

# Undercover Sentinels at the Drug Gates

*Sentinelas disfarçados nos portões das drogas*

*Centinelas encubiertos en las puertas de la droga*

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## Abstracts

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The illicit production and trafficking of drugs are a major threat to the United States and insidious to the people and fragile societies of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Deportations from the U.S. exacerbate this tragedy. Congress approved a law in 1996 requiring all non-U.S. convicts to be deported to their home countries where making a living often involves interacting with organized crime. By law, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) operates only in the U.S. and cannot unilaterally investigate and arrest high-level drug traffickers overseas. Given enforcement deficiencies of reducing drug supplies in producing countries, the Organization of American States (Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission - CICAD) provides a vehicle to LAC drug enforcement officials for capacity building and international information exchange. This article reflects on the effectiveness of three such initiatives: jetway surveillance, interruption of the flow of precursor chemicals used in drug production, and trafficking via the Internet.

**Keywords:** Drug enforcement. Training. Jetway surveillance. Precursor chemicals. Internet drug trafficking. Silk Road. Organization of American States (OAS).

## Resumo

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A produção ilícita de drogas e seu tráfico se constituem em grande ameaça aos Estados Unidos, assim como aos povos e às frágeis sociedades da América Latina e Caribe (ALC). As deportações dos Estados Unidos exacerbam essa tragédia. Em 1996, o Congresso americano aprovou uma lei que requer que todos os sentenciados estrangeiros devam ser deportados aos seus países de origem se seus sustentos estiverem envolvidos com o crime organizado. Pela lei, o departamento intitulado Administração da Repressão às Drogas (DEA em inglês) só pode operar nos Estados Unidos e não pode investigar e prender, unilateralmente, traficantes de drogas de alta periculosidade no exterior. Dadas as deficiências de controle na redução da produção de drogas nos países produtores, a Organização dos Estados Americanos (Comissão Interamericana para o Controle do Abuso de Drogas - CICAD) disponibiliza a troca de informações e capacitação para os funcionários no combate às drogas, ALC. Este artigo busca refletir sobre a eficácia de três dessas iniciativas: controle dos portões de entrada aéreos; interrupção do fluxo de insumos para a produção de drogas; e o tráfico via internet.

**Palavras-chave:** Aplicação da lei contra drogas. Treinamento. Vigilância aos portões de entrada. Produtos químicos precursores. Tráfico de drogas via Internet. Silk Road. Organização dos Estados Americanos (OEA).

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## Resumen

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La producción y el tráfico ilícitos de drogas son una amenaza de gran magnitud para los Estados Unidos y de gran insidia para las personas y las frágiles sociedades de América Latina y el Caribe (ALC). Las deportaciones de Estados Unidos exacerbaban esta tragedia. El Congreso aprobó una ley en 1996 que exige la deportación de todos los convictos no estadounidenses a sus países de origen, donde ganarse la vida a menudo implica interactuar con el crimen organizado. Por ley, la Administración de Drogas y Narcóticos (DEA) opera solo en EE. UU., y en el extranjero no puede investigar y arrestar unilateralmente a narcotraficantes de alto perfil. Dadas las deficiencias en la aplicación de la ley para reducir el suministro de drogas en los países productores, la Organización de los Estados Americanos (Comisión Interamericana para el Control del Abuso de Drogas - CICAD) proporciona a los funcionarios antinarcóticos en ALC un medio para la capacitación y el intercambio de información internacional. Este artículo reflexiona sobre la eficacia de tres iniciativas de este tipo: la vigilancia de puentes de embarque, la interrupción del flujo de precursores químicos utilizados en la producción de drogas y el tráfico a través de Internet.

**Palabras clave:** Aplicación de la ley contra drogas. Entrenamiento. Vigilancia de puentes de embarque. Productos químicos precursores. Tráfico de drogas a través de la Internet. Silk Road. Organización de los Estados Americanos (OEA).

### 1. Marriage Proposal on the Silk Road

“During a training session we each had a computer work station in St. Kitts and Nevis with instructions to initiate an illicit drug transaction through the online black-market website, Silk Road. Falsifying my real identity, I chose to present myself as female. The elaborate menu of products and services was diverse and designed to meet a wide range of customer demands. Before making my payment in bitcoins I halted the bogus drug transaction. However, in the process, I did receive a trafficker’s proposal of marriage to become his “green card” bride.” (Author)

Most of us have come to realize that the production, distribution, and illicit trafficking of drugs and related contraband are a major threat to the United States. They are also insidious to people of Latin American and Caribbean countries that, as it happens, are unable to draw upon U.S. resources for assistance. By law, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) operates only in the U.S. and cannot unilaterally investigate and arrest high-level drug traffickers overseas.

Whatever success is achieved reducing drug supplies depends upon host nation law enforcement cooperation such as intelligence sharing. Specific countries, however, currently lack self-sustaining counter narcotics police institutions, budgets, manpower, and effective criminal justice systems to adequately address counterdrug efforts.

Anti-drug agencies respond as best they can with what they have. But it isn’t much. Under the best of circumstances countries face plenty of drug challenges. Priorities and limited

budgets, however, are normally skewed to address other urgent needs. One military general questioned in frustration, “What can you expect from a country that has a total national drug enforcement budget of \$700,000 per year?” He said that if they could put a stop to only 15 percent of the drug traffic, the police would consider their efforts successful; the very best they could do. Success, however, requires good intelligence. Not so easy when the *National Center* for criminal drug data continues its dependence on manual typewriters.

Popular films can color impressions of vicious drug lords (*Clear and Present Danger*), crooked cops, desperate addicts, scorched poppy fields, and mules, including drugs hidden in pedigree puppies and human swallowers (*Maria Full of Grace*). I had notions about recreational inhalation but nothing about intractable addiction. Only later did I learn of brain cell disintegration in 15-year-olds, meth mouth, the intricate and crafty drug supply chain, systemic violence, and the collateral costs to fragile societies of Latin America and elsewhere.

This national turmoil, especially in smaller countries of Central America, is attributed in part to the transnational transmission of crime. A measure, approved by the U.S. Congress in 1996, “Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act,” requires that non-U.S. convicts have to be deported to their home countries. As reported by the International Crisis Group: “Most deportees will struggle to make a living without interacting with organized crime, which owes its prevalence in Central America to previous waves of U.S. deportations.”<sup>2</sup>

Apparently oblivious and indifferent to the social erosion afflicting their own countries, I interviewed officials who regarded the drug trade as a problem for the United States, not their own. To their advantage, however, several countries have tagged the value of their money to that of the American dollar. The “dollarization” of the national currency has the effect of facilitating money laundering, that is, transforming drugs into wealth and power, and more violence.

## **2. The Challenge of Corruption**

U.S. federal prosecutors have filed motions saying that Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández took bribes from drug traffickers and had the country’s armed forces protect a

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<sup>2</sup> Sofia Martínez Fernández, “Mass Deportations Only Fuel a Cycle of Violence and Migration,” International Crisis Group, OP-ED Latin America & Caribbean, June 25, 2018. This same source reports that between 1998 and 2005, for example, Central America absorbed 46,000 deportees with a criminal record. U.S.-bred gang culture permeated El Salvador which has the highest population in gang members – some 65,000 – with a further half million people considered sympathizers or dependents. This swelling of the ranks of violent criminal groups are responsible for the extortion of 70% of businesses in that country.

cocaine laboratory and shipments to the United States... (a bribe of) more than \$1 million from Mexican drug trafficker Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán... The document quotes Hernández as saying he wanted to **‘shove the drugs right up the noses of the gringos’** by flooding the United States with cocaine.” (Emphasis mine). Source: Claudia Torrens, Associated Press, Tampa Bay Times, Sunday, January 10, 2020, p. 14 A.

“Only in the area of money laundering, our member states seize over a *billion dollars* a year,” remarks the Secretary General of the Organization of American States. The stakes are high. A prominent informant confided to me that the top official in one country had indeed sanctioned the repression of drug traffickers but had given specific instructions *not* to interfere with currency transactions.

Informants schooled me in how traffickers employ sophisticated technology, insider intelligence and corrupted informants. They possess the latest weaponry, diversified and well-financed transshipment options (fleets of fishing vessels, super-fast boats, submersibles and squadrons of aircraft). Adapting to police response time, traffickers can off-load boats on the beach or planes on airstrips in 7-10 minutes and be on their way.

Once drugs enter circulation, military operations have little effect, except for photo opportunities. A lieutenant colonel lamented “that once drugs are dispersed, police intervention, in the best of circumstances, is isolated and too late, and in the worst, a waste of time and money.” By then the producers and traffickers have already satisfied one of their key markets, the narco-terrorists. They rely on drugs to support their causes with money, weapons, ammunition and food.

The demand for drugs in the United States appears intractable. Enforcement of marijuana is increasingly slack, and its use (recreational and medical) is permitted in several jurisdictions. By contrast, in 2018, hard drugs resulted in 67,367 overdose deaths and during the period 2012-2018 the rate of cocaine-related deaths tripled. Overdose deaths by psychostimulants (including meth) increased fully five times over that time span.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in 2020, the monetary costs due to abuse of illegal drugs totaled \$198 billion and prescription opioids, \$78.5 billion.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Holly Hedegaard, M.D., Araldi M. Miniño, M.P.H., and Margaret Warner, Ph.D. CDC - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, NCHS Data Brief No. 356, January 2020.

<sup>4</sup> John Elflein, Statista, “Number of drug overdose deaths in the United States in 2017, by drug type.” November 14, 2019. The amounts, however, are still dwarfed by the abuse costs of alcohol (\$249 billion) and tobacco (\$300 billion).

This brief account describes my 2012-2013 experience evaluating a series of regional counterdrug capacity building activities related to so-called jetway surveillance, precursor chemicals to process and produce illicit substances, and internet drug commerce.<sup>5</sup>

**Organization of American States (Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission – CICAD):** Given the enforcement deficiencies (budgets, manpower, corruption) of reducing drug supplies in producing countries and DEA international restrictions to directly intervene overseas, the Organization of American States (OAS) provides a vehicle for capacity building and international information exchange with the sponsorship, support, and active participation of other sister drug control institutions.<sup>6</sup>

In 2013, the OAS invited me to conduct an evaluation of several anti-drug training programs among Latin American and Caribbean law enforcement officials.<sup>7</sup> The assessment included the content and results of three jetway surveillance seminars, five precursor chemicals, and four internet sales of drugs seminars typically of four-day durations.<sup>8</sup>

Training focused on the *supply reduction* of drugs from crops, such as cocaine, heroin, and marijuana; synthetic drugs such as methamphetamine and ecstasy, and pharmaceuticals diverted from licit distribution channels as well as the commandeering of chemical substances used in illegal drug production.

**Drug Supply:** Prior to the training seminars beginning in 2012, available data indicated that annual **cocaine** production had reached 885 metric tons worldwide (1,950,540 lbs.) of which only 42% was seized each year before reaching domestic and foreign markets. **Heroin** production, originating just from Colombia and Mexico, amounted to approximately 20 metric tons (44,092 lbs.).

By 2005, **methamphetamine** consumption had risen to 165 pure unadulterated metric tons (363,763 lbs.). Supplies to the U.S. market rely on meth production by small toxic labs,

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<sup>5</sup> Participants included detectives, customs and excise officers, senior law enforcement, security screeners, forensic investigators, image interpreters, crime narcotics agents, health officials, chemists and pharmacists, public prosecutors, police, and airport authority officials.

<sup>6</sup> These include the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Colombia's National Police, Peruvian Antidrug Police, the Narcotics Affairs Section of the United States, the Drug Control Administration of the United States, the Alliance for Commercial Security Program, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol), and others.

<sup>7</sup> Training seminars took place in Barbados, Mexico, Jamaica, Bahamas, Trinidad & Tobago, Grenada, Costa Rica, and St. Kitts and Nevis.

<sup>8</sup> An earlier assignment with OAS had involved a nine-country assessment of policies, strategies, and programs to combat drug abuse in the western hemisphere.

domestic super labs using diverted bulk ephedrine or pseudoephedrine from the U.S. and Canadian pharmaceutical industry, and importation of meth produced outside the United States as finished product.

**Image 1: Domestic Meth Production**



**Source:** South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Waste Management.

The amount of **marijuana** available in the United States – including that produced both domestically and internationally – is unknown. Supply estimates are difficult to calculate but consumption between 2001 and 2006 ranged between 4,200 (9,259,415 lbs.) and 5,200 metric tons (11,464,000 lbs.).

**Image 2: Canine Inspection**



**Source:** United States Drug Enforcement Agency, DEA.

**Jetway Surveillance:** Most of us are familiar with some overt jetway surveillance tactics such as canines sniffing for drugs and explosives, one-way mirrors, and TSA checks. Others are less obvious, even undercover such as profiling and observance of unusual behaviors from afar. A seated woman, for instance, who has difficulty tying a shoelace may be packing drugs in her midsection.

Couriers can also be identified by means of ticket anomalies, snitches, and simply from observation or a “cold stop” without any independent predicated information. Telltale signs that raise suspicion include passport and luggage characteristics, deceptive and nonverbal behavior, as well as verbal and group indications of deception involving accomplices. Law enforcement is able to sift through the traveling public to identify persons of interest for further questioning.<sup>9</sup>

**Image 3: Drug Traffic Surveillance**



**Source:** United States Drug Enforcement Agency, DEA.

The results of the jetway surveillance training greatly increased the efficiency and effectiveness of customs and law enforcement officers on the job.

The Jetway training has streamlined the process of profiling for me personally and has given a better understanding of the connectors to crime committed at the airport. Proven guidelines to follow lay the foundation for the customizing and building of practical protocols to be set in place.

The increase in the sharing of information helps establish a baseline for all personnel who operate at the airport making it easier to justify suspicion and, as justification against complaints made, when action is taken against passengers, that is, when personnel act on indicators gleaned from the Jetway program, superior officers accept its legitimacy as justification. (Seminar participant)

**Tracking Precursor Chemicals:** Among professionals it is generally accepted that once drugs have been produced and distributed to their retail consumers, eventual seizures along the way fail to reduce the overall quantity of drugs destined for domestic and international markets. Oftentimes, piles of law-enforcement captured and packaged cocaine or marijuana stacked on the tarmac provide merely the backdrop for promotional photo opportunities. On the other hand, capacity building for the identification and elimination of precursor chemicals is designed to interrupt the supply chain that could lead to the manufacture of synthetic drugs in the first place.

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<sup>9</sup> “Behavior Indicators of Drug Couriers in Airport,” Naval Research Laboratory, Washington, D.C., April 30, 2015.

The processing and production of cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine have their own centers of gravity where drugs are formulated. Preemptively, law enforcement can act by seizing “upstream” large quantities of legal chemicals used for a wide range of products, like medicine, perfumes, plastics, and cosmetics. Many of these can be diverted for the preparation of illicit substances often in hazardous environments. Meth labs are notoriously dangerous where explosions and fires are frequent. Police raids require hazmat garb and specialized training to deal with volatile chemicals – all dealt with extensively during the OAS training.

For example, cocaine production requires chemical potassium permanganate used for oxidation. Methamphetamine requires several chemical substances such as hydriodic acid, hypophosphorous acid, and iodine. Amphetamine production utilizes some of these same chemicals but also red and white phosphorus, hydrochloric and sulfuric acids.

The conversion of raw product to heroin requires the availability of acetic anhydride and other chemicals such as acetone, ammonium chloride, ammonia solution, charcoal, hydrochloric acid and sodium carbonate. Large amounts of water and wood would also be necessary.

So-called “designer” drugs are synthesized drugs produced by changing the properties of a drug that comes from a plant (e.g. cocaine, morphine, or marijuana) with the intent of developing substances that differ slightly from controlled substances in their chemical structure while retaining their pharmacological effects. MDMA (ecstasy), ketamine, and methamphetamine are examples of designer drugs. In 2017, over half of the death certificates for cocaine or heroin overdose death involved a synthetic opioid such as fentanyl with an analgesic potency approximately 100 times greater than morphine.

“I learned how drugs are transported, the ways containers are opened, the identification of chemicals, the effects of drugs, and recognition of persons under the influence of drugs. This will help me in my work. This course was instrumental in exposing my institution to the trafficking modalities of criminal organizations involved in precursor chemical diversion. This seminar has been one of the highlights of my career.” (Seminar participant)

**Image 4: Meth Mouth**



Source: American Dental Association, ADA.

I have shared the information given with my superiors and we are in the process of educating the members of our specialist teams. The information added to my personal capacity and confidence to think more quickly, seeing things as actual indicators of possible criminal activity. It brought a fresh approach to simple techniques that can be employed as a cost effective and necessary ingredient in our activities as law enforcement officers. (Seminar participant)

**Internet Drug Commerce:** The Silk Road derives its name from the lucrative trade in silk carried out along its length from east Asia to southern Europe beginning in the Han dynasty in China (207 BCE–220 CE). At the time of the 2012-2013 OAS training seminars, the Silk Road also referred to an online black market and the first modern darknet market, best known as a platform for selling illegal drugs. As part of the dark web, it was operated as a Tor hidden service, such that online users were able to browse it anonymously and securely without potential traffic monitoring.<sup>10</sup>

**Silk Road Downfall:** Coincidentally, during the period of the training seminars, the FBI had already become aware of an online black-market website (Silk Road) where users could buy and sell goods, including computer hacking services, fake documents, poisons, illegal drugs and weapons – even murders for hire were discussed.

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<sup>10</sup> Wikipedia.

**Image 5:** Packages containing small quantities of illegal drugs coming through the international mail hub at Chicago's O'Hare Airport, attributed to Silk Road.



**Source:** Federal Bureau of Investigation, FBI; United State District Court for the Southern District of New York.

Remarkably, just prior to the preparation of this article, for the first time the FBI finally revealed details and openly described their efforts to hunt and capture website perpetrators. The following is my summary, paraphrase and editing of their findings based on FBI interviews.<sup>11</sup>

The site was run by an individual known only as the Dread Pirate Roberts, named after a character from the classic film "The Princess Bride." An elite FBI cyber taskforce worked to infiltrate the site and identify its founder: Ross Ulbricht, a 29-year-old, computer science engineer and Penn State graduate.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Silk Road (the Amazon of drug sites), accessed anonymously by users on the dark web, brought in approximately \$1 billion in sales, according to investigators, with Ulbricht making millions by taking a cut of each transaction. The investigation led FBI agents from Iceland to New York to San Francisco in search of the shadowy figure behind the website.

It would take multiple law enforcement agencies more than two years of following dead ends and false leads to unmask the identity of Dread Pirate Roberts. The website domain was called "onion." The onion router or Tor refers to the multiple layers to get to the center, multiple computers that one has to go through in order to reach that content, the center of the onion.

Sommers and Bernstein, authors of the CBS News report, revealed that the Tor network was created for the purpose of allowing people to communicate on the Internet without anyone

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<sup>11</sup> Caroline Sommers and Emily Bernstein produced the report for CBS News, dated November 10, 2020, "Inside the FBI takedown of the mastermind behind offering drugs, guns, and murders for hire."

having the ability to know who or where they were. These websites do not accept PayPal or Visa or MasterCard or any other types of credit cards because all that's traceable. The system employed the cryptocurrency, bitcoin.

By the end of 2011, Silk Road was processing orders worth half a million dollars a month selling drugs and other illicit goods and services. Some drug buyers and sellers were arrested as law enforcement redoubled their efforts to figure out their identities. Probing from a new perspective, prosecutors asked the New York FBI cyber branch to join the hunt. This was an elite team – with experience working inside the dark web and with Tor – also known as the onion router – where Silk Road was hidden.

FBI reporting indicated that Ross Ulbricht had a girlfriend, Julia Vie. Their relationship ended in 2011 after several years of dating. Julia was convinced that one of the main reasons for the breakup was Ulbricht's "insane" pressure to keep the website secret. But in the summer of 2012, Julia got an unexpected visit from Ross, who told her he was moving to San Francisco.

Circumstances took a turn in the spring of 2013 when a vendor threatened to expose the personal information of thousands of users. Without anonymity of sellers and buyers, the website would collapse. Ross decided to hire someone he believed was a member of a Hell's Angels biker gang to find and kill the blackmailer and his associates. He paid \$650,000 from his bitcoin account to get the job done.

According to FBI interviews, early in the summer of 2013, after nearly a year of trying to crack the inner workings of the Silk Road website, agents in the FBI's New York Cyber Branch finally got a break. They noticed a coding error on the site. Agents learned that in just two-and-a-half years, around 1.2 million transactions had been processed on the Silk Road site with bitcoin, generating the equivalent of approximately \$1 billion in revenue. The agents also found information and communications Dread Pirate Roberts believed would never be discovered.

By now, law enforcement agencies investigating Silk Road had several pieces of the puzzle: the FBI had found the server, the IRS had identified Ross Ulbricht's name in a personal email address, and Homeland Security had an undercover agent in direct contact with Dread Pirate Roberts. But no one was seeing the whole picture ... yet.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> **Author's note.** Precisely on September 29, 2013, I arrived in St. Kitts and Nevis to conduct the evaluation of the training seminar on the internet sale of drugs. Less than a month later, in October 2013, members of the FBI cyber security team traveled to San Francisco to arrest the man they believed was the mastermind behind Silk Road, Ross Ulbricht.

To make the prosecution “stick,” however, they had to catch him red-handed, that is, with his computer open and, at that moment, linked to the dark website.

From a Starbucks, Ulbricht went to a public library where FBI undercover agents had taken up their stations. He headed upstairs and was observed entering the science fiction section. He sat down at a table there but, although agents in the library could see him typing, he was not yet online to the dark website. A couple hundred feet away just outside of the library, unbeknownst to Ulbricht, was the person with whom he was communicating.

The FBI agent outside directed Ulbricht to go look at his message on the website, knowing that he had to log on in order to actually access it. Once he got to the post, at that very moment, the order to execute the arrest was given. The cyber team made sure the laptop stayed open. They found a treasure trove of evidence: fake identities, chats, even his personal journal. Most damning, the computer's username was “frosty”.

### **3. Epilogue**

FBI reporting confirms that Ross Ulbricht was charged with seven counts, including narcotics trafficking, computer hacking, money laundering, and a kingpin statute usually reserved for mafia dons and cartel leaders. In January 2015, four years after Silk Road started, Ulbricht's trial began. The defense admitted while he had created Silk Road, he had handed it off to others, who then lured him back in order to take the fall.

Ross Ulbricht had operated the website for nearly three years from 2011 to 2013. He collected \$18 million in bitcoins through commissions on tens of thousands of drug sales. Prosecutors cited at least six deaths to overdose from drugs bought on Silk Road. Ulbricht had made efforts to arrange the murder of five other people he deemed as threats to his business.

After a 12-day trial and less than four hours of deliberations, a jury found Ross Ulbricht guilty on all counts. Ultimately, he received two life sentences plus 40 years. And the federal system does not allow parole.<sup>13</sup>

All of the information was new to me and in this computer age we need to be on a technical par with the new breed of criminals out there. Having participated in this training has greatly increased my awareness and knowledge of the use of the internet for purchasing illegal drugs. I now have a much better understanding and appreciation of the threat this new form of engagement between users and traffickers have employed.  
(Seminar participant)

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<sup>13</sup> Taken from reporting at the time of the trial: CBS Interactive Inc., May 30, 2015, “Silk Road founder Ross Ulbricht gets life in prison.”