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Title: Mixing politics and crime—the prevalence and decline of political discourse on the cryptomarket

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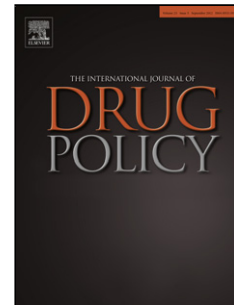
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Title: Mixing politics and crime – the prevalence and decline of political discourse on the cryptomarket

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Abstract:

Background: Dread Pirate Roberts, founder of the first cryptomarket for illicit drugs named Silk Road, articulated libertarian political motives for his ventures. Previous research argues that there is a significant political component present or involved in cryptomarket drug dealing which is specifically libertarian. The aim of the paper is to investigate the prevalence of political discourses within discussions of cryptomarket drug dealing, and further to research the potential changes of these over the timespan of the study.

Methods: We develop a novel operationalization of discourse analytic concepts which we combine with topic modelling enabling us to study how politics are articulated on cryptomarket forums. We apply the Structural Topic Model on a corpus extracted from crawls of cryptomarket forums encompassing posts dating from 2011 to 2015.

Results: The topics discussed on cryptomarket forums are primarily centered around the distribution of drugs including discussions of shipping and receiving, product advertisements, and reviews as well as aspects of drug consumption such as testing and consumption. However, on forums whose primary function is aiding operations on a black market, we still observe political matter. We identified one topic which expresses a libertarian discourse that emphasizes the individual's right to non-interference. Over time we observe an increasing prevalence of the libertarian discourse from 2011 to the end of 2013. In the end of 2013 - when Silk Road was seized - we observe an abrupt change in the prevalence of the libertarian discourse.

Conclusions: The libertarian political discourse has historically been prevalent on cryptomarket forums. The closure of Silk Road has affected the prevalence of libertarian discourse suggesting that while the closure did not succeed in curtailing the cryptomarket economy, it dampened political sentiments.

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