Over the past two decades, digital technologies have come to permeate ever more aspects of contemporary life. This trend looks set to continue and has profound implications for the social sciences, particularly criminology, with technology-facilitated offences now arguably constituting the most dynamic and rapidly growing area of contemporary crime. Despite this development, the discipline of criminology has been slow to embrace the critical study of technology-facilitated offences and social harms, with most research conducted in this area still informed by a relatively narrow range of cybersecurity and applied criminological perspectives.

Emerald Studies in Digital Crime, Technology and Social Harms is part of a new movement within criminology and related disciplines to broaden this narrow focus and engage critically with new trends in technology-facilitated offending and victimisation. The book series uses a combination of critical criminological, socio-legal and sociological perspectives to consider a wide range of technology-facilitated offences and harmful social practices, ranging from digital surveillance, cyber-bullying and image-based sexual abuse through to global darknet drug trading.
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To the cryptomarket community.
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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures and Tables</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. A Modern-day History of Cryptomarkets</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Overview</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 The ‘Calm’, or Anarchy, before the Storm</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Silk Road Marketplace – A Paradigm Change</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.1 An Illegal Platform Economy</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2 Encryption and Anonymity</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.3 Introducing Governance: Dispute Resolution and Escrow</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.4 Politics, Community and Book Clubs</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.5 ‘This Hidden Site Has Been Seized’</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Downfall of a Monopoly</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.1 Hacks, Scams and Chaos</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.2 Fraudsters and Politics</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.3 First as Tragedy, then as Farce (with Minor Adjustments)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.5 Onymous and Onwards
  1.5.1 Centralisation 27
  1.5.2 Localisation 29
  1.5.3 Increasing and Novel External Action 30
1.6 Conclusion 32

2. The Current State of the Cryptomarket Trade 35
  2.1 The State of Cryptomarkets 35
    2.1.1 Overall Market Size and Growth 35
    2.1.2 Cryptomarket Lifecycle 38
    2.1.3 Geographical Distribution and Regional Clustering 44
    2.1.4 Competition, Reputation and Sales 50
  2.2 What Is, and Is Not, on Cryptomarkets? 52
    2.2.1 Market Composition, Demand and Supply 52
    2.2.2 Non-drug Products 56
    2.2.3 Weapons 57
    2.2.4 Prohibited Goods and Services 60
  2.3 Impact on Conventional Drug Distribution Networks 64
  2.4 Harm Reduction 66
  2.5 Concluding Remarks 72

3. Cryptomarket Research Methods, Ethics and Epistemologies 75
  3.1 Scope of the Chapter 75
  3.2 The Cryptomarket Environment 77
  3.3 Methods and Approaches Used To-date 81
    3.3.1 Qualitative Approaches 83
    3.3.2 Survey Data 85
    3.3.3 Digital Trace, from the Markets 88
3.3.4 Digital Trace, from Elsewhere 95
3.3.5 Test Buys 97

3.4 Methodological Limitations and Implications 99
3.4.1 Current Limitations and Other Possible Methods 99
3.4.2 Importance of Interdisciplinary Work and Theory 104
3.4.3 The Ever-present Issue of Ethics (and Law Enforcement) 106

3.5 Methodological Summary 110

4. Charting the Unknown and Future Directions 115
4.1 Scope 115
4.2 Where to Now? 116
4.2.1 Continued Growth and Platform Stability 116
4.2.2 Increasing Localisation 117
4.2.3 A Natural Limit? 118
4.2.4 Crackdowns, Volatility and External Shocks 119
4.2.5 Increasing Intersection with Other Drug Markets 121
4.2.6 Increased Offending Due to Exposure to Other Illicit Goods and Services 123
4.2.7 Gentrification 124
4.2.8 Harm Reduction 127
4.2.9 A Summary of Predictions 127

4.3 Concluding Remarks 129

Bibliography 131
Index 161
This page intentionally left blank
LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figures

Fig. 1.1  The Silk Road Seizure Banner which Greeted Visitors after 2 October 2013  19
Fig. 3.1  Two Landing Pages, One from Dream Market in October 2017 and One from Black Bank in May 2015  79
Fig. 3.2  Number of Publications and Cumulative Number of Citations from Web of Science/Scopus, 2013 to 2018 (as at 25 March 2019)  82
Fig. 4.1  US Dollar Value of Bitcoin, July 2016 to July 2019  120

Table

Table 2.1  Cryptomarket Drug Composition from Soska and Christin (2015).  54
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INTRODUCTION

This book is about cryptomarkets and cryptomarket research, with a particular focus on the illicit drugs trade. As the title suggests, it is intended as a guidebook to those with an interest in conducting their own study into this fascinating and ever-expanding area of research. There is no shortage of interesting fodder. In little more than eight years, cryptomarkets have facilitated hundreds of thousands illicit drug exchanges, likely worth in excess of two billion US dollars. They have been implicated in fatal overdoses and facilitate door-to-door delivery of a greater volume and wider range of illicit drugs than may be witnessed in any open air drug market in the world, and yet they are widely suspected to be reducing a range of systemic drug and prohibition-related harms. They have been linked to acts of domestic terrorism (Malik, 2019), been falsely implicated in providing a safe haven for hitmen (Ormsby, 2016) and traders in weapons of mass destruction (Brewster, 2017) and caused both media sensations and moral panics on both sides of the Atlantic, and as far afield as Australia and Argentina. They have catalysed the development of new investigative tools and strategies, and new forms of transnational policing, jurisprudence and cross-jurisdictional extradition. And each year they grow bigger, demonstrating a remarkable resilience to internal and external assaults reminiscent of the mythical hydra of antiquity.
As we said, no shortage of fodder.

Overarching all of this has been the development of an entirely new sub-field of research – cryptomarket studies – which has seen extraordinary methodological development and innovation across a diverse range of disciplines, including criminology, sociology, computer science, economics and public health. There is room for more. Indeed, more studies, more grants, more researchers – whether undergraduate, post-graduate, doctoral or professorial – and the involvement of more disciplines and cross-disciplinary collaborations. These are sorely needed to extend the field further and to help understand what are truly twenty-first century phenomena: anonymous online marketplaces with operations and implications that stretch around the globe and into the deepest recesses of cyberspace.

So, to accompany this scholarly call to arms (or, more accurately, keyboards), we present this book, which comprises four distinct chapters, each intended to assist cryptomarket research in some way. Chapter 1 provides a history of the development of cryptomarkets. It grounds our understanding of these unique online phenomena within an economic-sociological framework and discusses how cryptomarkets emerged as a social institution with their own norms, processes and political ideologies. The chapter separates cryptomarket history into three broad epochs, with a preceding section focused on the period prior to the launch of Silk Road and concluding with the seemingly permanent state of flux following the massive transnational policing crackdown, Operation Onymous.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed overview of the current state of cryptomarket research with a focus on macro-level empirical trends and developments. These include estimates of the overall size and composition of the cryptomarket economy;
its geographical distribution and effects on drug trafficking routes and organised crime groups; and the various stages comprising the cryptomarket lifecycle, as well as the leading causes of their mortality. Also included in this chapter is a qualitative analysis of non-drug goods and services and market prohibitions. Here, free from the governing influence of any state or (legal) corporate power, the communities surrounding cryptomarkets – from market administrators to anonymous purchasers of drugs, guns or credit cards – reveal their values, ethics and limits of toleration.

In Chapter 3, we provide a detailed analysis of the various methodologies by which cryptomarkets are understood by the academic community. These include quantitative approaches, such as surveys and the use of automated software crawlers which collect and parse the digital traces left lingering on the dark web by tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of pseudonymous traders. Discussed also are qualitative approaches, from lurking on markets and discussion forums, to deep ethnography and interview techniques requiring the active participation and consent of one of the most elusive subject populations in the digital world. The use of both new and old research methods necessitates ethical consideration and reflection, which are also detailed and debated in the final section of the chapter, with particular reference to the often-conflicting needs of the academy and law enforcement.

Chapter 4, the conclusion of the book, discusses the limits of our knowledge and understanding of cryptomarkets. It outlines trends and activities which we suspect to be occurring, but have not yet confirmed or disproved, highlights research areas that are neglected or underdeveloped and offers a suite of questions, topics and hypotheses for future research.
As will become clear throughout the book, much has been achieved in recent years in our understanding cryptomarkets, but there is still much more to do. Presented herein are all of the tools, techniques and backgrounds information we believe are necessary to begin one’s foray into the cryptomarket research space. We hope that you find it a useful starting point for the exciting journey ahead.