

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTION

DIGITAL PIRATES

Alexia Maddox

Deakin University

Twitter: @alexiamadd

**WE MUST OPEN THE LENS OF INVESTIGATION
WIDER TO EXAMINE HOW LIBERAL IDEALS
ARE WOVEN INTO THE CULTURAL FABRIC OF
EVERYDAY LIFE IN NEW, AND OFTEN
UNEXPECTED CONTEXTS**

Coleman & Golub 2008 “Hacker practice”

SILK ROAD

- ▶ Silk Road was an **online marketplace** devoted primarily to the **sale of illegal drugs** including cannabis, a wide range of psychedelic drugs, stimulant drugs like cocaine, prescription drugs, and more.
- ▶ The site could be **accessed by a .onion link via TOR**. It was not difficult to do, once you knew exactly which link to use.
- ▶ The site was launched in February 2011 and ran successfully for over two and a half years until the United States FBI **seized it on 2 October 2013**.

DRUG CRYPTOMARKETS

- ▶ Cryptomarkets (or dark net markets) are:
 - ▶ Unregulated online market places that **operate similar to eBay** and are located in the Dark Web.
 - ▶ **Buyers and vendors are anonymous** through the use of encryption and other privacy technologies.
 - ▶ Site affordances include **recommendation and rating systems, forums, escrow, and browsing listings.**
 - ▶ Drugs are purchased using digital cash such as **Bitcoin** and **arrive in the post.**
 - ▶ **Operational security (OPSEC)** was a significant discussion point on the forums

THE DARK WEB

- ▶ The Dark Web (or dark net) is:
 - ▶ An overlay of special routing software designed to **provide anonymity for website visitors and publishers** (Gehl, 2018)
 - ▶ Used for private browsing and communications, following values of **information freedom, personal privacy and self-sovereignty**.
 - ▶ An experimental space of emerging socio-technical formations based upon a convergence of privacy technologies.

A DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF SILK ROAD

- ▶ 6 months **tech set up** prior to project launch.
- ▶ Immersion in the online environment of the market place forums to learn the **argot, humour, overlapping values and cultural norms and expectations.**
- ▶ **17 interviews** were conducted with people who had purchased drugs from Silk Road.
- ▶ Done through the use of anonymous and **encrypted text chat** by IRC.

The initiating community surrounding Silk Road consisted of techno-elites, drug users, cypherpunks and cyberlibertarians.

The moral and political value field of Silk Road resonated with Coleman and Golubs (2008) description of Hacker values:

- ▶ Protecting property and civil liberties
- ▶ Promoting individual autonomy and tolerance
- ▶ Securing a free press
- ▶ Ruling through limited government and universal law
- ▶ Preserving a commitment to equal opportunity and meritocracy.

THE CULTURAL COSMOLOGY OF THE PIRATE

This story begins with the imbrication between **digital contexts**, the **global commodity trade**, and **autonomous actors** who act **within and beyond state regulation** and intersect with the **logics** of maritime law, the pirate code and economic incentive.

WOULD THE REAL PIRATES PLEASE STAND UP?



Dent 2012 "Understanding the war on piracy"

THE CULTURAL COSMOLOGY OF THE PIRATE

The continuities here with an anthropology of (digital) piracy include:

- ▶ the **practices of undermining the secured movement or transmission of property** (McKelvey 2011, 736), a.k.a. smuggling or moving contraband, and
- ▶ appearing on the scene as a **charismatic folk hero** when contradictions and inequalities built into a political economy reach breaking point (Dawdy and Bonni 2012).

THE DIGITAL PIRATE

- ▶ The cryptomarket encoded Johns (2009)' notion that digital pirates **undermine property** and **enact security** through technical designs that **avoid centralised control** and **harness peer-to-peer architectures**.
- ▶ Silk Road was characterised by a sense of being “beyond the law” but operating under the site was operating under **nodal governance** of DPR (a pirate state).
- ▶ Dread Pirate Roberts (DPR) was a **charismatic leader** who evoked the persona of the digital pirate.

THE CULTURAL COSMOLOGY OF THE DIGITAL PIRATE

- ▶ Silk Road was an autonomous pirate state in the Dark Web that was operating on **decentralised and securitised principals of trade (of drugs)**.
- ▶ The moral economy surrounding the Silk Road cryptomarket etched out a space of **independent economy, collaborative creativity and political resistance**.
- ▶ Digital pirates reveal their ethical commitments through an array of **practices and idioms**.

At times, the research followed these in **uncanny parallels**.

UNCANNY PARALLELS

	Fieldsite	Research trajectory
Construction	Silk Road	Tech set up
Rupture	Site seizure	Ethics amendment
Redirection	Digital migration	Follow people
Contention	Distrust	Trolling
Obsolescence	Identity	Forum recruitment
Iteration	Silk Road 2.0	The Hub

CONTEXT COLLAPSE

- ▶ Methods of engagement needed to harness **peer-to-peer architectures** and **enact security** through technical design.
- ▶ **Collaborative creativity** defined the conduct of this research.
- ▶ **Vulnerability** was the transformative process through which researcher and the cryptomarket community found the eye of the storm, **an ephemeral place of intersection.**
- ▶ **Social solutions to structural inequalities** became the political agenda through which we could relate.

CONTEXT COLLAPSE EXCEPT...

Operating within this space meant that I was practicing self-sovereignty, transparency but not anonymity. At the end of the day, I was working by my own value field that merged ethical practice with social intelligence and the eye of the ethnographer.

Was I also a digital pirate?

It felt that way at times.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- ▶ This project was led by Dr Monica Barratt, through NDRI.
- ▶ Collaborators on the project included Professor Simon Lenton and Professor Matthew Allen.
- ▶ This research was funded internally by the National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University.
- ▶ This research would not have been possible without the support of the Hub Forums and the participants who gave so generously of their time and experience.