pretty much every federal law and the backing of the Justice Department, nevertheless recognizes that the Internet's decentralized model of information dissemination is a real challenge to its authority. This is also, I take it, the reason why the Department of Health Services, when asked by the San Francisco Chronicle about ASA's suit, declined to comment and [referred a reporter to the Food and Drug](#)

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[Administration's April 2006 statement that federal evaluations have found 'no sound scientific studies supported medical use of marijuana.'](#)"

Is that a good response? No. It's a lame response. But when it becomes evident that your authority is based primarily on *your own assertion of authoritativeness*, repeating yourself over and over again starts to seem like a good idea.

Posted by Alex on February 23, 2007 in [Drugs](#) | [Permalink](#)

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and to accelerate the rate of change and make it easy for anyone predisposed to help, i tracked down all of the government's data, turned it into pictures and provide the context that makes it easy to see how everything has been blown way out of proportion to reality.

truth is power: <http://www.drugwarstats.com>

Posted by: [brian bennett](#) | [February 24, 2007 at 07:46 AM](#)

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