



Silk Road Is the eBay of the Online Drug Trade

By: Winston Ross - September 26, 2013

Drugs still may not be legal, but buyers can find an online community vetting and rating dealers and their product. Winston Ross talks to the founder of Silk Road, the go-to site for the 'good stuff.'

Memo to Miley Cyrus: when you sing about “dancing with Molly,” you’re hyping a drug most of your fans won’t get to experience—at least, not the good stuff.

What you get, how you “roll,” what’s the pure, clean Molly, a.k.a. MDMA, a.k.a. Ecstasy. You’re rich, and your handlers only buy the best stuff from the best dealers. When you dance with Molly, Miley, you can be pretty sure it’s not going to kill you.

These people, on the other hand, likely got their stash from some random dealer at a party or a concert. It was probably cut with something, probably methylone, a.k.a. bath salts. It’s probably why all those Molly users died in the span of a week, experts say—not from dancing with Molly but getting a bad drug laced with something bad that killed them.

Before you blame Miley for promoting deadly drugs, consider this: it’s very rare to die from the good Molly. And there’s a much safer way to buy the good stuff than from some idiot at an electronic-music show. It’s a place on the Internet called Silk Road.

Silk Road, for the uninitiated, is the eBay of illicit substances, from MDMA to LSD. You can buy legal stuff like computer equipment and jewelry, but that’s not what most people are looking for. Because you have to travel through an encrypted wormhole to get there, and because you have to use a difficult-to-trace, encrypted currency to pay for anything, it’s a relatively safe place to buy drugs. And because not only the sellers but the kinds of drugs the site sells are rated and ranked by hundreds of users, it’s a relatively certain way to ensure that the drugs on offer aren’t cut with crap and aren’t going to kill you—at least, not if you avoid taking too much of them.

All that, say the site's moderators and drug-policy experts, means Silk Road and other venues like it offer the best available compromise to the ongoing debate about getting high in America. While outright legalization, regulation, and taxation might be the best way to ensure unadulterated drugs are as safe as possible to people who are going to use drugs no matter what the law says, Silk Road is a close second.

"People die from ecstasy because of overdose and low purity," said Silk Road's founder, known to the world only as Dread Pirate Roberts, in a rare interview conducted via messages on the site with The Daily Beast. "These people don't know what they are taking and how much, but it's the best they can do because of all the damage prohibition has done to the market for drugs. Silk Road is repairing that damage."

The site, he boasts, has "some of the purest drugs on the planet with well-defined dosages and a community of support for people seeking harm-reduction advice. We have some of the most responsible, dedicated, and brave individuals that make up our community."

And it really is a community. The site's long-term vendors have built up their reputations over months and years, accumulating hundreds of positive comments, nicknames like "Queen of Silk Road," and the kind of public adoration normally reserved for the neighborhood barber. Those who screw customers over, on the other hand, are quickly outed and ostracized.

Silk Road appears to be booming. It now has more than 10,000 listings for drugs, including nearly 2,000 for marijuana, the most popular option. A six-month "crawl" of the site by Carnegie Mellon University researcher Nicholis Christin provides the best educated guess of Silk Road's numbers. In late 2011 and early 2012, Christin concluded that the site's operators were pulling in \$92,000 a month in commissions, based on \$1.2 million in revenue for those selling goods. The total number of those vendors and the number of items sold doubled from when Christin began and finished his research.

Of the various items sold, "weed" made up 13.7 percent, followed by "drugs," 9 percent, and then "prescription," 7.4 percent. The U.S. was the most common supplier, with 43 percent of all sales. Most items were listed for less than three weeks, most sellers stayed on the site for about 100 days, and more than 96 percent of them received perfect feedback ratings, a five out of five.

"It appears at first glance that Silk Road sellers are highly reliable," Christin wrote, though he attributed that in part to the site's escrow system, wherein buyers don't release the funds they've committed to a purchase until they've received (and, if they want, tested) a product. He also noted that Internet users tend to "disproportionately use positive feedback when rating online experiences. In fact, over 99 percent of the feedback (on eBay, in a recent study) was positive."

The more money flows in, of course, the more likely it becomes that the cops will eventually try to get involved. After Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) recently criticized Silk Road, DEA sources were telling reporters that they're "keeping tabs" on the site. Another similar venture, Atlantis, abruptly shut down this week, citing "security concerns" that may well have been a law-enforcement issue.

Silk Road is still alive and well, at least for now.

“Silk Road will exist as long as prohibition is in place, and unfortunately it is safer than flat-out prohibition,” said Neill Franklin, executive director of the nonprofit Law Enforcement Against Prohibition. “It’s an in-between.”

That’s why anti-prohibition advocates are cheering the site on, if a little uneasily. The case for Silk Road is exactly the one for outright legalization, says Harvard University economics professor Jeff Miron, Silk Road is fine, he told *The Daily Beast*—“I have no objection to a *Consumer Reports* for drugs”—but the site still falls short of what a regulated market could accomplish.

“It’s still an underground market,” Miron says. “And with an underground market, you can’t sue the manufacturer if you get a bad-quality commodity.”

So, yes, legalization is better, if you’re the type who favors legalization. But the problem, acknowledges Miron, is that the United States is a long way away from legalization.

“It’s going to take an ‘allegedly conservative’ second-term Republican president, secretly libertarian, enough of a non-pothole, a stoner who in other ways seems very stable, normal, and middle class” to convince the conservative wing of Americans that prohibition is bad policy, he says. “He’ll have to be conservative on a lot of things, to have enough credibility when he says, ‘This is the wrong way.’”

Legalization may take a complete generational shift, says Franklin. Now that marijuana is legal in Colorado and Washington, he says, he expects to see the movement spread until the ban on weed is lifted nationwide. After that, who knows?

“Once we start seeing the benefits of the policy for marijuana, what if we do something different with cocaine and heroin?” Franklin says. “It’s only a matter of years before young people of today are in positions of influence and power.”

Dread Pirate Roberts says he’d welcome the competition—though not the regulation.

“I wouldn’t stand in the way of the loosening or eliminating of drug laws so that we could all more easily provide the service Silk Road does,” Roberts wrote. “What I AM against is the agents of the state being involved at all. If they had simply left people to their own devices and allowed them the freedom to choose as I have at Silk Road, we’d have an economy so productive and robust it would be generating wealth for centuries to come, with more than enough for everyone.”