



Fact sheet

from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon



THE INTERNET AND DRUG MARKETS

New EMCDDA trendspotter study explores online supply of drugs

(30.1.2015, LISBON) The speed with which the Internet is transforming drug markets poses a major challenge to law enforcement, public health, research and monitoring agencies. This is according to ***The internet and drug markets***, the latest ‘trendspotter’ study from the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)** released today ⁽¹⁾. The study aims to raise understanding of the current online supply of drugs and to map the range of Internet markets in existence.

The study kicked off with data collection and a literature review in September 2014 and culminated in an expert meeting in Lisbon from 30–31 October. Insights were provided from the fields of IT, research, monitoring and law enforcement and from the perspectives of Internet and drug users. Special focus was placed on the online sale of new psychoactive substances (NPS) and medicinal products for illicit use; the role of social media and apps; and drug sales on the ‘deep web’ (inaccessible via standard web browsers).

Social media were found to play an active role in drug markets, whether used directly for buying and selling drugs or indirectly for marketing, opinion-forming or experience-sharing. Smartphone apps were also seen to be being used in drug supply, with one study showing a growth in apps promoting illicit drug use.

Use of the ‘surface web’ (accessible via common search engines) for the sale of NPS has received increased attention over the last decade. In 2013, EMCDDA online monitoring identified 651 websites selling ‘legal highs’ to Europeans. However, a recent development in the online market, highlighted in today’s study, is the sale of NPS on the ‘deep web’. The report refers to an increasingly blurred dividing line between ‘surface web’ and ‘deep web’ operations, resulting in a ‘grey market’ (with some sites having a ‘surface web’ presence, but with underlying elements on the ‘deep web’).

A prominent subject in the study are ‘cryptomarkets’, or ‘deep web’ online marketplaces. These allow goods and services to be exchanged between parties who use digital encryption software (e.g. Tor) to conceal their identities. Traditional street drugs and some prescription medicines are reported to be most popular products on these ‘cryptomarkets’.

Silk Road was the best-known ‘cryptomarket’, which operated as a Tor-hidden service using bitcoin as its trading currency. Illustrating the ongoing cat-and-mouse game between law enforcement and Internet drug vendors, it was closed by the FBI in October 2013, replaced a month later by Silk Road 2.0 and ultimately closed by Interpol in November 2014.

The online sale of counterfeit medicines — described in the report as a major global enterprise — raises concerns that illegitimate online pharmacies may become a source of supply to the illicit drug market in the future. According to the study, this is an area ‘likely to require further monitoring’.

Notes

⁽¹⁾ For more see, www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/technical-reports/internet-drug-markets

The Internet and drug markets will be further explored in an EMCDDA Insights publication to be published later in 2015.