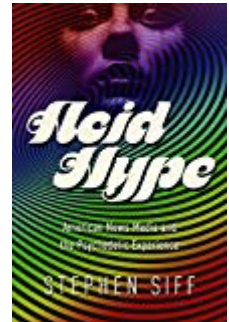


**Stephen Siff.** *Acid Hype: American News Media and the Psychedelic Experience.* History of Communication Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 264 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-03919-5.



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**Published on** H-1960s (November, 2016)

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Stephen Siff's *Acid Hype* joins the list of significant books about the LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) craze that swept the United States in the 1960s. Older standard accounts, including Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain's *Acid Dreams* (1985) and Jay Stevens's *Storming Heaven* (1987), have been joined recently by Robert Greenfield's excellent *Timothy Leary* (2006), Don Lattin's popular history, *The Harvard Psychedelic Club* (2010), and Rick Dodge's *It's All a Kind of Magic* (2013) on Ken Kesey. Siff's shrewd take is that much of the importance of psychedelia was its promotion in the media, beginning with *Time* and *Life* articles in the mid-1950s. Only in 1968 did the public learn that the publisher Henry Luce and his wife Clare Boothe Luce had a special interest in the topic derived from personal experimentation. The Luces dropped acid long before any hippies did.

One of the most intriguing features of this excellent book is that Siff includes the circulation figures for all the newspapers and magazines that he uses. For today's readers, this is especially important, since the mass-circulation magazine no

longer exists. Those magazines mattered. Gordon Wasson's article on magic mushrooms in *Life* in 1957 reached not only the magazine's 5.7 million middle-class subscribers and store buyers but also other household members and their guests, since *Life* was usually kept on the living-room coffee table.

Siff recounts the history of LSD from its discovery in Basel, Switzerland, by Albert Hofmann in 1943 to its marketing by to the United States for medical or psychological research from 1948 to 1966. In the fifties, the drug was seen as a potential cure for schizophrenia, but it was also taken personally by experimenters to gain a better understanding of mental illness. Major newspapers covered scientific research on the drug in a serious way, while leading magazines produced longer articles accompanied by photographs designed to suggest what a trip was like. When journalists described and illustrated drug experiences, they validated what a drugged state was like to their readers. The stories could be frightening, but they also fascinated. LSD was legal, and the gov-

ernment showed little interest in curbing or regulating use.

A shift took place after Aldous Huxley published *The Doors of Perception* (1954) and *Heaven and Hell* (1956). In the first book, Huxley reported his experiences with mescaline, a manufactured psychedelic drug first derived from the peyote cactus in 1896. The second book described the author's LSD trips. Because Huxley was a celebrity, his books were widely reviewed, which allowed his ideas to circulate broadly. One key insight was that an acid trip did not resemble a psychotic episode. Huxley shifted the debate from use to treat disease to use to liberate the self in a spiritual quest. This latter aspect was what drew the Luces to LSD.

In Los Angeles, the top LSD medical experimenter was Dr. Sidney Cohen, who began to research acid in 1955, after he met Huxley. The UCLA psychiatrist wanted to turn on writers and intellectuals because he thought that they would produce good retrospective written reports about their trips. Siff makes an excellent use of Cohen's *The Beyond Within* (1965), which has been underappreciated.

Timothy Leary used magic mushrooms for the first time in Mexico in 1960. He returned to his laboratory at Harvard to experiment with psilocybin, the active psychedelic substance in the mushrooms, which Sandoz had isolated in 1958. Leary also became acquainted with Huxley, who was spending several months in Boston. In 1961 Leary tried LSD and switched his research to acid, until Harvard fired him in 1963. He continued his research at Millbrook, New York, until 1965. The former Harvard scientist held frequent press conferences that usually landed on the front page of the *New York Times* because he carefully constructed a headline and a quote. Siff's contribution to the Leary story is to show that the media in the early sixties not only increased awareness about psychedelic drugs but also became an echo chamber that hyped the drugs to the public. As

Cohen and others had warned, this excessive attention alarmed people, especially when newspapers reported mental breakdowns and crimes that were attributed to LSD. Euphoric reports in major magazines, lavishly illustrated with artful photographs or drawings suggesting an acid trip, contrasted with the matter-of-fact negative reporting in the nation's newspapers.

In the mid-1960s LSD became associated with the emerging hippie counterculture. Mainstream newspapers despised the counterculture, and the use of acid became unacceptable to the middle class. Magazines also opposed the counterculture, including *Time* and *Life*, whose sole positive comments were about spiritual seeking associated with LSD. After Henry Luce died in 1967, *Time* stopped praising psychedelics. Public opinion turned hostile. In 1966 New York and California outlawed LSD, and in 1970 the federal government classified the substance as a dangerous schedule 1 drug. After Sandoz quit marketing acid and the federal government withdrew research funding, it was difficult to study LSD. Journalists could no longer talk to scientists about the drug. Stories about illegal drugs, as Siff notes, almost always emphasize danger and unsavoriness.

President Richard Nixon announced the war on drugs in 1969. Acid was now a public nuisance that Nixon was determined to stamp out. The press took instruction from the government, which was actually following public opinion. Newspaper and magazine stories were negative; television shows, at government request, pushed anti-drug plots; and radio stations were pressured not to play songs that contained drug lyrics. Movies were almost the only art form free to explore acid, which was celebrated in *Easy Rider* (1969). In the early seventies LSD films faded. By then the hyped excitement about LSD along with the belief that it would save the world, improve culture, inspire religion, and bring peace had evaporated. Acid hype turned out to be media hype.

Siff's excellent book captures that and other insights about the drug well. *Acid Hype* is a conscientiously researched, thoughtfully conceptualized, and clearly written account of the media's significant role in manufacturing the LSD craze in America in the late 1960s.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-1960s>

**Citation:** William Rorabaugh. Review of Siff, Stephen. *Acid Hype: American News Media and the Psychedelic Experience*. H-1960s, H-Net Reviews. November, 2016.

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