The dark net – five things you need to know

Published on 31 May 2022   Written by Alexander Hudson, Dark Web Intelligence Unit, National Crime Agency

About the dark net and how it's used by criminals

Going equipped   2 mins read

1. There is a common belief that the dark net is a complex, secretive environment that involves encryption and hackers, where child abusers and drug dealers can work anonymously with little chance of getting caught. But using the dark net is actually no more complicated than using apps on your phone.

2. When most people talk about the dark net, they usually mean Tor (short for The Onion Router). Tor supports multiple dark net forums and markets, including Silk Road, the first dark net market. To access the dark net, all you need to do is go to torproject.org and download the Tor browser. That's it. Instead of sites ending with .com or .org, you are now connecting to sites that end in .onion. Many high-profile organisations have dark net sites, including BBC News and Facebook.

3. The legitimate use of Tor is to help those challenged by repressive regimes to communicate and reach the outside world. Unfortunately, this means that it can also be used by criminals in order to maintain anonymity. The use of privacy technology aids both sides.

4. There is no 'Google' for Tor. Some search engines exist, such as Ahmia, but generally you have to be given the link in order to find something useful. The dark net's combination of encryption, support for privacy and ease of use creates a simple environment for criminals to exploit.

5. There are still a few things you can do to identify dark net users, especially when it comes to the buying and selling of controlled substances.

- A Tor user will have the Tor Browser Bundle loaded onto their laptop or PC (or will use the mobile version, Orbot). Subscriber checks against routers will show consistent connections to Tor.
- Drugs are supplied on a 'little and often' basis through the post.
- Supply can be made to a neighbour's house, another family member or mailboxes. A drop address isn't necessarily the criminals' home.
- A Tor user who is committing criminal transactions will use cryptocurrencies, such as Bitcoin.

For support and advice on dark net investigations, contact your Regional Dark Net Operational Team (RDOT) within your respective Regional Organised Crime Unit, who are part of the UK Dark Web Intelligence, Collection and Exploitation (DICE) network. This is a collaboration of specialists across the National Crime Agency (NCA) and regional policing that tackles the sale of illicit commodities on the dark web.

***

- This article was peer reviewed by Detective Sergeant Ben Cadd, Thames Valley Police.

Download Going equipped

- **Going equipped: Issue 4 Spring/Summer 2022 (pdf) 2.3 MB**

Tags

Cybercrime   Digital intelligence and investigation   Going equipped