

POLICY —

Officials arrest suspect in \$4 billion Bitcoin money laundering scheme

Bitcoin's decentralized architecture makes it popular with criminal groups.

TIMOTHY B. LEE - 7/26/2017, 9:07 AM



Police in Greece have arrested a man wanted in the United States for allegedly running a massive Bitcoin-based money laundering operation, according to the [Associated Press](#). Authorities say the 38-year-old Russian man was responsible for converting \$4 billion in illicit, conventional cash into virtual currency.

The suspect hasn't been publicly named, but Reuters [got a picture](#) of him being arrested. According to Reuters, he was arrested in the "Greek region of Chalkidiki on Monday on a US warrant."

The news is a reminder that—like ordinary cash—Bitcoin has a wide variety of uses, both legitimate and illicit. Bitcoin boosters like to focus on potential applications like international remittances, micropayments, and conventional retail sales. But Bitcoin has become the payment network of choice for "dark Web" markets for drugs and other illicit merchandise, from the original Silk Road—[shut down in 2014](#)—to the [recently busted AlphaBay](#).

Conventional financial institutions comply with anti-money laundering regulations that make it difficult for criminal organizations to use their payment infrastructure. Networks like MasterCard and Visa blacklist suspected criminal enterprises as soon as they're identified. So criminals are always on the lookout for alternative payment systems that are not as strictly regulated. And Bitcoin's decentralized architecture, which puts it beyond the control of any government or financial institution, makes it an attractive option.




TIMOTHY B. LEE
Timothy covers tech policy for Ars, with a particular focus on patent and copyright law, privacy, free speech, and open government. His writing has appeared in Slate, Reason, Wired, and the New York Times.
EMAIL timothy.lee@arstechnica.com // **TWITTER** [@binarybits](https://twitter.com/binarybits)



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ads2 / Ars Scholae Palatinae POPULAR JUL 26, 2017 9:15 AM 


People make the mistake of thinking that being decentralized means it is untrackable. The reality is quite the opposite, as the decentralized design means that transactions provide a rich source of network and timing information for analysis.

 **+67** (+68 / -1)  1048 posts | registered 1/7/2008

Blue Adept / Ars Praefectus JUL 26, 2017 9:19 AM 



Bitcoin is the Bittorrent of money. Sure, it probably has its uses, but "that's how I get my new Linux distributions" or "It makes it easier for me to do international trade with Columbia" only goes so far.


 **-23** (+30 / -53)  5097 posts | registered 1/23/2001

cdclndc / Ars Praefectus POPULAR JUL 26, 2017 9:22 AM 

Blue Adept wrote:
Bitcoin is the Bittorrent of money. Sure, it probably has its uses, but "that's how I get my new Linux distributions" or "It makes it easier for me to do international trade with Columbia" only goes so far.



Yet it is my understanding that Bitcoin is more traceable than cash. Should we abandon that as well?


 **+36** (+44 / -8)  9325 posts | registered 6/7/2010

ip_what / Ars Scholae Palatinae POPULAR JUL 26, 2017 9:26 AM 

Quote:
The news is a reminder that—like ordinary cash—Bitcoin has a wide variety of uses, both legitimate and illicit.



When was the last time 10% of the entire value of all "ordinary cash" in circulation was laundered by a single mobster?

 **+62** (+73 / -11)  1980 posts | registered 5/14/2014

Dzov / Ars Centurion / *et Subscriptor* SPLIT OPINION JUL 26, 2017 9:26 AM 

cdclndc wrote:
Yet it is my understanding that Bitcoin is more traceable than cash. Should we abandon that as well?

How many crypto viruses ask for a cash ransom? Zero?
How many ask for bitcoins or some other cryptocurrency? All of them?

 **+4** (+26 / -22)  250 posts | registered 4/4/2014

cdclndc wrote:

Blue Adept wrote:

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Yet it is my understanding that Bitcoin is more traceable than cash. Should we abandon that as well?

In some ways, Bitcoin more traceable than traditional bank transactions, too. The record is public, so you don't need a subpoena. The record is international, so you don't need cooperation from foreign countries. And the record is permanent.

↑ +79 (+79 / 0) ↓

232 posts | registered 11/4/2014

IntellectualThug / Wise, Aged Ars Veteran

SPLIT OPINIONJUL 26, 2017 9:28 AM

“

Blue Adept wrote:

Bitcoin is the Bittorrent of money. Sure, it probably has its uses, but "that's how I get my new Linux distributions" or "It makes it easier for me to do international trade with Columbia" only goes so far.

Seriously. I've only personally seen Bitcoin used to buy and sell drugs on the internet. It's completely absurd to act like that isn't a massive part of Bitcoin's popularity.

Quote:

In some ways, Bitcoin more traceable than traditional bank transactions, too. The record is public, so you don't need a subpoena. The record is international, so you don't need cooperation from foreign countries. And the record is permanent.

That's why there are coin foggers. Though trying to launder \$4 billion through them would certainly overload any fogger's capacity to obfuscate things.

Last edited by IntellectualThug on Wed Jul 26, 2017 9:30 am

↑ +5 (+26 / -21) ↓

162 posts | registered 5/24/2016

strohminator / Ars Scholae Palatinae

JUL 26, 2017 9:29 AM

“

Blue Adept wrote:

Bitcoin is the Bittorrent of money. Sure, it probably has its uses, but "that's how I get my new Linux distributions" or "It makes it easier for me to do international trade with Columbia" only goes so far.

It's not even that good for trading with Colombia. The currency is so volatile that you could easily have a 10% swing in the value of bitcoin in the day or two that it takes to agree on a price, convert to bitcoin, transfer, and then convert back to local currency. No legit business will put up with that.

↑ +4 (+21 / -17) ↓

928 posts | registered 4/13/2010

sprockkets / Ars Legatus Legionis

JUL 26, 2017 9:30 AM

“

Hey, are you back at ars Tim?

↑ 0 (+4 / -4) ↓

12258 posts | registered 8/12/2005

yet_another_wumpus / Ars Centurion

JUL 26, 2017 9:32 AM

“

ip_what wrote:

Quote:

The news is a reminder that—like ordinary cash—Bitcoin has a wide variety of uses, both legitimate and illicit.

When was the last time 10% of the entire value of all "ordinary cash" in circulation was laundered by a single mobster?

I strongly suspect that more than 10% "ordinary cash" is counterfeit.

Cash isn't laundered by mobsters. It is laundered by Wall Street banks, Russian oligarchs, and real estate tycoons. Connecting the dots might get interesting.

cdclndc / Ars Praefectus

JUL 26, 2017 9:32 AM

“

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cdclndc wrote:

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How many crypto viruses ask for a cash ransom? Zero?

How many ask for bitcoins or some other cryptocurrency? All of them?

In all honesty I'd say that's more a convenience factor. The bitcoin is ultimately converted to cash. I'd say there would be zero cases where anyone holding an object hostage, whether it be an item, person, or electronic data, would actually give out a mailing address for the cash to be mailed to.

daemonios / Ars Tribunus Militum

JUL 26, 2017 9:35 AM

“

cdclndc wrote:

Blue Adept wrote:

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Yet it is my understanding that Bitcoin is more traceable than cash. Should we abandon that as well?

In Portugal you soon won't be able to pay for any transaction upwards of €3,000 with hard cash. The untraceability of cash is well known and dealt with. It's my understanding that while Bitcoin wallets are public, their owners' identities are not, so barring user error (or an exploit in the system, but that would be bad news indeed for cryptocurrency) that makes Bitcoin transactions untraceable. This is the main reason I oppose Bitcoin.

unequivocal / Ars Scholae Palatinae / et Subscriptor

POPULAR JUL 26, 2017 9:40 AM

“

yet_another_wumpus wrote:

ip_what wrote:

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Cash isn't laundered by mobsters. It is laundered by Wall Street banks, Russian oligarchs, and real estate tycoons. Connecting the dots might get interesting.

Are you saying that you think that 10% of all us dollars or other national currency in circulation is counterfeit?

IntellectualThug / Wise, Aged Ars Veteran

POPULAR JUL 26, 2017 9:40 AM

“

daemonios wrote:

cdclndc wrote:

Blue Adept wrote:

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That makes them pseudonymous, not untraceable. There is a big, big difference between those two things.

↑ +33 (+35 / -2) ↓

162 posts | registered 5/24/2016

ip_what / Ars Scholae Palatinae

POPULAR JUL 26, 2017 9:41 AM

yet_another_wumpus wrote:
show nested quotes

I strongly suspect that more than 10% "ordinary cash" is counterfeit.

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I knew I'd get some zerohedge talking points on that comment. But I really needed Janet Yellen for the bingo.

Just an FYI, the black money crisis that caused India to demonotize old R500 and R1000 notes was caused, in part, by a concern that up to 0.01% of notes in circulation were counterfeit.

Edited to slightly reduce the oversimplification.

Last edited by ip_what on Wed Jul 26, 2017 9:50 am

↑ +30 (+31 / -1) ↓

1980 posts | registered 5/14/2014

Iphtashu Fitz / Ars Scholae Palatinae

JUL 26, 2017 9:49 AM

yet_another_wumpus wrote:

Cash isn't laundered by mobsters. It is laundered by Wall Street banks, Russian oligarchs, and real estate tycoons. Connecting the dots might get interesting.

Tell that to the drug cartels, gangs, etc. that routinely launder money.

↑ +23 (+26 / -3) ↓

764 posts | registered 2/15/2007

Ragnarredbeard / Ars Tribunus Militum

JUL 26, 2017 9:52 AM

Shocked! I am shocked that Bitcoin can be used for illicit activity.

↑ +23 (+24 / -1) ↓

1514 posts | registered 1/28/2011

puppies / Ars Scholae Palatinae / et Subscriptor

JUL 26, 2017 9:54 AM

Quote:

The news is a reminder that—like ordinary cash—Bitcoin has a wide variety of uses, both legitimate and illicit.

I mean, yeah, but the legitimate to illicit ratio is... quite different.

↑ +13 (+18 / -5) ↓

3950 posts | registered 7/8/2013

cmacd / Ars Praefectus

POPULAR JUL 26, 2017 9:55 AM

IntellectualThug wrote:
show nested quotes

Seriously. I've only personally seen Bitcoin used to buy and sell drugs on the internet. It's completely absurd to act like that isn't a massive part of Bitcoin's popularity.

I like bitcoin because it functions like cash online. I can pay for something from a vendor without giving them any sort of contact info, without giving them billing info they can try to hit up again, without messing with prepaid debit cards (which can have their own hidden fees), etc. It's a one-time one-way transaction, like handing over cash, and we're done.

I agree, that's *mostly* a benefit for illicit activities. But not exclusively. I'd happily use bitcoin to pay for something like a music/video/news subscription...pay the yearly rate, once, and get no spam in my inbox (if I use one I don't check), not have to worry about any future bills or remembering to cancel, etc. Here's your cash, I get a year of service. When the subscription stops working, I can hand you more cash. Or not.

Same for sending money between friends...I can have a wallet full of virtual cash and send it to you directly for a marginal fee. Paypal may be free, but also poses risks especially if you link it to your bank account.

+29 (+32 / -3)

7362 posts | registered 5/18/2010

TriggerPullerUSMC / Smack-Fu Master, in training

NEW POSTER JUL 26, 2017 9:56 AM

IntellectualThug wrote:
show nested quotes

That makes them pseudonymous, not untraceable. There is a big, big difference between those two things.

Not picking on you but pseudonymous is a term relating to the use of a fake name used by an author. You could say Satoshi is pseudonymous but the ledger/transactions etc of bitcoin itself are not pseudonymous- I am pretty sure it is pseudo-anonymous-

-18 (+4 / -22)

2 posts | registered 7/26/2017

ip_what / Ars Scholae Palatinae

JUL 26, 2017 9:57 AM

Dzov wrote:
cdclndc wrote:
Yet it is my understanding that Bitcoin is more traceable than cash. Should we abandon that as well?

How many crypto viruses ask for a cash ransom? Zero?
How many ask for bitcoins or some other cryptocurrency? All of them?

Honestly, I'm not sure traceability is the driving concern here. It's a factor, sure, but the real reason bitcoin stands out for ransom payments it irreversibility and international reach. If ransomware makers could have their victims drop a duffel bag of cash off in the park, they'd probably prefer that. You can't ransom your computer with Western Union, PayPal, or Walmart gift cards, because those would all be frozen and funds returned the second the computer was decrypted. The only thing that comes close are swift wire transfers, but then you're directly involving banks who can freeze assets on the other end.

+18 (+18 / 0)

1980 posts | registered 5/14/2014

Zergfest / Wise, Aged Ars Veteran

JUL 26, 2017 10:02 AM

ads2 wrote:
People make the mistake of thinking that being decentralized means it is untrackable. The reality is quite the opposite, as the decentralized design means that transactions provide a rich source of network and timing information for analysis.

That's why Monero and similar cryptocurrencies are gaining popularity. They're designed to be untraceable.

Bitcoin will become more and more respectable as time goes on...

+12 (+15 / -3)

176 posts | registered 5/28/2015

beebee / Ars Praefectus

JUL 26, 2017 10:05 AM

Iphtashu Fitz wrote:
yet_another_wumpus wrote:
Cash isn't laundered by mobsters. It is laundered by Wall Street banks, Russian oligarchs, and real estate tycoons. Connecting the dots might get interesting.

Tell that to the drug cartels, gangs, etc. that routinely launder money.

You two are talking around each other. To launder money, you need to run it through some legal business. But only criminals need to launder money.

+17 (+20 / -3)

6170 posts | registered 5/2/2011

Z06 Vette / Ars Centurion

JUL 26, 2017 10:07 AM

ip_what wrote:
Quote:
The news is a reminder that—like ordinary cash—Bitcoin has a wide variety of uses, both legitimate and illicit.

When was the last time 10% of the entire value of all "ordinary cash" in circulation was laundered by a single mobster?

When did Trump become head of the Federal government?

+6 (+15 / -9)

352 posts | registered 4/21/2016

Commenter42 / Smack-Fu Master, in training

JUL 26, 2017 10:13 AM

TriggerPullerUSMC wrote:
show nested quotes

Not picking on you but pseudonymous is a term relating to the use of a fake name used by an author. You could say Satoshi is pseudonymous but the ledger/transactions etc of bitcoin itself are not pseudonymous- I am pretty sure it is pseudo-anonymous-

And that's exactly what he described making a transaction under a false name.

+7 (+7 / 0)

89 posts | registered 5/9/2016

cmacd / Ars Praefectus

JUL 26, 2017 10:16 AM

beebie wrote:
Iphtashu Fitz wrote:
yet_another_wumpus wrote:
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You two are talking around each other. To launder money, you need to run it through some legal business. But only criminals need to launder money.

Yeah, you can *obfuscate* bitcoins easily enough, but the money isn't laundered until you can show a supposedly legitimate source for it.

+19 (+19 / 0)

7362 posts | registered 5/18/2010

dr.edwulf / Ars Centurion

JUL 26, 2017 10:18 AM

ip_what wrote:
Quote:
The news is a reminder that—like ordinary cash—Bitcoin has a wide variety of uses, both legitimate and illicit.

When was the last time 10% of the entire value of all "ordinary cash" in circulation was laundered by a single mobster?

I'm not sure, really. But, when you can launder money and still become POTUS, that's pretty interesting.

[http://www.politico.com/story/2017/07/1 ... man-240679](http://www.politico.com/story/2017/07/1...man-240679)

[http://www.salon.com/2017/05/23/is-dona ... t-problem/](http://www.salon.com/2017/05/23/is-dona ...t-problem/)

+8 (+13 / -5)

342 posts | registered 6/30/2016

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Cash isn't laundered by mobsters. It is laundered by Wall Street banks, Russian oligarchs, and real estate tycoons. Connecting the dots might get interesting.

Tell that to the drug cartels, gangs, etc. that routinely launder money.

That's what he said.

<https://www.forbes.com/forbes/welcome/? ... port-says/>

↑ 0 (+2 / -2) ↓

776 posts | registered 3/7/2010

ip_what / Ars Scholae Palatinae

JUL 26, 2017 10:27 AM

“

cmacd wrote:

show nested quotes

Yeah, you can obfuscate bitcoins easily enough, but the money isn't laundered until you can show a supposedly legitimate source for it.

My real question after reading this story is how the hell do you convert even a tenth of \$4 billion from bitcoins to currency? Some oligarch's business has to be "buying" bitcoin wallets off the block chain and counting them as assets, right?

↑ +5 (+6 / -1) ↓

1980 posts | registered 5/14/2014

beebee / Ars Praefectus

JUL 26, 2017 10:30 AM

“

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show nested quotes

I'm not sure, really. But, when you can launder money and still become POTUS, that's pretty interesting.

<http://www.politico.com/story/2017/07/1 ... man-240679>

Real estate is the classic money laundering legit business. Look at subdividing land. When you subdivide, there isn't a bill of sale. It comes down to the honor system. You report the money to the IRS.

But even basic real estate deals can be used to launder money since the price of real estate is whatever you are willing to pay. So to launder money, you just over pay. Trump's Florida deal with the Russian oligarch is a classic money laundering transaction.

I suspect those deals on eBay where the items sell for more than new are related to money laundering.

↑ +12 (+15 / -3) ↓

6170 posts | registered 5/2/2011

ip_what / Ars Scholae Palatinae

JUL 26, 2017 10:32 AM

“

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That's why Monero and similar cryptocurrencies are gaining popularity. They're designed to be untraceable.

Bitcoin will become more and more respectable as time goes on...

The analog hole that bedevils DRM also makes untraceable cryptocurremcy impossible. Sure, you can move paper around anonymously, but the second you want cash or drugs or pizza in your hand you can be traced.

↑ +2 (+4 / -2) ↓

1980 posts | registered 5/14/2014

TriggerPullerUSMC wrote:

show nested quotes

I think it is cool that you are willing to make such bold statements on a topic you seem to have zero real knowledge of- takes a special type of person.

Or maybe you don't understand how you personally seeing maybe microscopic sliver of all bitcoin activity, means that your statement doesn't really mean very much. And it is pretty apparent that you don't understand what you call "foggers" very well. I can't wait to see what you say next.

Oh yeah, I don't know anything about it. I didn't start mining them back in Summer 2011 when it was still possible to make entire coins in Slush's pool with a pathetic little Radeon HD4850 and everyone was astounded the valuation per coin hit \$25. I totally didn't use it on the very first darknet market Silk Road 1.0 when I was in college, and certainly did not watch the valuation bounce around like a pingpong ball when the bigger markets imploded or got taken down. I also haven't kept up with the news or the fact that numerous darknet markets have been compromised by law enforcement and found to hold millions of dollars in hidden assets.

Oh wait, I actually did all those things and know what the fuck I'm talking about.

Fuck off. You're the worst kind of usual Bitcoin proponent, acting like anyone with an opinion contrary to your own is some kind of misinformed idiot. You're more than likely the newcomer compared to me, and I've been watching douches like you espouse some Virgin Mary pure vision of Bitcoin while the reality is that the people who have ALWAYS had the best use-case for Bitcoin's unique benefits is internet drug dealers. Regardless of the legitimate business uses the reason Bitcoin is even on the fucking map is Silk Road and its compatriot businesses.

As for foggers? They take a bunch of bitcoin in and give you someone else's equivalent value in bitcoin, which ostensibly makes it impossible to tell whose bitcoin is going where. Feed any of the current foggers even a fraction of \$4B? Here's how that plays out: the owners realize you just handed them a multimillion-dollar transaction, then they exit scam and peace out with your BTC. If they're nice or stupid, you still overload the system's ability to tumble coins by making almost all the coins in the system yours to start, and they get tumbled out to you again, and no courtroom is going to look at a giant transaction in and out composed of mostly the same coin and believe it isn't still yours.

↑ +7 (+17 / -10) ↓

162 posts | registered 5/24/2016

Timothy B. Lee / Senior tech policy reporter

STORY AUTHOR

STORY AUTHOR

JUL 26, 2017 10:49 AM

sprockkets wrote:

Hey, are you back at ars Tim?

Yes I am! This is my first week after a 4-year hiatus. Couldn't be more excited.

↑ +22 (+23 / -1) ↓

419 posts | registered 1/6/2007

IntellectualThug / Wise, Aged Ars Veteran

JUL 26, 2017 10:57 AM

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I agree, that's *mostly* a benefit for illicit activities. But not exclusively. I'd happily use bitcoin to pay for something like a music/video/news subscription...pay the yearly rate, once, and get no spam in my inbox (if I use one I don't check), not have to worry about any future bills or remembering to cancel, etc. Here's your cash, I get a year of service. When the subscription stops working, I can hand you more cash. Or not.

Same for sending money between friends...I can have a wallet full of virtual cash and send it to you directly for a marginal fee. Paypal may be free, but also poses risks especially if you link it to your bank account.

I do think Bitcoin has some interesting legitimate use cases as a true digital analog of cash, but they're mostly hamstrung by the incredible volatility of the system. I've seen transactions that were worth \$100 when they happened be worth \$50 by the time the receiver could even extract them back out to cash. Same in the reverse, too. In both cases someone feels like he's getting screwed.

I think these legitimate use cases will become much more feasible if Bitcoin can be stabilized, until then the decentralization is more a liability than an asset to anyone except Cryptoanarchist weirdos and drug dealers.

↑ +8 (+11 / -3) ↓

162 posts | registered 5/24/2016

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Yet it is my understanding that Bitcoin is more traceable than cash. Should we abandon that as well?

Most of the world still uses cash, despite what credit card companies might want you to believe. In fact every time an economic crisis hits in a third world country, thry usually only take cash to fuel your car, because in third world countries credit cards cuts are outrageous so they prefer cash.

Last edited by raxadian on Wed Jul 26, 2017 11:03 am

↑ -5 (+1 / -6) ↓

258 posts | registered 6/2/2017

sprockkets / Ars Legatus Legionis

JUL 26, 2017 11:02 AM

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Tim Lee wrote:

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Yes I am! This is my first week after a 4-year hiatus. Couldn't be more excited.

Yay, missed ya and hard to track your other stuff (for me anyhow).

If only you also reviewed Android phones lol...

↑ 0 (+1 / -1) ↓

12258 posts | registered 8/12/2005

raxadian / Wise, Aged Ars Veteran

JUL 26, 2017 11:07 AM

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Yay, missed ya and hard to track your other stuff (for me anyhow).

If only you also reviewed Android phones lol...

Most phones are Android phones, do you want poor Tim to die from overwork?

The Guardian does nice reviews of Android phones once in a while. While the price listed will be different because is a UK site, the hardware tends to be the same save for those companies that do tons of variants yet use the same name. *cough* Samsung *cough*

Last edited by raxadian on Wed Jul 26, 2017 11:16 am

↑ 0 (0 / 0) ↓

258 posts | registered 6/2/2017

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