

Thematic Segment: *The criminal misuse of information and communications technologies for illicit drug-related activities is increasing*

I attend today as part of the IDPC delegation - an NGO in consultative status with ECOSOC - but the work I will present today is that of the Global Drug Policy Observatory

We all now live in an increasingly digital global society, with many facets of life routinely facilitated, enabled, experienced, or augmented by digital communication technologies. The ongoing pandemic has further embedded and entrenched the digital into the everyday. The dividing line between the digital and physical world is now indelibly blurred; and this is true right across the contemporary human experience. It is therefore hardly surprising that there is an increase in the use of such technologies to facilitate or enable the illegal trade in scheduled substances. Indeed, both the internet and the trade in drugs are transnational, with little respect for international borders, and their relationship is therefore understandably both symbiotic and complimentary. As such, efforts to achieve an entirely 'drug free' *digital* world are as unlikely to *completely* succeed as those to prohibit offline forms of supply. Instead, policy and enforcement focus might therefore aim to reduce the rate of adoption and innovation of the use of digital technologies for facilitating the drugs trade.

The rate of shift from offline to internet-enabled drug transactions have accelerated along in recent years as a direct consequence of the regulations, policies, and law enforcement practices *designed to reduce the trade*. **In particular, the practice of market takedown.**

Just as taking down unregulated internet pharmacies on the open internet in the 1990s led to cryptographically-obscured spaces on the so-called darknet since 2011, so too the burgeoning shift from the darknet to encrypted messaging apps *is also directly linked to* – indeed is likely a *response to* - the takedown of darknet sites.

Together with esteemed academic and harm reduction practitioner colleagues (all leading drug cryptomarket researchers) we highlighted some of the unforeseen consequences of the 'takedown' approach at a side event at CND63 in March 2020. In June of *this* year, we produced the policy brief *Drug Cryptomarkets in the 2020s: Policy, Enforcement, Harm, and Resilience*.¹ That analysis identified takedown as singularly counter-productive: it increases market proliferation, catalyses wide-spread market innovation, and accelerates 'target hardening' across the environment. Perhaps most concerningly, takedown also severely impedes ongoing and effective harm reduction efforts. Moreover, it also increases the law enforcement skills and funding required to police the internet-enabled trade exponentially; with ever-decreasing returns. Despite this, and in the absence of any alternative formal *guidance on dealing with the online trade*, **takedown** continues as the default approach. Indeed, the most recent (2021) World Drug Report explicitly *recommended* – for the first time - that member states '*... take down* online markets and platforms'

Instead, our analysis recommends policy-makers and enforcement practitioners consider a nuanced approach – away from takedown – and toward a strategy that more efficiently focuses limited human and financial resources *only on the most injurious of substances and markets*. Such an approach may *slow the rate* of adoption of information and communications technologies for drug-related activities – and at the same time it would free skilled cybercrime specialists to prioritise more pernicious criminal activities online, such as terrorism , and child sexual exploitation, rather than chasing the impossible – and often counter-productive - goal of a drug free internet. Without

¹ Horton-Eddison, M., Shortis, P., Aldridge J., Caudevilla, F., *Drug Cryptomarkets in the 2020s: Policy, Enforcement, Harm, and Resilience*, Global Drug Policy Observatory, Policy Brief 16, June 2021: https://www.swansea.ac.uk/media/Drug-Crypto-Markets_FINAL_June_2021.pdf

engaging with academic research to inform more effective policy, the next decade looks likely to be characterised by an increasing adoption of ever more sophisticated – and potentially pernicious – technologies to enable to global illegal trade.

Please search the Global Drug Policy Observatory's cryptomarket project for our policy brief entitled '*Drug Cryptomarkets in the 2020s: Policy, Enforcement, Harm, and Resilience*' to read more.

Thank you.