

The golden age of dark web drug markets is over

In July 2017, federal agents took down the Alphabay marketplace, then one of the largest and most profitable sources for drugs on the dark web. At the time, it seemed like a messy end to the string of dark net takedowns that started with the Silk Road. But more than a year and a half after the takedown, federal agents are still making arrests in Alphabay cases, chasing down dealers who sold drugs through the site.

The most recent case came to a close this past week, when Canadian national Christopher Bantli pled guilty to selling fentanyl and other opioid analogues through Alphabay under the name “canadasunshine.” Bantli sold to a string of undercover DEA agents throughout 2015 and 2016, and was indicted under seal as early as September 2016. But he wasn’t arrested until January 2019, when federal agents were able to extradite him to the US for the recent plea. It’s unclear how agents located Bantli or whether they used information seized in the Alphabay takedown to do so.

Those cases are growing more common across the board. Even before the takedown, drug enforcement agents were able to take down individual vendors through targeted buys. That technique that only grew more effective as the sketchier bitcoin exchanges got shut down and agencies were able to prop up phony money-laundering operations in their place, generating even more leads.

By now, the playbook for taking down dark web drug dealers is pretty well established. A money-laundering sting in June implicated in 35 different vendors, but smaller cases have trickled in at a regular clip. A month after Alphabay was

taken down, an alleged cocaine vendor was arrested in the central valley of California. Ten days later, six more were indicted in the same district. Two Brooklyn-based heroin dealers were sentenced that January. In March, a Stockton man was sentenced to eight years for buying unlicensed firearms through the market. The vendor arrests have gone on and on and on, long after the markets themselves have closed up.

When the Silk Road first came onto the scene, it seemed like law enforcement had been outsmarted. The combination of Tor and Bitcoin seemed like a safe, untraceable way to buy illegal goods. Even when feds took one site down, more would spring up in its place. Looking at all the illicit commerce being done each day, the markets seemed unstoppable.

But after a seemingly endless stream of vendor arrests, that model is less convincing. Instead of a new paradigm, dark web marketplaces now look more like a brief window where marketplace technology outpaced law enforcement's ability to track it. But now law enforcement has caught up – and judging by the rate of indictments, they're making up for lost time.

<https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/17/18226718/alphabay-takedown-drug-marketplace-federal-arrest>