





THE HIGH ROAD

Silk Road is an online marketplace like no other. Totally anonymous, the website uses sophisticated encryption software and a digital currency to facilitate the worldwide sale of prohibited items, particularly illicit drugs.
Australian Penthouse investigates

Story: Andrew McMillen

Imagine how exciting it is when you get something in the mail, even the shittiest thing, like a free sample. But in this case, you're getting drugs that you really want to take. It's a compounded experience of excitement; an exponential high."

A 24-year-old man who lives in an inner-city suburb of Brisbane is describing what he felt upon opening his mailbox in late 2011 to discover a package containing one gram of cocaine. It was addressed to a person who does not exist. He does not know the source of the substance beyond its country of origin and this was not the first time he had purchased drugs online; his first order was for one gram of MDMA powder. That package was sent to

a house that he knew was unoccupied; it took around nine days to arrive from Canada. He checked the vacant mailbox daily. "I'm still waiting for some undies off of eBay from Hong Kong," he says. "[The MDMA] arrived way quicker."

Why the alternate address in the first place? "Because having something illicit sent in the mail seems fairly thick," he replies. "It seems so simple; too good to be true. I wanted to put some form of buffer between myself and the order I made, as a 'test run'.

"One day, it was in there and it hadn't been intercepted. I didn't get immediately arrested when I took it out of the mailbox. Since I didn't use my real name, it didn't seem possible to trace it back to me. It still hasn't been." ▶

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► These orders were made using a website called Silk Road. It can only be accessed after installing anonymity-enabling software called Tor. All purchases are made using 'Bitcoin', a currency which only exists online and whose public transaction history can be untraceable if handled correctly.

My interviewee randomly discovered online mentions of Silk Road in May 2011, and pursued the intriguing concept all the way through to installing Tor and trading Australian dollars for Bitcoin, a process he calls "semi-prohibitive" owing to the persistence and tech knowledge required to check all the boxes before users can actually place an order. In four separate transactions, my interviewee has ordered three grams of MDMA and three grams of cocaine at a cost of "close to AU\$700".

So what motivated him to take a chance on buying illicit substances online from a complete stranger?

"I enjoy taking drugs casually, but I hate the process," he says. "I don't know any dealers. Even if I want to get weed, I don't know anyone, so it always becomes this drawn-out process of finding someone who knows someone who knows someone. It's a real pain in the arse. Whereas this way, it's so direct and private. I didn't leave my room, and then nine days later there was something in the mailbox for me. It's discreet and exciting. Imagine the fun of shopping on eBay, but then you can also get high."

Visiting Silk Road for the first time, I feel a little bit like Alice falling down the rabbit hole. After downloading the correct Tor software bundle, I connected within five minutes. A warning appears at the bottom of the registration screen: "Be advised: This website is experimental. We do not guarantee your anonymity,

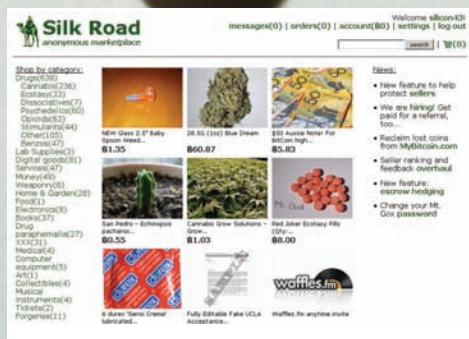
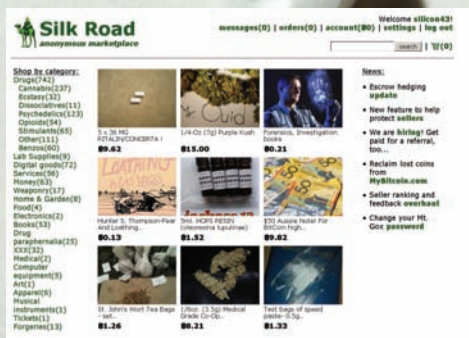


protection from law enforcement in your jurisdiction, or protection from other users of this service. You and you alone are responsible for the risks associated with entering and using this website." The site does not request any information from its users beyond a username and password, not even an email address. And then, you're in.

The site's bright, clean design displays images of nine items for sale, among them 'red joker' ecstasy pills, one ounce of the 'purple kush' cannabis strain, a \$50 Australian banknote and syringes.

equivalent of strolling down a dim-lit alley filled with surly guys wearing heavy trenchcoats, except you can contemplate purchasing their goods while lounging in your underwear, without any fear of being stabbed.

Each page on the site generally takes a few seconds to load, regardless of the user's connection speed, due to an overcrowded Tor network. A page called 'How does it work?' describes the site as "an anonymous marketplace where you can buy and sell without revealing who you are. We protect your identity through every step of the process, from connecting to this site, to purchasing your items, to finally



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When I first visit the site in late August 2011, one Bitcoin is worth US\$11.15; a fortnight later, the exchange rate has dropped to US\$6.18 per Bitcoin.

The nine 'featured' items change upon each page refresh. A column on the left categorises the goods for sale: 'drugs' is split into sub-categories such as 'dissociatives' (11 items for sale), 'psychedelics' (123 items), 'stimulants' (65) and the most popular category, 'cannabis' (237). Other categories include 'digital goods', 'money', 'XXX', 'weaponry' and 'forgeries'.

At first, it's a little overwhelming. What Silk Road [SR] offers is the online

receiving them." Lengthy guides for both buyers and sellers are freely available. The latter guide states that "every precaution must be taken to maintain the secrecy of the contents of your client's package. Creatively disguise it such that a postal inspector might ignore it if it was searched or accidentally came open."

It concludes with a 'final note': "Regardless of your motivations, you are a revolutionary. Your actions are bringing satisfaction to those that have been oppressed for far too long. Take pride in what you do and stand tall."

There's an active and boisterous SR



forum community, which is hosted off-site and requires an additional registration; this process requests an email address, but a note states it doesn't have to be a legit address.

After poking around the site and smirking at some of the items for sale—condoms, an e-book of Neil Strauss's pick-up artist classic *The Game*, military training manuals—I decide to engage with a few sellers by requesting interviews using the site's private messaging system.

Within 10 minutes, three sellers respond enthusiastically to my request; one says: "I'll even give you a media discount if you order." The website's

was covered online by *Wired* and *Gawker* in June 2011. When I ask what they like about Silk Road, I'm met with a range of responses. "Being able to provide a safe and anonymous way for someone to purchase what they choose to put into their body," says one seller. "It's nice how it turns drug dealing into an office job, with less risk and more stable demand while interacting openly with customers," replies another merchant. This focus on administrative duties is echoed by another, who says it's "nice to have everything so organised and centralised; it really cuts down on the time spent per order, which is a huge plus when

"I MAKE A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION TO THE LIVES OF PEOPLE WHO OTHERWISE WOULDN'T HAVE ACCESS TO DRUGS"

administrator, who goes by the username 'Silk Road', also responds. "Sorry, we aren't doing interviews at the moment," he says. "Good luck." Of the 27 SR sellers I approach during a two-week period, seven respond thoughtfully and at length to my questions. They are mostly based in the United States and Canada, though one is Australian. All seven request that I don't mention their usernames. A few prefer to conduct the interview using PGP text encryption, which adds another element of spookiness to the situation. Most of the sellers found their way to Silk Road after the site

you've got a mountain of them to work through."

I ask what sellers don't like about the service. One tells me, "While the vast majority of users are honest and trustworthy, you always have to keep your guard up. There are plenty of scammers here on SR." Another is frustrated by the long wait between making a sale and receiving the Bitcoins in their account. "It can take a while for people to finalise transactions, so the money gets stuck in escrow until the customer finally remembers to finalise, or it auto-finalises after like 20 or so days."

One seller is concerned about the silo-like nature of the site: "Having everything organised—vendor statistics easily accessible, reliance on a single server, etc.—makes any vendor, or even SR itself, a juicier target for LE [law enforcement]." An Australian vendor replies, "I don't like being out in the open. Even though I feel rather anonymous within SR, I could always make a simple mistake with my packaging or use of encryption that would give me away."

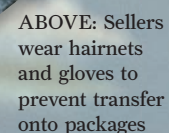
A few of my respondents reveal that they have sold drugs in the real world. One dubs the online process "much easier" than face-to-face sales. "SR buyers have no info about me whatsoever," he tells me. "Whereas with a face-to-face transaction, a buyer might know my name, what I look like, the car I drive, or the city I live in. So if they get caught, LE goes up the food chain. Here on SR, there's nowhere for LE to go."

Another seller says SR is preferable because it "takes potential violence out of the equation, and mitigates theft; you can't exactly take someone to court for robbing you during a black-market trade, which is why there is so much violence. I prefer SR to offline, any day of the week." One seller candidly replies that SR is: "better and cleaner. Customers are more educated and nice, and it leaves you more spare time to study, play with the kids and clean the house. It's telecommuting at its finest."

None of the sellers I interviewed would detail how they package the illicit substances sent through the international postal system. A couple mentioned that it's an unwritten law among SR sellers to not disclose such

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The seller tells me that "getting feedback like that makes those nights spent sweating over a hot vacuum sealer seem worthwhile!"



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