

Drugs on the Dark Net: How Cryptomarkets Are Transforming the Global Trade in Illicit Drugs

By James Martin

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Book Review

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Drugs on the Dark Net is a conceptual, empirical and non-technical book which combines research undertaken on the Dark Net with criminological analysis and is written for both academic and non-specialist readers. It explores the contemporary emergent and dynamic phenomena of online illicit drug dealing within a shifting technological landscape of crime markets. Specific detailed focus is devoted to the retail of drugs taking place on the Dark Net, an encrypted part of the internet called the TOR network. Such online illicit sites are known as dark net marketplaces or *cryptomarkets*, with the most notable to date called *Silk Road*. Cryptomarkets are defined as ‘online forums where goods and services are exchanged between parties who use digital encryption to conceal their identities’¹. Of interest for readers of this unique book is how Martin presents in depth detail on how these online trading hubs are different to traditional drug trading networks and reliant on TOR technologies, third party hosting and administration, use of traditional postal systems to dispatch products, decentralised exchange networks and use of encrypted electronic currencies or cryptocurrencies (i.e. Bit Coin) and how encrypted sites support and facilitate distribution and vendor networks for illicit drugs. Cryptomarkets host and facilitate transacting between vendors and buyers active on global computer networks. Parallels are drawn with legitimate online marketplaces such as eBay. Equally of interest to readers is how such resilient online cyber communities thrive and are characterised by psychonautic drug consumerism, black market vendors and activity relating to political activism, nodal mentalities, information exchange, indigenous harm reduction and ethical frameworks.

Four chapters each examining cryptomarkets from different angles are in place; *Conceptualising Cryptomarkets*; *Cryptomarket Operations*; *Conventional vs Online Drug Distribution Networks*, and *Cryptomarkets and Law Enforcement*. Chapter one presents the concept of cryptomarkets and how these illicit sites operate as complex and multifaceted entities, and as sites of informal governing nodes, with online communities characterised by

¹ Martin, J (2013). Lost on the Silk Road: Online Distribution and the ‘cryptomarket’ *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 1748895813505234

collective identities, inter site migration, digital refugees and community and political affiliations. Martin's book contributes to our understanding of this informal nodal governance as underpinned in these cyber networks by self-regulation, indigenous harm reduction, communal folk pharmacology, and with vendor-buyer consumer relations grounded in trust and mutual responsibilities centring on service quality, feedback, contracts and refund policies.

Chapter two explores commercial operations as they relate to online processes, website and vendor branding and marketing strategies, and how consumer feedback and automated ranking systems underpin the success of cryptomarkets. The dynamic and complex nature of commercial enterprises trading in the physically disparate cyber environment are mediated by inclusive and representative activity of both administrators and users themselves who set the tone and content of sites by populating vendor subpages, and posting consumer feedback. Equally of interest are the dynamic and reflexive hierarchies present in governing the so called engines of cryptomarket activity (vendors and consumers).

Chapter three analyses the structure and characteristics of off line and online cryptomarkets, and compares cryptomarkets with traditional open and closed drug dealing networks by virtue of its direct relations between vendors and consumers, safer methods of exchange and dispute resolution, and the ability to provide consistently cheaper and higher quality products via direct and semi direct distribution models. Martin underscores how given the potential for conventional drug related systemic harm, a more productive line of enquiry into this form of drug trading warrants consideration as to whether cryptomarkets offer a net public safety benefit outcome. Consumer awareness of reduced risk of systematic violence as associated with traditional drug markets, along with ease of transacting and postal dispatch remains evident.

Chapter four focuses on online drug trading from law enforcement perspectives, and presents detail on the myriad of tactical, strategic and ideological challenges and approaches (undercover operations, postal interception, surveillance and domestic evidence gathering, and prosecution) in policing online drug traders activity in cryptomarkets. Communication between cryptomarket users continues to innovate and develop in terms of counter interdiction strategies and intelligence, making surveillance problematic. Displacement and migration between sites and new generation cryptomarkets evolves, and given their growing market share and sophisticated, efficient and covert presence on the Dark net for the most part still circumvent law enforcement tactics. Unless TOR encryption or cryptocurrencies fail, we can expect cryptomarkets to continue to diversify, expand and control a greater proportion of the global illicit drug trade.

The book provides a timely and novel insight into the world of online communities, commercial innovation and cybercrime, and implications for governance and policing, as it relates to the moving target of Dark Net drug trade, and how the war on drugs increasingly navigates within the resilient cyber world and its cybercriminals. Decentralisation,

competition and innovation are increasingly visible within the new Post Silk Road dynamic phase of cyber activity. Complexities and benefits relating to increasing evidence of accessible and diverse cryptomarkets are presented well, alongside the emergent counter argument of its competitive and accountable nature, and potential for reduction of systemic drug related violence, harms and organised crime when compared with traditional drug trade, all of which create a dilemma for law enforcement agencies. Continued diversification of cryptomarkets however, can radically transform the global illicit drugs trade, however much they hinge on global computer networking. Ultimately the book succeeds in stimulating debate and further investigative research in the realm of drug related cyber crime.