

The closure of the Silk Road: what has this meant for online drug trading?

The FBI seizure and closure of the Silk Road has sparked a proliferation of users migrating to alternate dark web market-places to continue trade of illicit substances. The present editorial seeks to quantify the increase in retailers and explore the implications of this migration.

Globally, drug markets have changed radically, with increasing use of the internet for the discussion of drugs and, more recently, the sale of drugs [1]. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) seizure and closure of the Silk Road market-place on 3 October 2013 prompted immediate discussion among online forums concerning alternative market-places for the trade of illicit substances. Two alternative market-places in particular were identified: 'the Black Market Reloaded (BMR)' and 'Sheep Marketplace'. In addition to these, 6 November saw a new version of the Silk Road (Silk Road 2.0) also commence trading. These websites operate on the 'dark web' using a similar format to the Silk Road and other established online community market-places, such as e-Bay [2]. The products on these market-places are similar to those sold on the Silk Road, with the notable exception of BMR, which includes firearms. Firearm sales were banned on the Silk Road.

Commissioned by the Federal Government Department of Health, the Drug Trends team at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) in Sydney, Australia has been monitoring the Silk Road market-place for changes in the online availability of illicit and emerging substances since September 2012 [3]. This ongoing monitoring provides a unique opportunity to assess the impact of the recent closure of the Silk Road.

In the wake of the closure, monitoring turned to alternative market-places and a count of total active retailers was recorded on 3 October 2013, with subsequent counts conducted weekly. From 7 November 2013, retailers operating on Silk Road 2.0 were also counted. Figure 1 shows that BMR recorded a more than twofold increase in the number of active retailers over the 6-week period, although this increase plateaued at the most recent time-point. Retailer numbers on the Sheep Marketplace, however, saw a 461% increase over the time-period, and overtook BMR as the market-place with the highest number of active retailers in the most recent time-point. The initial count of Silk Road 2.0 retailers revealed 92 active sellers, although a large amount of promotion of the new market-place on Twitter™ was

observed following its opening that will likely lead to an increase in retailers in subsequent counts.

The closure of the Silk Road, then, has seen a proliferation in the number of active retailers on alternative dark web market-places. It would appear that the highly publicized closure of the Silk Road market-place has not shaken the confidence of consumers in the integrity of online 'dark web' market-places, nor does it appear to have had a significant impact on the online trade of illicit substances. In due course, outcomes of FBI investigations may tell a different story. Additionally, although a drop in the value of the online currency, Bitcoin [4], was observed following the closure, its value has since recovered and risen to levels higher than those seen before the closure. It would appear that dark web market-place consumers have adapted to the closure of the Silk Road in a similar fashion to the 'surface web' stores selling new psychoactive substances (NPS); when one store is closed or a drug is made illegal, others quickly appear to replace them [1,5,6].

There is great potential for these online market-places to influence traditional street markets in terms of price, purity and availability of illicit substances. The community model employed by dark web market-places means that retailers rely upon positive feedback to drive future sales [7]. Feedback largely details the purity of product, speed of delivery and the security of the packaging to avoid detection. Based on this feedback, consumers are able to make more informed choices about which substances they buy, making this an attractive alternative to traditional markets [8]. The relative ease and low cost of buying online via dark web market-places may also entice consumers to purchase in larger quantities for distribution, thereby risking greater legal ramifications if caught.

The speed with which the internet allows transformations to occur in drug markets poses a major challenge to law enforcement, research and public health agencies [9]. This highlights the need for timely and responsive monitoring systems to continue work in this important area. Future monitoring will continue to track the growth of retailers on dark web market-places in order to assess their longevity and relative popularity, as well as the impact of changing legislation and technological advancements.

Declaration of interests

None.

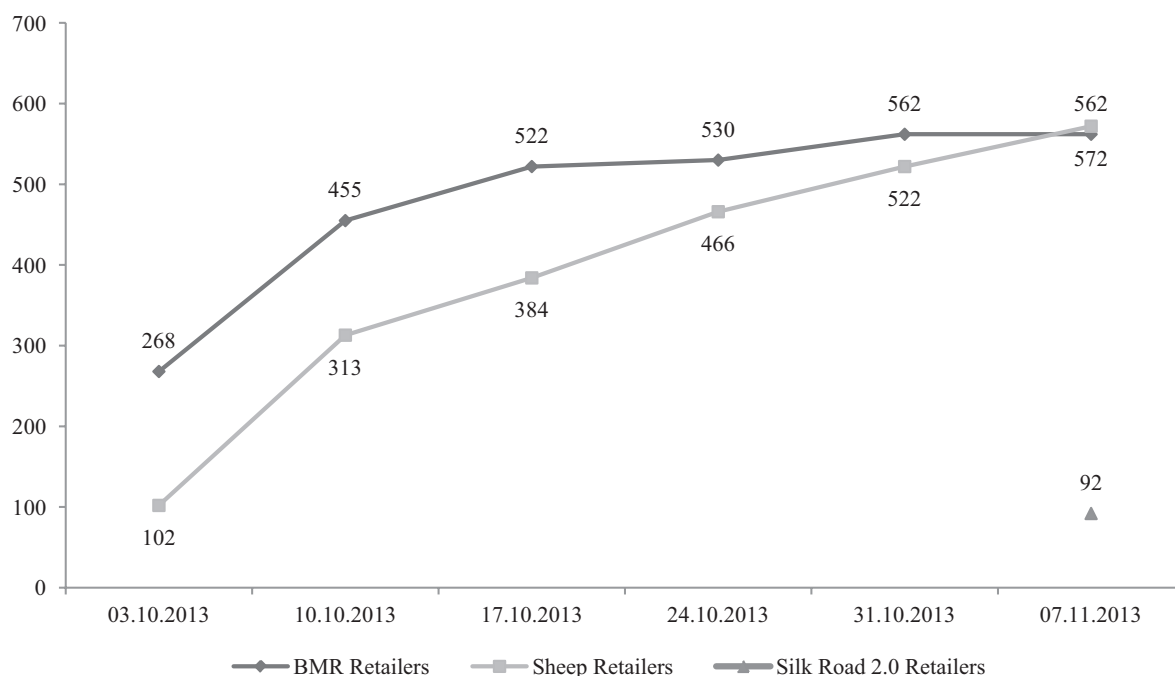


Figure 1 Number of active retailers on the Black Market Reloaded, Sheep Marketplace and Silk Road 2.0 by date. BMR=Black Market Reloaded

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JOE VAN BUSKIRK, AMANDA ROXBURGH,
MICHAEL FARRELL & LUCY BURNS
National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC),
University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW 2052,
Australia. E-mail: j.vanbuskirk@unsw.edu.au

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