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The End of the Silk Road: Will Shutting Down the 'eBay for Drugs' Cause More Harm Than Good?

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Silk Road, referred to as "the eBay for drugs," has been seized by U.S. federal agents according to the *New York Times* and other outlets. Silk Road has been used, successfully and discreetly, by countless people around the world since February 2011. Operating as an above-ground source for a variety of drugs, ranging from marijuana to heroin and virtually everything in between, Silk Road created a safe environment, free of weapons and violence during the transaction, where people could acquire drugs.

The shutdown of Silk Road, intended to curtail organized drug use and sales, is designed to get headlines -- but won't accomplish much. Silk Road is not the only website of its kind and its displaced users will likely either turn to a competitor site or seek out drugs in other ways. This approach to fighting the war on drugs has never worked and it's not likely to start working now. It is becoming increasingly common knowledge that the drug war as we know it is a failure.

For over two years, countless people around the world accessed the site, spending an estimated $1.2 billion in BitCoins, the majority of it being spent on drugs. And it all happened without much fanfare. People bought drugs from drug sellers with products that had been rated by other consumers, people consumed their drugs, life went on. If drugs were not prohibited substances, none of this would be remarkable. It's only that the drugs in question were illegal that makes any of this headline news.

A number of steps were required to participate in the Silk Road marketplace -- a marketplace that existed parallel to the visible internet on the 'deep web,' accessed via the anonymization network Tor. It took quite a bit of legwork, generally involving creating a bogus email address, acquiring BitCoins, in some cases establishing a separate bank account. It was do-able, of course, but no one did it on the spur of the moment and those who used the site did so at risk of being detected.

Even with all the hurdles and the risks, people chose to use Silk Road rather than rely exclusively on whatever illegal and potentially dangerous drug market existed in their 'real world' community. The site's success reinforced that people who are dependent or addicted can make rational choices, even if we like to imagine them as being totally irrational. Given the choice of quickly and easily accessing drugs in potentially sketchy or dangerous neighborhoods, or buying them safely on-line but having to wait, many users prefer privacy, security and a wait to the alternative.

Rather than a heinous crime, using Silk Road could be seen as a more responsible approach to drug sales, a peaceable alterative to the deadly violence so commonly associated with the drug war. Amir Taaki, an advocate for BitCoin, the electronic currency used to complete transactions on Silk Road, said in an interview quoted in the *Guardian*, "People want drugs. The drug war is probably a failed war. I want to get rid of cartels. The way to do that is for people to buy their drugs straight from the producer. That's what's cool about things like Silk Road -- you can bypass gangs." The *Guardian* also reports advocates of Silk Road asserting that the website 'provided drugs of a higher purity-with therefore fewer potentially dangerous contaminants -- in a safer way than traditional drug-dealing.'

Just this week, research published in the BMJ Open confirmed what millions have been saying for years: the drug war is a misguided effort, at best, to address problems related to drug consumption and sales. The researchers state:

"With few exceptions and despite increasing investments in enforcement-based supply reduction efforts aimed at disrupting global drug supply, illegal drug prices have generally decreased while drug purity has increased since 1990. These findings suggest that expanding efforts at controlling the global illegal drug market through law enforcement are failing."

Seizing and shutting down Silk Road will do nothing to stop demand for drugs, nor will it end drug sales or drug use. It won't help anyone get into treatment, it won't teach anyone about dangerous combinations of drugs. You know it, I know it, the federal government knows it, the leaders of countries around the world know it. We all know that our whole approach to drug prohibition has been a failure.