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Ein Bot geht shoppen

Darknet-Kunst Die Schweizer Künstlergruppe Bitnik lässt ein Computerprogramm die illegalen Warenhäuser des Darknet erkunden

Alice Kohli | Ausgabe 46/2014 1

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Ecstasypillen: 1.200-mal im Angebot auf Agora
Foto: !Mediengruppe Bitnik/Copyleft 2014

Am 4. November traf in der [Kunsthalle St. Gallen](#) ein gepolsterter Umschlag ein. Er enthielt eine DVD-Hülle und darin, luftdicht verpackt, zehn Ecstasy-Pillen mit aufgedrucktem Twitter-Logo. Gekauft wurden sie im Darknet auf der Plattform Agora. Wo Ebay Produkte in „Haus & Garten“ oder „Schmuck & Beauty“ unterteilt, findet man dort Kategorien wie „Fälschungen“ und „Waffen“.

Die größte Rubrik ist „Drogen“, aufgegliedert in Sorten und Ausführungen. Allein in der Subkategorie „Ecstasy in Pillenform“ gibt es 1.200 Angebote, darunter auch die mit dem Twitter-Vogel. „Schöne, gelbe, runde Pillen“, wirbt der Anbieter. „Großartiges Produkt“, schwärmt ein Kunde und gibt dem Händler fünf von fünf Punkten.

Die Pillen sind ein Glücksgriff, im wahrsten Wortsinn. Ihr Käufer wusste nicht, was er tat. Er ist ein von den Schweizer Künstlern Carmen Weisskopf und Domagoj Smoljo (kurz: [!Mediengruppe Bitnik](#)) aufgesetztes Computerprogramm, ein so genannter Bot. Ihr RandomDarknetShopper – nennen wir ihn Randy – hat pro Woche ein Budget von 100 Dollar in Bitcoins und den Auftrag, sich etwas Schönes zu kaufen. Randomisiert, per Zufallsgenerator. In der Kunsthalle St. Gallen hängen in Schaukästen nun seine Anschaffungen: ein Feuerwehrschlüssel aus Großbritannien, der Zugang zu städtischen Einrichtungen verschafft. Ein Karton Chesterfield Blue aus Moldawien, versandt in einem Paket mit der Aufschrift „Geschenk“ (die Schmuggelerfolgsrate liege bei 99 Prozent, steht auf Agora). *Lord-of-the-Rings*-E-Books. Eine gestohlene Platinkarte von Visa. Noch nicht geliefert wurden: futuristische Nike-Turnschuhe aus China und eine gefälschte Louis-Vuitton-Handtasche, Typ „Trevi“, aus den USA. Alles in allem hat Randy eine solide Grundausrüstung für Kleinkriminelle erstanden.

Neben den Schaukästen informiert ein Laptop über die neusten Einkäufe. Die computergenerierte Frauenstimme klingt wie eine Flughafendurchsage: ruhig, klar, mit einem undefinierbaren Akzent. Eine Stimme, die alle Unsicherheiten und Ängste zu überspielen vermag, die die moderne Welt mit sich bringt. Etwa die Frage, wie die Konzepte von legal und illegal im Zeitalter des Internets aufrechtzuerhalten sind.

Die beschäftigt nicht nur Künstler, sondern auch Europol und FBI. 17 Personen wurden gerade verhaftet, über 410 Domains des Anonymisierungsnetzwerks Tor gesperrt, Bitcoins im Wert von einer Million US-Dollar beschlagnahmt. Dazu Gold und Silber, Drogen und Waffen. „Dieses Mal haben wir auch Dienstleistungen im Darknet getroffen“, verkündete der Chef des European Cybercrime Centre stolz. Lange hätten sich Kriminelle dort sicher gefühlt. „Wir konnten zeigen, dass sie weder unsichtbar noch unantastbar sind.“

Man möchte den eifrigen Polizisten auf die Schultern klopfen, wäre Anonymität im Darknet nicht für viele existenziell. Zu Kriegszeiten, in Krisenregionen oder unter Gewaltherrschaften kann es überlebenswichtig werden, im Internet unsichtbar zu sein. Es wäre ein schwerer Schlag, sollte sich herausstellen, dass das Netzwerk nicht mehr vertrauenswürdig wäre, sagen auch Carmen Weisskopf und Domagoj Smoljo.

Agora war von der Operation nicht betroffen, der RandomDarknetShopper ist weiterhin auf Einkaufstour. Für den Fall der Fälle haben die Künstler die Schweizer Rechtslage abgeklärt: Ein widerrechtlicher Eingriff für eine beschränkte Zeit wird durch ein überwiegendes Kunstinteresse gerechtfertigt.

Teilen:   

06:00 26.11.2014

kunst

schweizer

künstlergruppe

bitnik

darknet

...

Privatsphäre im Internet

Tor zur Unterwelt

Es ist ein Schutzraum im Netz für Dealer und politische Aktivisten. Jetzt gehen Ermittler verstärkt gegen das Darknet vor.



Die Welt im Darknet ist - ja, was ist sie? Verwegener? Gefährlicher? Oder einfach nur: freier?
Bild: spacejunkie / photocase.de

SANKT GALLEN/ZÜRICH/BERLIN taz | Carmen Weisskopf und Domagoj Smoljo sind hauptberuflich, sagen wir: Beleuchter. Gemeinsam haben sie ein knall oranges Moped, ein fünfjähriges Kind und ein Kunstprojekt, das zu den intelligentesten Europas zählt. Sie nennen sich „!Mediengruppe Bitnik“. Wenn sie eine Aktion planen, dann nie ohne Anwalt. Ihr Thema: Überwachung und Staatlichkeit, Widerstand und derzeit vor allem: das Darknet. Gerade wollten die beiden Schweizer ihren Rückzugsraum mit einer Ausstellung feiern - und dann das: Der Rückzugsraum scheint bedroht.

Ende vergangener Woche: Der Chef von Europols Einheit gegen Cyberkriminalität, Troels Oerting, verkündet in Den Haag: „Die Kriminellen können davonrennen, aber sie können sich nicht verstecken.“ Weder seien sie unsichtbar noch unberührbar, auch nicht dank Tor. 410 Seiten im Darknet hätten die Ermittler gerade geschlossen. Eine riesige Razzia. „Unsere Arbeit geht weiter“, sagt Oerting. Tor, das war der Rückzugsraum. Tor, das ist seine Grundlage.

Das Tor-Projekt mit seinem Browser ist in den vergangenen Jahren zu einer der größten Hoffnungen auf Privatsphäre geworden und es war unter anderem Edward Snowden, der das Programm rühmte und bewarb. Denn der Tor-Browser lenkt einen auf dem Weg zu einer Internetseite um so viele Ecken, dass die Seite, auf der man dann irgendwann ankommt, nicht mehr nachvollziehen kann, von wo aus man losgesurft ist. Tor steht für The Onion Router: Wie die Schalen einer Zwiebel sich um ihr Inneres legen, so verbirgt Tor die InternetnutzerIn.

SCHWERPUNKT ÜBERWACHUNG



Öko / Netzökonomie

17. 11. 2014



JOHANNES GERNERT
sonntaz-Redakteur



MARTIN KAUL

Reporter



THEMEN

#Tor, #FBI, #Privatsphäre

Anonym im Netz

Das entspricht der Sehnsucht vieler Menschen: Sie wollen im Internet anonym unterwegs sein. Sie wollen nicht, dass der Betreiber einer Internetseite weiß, dass sie bei ihm waren. Tor ist das Computerprogramm, das diese Sehnsucht bedient. Es kostet nichts, ist leicht zu installieren und zu nutzen. Die aktuelle Version heißt 0.2.5.10, ein paar Klicks nur, dann öffnet sich auf dem Bildschirm ein Fenster – und dieses Fenster führt hinein in eine Welt, die – ja, was ist sie? Verwegener? Gefährlicher? Oder einfach nur: freier?

Allerdings nutzen nicht nur Whistleblower, kritische Journalisten oder bedrohte Aktivisten die Software, sondern auch Pädophile oder Kreditkartenbetrüger. Und so ist im Schutz dieser Verschleierungstechnik einer der letzten, anarchischen Freiräume des Netzes entstanden, mit einem speziellen Adressverzeichnis, dessen Seiten auf .onion enden und die von Google nicht gefunden werden: das Darknet. Dort gibt es Dinge zu kaufen, deren Erwerb nicht immer gesund und schon gar nicht legal ist: Steroide, Waffen, gefälschte Ausweisdokumente.

Carmen Weisskopf und Domagoj Smoljo sitzen in ihrem Atelier. Es ist eine alte Garage, ein Lagerraum, ihre Kreativwerkstatt im Kellergeschoss eines Mehrfamilienhauses in Zürich. Draußen vor der Tür steht ihr oranges Moped, drinnen grübeln die beiden über ihre Ausstellung. Sie haben schon einmal ein Paket mit Kamera darin in die ecuadorianische Botschaft zu Julian Assange geschickt und die Bilder vom Weg dorthin veröffentlicht. Derzeit wollen sie das Darknet ergründen. „Das Darknet“, sagt Carmen Weisskopf, „hat das Potenzial, ein freier Ort für uns zu werden.“

Eine gute Stunde von ihrem Atelier, in den Altstadtgassen von Sankt Gallen in der Schweiz, führt der Weg zu einer kleinen Kunsthalle, 700 Meter über dem Meeresspiegel. In den weiten, weißen Räumen dieser Halle schallen die Schritte wie ins Unendliche. Hier haben Weisskopf und Smoljo mit der Kunsthalle Sankt Gallen eine Entdeckungsreise installiert. „The Darknet: From Memes to Onionland. An Exploration“.

Wann kommt das Kokain?

Hinten rechts in der Ecke ist ihr eigenes Projekt zu besichtigen. Bitnik hat einen Einkaufscomputer programmiert. Der ordert über einen Zufallsgenerator jede Woche ein Produkt im Darknet, das per Postversand ohne Umwege in die Kunsthalle bestellt wird. Zehn der großen grauen Ausstellungsboxen rechts in der Ecke sind noch leer, zwei dagegen bereits belegt. In einem hängt ein Schlüsselset. Angeblich verschaffen die Schlüssel Zugang zu Feuerwehrtürmen in Großbritannien. In einem anderen Kasten ist eine Ladung Chesterfield-Zigaretten ausgestellt. In der Post unterwegs sind außerdem eine gefälschte Louis-Vuitton-Tasche und eine Visa Card Platin.

Und nun fragen sich die Verantwortlichen in der Kunsthalle: Wie lange wird es wohl dauern, bis der Computer erstmals, sagen wir, eine Ladung Kokain ordert? Und was passiert dann – mit der Staatsanwaltschaft, dem Rechtsstaat und dem Kunstbegriff?

Das sind sie also, die Beleuchter. Bitnik holt das Darknet ins Licht. Bitnik will die Debatte darüber befördern: Könnte es nicht sein, dass wir das Internet noch mal neu erfinden, wenn wir es dorthin verlagern? Es wäre langsamer, es hätte eine andere Ästhetik – aber es hätte auch so viele Vorteile. Nicht jeder Klick würde dauernd irgendwo registriert. Was Bitnik sicher nicht ahnten: dass ihre Ausstellung so aktuell werden würde.

Als der Europol-Ermittler Troels Oerting in Europa den Kampf ausruft, haben Ermittler des FBI in den USA schon den jüngsten Kopf des Onlineuntergrundmarkts Silk Road in San Francisco festgenommen, dem Ebay für Illegales. Sein Name ist Blake Benthall. Benthall wird in der selben Stadt festgenommen, in der ein Jahr zuvor sein Vorgänger verhaftet worden war.

Auch damals begannen Spekulationen darüber, wie gefährdet Anonymität und Privatsphäre im Tor-Netzwerk seien: Haben die Ermittler eine Sicherheitslücke entdeckt? Ist das Tor-Netzwerk gefährdet? Dass sich die Kommunikation darin mit viel Aufwand entanonymisieren lässt, darauf hat es immer wieder Hinweise gegeben, auch in wissenschaftlichen Studien. Daran schließt sich jedes Mal die Frage an: Was bedeutet das für Aktivisten im Iran oder für kritische Journalisten in China?

Mit gefletschten Zähnen vor Polizisten

In der vergangenen Woche teilten die Ermittler von Europol und FBI mit, sie hätten bei einer Operation namens „Onymous“ 17 Menschen festgenommen. 410 Seiten des Darknets seien bei der Aktion geschlossen worden. Später werden sie die Zahl auf 27 herunterkorrigieren.

Blake Benthall ist 26 Jahre alt, ein Programmierer aus Kalifornien. Erst im Oktober hat er sich bei einer Demonstration in San Francisco mit gefletschten Zähnen vor einer Reihe von Polizisten fotografieren lassen und das Bild auf Instagram gepostet. Eine Zeit lang hat Benthall für die Raumfahrtfirma von Elon Musk gearbeitet, dem Paypal-Gründer und Tesla-Chef, der irgendwann den Mars besiedeln will. SpaceX heißt die Firma. Sie bestätigt, dass Benthall ihr Mitarbeiter war, bis Februar 2014. Da hatte er, mutmaßlich, seit einigen Monaten schon die Geschäfte der Silk Road 2 übernommen und managte den Drogenumschlagplatz, der in manchen Monaten laut FBI acht Millionen Dollar Umsatz gemacht hat.

Benthall, der sich als Silk-Road-Chef in den Foren der Plattform „Defcon“ nannte, muss sich im Klaren gewesen sein, wie stark seine Seite und das Netzwerk, das sie schützt, unter Beobachtung steht. Erst Ende Juli zog er mit den Servern um, weil die Entwickler des Tor-Projekts dazu geraten hatten. „Das ist sehr teuer und ärgerlich, aber es muss sein“, schrieb er an die Administratoren und die Moderatoren der Silk Road. Und schon da lasen die Ermittler mit.

Das FBI sucht Lücken

Im September beobachteten sie Benthall bei einem Besuch von Verwandten in Houston, Texas, und glichen die Zeiten, zu denen er das Haus betrat und verließ, mit „Defcons“ Aktivitäten auf der Silk-Road-Seite ab. Immer wenn er aus dem Haus ging, hörten diese Aktivitäten auf. Klassische Ermittlerarbeit. Wie die FBI-Männer allerdings in die Silk-Road-Foren vordrangen, wird aus der Anklageschrift nicht klar. Haben Sie eine Lücke im Tor-Netz gefunden?

Auf die Festnahmen nach der aktuellen Razzia und die Beschlagnahmung von drei Tor-Servern hat das Tor-Projekt zunächst mit einer Mitteilung auf seiner Homepage reagiert: „Wir müssen uns jetzt fragen: Wie konnte das passieren? Wir wissen es nicht.“

Anfang der Woche dann, die neue Silk Road 3.0 hatte schon wieder eröffnet, sagte Andrew Lewman, geschäftsführender Direktor des Tor-Projekts, der BBC, er halte die Behauptungen der internationalen Ermittlertruppe, sie hätten das Darknet quasi zerschlagen, für „extrem aufgeblasen“. Das Tor-Netzwerk sei nicht gefährdet. Wenig später hat das Mozilla-Projekt, das den Firefox-Browser entwickelt, mitgeteilt, man werde Tor unterstützen. Auch Facebook hat seit Ende Oktober eine Seite im Tor-Netz.

Interview

«Connecter le darknet au champ artistique»

En Suisse, Mediengruppe Bitnik scrute la face cachée du Web.



Dans l'enveloppe envoyée d'Allemagne, un boîtier de DVD. Et dans le boîtier, dix pilules d'ecstasy emballées sous vide dans de l'aluminium. (Photo ! Mediengruppe Bitnik, Copyleft.)

par [Marie Lechner](#)

publié le 18 novembre 2014 à 17h06

Artistes hackers détournant les caméras de surveillance, construisant des télé pirates ou truffant l'Opéra de Zürich d'audiobugs pour retransmettre les concerts live via des numéros de téléphone choisis au hasard, le duo ! Mediengruppe Bitnik (Carmen Weisskopf et Domagoj Smoljo) détaille sa plongée dans [les eaux troubles de la Toile](#).

Qu'est-ce qui vous a attirés vers le darknet ?

Il existe différents termes pour décrire l'espace que nous voulions explorer. Deepweb, darknet, darkweb ou simplement «réseau invisible». S'ils ont des significations légèrement différentes, ils dressent tous un tableau similaire : au-delà du quotidien d'une majorité d'internautes, il existe un autre Internet formé et animé par des millions d'utilisateurs mais ignoré du grand public. C'est une sous-culture internet formée via les réseaux cryptés et anonymes, un monde parallèle des communications en ligne. Etant donné que l'existence online concerne des aspects toujours plus variés de nos vies, les forces extérieures vont essayer de la contrôler et de la gouverner toujours plus. Suite aux révélations de Snowden, nous avons le sentiment que les relations de pouvoir étaient en train de changer. Depuis qu'il est devenu évident que le «Web de surface» est une gigantesque machine de surveillance, les gens sont de plus en plus nombreux à se retourner vers des réseaux anonymes pour échapper à ces yeux inquisiteurs. Ils comptent sur le cryptage et les logiciels d'anonymisation pour sécuriser leurs communications, ils sont journalistes, dissidents, activistes, artistes, programmeurs...

Quand les médias parlent du darknet, il n'est question que d'activités illégales. Qu'en est-il ?

Par définition, les structures ouvertes peuvent être utilisées par tout un chacun. Nous pensons que l'activité illégale est exagérée et que ces reportages sensationnalistes visent à légitimer la surveillance globale de masse et le contrôle du darknet. Personne ne demande à fermer les transports publics parce que la mafia ou un revendeur de drogue les empruntent. Nous avons suivi les infos concernant Operation Onymous [*le coup de filet du FBI et d'Europol contre des dizaines de sites cachés illégaux, ndlr*]. Pour l'instant, on ignore comment les services cachés ont été localisés. Ce qui amène à la délicate question de savoir si on peut continuer de faire confiance au réseau Tor. Si le réseau était défectueux, ce serait un grand choc pour de nombreuses personnes qui l'utilisent au quotidien pour protéger leur vie privée. Cette surveillance de masse sur Internet est sans précédent. Le stockage à l'infini de nos mails, nos images ou du moindre de nos mouvements passés a des répercussions sur nos futurs.

Pourquoi en faire un objet d'exploration artistique ?

Nous estimons qu'il est crucial que l'art s'empare de ces nouveaux formats et sujets s'il veut rester pertinent. Il n'y a pas que l'Internet mais aussi le(s) darknet(s) qui changent les fondamentaux de nos sociétés. En explorant le darknet d'un point de vue artistique, nous souhaitons étudier les structures et formes de communication alternatives. Comment la communication et les échanges sont-ils possibles dans les réseaux anonymes ? Comment se construit la confiance quand on ignore à qui on a affaire ? Utiliser Tor pour surfer sur le Web de surface procure aussi une expérience totalement nouvelle. Tor utilise les nœuds relais, ce qui permet de masquer et modifier votre localisation. Selon le point de sortie aléatoire qu'on vous assigne, vous naviguez comme une personne résidant en Chine, en Inde ou aux Etats-Unis. Ce changement d'identité vous permet de découvrir Internet d'une manière totalement différente.

Qu'est-ce qui différencie le darknet du Web ordinaire ? Comment y accède-t-on ?

Le Web de surface est indexé par les moteurs de recherche généralistes. Le darknet est différent parce qu'il ne peut être indexé donc on ne peut y faire de recherches et il n'y a pas d'archivage de ses contenus. En ce sens, la plate-forme de partage d'images 4chan.org, qui détruit ses posts, peut être considérée comme en faisant partie. Le deepweb fait référence aux réseaux cryptés comme Tor, l'un des plus gros réseaux anonymes, qui nécessite d'utiliser un logiciel et un navigateur éponyme pour y accéder. C'est là aussi que se trouve Agora, la place de marché où notre robot, le *Random Darknet Shopper*, est localisé.

Comment fonctionne votre robot ?

The Random Darknet Shopper est une performance de *mail art*, une exploration du Web profond à partir des produits qui y sont échangés (*lire ci-contre*). Il connecte directement le darknet au champ artistique. Les produits sont en général de contrebande et vont de la drogue à la contrefaçon, des services incluant la sécurité ou le hacking. En rendant aléatoire notre consumérisme, nous avons la garantie d'obtenir une large sélection de biens parmi les 16 000 articles listés sur la place de marché Agora. Nous voulons voir quels biens sont extraits du deepweb, d'où ils nous sont envoyés, comment (et si) ils arrivent.

Nous voulons découvrir comment ces produits sont emballés pour être dissimulés aux services postaux, comme les pilules d'ecstasy placées à l'intérieur d'un coffret DVD pour leurrer le scan aux rayons X. Et puis nous étions intéressés par cette esthétique par défaut, retranscrire dans l'espace de l'exposition ce paysage d'objets trouvés dans le darknet. Ces objets partagent l'une des caractéristiques les plus intéressantes de ces marchés cachés. Ils sont exemplaires de la manière dont Internet en général et les darknets plus particulièrement contribuent à brouiller les règles juridiques nationales. Ce qui est produit et vendu légalement dans un pays ne l'est pas nécessairement dans un autre. En étant globaux, ces marchés produisent une vaste zone grise de biens disponibles virtuellement partout. En outre, les biens échangés dans le darknet montrent comment la confiance s'est établie avec succès dans les réseaux anonymes. Bien que le marché caché soit basé sur l'anonymat de ses participants, les systèmes de notations et les forums de messages anonymes assurent un certain niveau de confiance. La possibilité de noter votre dealer change radicalement la manière dont les gens achètent de la drogue. Acheter des biens illégaux en ligne demande que l'on ait accès à un système de notation fiable en restant anonyme. Le tout depuis le confort de sa maison.



ART | NOV. 26, 2014

European Art Collective Trawls the Darknet With Bot, Gets Creepy Packages

By Dawn Chan



A package containing a pair of Nike Air Yeezy IIs that originated from China. Courtesy of !Mediengruppe Bitnik. Photo: Courtesy of !Mediengruppe Bitnik

SEEN

33 days in
the art world.

By now you've probably heard about the internet's shadowy "Darknet" black-market sites, where Bitcoin-rich shoppers cloaked in anonymizing software can buy everything from hackers' services to MDMA. The FBI clamped down on the most famous of the sites, Silk Road. Another site, Utopia, was shuttered this year by Dutch National Police after undercover agents bought "several thousand" ecstasy pills and were even offered an assassin. A third site, Agora, has reached a critical mass, with more listings than any other; shoppers there can find everything from "Pakistani Culero hash" to semiautomatic firearms.

Now Agora's become the virtual realm of a new art project, by a Zurich- and London-based art collective called !Mediengruppe Bitnik. The group — Domagoj Smoljo and Carmen Weisskopf — created a bot that crawls along through the site's contraband offerings.

With a weekly budget of \$100 in Bitcoins, the bot randomly makes one purchase per week. The illicit goods are then shipped to the Kunsthalle St. Gallen in Switzerland, where they're exhibited in display cases as cumulative additions to the museum's current exhibition, titled "The Darknet – From Memes to Onionland."

Every week, in other words, Smoljo and Weisskopf are faced with an unmarked, nondescript-looking package that yields a creepy surprise. "We underestimated the strain and tension the bot causes with us every time it goes shopping — while at the same time also underestimating the joy it causes every time a parcel arrives," said the duo, who are among several organizers of the show.

The exhibition they've assembled includes a number of other well-known artists intrigued by the implications of tech culture, whether sinister or humorous. Cory Arcangel contributed a conceptual piece, optimizing the museum's exhibition page for search engines. Seth Price, meanwhile, is offering visitors copies of his 2008 book, *How to Disappear in America*, which dishes out advice on how to avoid surveillance.

Of all the exhibited artists, Smoljo and Weisskopf are tempting their legal fates the most. Could they end up in jail? A legal expert advising the museum thinks they have a good defense, asserting that Switzerland's books permit lawbreaking that demonstrates "a plausible interest of scientific, artistic, or informational nature."

And Smoljo and Weisskopf have that case for plausible interest laid out. "By exploring the Darknet from an artistic viewpoint, we hope to critically evaluate mass surveillance," they said. "How is identity formed in these networks? How do you trust each other if you don't know whom you are talking to?"

Meanwhile, the duo's shopping bot has been hard at work. Thus far, it's purchased goods that include:

- a pair of Nike Air Yeezy IIs, sold by a vendor unimaginatively named "Fake."
- a baseball cap with a hidden camera in its brim
- vacuum-sealed ecstasy pills (multiple times)
- a "decoy first-class letter," which the vendor, "DoctorNick," suggests using to "test a new drop address" or "see if your roommates/parents are scrutinizing or opening your mail."
- a complete *Lord of the Rings* e-book collection

TAGS: ART DARKNET BYAZURICH AGORA MORE

Darknet

What happens when a software bot goes on a darknet shopping spree?

The Random Darknet Shopper, with bitcoin to burn, has purchased counterfeit jeans, master keys, dodgy cigs and even a bag of ecstasy tablets. Who is legally liable?

● [Life after Silk Road: how the darknet drugs market is booming](#)

Mike Power

@mrmichaelpower

Fri 5 Dec 2014 13.56 GMT



29



▲ Baseball cap with hidden video camera, bought from a darknet market by the bot.

Photographs: !mediengruppebitnik

Can a robot, or a piece of software, be jailed if it commits a crime? Where does legal culpability lie if code is criminal by design or default? What if a robot buys drugs, weapons, or hacking equipment and has them sent to you, and police intercept the package?

These are questions we haven't had to ask until now, but they are part of a pertinent philosophical dilemma thrown up by the emergence of darknet markets, anonymous internet use, and bitcoin. These and other questions are all explored in a new exhibition, *The Darknet: From Memes to Onionland*, at The Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, an hour east of Zürich, Switzerland.

A robot deployed on the dark web over the past few weeks has bought a pair of fake Diesel jeans, a baseball cap with a hidden camera, a stash can, a pair of Nike trainers, a decoy letter (used to see if your address is being monitored), 200 Chesterfield cigarettes, a set of fire-brigade issued master keys, a fake Louis Vuitton handbag, and **10 ecstasy pills**. All of the products are on display as part of the exhibition, which runs until 11 January.



▲ The ecstasy pills bought by the bot. Photograph: !mediengruppebitnik

London-based Swiss artists !Mediengruppe Bitnik, [Carmen Weiskopf and Domagoj Smoljo](#), coded the Random Darknet Shopper, an automated online shopping bot, and instructed it to spend \$100 in bitcoin per week on a darknet market that lists over 16,000 items, not all of them illegal.

Their aim is to explore the ethical and philosophical implications of these markets, which, **despite high-profile internationally co-ordinated raids costing millions**, persist and flourish.

“The arts should be able to mirror something that is happening in contemporary society in a contemporary way,” says Weisskopf. “We really want to provide new spaces to think about the goods traded on these markets. Why are they traded? How do we as a society deal with these spaces? At the moment there is just a lot of pressure, but not a lot of thinking about stuff, just immediate reaction.”

The gallery is next door to a police station, but the artists say they are not afraid of legal repercussions of their bot buying illegal goods.

“We are the legal owner of the drugs - we are responsible for everything the bot does, as we executed the code, says Smoljo. “But our lawyer and the Swiss constitution says art in the public interest is allowed to be free.”

The project also aims to explore the ways that trust is built between anonymous participants in a commercial transaction for possibly illegal goods. Perhaps most surprisingly, not one of the 12 deals the robot has made has ended in a scam.

“The markets copied procedures from Amazon and eBay - their rating and feedback system is so interesting,” adds Smojlo. “With such simple tools you can gain trust. The service level was impressive - we had 12 items and everything arrived.”

“There has been no scam, no rip-off, nothing,” says Weisskopf. “One guy could not deliver a handbag the bot ordered, but he then returned the bitcoins to us.”

laws, but what does that mean for society? Trading is something people have always done without regulation, but today it is regulated,” says ays Weisskopf.

“There have always been darkmarkets in cities, online or offline. These questions need to be explored. But what systems do we have to explore them in? Post Snowden, space for free-thinking online has become limited, and offline is not a lot better.”

Previously, the collective have hacked London underground CCTV cameras and invited the operators to a game of chess, and last year they posted a camera and a GPS tracking device to Julian Assange inside the Ecuadorean embassy. The camera live-tweeted its progress to the hands of the Wikileaks founder.

Smojlo says the darkmarkets are here to stay, no matter what law enforcement does, identifying bitcoin as a key shift in thinking that will have repercussions beyond its hacker and darknet constituencies. The last few years has witnessed a rupture, a schism between centralised and decentralised systems, they say.

“People have realised [with bitcoin] that money is not an absolute. They realised they could shape it. They could create their own things with maths, P2P networks, decentralisation and cryptography. Whether Tor survives or not, you will soon be able to run darknet nodes on your own computer, which can't be taken down,” says Smoljo.

“Something has opened, broken up, this space will be explored,” agrees Weisskopf.

A spokesman for the National Crime Agency, which incorporates the National Cyber Crime Unit, was less philosophical, acknowledging that the question of criminal culpability in the case of a randomised software agent making a purchase of an illegal drug was “very unusual”.

“If the purchase is made in Switzerland, then it's of course potentially subject to Swiss law, on which we couldn't comment,” said the NCA. “In the UK, it's obviously illegal to purchase a prohibited drug (such as ecstasy), but any criminal liability would need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis.”

● [Life after Silk Road: how the darknet drugs market is booming](#)

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Darknet

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Is the Darknet a glimpse into the web of the future?

By Peter Shadbolt, CNN

Updated 1206 GMT (2006 HKT) December 8, 2014



PHOTOS: Shopping in the dark

This unassuming package contains a random item bought from the dark net by a computer program. It is part of an art exhibition entitled "Random Darknet Shopper" currently ongoing in St. Gallen, Switzerland.

1 of 20

Hide Caption ^



STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- The Darknet is an anonymised section of the net where users can operate without leaving their digital fingerprints
- The Darknet attracts the internet's fringe dwellers, from criminal syndicates to human rights activists and dissidents
- An art group has armed an internet bot to spend \$100 in bitcoins a week on random articles
- So far the bot as bought everything from cigarettes to illicit drugs

What will the internet of the future look like? And what purpose will it be used for?

From augmented reality, which anticipates the information you'll want just by looking at an object, to smart services that use artificial intelligence to help us manage our workloads, the look, feel and utility of the internet of 2040 is a wide open field.

Already advances in virtual reality technology - Facebook notably bought the [virtual reality start-up Oculus VR](#) for \$2bn this year - are beginning to change the way we deal with everything from medical science, to military training, to learning difficulties.

To what extent, however, we'll have control over our own data is one of the future's great unanswered questions.

For many the future of the internet is already here; and it looks a lot like it did in 1990s.

Called the Darknet, this anonymised section of the net allows everyone from copyright pirates, to drug dealers, to dissidents to communicate and do business without fear of leaving their digital fingerprints.

Special browser



Related Video: Security tips from hackers
02:34

Jamie Bartlett, whose book "The Dark Net" investigates the digital underworld, told CNN that this opaque and subversive world is inaccessible through normal browsers, and requires special software.

"A special browser called Tor allows a user to browse the internet without their IP address being given away," Bartlett said. "It uses a clever encryption system that means no one can see what computer a user is on."

This same encryption system also affords anonymity to the websites that inhabit this corner of the web, meaning that governments and law enforcers have no idea where the site is being hosted.

That doesn't mean that the individuals running these operations can forever remain hidden, as [the capture of the creator of "Silk Road"](#), a famous illegal online marketplace, by the FBI in 2013 demonstrates.

Still, the tools to make life difficult for law enforcement seem to be there: "Anyone can set up these websites which are almost impossible to shut down and censor," he said. "As a result it's a bit of a Wild West -- more or less anything goes."

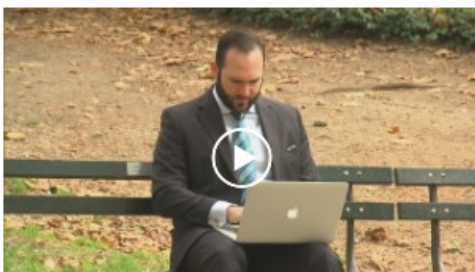
"You've got illegal pornography there, these drugs markets there, assassination markets and hit men for hire. All sorts of terrible stuff but also all sorts of good stuff too."

"Democratic revolutionaries, whistle blowers, human rights activists who are also concerned about giving away their location also want somewhere where they can post stuff illegally and anonymously."

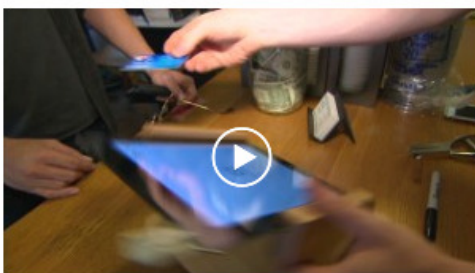
U.S. military

Bartlett said the browser was initially developed by the U.S. military as a way of traversing the internet secretly, but since then had become an open source project. He suggests the military released the encrypted browser as a way of providing cover for their operations.

Because the Tor browser uses a non-standard protocol, people observing network traffic can identify it easily even if they can't see what the user is looking at.



Related Video: How to become unhackable
02:55



Related Video: Stolen credit card price tag:
\$102 02:18

"They realised that this is not a good idea if the only people using it are the US military -- it's going to be obvious who they are. For that reason, they turned it into an open source project."

Today, the Darknet is moving from fringe to mainstream, attracting anyone who wants anonymity -- be they hired killers or humble bloggers.

Back to the future

For Bartlett, the Darknet is a return to the labyrinthine recesses of the first days of the worldwide web. He said the future of the net is likely to be an increased proliferation of these non-standard protocols that provide ever deeper levels of anonymity.

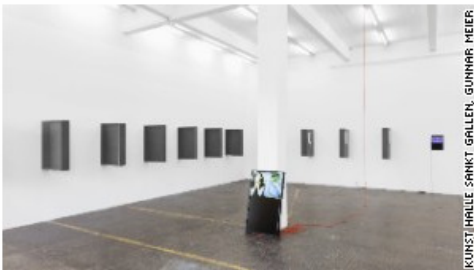
"It really feels like the early days of the internet ... (everything) is hosted on these rudimentary networks. It's like the internet of the early 90s when things weren't indexed the way they are now.

"Everything is hyperlinked together and Google can find everything, but back in the day the whole internet was dark -- you didn't know what you were doing or where you were going.

"You even used to write down web addresses on pieces of paper and pass them to each other."

Art project

Just what can be found on the Darknet is often the subject of wild conjecture, but a recent project launched by the !Mediengruppe Bitnik art collective -- called "The Darknet -- From Memes to Onionland" - shows exactly what is on offer on the Internet's underbelly.



The Random Darknet Shopper art project

Arming an automated internet bot with US\$100 in bitcoins (the crypto-currency accepted as legal tender on many illicit marketplaces) the "Random Darknet Shopper" trawls its murky corners and every week buys one item at random.

So far, the bot has purchased a "stash can" of Sprite that doubles as a hiding place for either drugs or money, a platinum Visa card for \$35, 10 Ecstasy Pills from Germany for US\$48, 10 packets of Chesterfield cigarettes from Moldova, and many other items such as jeans, "designer" bags, and books.

One of the most intriguing pieces for the exhibitors at the Kunst Halle St. Gallen gallery in St. Gallen, Switzerland -- where all the parcels arrive -- has been a fireman's set of skeleton keys from the United Kingdom.

"Our first question was what do you do with this? What does it open?" Carmen Weisskopf, co-founder of the art collective, told CNN. On the Darknet, the keys are advertised as useful for unlocking toolboxes or "gaining access to communal gates and storage areas."

'Thrilling and scary'

She said receiving the parcels at the gallery was at once "thrilling and scary."

"The motivation for the artwork really came in the light of the Snowden revelations - for internet artists it meant we had to re-evaluate the networks we work in. We became really interested in looking at these anonymous and encrypted networks from an artistic point of view."

She said the starting point for them had been how to build trust in an anonymous network.

The project has already dented the levels of trust at the art collective who early on in the project called in the services of a lawyer to shore up their legal position should the bot turn up anything that puts them outside the law. Fortunately, Weisskopf said, firearm sales are limited to clients within the United States.

"That's why we got the idea of going into marketplaces because trust is something you need to build in markets."

The artists have already gained notoriety by sending a parcel to fugitive whistleblower Julian Assange. The parcel was equipped with a cam that recorded its journey through the postal service to the Ecuadorian Embassy in London where Assange is currently holed up.

11-12-14

The Art Bot That Bought 10 Pills of Ecstasy

An art project by !Mediengruppe Bitnik channels the “randomized consumerism” of an illicit digital marketplace.



1/9 “Useful for the tool box for unlocking and gaining access to communal gates and storage areas.”



BY MARINA GALPERINA 4 MINUTE READ

Yesterday, a package of 10 “beautiful yellow round pills with the Twitter logo” arrived safely at an art gallery in Switzerland. The pills were sent from somewhere in Germany—the actual origin is unknown—and were vacuum-sealed in aluminum foil and hidden inside a DVD case. The “snapback 120mg MDMA,” as the pills are formally known, was purchased by the “[Random Darknet Shopper](#)”, a bot created by the [!Mediengruppe Bitnik](#) art collective for “[The Darknet – From Memes to Onionland. An Exploration](#)” exhibition at Kunst Halle St. Gallen gallery in St. Gallen, Switzerland. The exhibit offers a fascinating glimpse of the World Wide Web’s underside.

“Random Darknet Shopper” is an automated bot, an electronic shopper that gets a weekly budget of \$100 in bitcoin. Among its recent purchases (all of which are on display at the gallery): spy gear, a *Lord of the Rings* e-books box set, 10-packs of Chesterfield Blue cigarettes shipped from the Ukraine through Moldova to St. Gallen, a Platinum Visa card and a pair of Nike Air Yeezy2 sneakers. So far, !Mediengruppe Bitnik’s favorite item is the Firebrigade Master Key Set from the U.K. “It has this mystical quality as to what you can do with it,” say Domagoj Smoljo and Carmen Weisskopf of !Mediengruppe Bitnik. (Potentially, the master keys could open locked subway systems, allow access to firehouses, and even operate old-time elevators.)



Most of these items aren't the kind of things you can pick up just anywhere online. Agora and other “[deep web](#)” markets can be accessed via Tor, technology meant to protect users' anonymity, and cloak their activity from snooping government bodies. The artists describe Random Darknet Shopper as a live mail art piece, similar to their “[delivery series](#)” which began with [Delivery For Mr. Assange](#) when they shipped a parcel to the notorious WikiLeaks editor at the Ecuadorian embassy in London. That package had a tiny hole in it, through which a hidden camera documented its trip through the postal system. This current project has a safe and legal predecessor: Darius Kazemi's [Random Shopper bot](#), which randomly purchased an assortment of stuff from Amazon. But things get ethically and legally murkier—and quite a bit more interesting—when a crawler specifically devoted to Agora can trawl through its 16,000 items, many of which are as illicit as Ecstasy.



“We want to see what goods come out of the deep web,” say the artists, “where they are sent from, how (and whether) they arrive. We want to find out how the goods are packaged to be concealed from the postal services.”

The Random Darknet Shopper raises all kinds of conundrums. How can a society manage “dark” markets given the problems that arise when an international online marketplace runs into the different laws of different countries? Then there’s new relatively new phenomena of these “dark” markets adopting capitalist business practices, and having to rely on trust between sellers and buyers. “Although the hidden market is based on the anonymity of its participants, rating systems and anonymous message boards ensure a certain level of trust,” the artists explain. “The ability to rate your dealer is radically changing the way people are buying drugs and other controlled items. Buying contraband online means having access to a reliable rating system, while at the same time staying anonymous, all from the comforts of your home.”

With projects like this, it’s often difficult to ascertain the authenticity of the items and of their provenance. But the artists assure *Fast Company* that they’ve taken real precautions. “Together with an arts rights lawyer, we evaluated the work beforehand,” they say. “We made a promise to ourselves to show what we get. No censoring. But we do deal with ethical issues every week. Also, because the work involves the people working at the gallery. So we do discuss this issue a lot, but we are taking it one item at a time.”

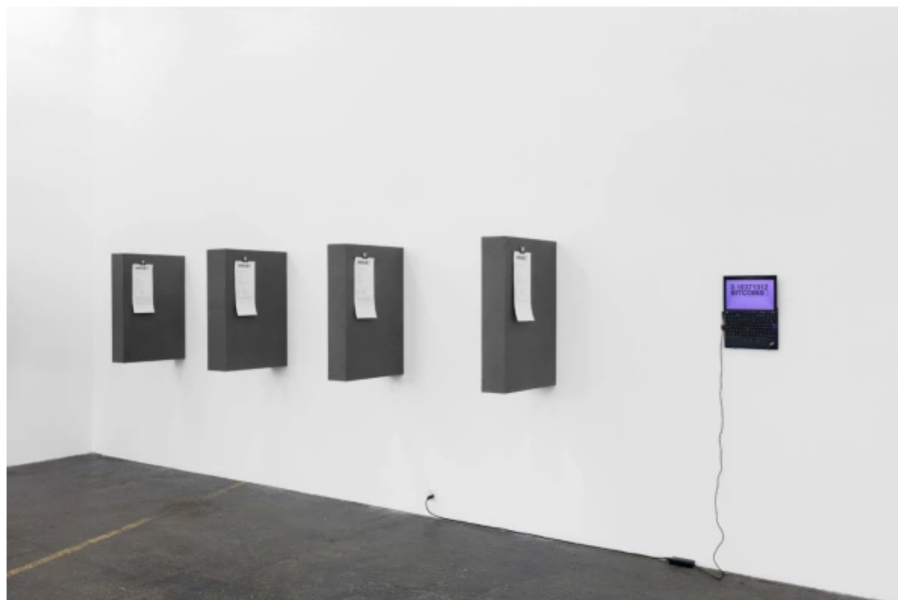


PHOTO: VIA KUNST HALLE SANKT GALLEN, GUNNAR MEIER

The group show explores other recesses of the deep web. For example, Eva and Franco Mattes’s “Emily’s Video” is an edited video compilation of volunteer reactions to horrifying footage culled from the dark web. Robert Sakrowski has curated a YouTube history of Anonymus. Seth Price presents [a guide](#) to “disappearing” and “dropping out of mainstream society” in America, based on materials he collected from the Internet.

“By exploring the Darknet from an artistic viewpoint we hope to critically evaluate mass surveillance, and to study alternative structures and forms of communicating outside mass surveillance,” say the !Mediengruppe Bitnik artists. “How is identity formed in these networks? How is communication and exchange possible in anonymous networks? What forms of trust building arise? How do you trust each other if you don’t know to whom you are talking to? How can we as artists examine these questions in a meaningful way?” Their questions are meaningful to everyone, of course—even if not all of us will try to get answers via the purchase of some yellow happy pills.

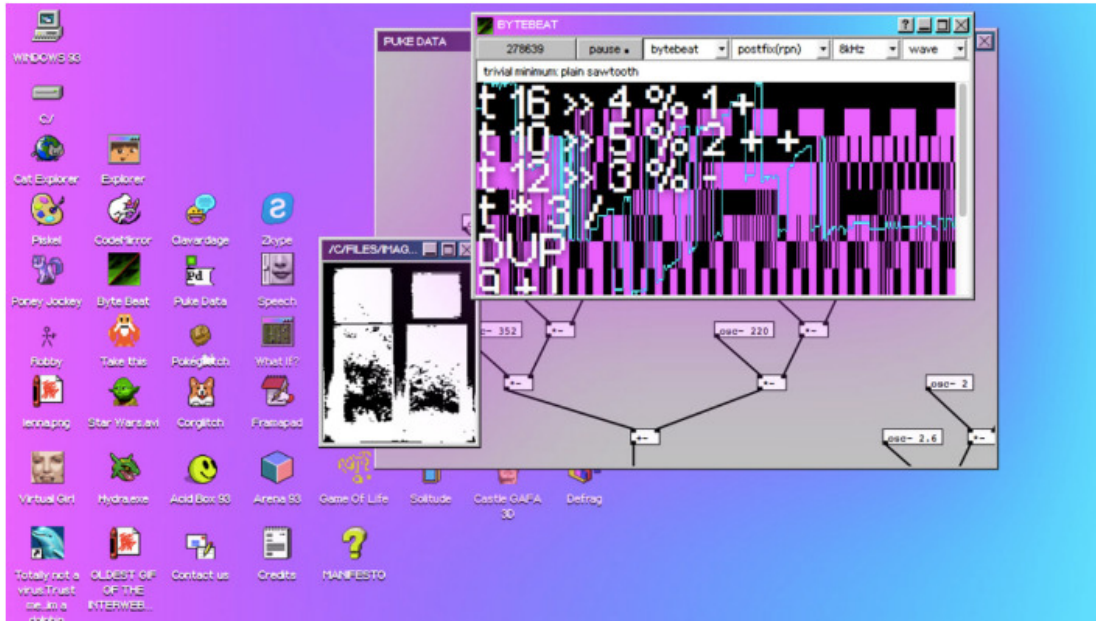
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brooklyn based curator, writer and reporter. [More](#)

12-22-14

The Year's Best Art On The Internet

Some of the best art of the year from/of/for the Internet is some of the best art of the year, period.



[SCREENSHOT: VIA [WINDOWS93](#)]



BY MARINA GALPERINA 8 MINUTE READ

A random dark net shopping bot, a rabid meme music video collage, concept websites, and a browser-based film—these were some of the best artworks of the year, and they weren't hanging in a Chelsea gallery. Some were born digital. Some were built with shareware platforms or crowdsourced. Many referenced, intensified, and disrupted everyday Internet user experience, while spilling into the “physical.”

Maybe the antiquated, catch-all term “net art” should be applied very loosely to this group, unless you'd like to get into a long, footnoted discussion about the latest art lexicon update in the age of (or **rather**, **after**) the Internet. This year in particular, the web-enabled stand-out artworks were accessible, obsessive, interdisciplinary and ballsy.

RANDOM DARKNET SHOPPER, !MEDIENGRUPPE BITNIK



!MEDIENGRUPPE BITNIK

Every media outlet talked up “Deep Web” this year, but the technical aspects of anonymized browsers exploring its legally murky depths aren’t exactly obvious to the general audience. For a group show at the Kunst Halle St. Gallen gallery in Switzerland, the [!Mediengruppe Bitnik](#) art collective capitalized on these inquiries by creating the mysterious “[Random Darknet Shopper](#),” a bot that would randomly buy something from the Agora digital marketplace and have it shipped to the gallery.

With its \$100 in bitcoin weekly budget, the bot has purchased MDMA pills, black market Nikes, Ukrainian cigarettes and, since *Fast Company* [profiled](#) the project, a “Hungarian passport scan” and “a baseball cap with hidden camera.” Ongoing documentation is freely [viewable online](#).

The project raised important questions, such as, “How does the ethical reasoning of capitalism work in an unregulated digital market place, particularly when the consumer is a bot?” “Is that really MDMA?” and “Is this art?”

Dec 23, 2014, 06:04pm EST

A Robot Really Committed A Crime: Now What?



Ryan Calo Former Contributor @
Tech

I write about the legal and policy aspects of emerging technology.

 This article is more than 6 years old.

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in

It is always fun, and sometimes worrying, to see imagination come to life. I was on a panel last year at UC Berkeley around robotics and law. We talked about some of the conundrums robots and artificial intelligence might pose for law and policy--the subject of my forthcoming work *Robotics and the Lessons of Cyberlaw*. One hypothetical involved a shopping "bot" that randomly purchases items on the Internet. What if the bot purchases an item that is illegal in the jurisdiction where the item was shipped?

Given that criminal law commonly requires *mens rea* (Latin for an "intending mind"), it would seem the recipient of the package, even if she programmed the bot herself, might not be held criminally liable. After all, she intended to surprise herself, not to purchase contraband. This and other examples of emergent behavior create the interesting prospect of crimes without perpetrators, or so [I argue](#).

Greg Miller did a [wonderful write up](#) of the exchange for WIRED, careful to note that the activity in question represents the speculation of a law professor (if based upon a [live project](#) by Darius Kazemi).

Well, now *The Guardian* is reporting that a version of [this very thing has happened](#). Two London-based artists coded a bot that randomly purchased items from a hidden or "darknet" market using Bitcoin. The bot purchased, among other things, fake Diesel jeans and ten pills of ecstasy. But it also purchased perfectly lawful items such as a stash can and baseball cap with a camera in it. You can see the items [here](#).

Are these artists liable for what the bot bought? Maybe. In the United States, at least, criminal law is predominantly statutory. We would have to look to the precise wording of the federal or local law and then apply it to the facts at hand. If, for instance, the law says a person may not *knowingly* purchase pirated merchandise or drugs, there is an argument that the artists did not violate the law. Whereas if the law says the person may not engage in this behavior *recklessly*, then the artists may well be found guilty, since they released the bot into an environment where they could be substantially certain some unlawful outcome would occur. I presume they even wanted the bot to yield illegal contraband to make the installation more exciting. Wanting a bad outcome doesn't make it illegal (you cannot wish someone to death), but purposefully leaving the bot in the darknet until it yielded contraband seems hard to distinguish from intent.

[My hypothetical](#) is very close to the art project, with a key difference designed to make the issue even harder. True emergent behavior--as Steven Johnson [captures so well](#)--is both surprising and useful. The hope is that the emergent system will find a new and therefore surprising way to create value, be it art, entertainment, or something else. Amazon felt its warehouses, as organized by people, were inefficient, so it engaged and ultimately purchased the robotics company Kiva Systems where "[products organize themselves](#)." Emergence is where a system does something novel and perhaps good but also unforeseeable, which is why it presents such a challenge for law. So in my hypothetical, the bot is not designed to go somewhere nefarious--it just happens to do so.

What seems more and more clear is that issues like these will go from hypotheticals, to art installations, to everyday facts of life. And I have to wonder how ready we are.



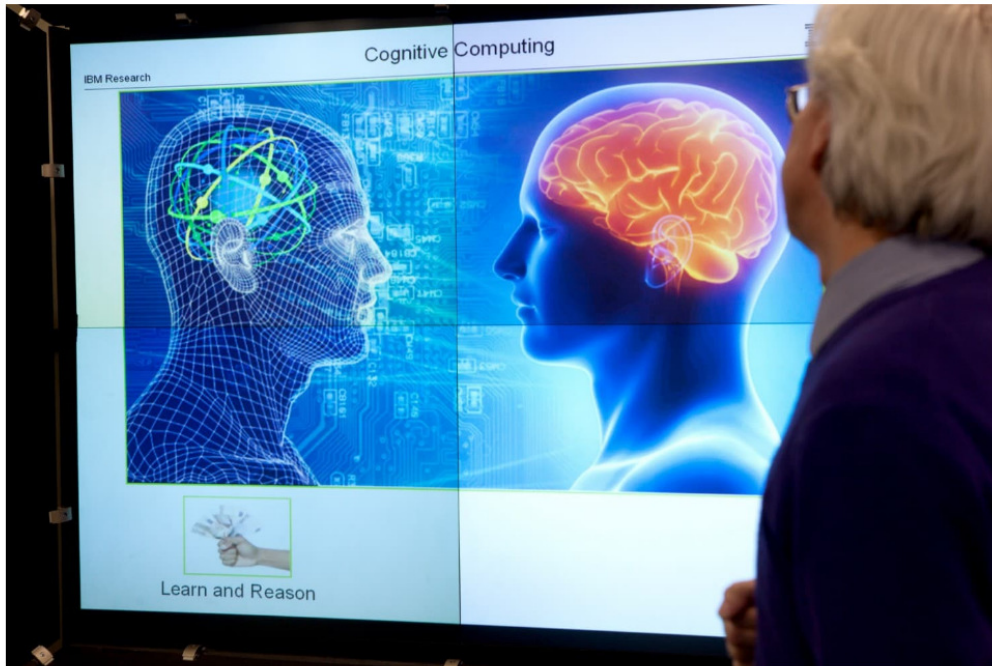
Ryan Calo

I'm a law professor at the University of Washington and faculty director of the interdisciplinary Tech Policy Lab. My affiliations include the Stanford Law School Center...

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Opinions

Robots are sneaking up on Congress (along with four other tech trends)



IBM's Pierre Darmon explains Watson's cognitive learning software. Members of Congress could use similar technology to better serve their constituents, Amy Webb writes. (Melanie Burford/Prime)

By **Amy Webb**
January 9, 2015

Amy Webb is the founder and chief executive of Webbmedia Group, a digital strategy firm that advises an international client base on near-future emerging technologies and digital media trends. She is also a visiting Neiman fellow at Harvard University.

One of the best Twitter accounts — inside the Beltway or out — belongs to former representative [John Dingell](#) (D-Mich.), who announced his retirement with self-effacing posts such as “Added the ‘F’ word to my Twitter bio” and “Also retiring: the underscore in my username.” He’s also tweeted [an inside joke](#) to master Photoshopper [@darth](#), posted [incredible #TBT selfies](#) and called out the Environmental Protection Agency [for tweeting about Kim Kardashian](#).

Dingell gets social media in a way that has eluded many members of Congress, who don’t always stay current on technology. During the last session, they [tweeted in the third person](#), alphabetized their [floppy disks](#) and sent thousands of e-mails from their BlackBerrys.

And yet during that time, we saw an unprecedented number of data breaches and hacking attacks in both the public and private sectors. Bitcoin, a new cryptocurrency and the system it runs on, were hardly discussed. A national debate about the future of the Internet and how we use it was ignored by too many members of Congress to list, but I don’t blame them. [Net neutrality](#) is a heady, complex issue.

It’s now or never. Technology — and the various ways we use and exploit it — is inextricably tied to governing and being governed. So congressional leaders and their staff members must embrace not just what’s on the horizon but everyday technology found in the private sector. The longer members of Congress wait to adapt to and adopt new technologies, the harder it will be for them to catch up.

I regularly meet with researchers, academics, hackers and makers to learn about their latest projects. I also review microeconomic trends, changes in consumer behavior, patent filings, new software and gadgets from around the world. Then, each December, I [make a list of trends](#) that show where technology is moving. Of the 55 big ideas highlighted for 2015, five will affect our elected leaders. Here’s what Congress should do with them:

Cognitive computing

Cognitive computing systems use artificial intelligence and natural language processing, which extracts meaning from our everyday speech, to understand human intentions. In short, researchers have taught computers to think, and they're starting to make inferences and decisions. For example: Toward the end of 2014, Google researchers unveiled a project that used such a system [to caption a bunch of photos](#) — without explicitly teaching the system to recognize what was in them. A photo with the caption “Two pizzas sitting on top of a stove top oven” showed exactly that, plus a nearly drained glass of wine. To craft that caption, millions of digital images were processed through thousands of computers so that Google's neural network could teach itself to recognize what was being depicted.

When IBM put its supercomputer, [Watson](#), on “Jeopardy” in 2011, it [made for great television](#). But Watson is more than a game-show stunt — it's an extremely powerful platform capable of learning and thinking on its own. It can take a big heap of data and help a doctor make a difficult diagnosis. Cognitive systems can compose music and new languages, without any help from humans.

Could a computer invent a new language to help Congress have better dialogue? Probably not. But here's what a cognitive system could do for [Sen. Joni Ernst](#) (R-Iowa), who defeated Rep. Bruce Braley in a very tight race: Her staff could use machine learning to better understand her constituents, especially the difficult ones who can list many things they dislike but cannot articulate what they want.

Rogue robots

Robots sometimes look like humans, but often they're just smart programs running on the Internet. A series of bots, many experimental, are being programmed to do specific tasks, such as communicate with people or make purchases. Soon, intelligent bots will be running . . . from the law.

For example: The Random Darknet Shopper is an art project and automated shopping bot. It's programmed to spend \$100 in bitcoin every week on a random purchase within a specific online marketplace. There's just one problem: Recently, it [bought 10 ecstasy pills](#) and a falsified Hungarian passport. Last year, Snapchat had a porn bot problem that seemed unstoppable. It would indiscriminately send photos of naked women to random phones — spamming chief executives and teenagers alike. (Snapchat has prevented those accounts from continuing to post, however this kind of spam is an ongoing problem for many networks.)

Here's what that could mean for Rep. Larry Bucshon (R-Ind.), chairman of the House Science Committee's subcommittee on research and technology: The next wave of cybercrime may be unintentional. How can Buschon's panel create policies for bad bots without implicating their well-meaning programmers?

Digital consent

As we continue to upload personal data to social networks, photo- and video-sharing sites, wearable devices, and elsewhere, companies will continue to question who owns the rights to our data — and who has the right to look at it. Ultimately, Congress will have to decide.

For example: The data collected by wearable devices isn't necessarily private. Check the terms of service for that watch or smart pedometer you got for Christmas, and you'll discover that the personal health information your device is collecting isn't entirely yours. Last year, Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) [called on the Federal Trade Commission](#) to prevent companies like Fitbit from selling users' data to advertisers. While the FTC considers that request, it is also looking into how Apple will shore up encryption and data protection when its watch debuts this year, with Commissioner Julie Brill [saying](#) she's concerned about health data leaks.

In the meantime, the [Blackphone](#), a \$629 smartphone that helps block the National Security Agency, the Department of Homeland Security and just about everyone else from eavesdropping, will roll out to the general public in 2015. Last year, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) [sent a scathing letter](#) to the NSA's director, questioning whether the agency had been spying on members of Congress. Maybe he should get on the Blackphone's waiting list. Congressional leaders, such as Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) and Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), often argue for more digital privacy but don't have enough information about what's happening with our data and why.

Algorithmic oversight

An algorithm is a set of rules or processes that are followed to solve a problem. They've been around for centuries in one form or another, but now that computers are so powerful, algorithms need supervision. Algorithms promise power and efficiency, but they can also cause significant damage when left unchecked. Depending on the decisions programmers make and the data they use, algorithms can produce wildly inaccurate results. As a result, we are increasingly misclassifying objects, data and people.

For example: There are lots of stories of algorithms [wrongly identifying terrorism suspects at airports](#), and [algorithms for high-frequency trading](#) nearly destroyed the stock market. Sens. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) and Tammy Baldwin (D-Wis.) should ask the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, which they lead, to invite experts from the private sector to help educate lawmakers about algorithms. This isn't about governing or regulating algorithms, but instead not relying on their answers with complete confidence.

In the meantime, lots of our elected officials are already gearing up for the 2016 campaign season, and I predict a lot of misclassification of voters and donors alike. Algorithms can be used to pinpoint specific kinds of constituents and to predict their likely votes, but only if the data is good.

One-to-few publishing

Sunday-morning talk shows are still the prize, but members of Congress are missing a big opportunity in an old form of publishing. Newsletters, podcasts and niche networks that captivate smaller audiences will make a comeback in 2015, and these one-to-few platforms are the perfect way to harness constituents' attention. But keep in mind: The reason this next generation of newsletters and podcasts is succeeding is because they use a different format. They're personalized and intended for a particular group of people, and therefore make readers feel more exclusive and special.

For example: Some of the newest social networks are going in the opposite direction of Facebook and Twitter. Rather than letting users post all day long to the largest audience possible, they mandate quality and editing. [This.cm](#) is one such network; each member of the community gets to post only one link a day. You can't just join, though — you have to be invited by another member. It's quickly become one of the hottest invites around.

Dozens of newsletters such as [Today in Tabs](#) and [MediaREDEF](#) have been backed by investors, even though they have small audiences. Podcasts are on the rise again, too. It may seem counterintuitive to pollsters, but it's already clear that a smaller audience can be more valuable. Voters crave access to exclusive digital networks. When a critical mass of users is actively engaged in a network, that means they're paying attention, and that's the metric that will matter most in the next election cycle.

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 35 Comments

MOTHERBOARD
TECH BY VICE

The Best Things a Random Bot Bought on the Dark Net

Though Random Darknet Shopper was just an art project, it had a talent for buying some rather amusing goods.

 By [DJ Pangbum](#)

January 13, 2015, 9:55pm [Share](#) [Tweet](#) [Snap](#)



«THE DARKNET. FROM MEMES TO ONIONLAND». IMAGE: !MEDIENGRUPPE_BITNIK

When people think of the darknet, they often think of buying drugs. But there's a lot more out there, and all it takes is a random shopping bot with a budget to find it.

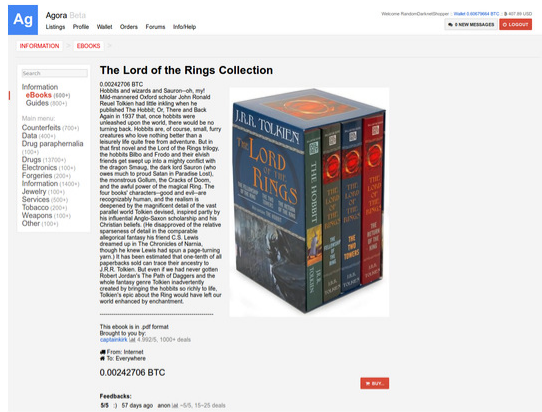
On January 11th, the art collective [!Mediengruppe Bitnik](#) wrapped up *The Darknet: From Memes to Onionland*, an exhibition for items purchased by their Random Darknet Shopper, a botnet that scoured the darknet for miscellaneous goods, which it bought and sent to the artists. The exhibition ran at The Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, located about an hour east of Zürich, Switzerland, and featured items purchased by the Random Darknet Shopper.

As [Carmen Weisskopf](#) and [Domagoj Smoljo](#), the London-based Swiss artists behind !Mediengruppe Bitnik, noted on the project website, Random Darknet Shopper (RDS) is an automated online shopping bot they provided with a budget of \$100 in bitcoins per week.

Once a week, RDS went on a shopping spree on the Agora marketplace, which the duo say had some 16,000 listings when they got their bot started. Sometimes it was thrifty, other times it was a big spender. Curiously enough, Weisskopf and Smoljo [told the Guardian](#) that they weren't scammed once. If this sounds like [Darius Kazemi's Random Shopper](#), which worked on Amazon, it's pretty much the same concept.

The full list of purchased items is available on !Mediengruppe Bitnik's website. But, below are a selection of Random Darknet Shopper's purchases, which range from the curious and absurd to the illegal and mind-bending.

The Lord of the Rings Collection E-book



In one of the more amusing purchases, [Random Darknet Shopper](#) bought the e-book version of *The Lord of the Rings Collection*. The e-book sold for 0.00242706 BTC, which converts to 57 cents in US dollars. What Random Darknet Shopper teaches us here is that some vendors must be selling their wares in bulk, because J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy trilogy just isn't putting food on their table on its own.

Ecstasy 10x Yellow Twitter 120MG MDMA



IMAGE: !MEDIENGRUPPE BITNIK

Shortly after pulling off the *Lord of the Rings* steal, [Random Darknet Shopper](#) fetched ten 120mg Yellow Twitter MDMA pills from a German vendor named Snapback. The vendor, for his part, boasted that the pills were famous on other Tor drug sites, and were totally pure "with no bullshit inside." Judging by customer feedback, Snapback sells the real goods. Lesson? Random Darknet Shopper knows how to choose its drugs well.

Spy Gear



IMAGE: !MEDIENGRUPPE BITNIK

On December 11th, Random Darknet Shopper bought some spy gear; specifically a [Mini DV/DVR video cap recorder](#) with .mp3 and Bluetooth functionality.

"Have you ever wondered how would it be if you could record your eyesight? Memories, meetings, scams, parties, trips, etc.," wrote the vendor, optiman, in grammatically-mangled English. "Have you ever wanted to record something without anyone knows or suspects? Have you ever regret that you couldn't record something important or special? Use the hidden camera cap with the remote control, its easy to use and very useful."

Optiman's sales pitch must have worked on Random Darknet Shopper. And how ironic given that all of this went down on a Tor site, where an anti-surveillance ethos abounds.

Chesterfield Cigarettes



For some reason that will never be known to humans, Random Darknet Shopper had a thing for Chesterfield cigarettes. A parcel of 10 packs of cigarettes arrived from of all places Moldavia, while another [package of Chesterfields originated in Ukraine](#). The big takeaway here is that Chesterfields seem to be a popular black market item in Eastern Europe.

Sprite Drug Stash Can



IMAGE: !MEDIENGRUPPE BITNIK

Random Darknet Shopper's purchase of the [Sprite Stash Can](#) has to be one of the most hilarious, if only because we now know that the surveillance tools vendor, optiman, is also crafting stash cans and selling them on the Darknet. !mediengruppe Bitnik criticized optiman for taking a month to deliver the parcel, but, hell, it looks pretty nifty. Will it work? Only the daring will ever know.

TAGGED: TECH, CULTURE, MOTHERBOARD, DARKNET, DESIGN, 'AGORA, MOTHERBOARD_SHOW, DARK_NET, RANDOM_DARKNET_SHOPPER

Art

Art Bot Buys Drugs, Tests the Bounds of Consciousness



by Becca Rothfeld
January 14, 2015



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Items ordered by the Random Darknet Shopper (all images courtesy of the artists)

This fall, an automated “shopper bot” called the “Random Darknet Shopper” purchased ten pills of MDMA from the dark web. The bot was the brainchild of the innovative !Mediengruppe Bitnik art collective, a group that uses “hacking as an artistic strategy” to “recontextualise the familiar,” according to [their website](#).



The “snapback 120mg MDMA” pills ordered by the art bot.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik favors elaborate, interactive projects that probe our relationship to digital communication or surveillance technologies — previously, they’ve hacked CCTV cameras and replaced their footage with an invitation to play chess — and they told [Marina Galperina](#) of FastCoLabs that the shopper bot experiment was designed to explore alternatives to regulated, mainstream channels of online communication. What becomes of identity and interpersonal communication on the dark web, where

anonymity is paramount? If we must choose between monitored interactions on the one hand and impersonal exchanges on the other, how can we forge meaningful relationships on the internet? Caught between the web and the dark web, we are left to choose between performance of the self and radical depersonalization.

Random Darknet Shopper was part of *The Darknet — From Memes to Onionland. An Exploration*, an exhibition that approached these urgent questions from multiple perspectives. The show, which appeared in Kunst Halle St. Gallen in Switzerland and closed last week, also featured a YouTube history of Anonymous and Eva and Franco Mattes’s “[Emily’s Video](#)” (2012), which depicts footage of volunteers reacting to a mysterious video. All the pieces in the exhibition hinged on questions of identity and anonymity.



"The Darknet—From Memes to Onionland. An Exploration" at the Kunst Halle St. Gallen.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik's bot explored these issues at the level of economic exchange, taking depersonalization to its limits. Though Random Darknet Shopper was stripped of anything resembling human identity, it was able to participate without difficulty in the electronic marketplace on the dark web. The bot used its weekly budget of \$100 bitcoin to make random purchases. In addition to the MDMA, it also ordered *Lord of the Rings* e-books, sneakers, and a Platinum Visa card.

In a recent article in the *London Review of Books*, Andrew O'Hanagan wrote about a similar experiment, in which he created a virtual life for a man who had died. Like the virtually resurrected subject of O'Hanagan's article, Random Darknet Shopper is non-living proof that digital artifacts can take on the roles we typically reserve for humans. Our Twitter followers or Amazon accounts won't notice the absence of a feeling, phenomenological self as long as our avatars continue performing their functions.

Philosopher David Chalmers is famed for a thought experiment that tests the boundaries of consciousness: he originated the notion of the philosophical zombie, a monster who resembles us in every way but lacks phenomenological experience. Although philosophical zombies are externally indistinguishable from humans with conscious experience, performing all of the same sorts of actions, they are not "conscious" in the way we typically use the word. As !Mediengruppe Bitnik's bot demonstrates, the philosophical zombie apocalypse is upon us as digital identities proliferate.

—
RANDOM DARKNET SHOPPER (2014 - ONGOING)

ENGLISH / **DEUTSCH**

15.01.15

SWISS PUBLIC PROSECUTOR SEIZES AND SEALS WORK BY !MEDIENGRUPPE BITNIK



«Can a robot, or a piece of software, be jailed if it commits a crime? Where does legal culpability lie if code is criminal by design or default? What if a robot buys drugs, weapons, or hacking equipment and has them sent to you, and police intercept the package?» These are some of the questions Mike Power asked when he reviewed the work «Random Darknet Shopper» in [The Guardian](#). The work was part of the exhibition «The Darknet – From Memes to Onionland. An Exploration» in the Kunst Halle St. Gallen, which closed on Sunday, January 11, 2015. For the duration of the exhibition, !Mediengruppe Bitnik sent a software bot on a shopping spree in the Deepweb. Random Darknet Shopper had a budget of \$100 in Bitcoins weekly, which it spent on a randomly chosen item from the deepweb shop Agora. The work and the exhibition received wide attention from the public and the press. The exhibition was well-attended and was discussed in a wide range of local and international press from Saiten to Vice, Arte, Libération, CNN, Forbes. «There's just one problem», [The Washington Post](#) wrote in January about the work, «recently, it bought 10 ecstasy pills».

What does it mean for a society, when there are robots which act autonomously? Who is liable, when a robot breaks the law on its own initiative? These were some of the main questions the work Random Darknet Shopper posed. Global questions, which will now be negotiated locally.

On the morning of January 12, the day after the three-month exhibition was closed, the public prosecutor's office of St. Gallen seized and sealed our work. It seems, the purpose of the confiscation is to impede an endangerment of third parties through the drugs exhibited by destroying them. This is what we know at present. We believe that the confiscation is an unjustified intervention into freedom of art. We'd also like to thank Kunst Halle St. Gallen for their ongoing support and the wonderful collaboration. Furthermore, we are convinced, that it is an objective of art to shed light on the fringes of society and to pose fundamental contemporary questions.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik, January 15 2015

14.01.2015

STAATSANWALTSCHAFT ST. GALLEN BESCHLAGNAHMT UND VERSIEGELT ARBEIT DER !MEDIENGRUPPE BITNIK

«Können ein Roboter oder eine Software ins Gefängnis gesteckt werden, wenn sie ein Verbrechen begehen? Wer haftet, wenn ein Code dazu programmiert wurde, Verbrechen in Kauf zu nehmen? Was, wenn der Roboter Drogen, Waffen oder Hacker-Ausrüstung kauft, sie an einen Empfänger liefern lässt und die Polizei das Paket abfängt?» Diese Fragen stellte Mike Power in der britischen Tageszeitung [The Guardian](#) im Dezember anlässlich seiner Besprechung der Darknet-Ausstellung in der Kunst Halle St. Gallen, die am Sonntag 11. Januar 2015 zu Ende ging. Die !Mediengruppe Bitnik hatte während drei Monaten einen Bot im Darknet auf Reisen geschickt, der mit 100 Dollar wöchentlich in diesem Schattenreich des Internets per Zufallsgenerator auf Shoppingtour ging. Die Ausstellung stiess auf reges Interesse bei der Bevölkerung und der Presse. Die Führungen waren immer ausgebucht, neben dem St. Galler Tagblatt und Saiten berichteten Kunstmagazine sowie Vice, Arte, Libération, CNN, Forbes. «In der Tat gibt es nur ein Problem», schrieb die [Washington Post](#) Anfang Januar über die Aktion in St. Gallen: «Kürzlich kaufte der Roboter zehn Ecstasy-Pillen.»

Was bedeutet es für die Gesellschaft, wenn Roboter plötzlich autonom handeln? Wer ist haftbar, wenn ein Roboter von sich aus gegen das Gesetz verstösst? Dies waren zentrale Fragen der Arbeit «Random Darknet Shopper». Globale Fragen, die nun lokal verhandelt werden.

Am Morgen des 12. Januar, am Tag nach Beendigung der dreimonatigen Ausstellung, beschlagnahmte und versiegelte die Staatsanwaltschaft des Kantons St. Gallen in der Kunst Halle unsere Arbeit. Mit der Beschlagnahme und der Vernichtung der Ecstasy-Pillen soll offenbar eine Drittgefährdung ausgeschlossen werden. Dies ist unser aktueller Kenntnisstand, weswegen wir uns im Moment nicht weiter zur Sache äussern können. Wir sind jedoch der Meinung, dass die Beschlagnahme der Kunstobjekte ein ungerechtfertigter Eingriff in die Kunstfreiheit darstellt. An dieser Stelle möchten wir uns bei der Kunst Halle St. Gallen für die Zusammenarbeit und die Unterstützung bedanken. Wir sind überzeugt, dass es eine Aufgabe der Kunst ist, Ränder auszuleuchten und zeitgenössische, gesellschaftliche Fragen zu thematisieren.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik, 15. Januar 2015

Großes Kino: Staatsanwaltschaft beschlagnahmt Darknet-Ausstellung der Mediengruppe Bitnik

16.01.2015 um 10:22 Uhr - Markus Beckedahl - in Kultur - 13 Ergänzungen



Auf die Darknet-Ausstellung der !Mediengruppe Bitnik [hatten wir bereits hingewiesen](#). Die schweizer Medienkünstler haben mit dem „Random Darknet Shopper“ einen Bot gebaut, der im Darknet automatisiert nach einem Zufallsprinzip dort angebotene Sachen kauft und sich das schicken lassen, um diese öffentlich auszustellen. Geliefert wurden u.a. MDMA-Pillen, [gefälschte Jeans](#) und der [Scan eines ungarischen Passes](#). Die Kunstaktion stellte wichtige Fragen der Zukunft:

„ Was bedeutet es für die Gesellschaft, wenn Roboter plötzlich autonom handeln? Wer ist haftbar, wenn ein Roboter von sich aus gegen das Gesetz verstößt? Dies waren zentrale Fragen der Arbeit «Random Darknet Shopper». Globale Fragen, die nun lokal verhandelt werden.

Jetzt wurde die Ausstellung am Tag nach der Beendigung in Sankt Gallen von der Staatsanwaltschaft beschlagnahmt. Die !Mediengruppe Bitnik protestiert natürlich dagegen und sieht sich in ihrer Kunstfreiheit verletzt: [Staatsanwaltschaft St. Gallen beschlagnahmt und versiegelt Arbeit der !Mediengruppe Bitnik](#).

„ Am Morgen des 12. Januar, am Tag nach Beendigung der dreimonatigen Ausstellung, beschlagnahmte und versiegelte die Staatsanwaltschaft des Kantons St. Gallen in der Kunst Halle unsere Arbeit. Mit der Beschlagnahme und der Vernichtung der Ecstasy-Pillen soll offenbar eine Drittgefährdung ausgeschlossen werden. Dies ist unser aktueller Kenntnisstand, weswegen wir uns im Moment nicht weiter zur Sache äussern können. Wir sind jedoch der Meinung, dass die Beschlagnahme der Kunstobjekte ein ungerechtfertigter Eingriff in die Kunstfreiheit darstellt. An dieser Stelle möchten wir uns bei der Kunst Halle St. Gallen für die Zusammenarbeit und die Unterstützung bedanken. Wir sind überzeugt, dass es eine Aufgabe der Kunst ist, Ränder auszuleuchten und zeitgenössische, gesellschaftliche Fragen zu thematisieren.

Wir wünschen viel Erfolg und viel Spaß!

Über den Autor/ die Autorin

markus

Markus Beckedahl hat schon 2002 in der Ur-Form von netzpolitik.org gebloggt und entwickelt seit 2004 als Chefredakteur die Plattform. netzpolitik.org ist als Teil der von ihm mitgegründeten [newthinking communications GmbH](#) gestartet, aus dem auch die von ihm mitgegründete [re:publica](#)-Konferenz entstanden ist. Markus Beckedahl ist seit 2010 Mitglied im Medienrat der Landesmedienanstalt Berlin-Brandenburg und war von 2010-2013 Mitglied in der Enquete-Kommission "Internet und digitale Gesellschaft" im Deutschen Bundestag. In der Zeit vor netzpolitik.org war er mal bei den Grünen aktiv. Er schreibt den wochentäglichen [bits-Newsletter](#) aus dem netzpolitik-Universum. **Kontakt:** Mail: markus (ett) netzpolitik.org / Telefon: +49-30-92105-986 (zu Arbeitszeiten) -- Er ist auch auf [Facebook](#): [Twitter](#) und [Instagram](#) zu finden.

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16.01.2015 um 10:22

Kategorie
Kultur

Schlagworte
Darknet, Mediengruppe Bitnik,
medienkunst, Schweiz



Drug-buying robot arrested in Switzerland

When androids do ecstasy, do they dream of electric sheep?



Patrick Howell O'Neill

Crime

Published Jan 17, 2015

Updated May 29, 2021, 6:07 pm CDT

It turns out that robots can go to jail for buying drugs too. Welcome to 2015.

A three-month-old Swiss art project called “[The Random Darknet Shopper](#)” was [seized](#) by police this week after spending \$100 in [bitcoins](#) per week to buy products from [Dark Net](#) markets, including ecstasy (which was just \$48) and a fake passport (for a mere \$25).

The art project—titled *The Darknet – From Memes to Onionland. An Exploration*—finished its run on Sunday, the day before the seizure.

“The purpose of the confiscation is to impede an endangerment of third parties through the drugs exhibited by destroying them. This is what we know at present,” !Mediengruppe Bitnik, the artists behind the bot, [wrote](#) on their website. “We believe that the confiscation is an unjustified intervention into freedom of art.”

Maybe, but this is also pretty much exactly what the Random Darknet Shopper was designed to do. The artists programmed the thing in order to test, “What does it mean for a society, when there are robots which act autonomously? Who is liable, when a robot breaks the law on its own initiative?”

In Switzerland, at least, that question is beginning to be answered.

It was a hell of a week for the [Dark Net](#). The [Silk Road](#) trial [began on Tuesday](#) and accused mastermind [Ross Ulbricht](#) is placing the blame on an [infamous Bitcoin trader](#) instead.

H/T [Animal NY](#) | Photo via [!Mediengruppe Bitnik](#)

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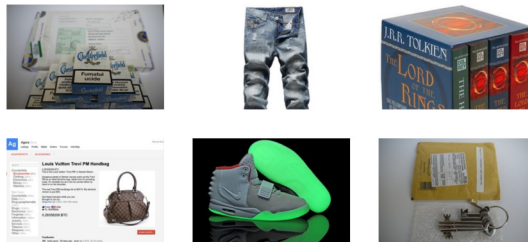


The pills that landed Random Darknet Shopper on the wrong side of the law

What happens when an online bot gets arrested by police?

The Random Darknet Shopper has been buying ecstasy pills for its artist owners

Random Darknet Shopper
10 IMAGES



There was only so long that the police would let a bot created by Swiss art collective [!Mediengruppe Bitnik](#) order all manner of things from the [darknet](#) in the name of [art](#). Random Darknet Shopper has been randomly buying nefarious goods since November, with the objects shown at a Zurich exhibition called *The Darknet – From Memes to Onionland. An Exploration*.

With a set budget of \$100 per shopping trip, Random Darknet Shopper has ordered a fabulous array of objects from the depths of the web: Diesel jeans, a set of fire brigade master keys and Chesterfield cigarettes. But police finally took exception to its order of 10 ecstasy tablets and a fake Hungarian passport. Last week, the bot was seized by Swiss cops, one day after the exhibition closed.

In a statement on the [!Mediengruppe Bitnik](#) website, the group hit out at what they perceive as "an [unjustified intervention into freedom of art](#)". We caught up with two members of the collective to see if they'll face criminal charges for the actions of their bot.

Is Random Darknet Shopper in custody?

!Mediengruppe Bitnik: Yes, Random Darknet Shopper and all the objects are in custody. But they are sealed. This means, that the public prosecutor has to hear us before he can proceed with any actions. We think this will happen in the next few days.

Are you under threat from the force of the law yourselves? Have the police spoken with you?

!Mediengruppe Bitnik: It is unclear if we are. Until now, no charges have been pressed against the bot or against !Mediengruppe Bitnik. We have no direct contact. Only through our lawyer have we been in contact with the public prosecutor. Through her, we have had to claim ownership for the Random Darknet Shopper since we want the seized objects back.



Fire brigade master keys !Mediengruppe Bitnik

Judging from the public statements from the public prosecutors office, it looks like their main interest lies in the destruction of the drugs and not in prosecuting us. They also seem to have a good sense of humour. They've publicly stated that they enjoy being part of the art project, because the piece raises interesting questions in their field. They've even suggested to use the order of forfeiture instead of the MDMA in future exhibitions. That's quite some art expertise.

What's your favourite thing that it purchased?

!Mediengruppe Bitnik: It's still the fire brigade masterkey set from the UK. It has this magical potential of opening doors and gates.

Which darknet sites was the bot operating on?

!Mediengruppe Bitnik: Random Darknet Shopper only operated on Agora, one of the biggest darknet markets at the moment.

Do you miss it?

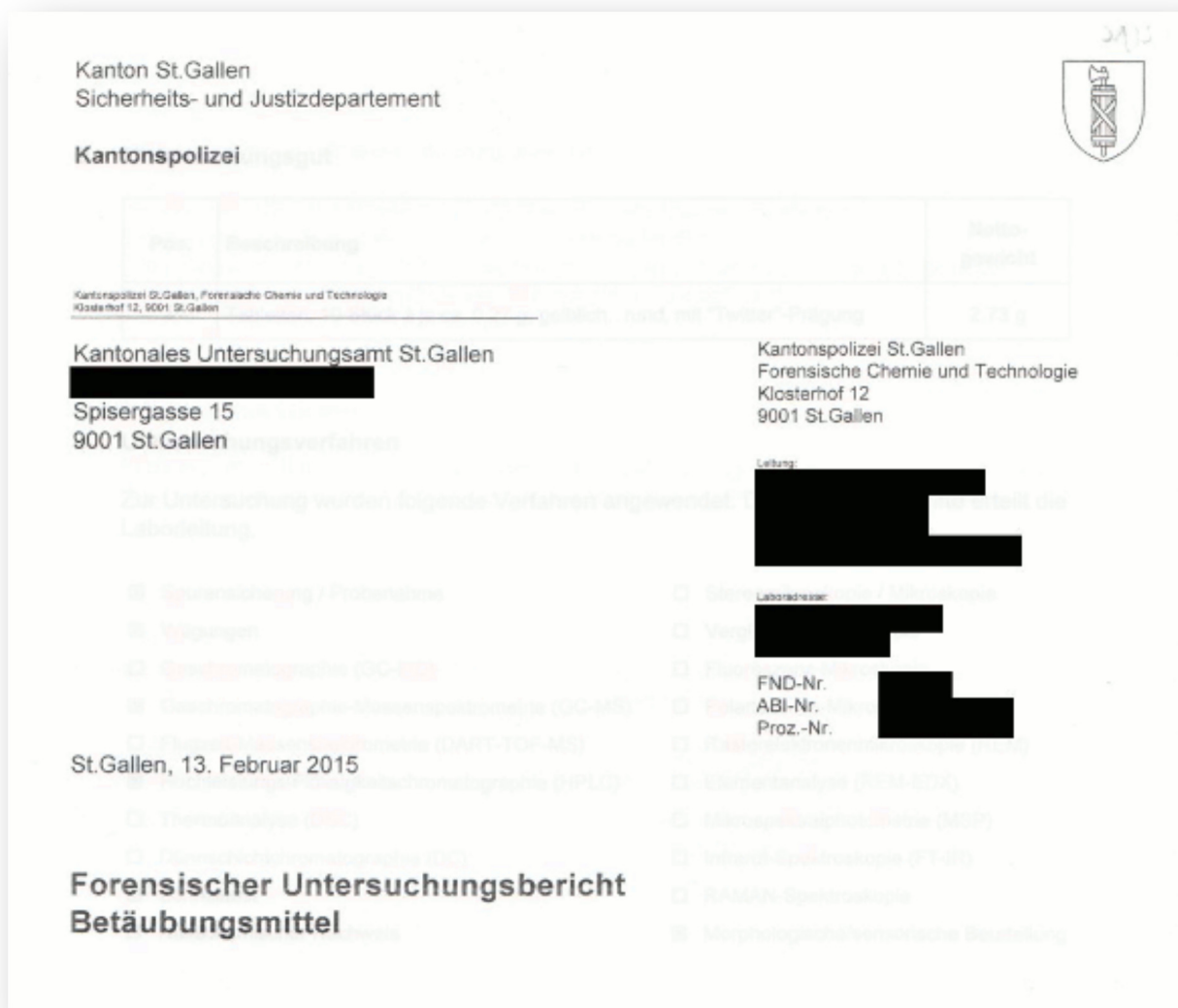
!Mediengruppe Bitnik: Yes, definitely. We want it back! Not only because there are other institutions interested in exhibiting the work in the near future. The Random Darknet Shopper has also become dear to our hearts. For 12 weeks it thrilled us with the purchase of another obscure item every week. Quite a shopping experience every time! And then after a few days wait each of the items would beautifully materialize from the dark.

!MEDIENGRUPPE BITNIK

RANDOM DARKNET SHOPPER (2014 - ONGOING)

04.03.15 | No. 6

ECSTASY IS ECSTASY



Forensic examination shows that the pills really are Ecstasy. Each pill contains 90mg of MDMA. According to the forensic report the pills will now be destroyed. The other objects remain sealed together with the complete packaging of the pills. We expect the case to be resolved within the next few weeks. The Random Darknet Shopper bot and all other objects should then be released.

RANDOM DARKNET SHOPPER (2014 - ONGOING)

15.04.15

**RANDOM DARKNET SHOPPER RELEASED,
ECSTASY DESTROYED**



Random Darknet Shopper has finally been released and is now back in our possession. All items were kept sealed and untouched except the Ecstasy, which was taken out of its vacuum-sealed packing. It was tested positive for MDMA by the authorities, and then destroyed.

So, three months after the confiscation in January, all items except the Ecstasy were given back to us by the public prosecutor.

At the same time we also received the order for withdrawal of prosecution. In the order for withdrawal of prosecution the public prosecutor states that the possession of Ecstasy was indeed a reasonable means for the purpose of sparking public debate about questions related to the exhibition. The public prosecution also asserts that the overwhelming interest in the questions raised by the art work «Random Darknet Shopper» justify the exhibition of the drugs as artefacts, even if the exhibition does hold a small risk of endangerment of third parties through the drugs exhibited.

We as well as the Random Darknet Shopper have been cleared of all charges. This is a great day for the bot, for us and for freedom of art!



[Art & Design](#)

Why did Swiss police arrest an algorithm?

By Caroline Christie



Artists !Mediengruppe Bitnik created a bot that crawled the dark net buying whatever it could find

On 16 April Swiss authorities released an algorithm from custody. The bot was arrested in January after it bought 10 ecstasy tablets online, and had been held for over the past three months while a judge determined whether or not a string of code programmed by two artists to hop about the internet buying all sorts of illegal stuff should be prosecuted.

Created by the Swiss art collective !Mediengruppe Bitnik, <<Random Darknet Shopper>> was designed to trawl through the dark net, fueled by \$100 worth of Bitcoins a week, buying whatever it saw fit. The result ended in a haul of suspect packages delivered to the artists, including a baseball cap with a hidden camera, a low-res jpeg of a Hungarian passport, some knock-off [Yeezy trainers](#), five packets of Chesterfield cigarettes, a working VISA credit card number and the ecstasy tablets. The loot was then framed, hung and displayed as part of the exhibition [The Darknet – From Memes to Onionland: An Exploration in Switzerland](#)

[Writing on their blog](#), the artists described the decision to release their bot from the hands of the authorities as “A great day for the bot, for us and for freedom of art!”

Consisting of Domagoj Smoljo and Carmen Weisskopf, who met whilst studying at Zurich University of the Arts, !Mediengruppe Bitnik describe themselves as slow producers, in that they take the time to really understand the materials they work with. They began their hacks in 2004 after Domagoj and Carmen created a basic web page server for their work. The prospect of easily producing art in a democratic way ignited a fascination with manipulating technology and new media that’s led to a chorus of public telephone boxes simultaneously ringing out over a city, inviting members of the public to play chess with CCTV cameras in London and turning the opera house in Zurich into a giant pirate radio broadcast operation.

From their base in Switzerland, Carmen explained what happened when the authorities took possession of their latest work:

“The day after the exhibition closed, the state attorney and a police officer walked into the exhibition place and ceased the work, but they were unprepared so it was clear that it hadn’t been planned. They didn’t have a search warrant and it was totally chaotic,” she told Little Atoms.

After erratically deciding that the matter was a legal one, the police chose to seize the evidence and the artwork was sealed, meaning the state authorities could not touch the evidence until the case has been heard in front of a judge, where the owning party of the work can then dispute the terms of the seizure.

The artists feared that without this process the work would have been destroyed, damaged or lost.

How do you arrest a bot?

Alongside the artwork, the police also confiscated the artist's computer that housed the algorithm. Despite not having access to the bot while the computer was in custody, as with all software and virtual-based things, building an identical copy wouldn't have been too difficult.

As the legal process gathered momentum, it became clear that prosecutors were not interested in any of the other parts of the work apart from the ecstasy tablets, which were tested by the authorities and found to contain MDMA.



Now that the authorities have returned the work, but not the ecstasy which has presumably been destroyed, they've open a door for a softer legal touch when using artistic expression as a defence. Carmen and Domagoj explained what this precedent means for future works:

“In the order for withdrawal of prosecution the public prosecutor states that the possession of ecstasy was indeed a reasonable means for the purpose of sparking public debate about questions related to the exhibition. The public prosecution also asserts that the overriding interest in the questions raised by the artwork Random Darknet Shopper justifies the exhibition of the drugs as artefacts, even if the exhibition does hold a small risk of endangerment of third parties through the drugs exhibited.”

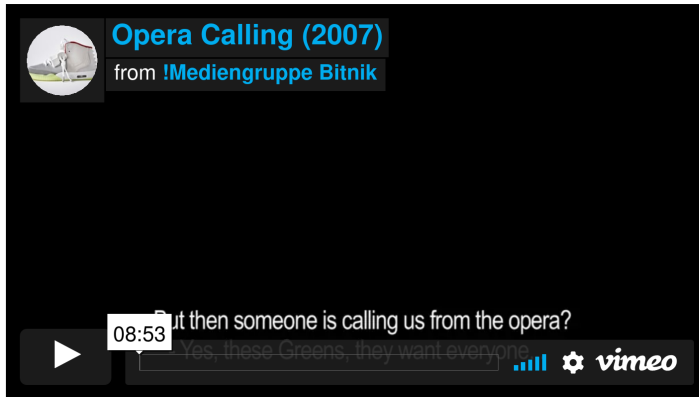
The collective's penchant for harnessing technology in order to raise awareness around digital rights, authorship and responsibility started out in the form of simple hacks using basic servers but has since evolved into using sophisticated algorithms and detailed networks.

“I guess in the first instance it was about experimenting with art online via networked digital media, but the practice became more and more focused” explained Carmen.

Hacking the city

All their work has one common theme; the use of everyday objects as a springboard for bigger ideas, so Zurich, the birthplace of Dadaism, is a natural home for the artists. Domagoj described their work as playing with formal aesthetics, in that they harness the bizarre in the everyday by using concepts as their primary material. “We're conceptual artists that like to put our concepts into practice, but we still regard the concept as our main starting point and the main bit of our pieces.”

In 2007, they hijacked Zürich Opera House by placing boxes inside the theatre which broadcasted the performance to listeners via a telephone connection. The idea was to make the experience more democratic by taking a form of exclusive high art and making it accessible. The gallery, where the performance was housed, then functioned as call centre, with the artists phoning up random telephone numbers asking if they wanted to be connected to the performance. Carmen described the technique as a “liberté canal”; an open channel where anyone can log in and access the stream.



[Opera Calling \(2007\)](#) from [!Mediengruppe Bitnik](#) on [Vimeo](#).

“The opera had to react, the gallery had to react, the audience is kind of involved even though they didn’t ask for it. It produces a friction where nobody knows where it’s heading.”

Since Opera Calling, members of the public have been requesting that the artists hack their cities. One anonymous fan even asked !Mediengruppe Bitnik if they could hack their local government office, by placing a liberté canal in the toilets in order to broadcast the real negotiations that happen behind closed cubicle doors.

But despite the strong relationship between hacking and activism, the artists are keen to keep out of politics by making sure the work doesn’t express any set objectives or messages. Instead they’re keen to ask questions rather than answer them.

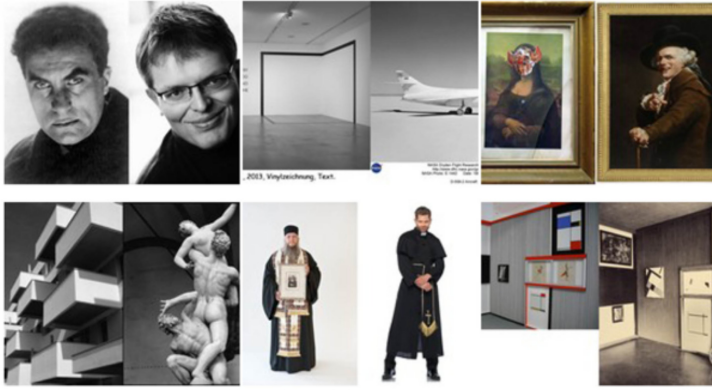
Their approach to hacking comes from open-source ideology; creating quick and dirty solutions to problems by taking bits of open source code and adapting it accordingly. But they don’t use hacks to solve problems; instead they use them to understand cultural systems.

“Like a computer system where you can see, OK these are the players; this is input this is output, what happens at this point if we interfere here or start to manipulate this point, what does that do the output?”

“Today you can hack everything, you can even hack your food.”

Despite their arty-artificial intelligence emerging unscathed from a close shave with the law, it hasn’t stopped Carmen and Domagoj from creating new annoyances for the authorities. At the moment, if you visit the [Cabaret Voltaire gallery’s website](#) you will be greeted with a series of random images, totally unrelated to rest of the site’s content, generated using their signature bots.

Entitled Same Same, the duo’s new program systematically replaces the galleries current images with algorithmically similar ones. Using Google Images’ search criteria and metadata to source images that share similar qualities with the pictures on the gallery’s site, the results can be quite hit or miss.



But the point of the piece isn't to highlight issues of ham-handed aesthetics and the internet. Carmen and Domagoj want to discuss intellectual copyright and who owns what in the age of online.

"The algorithm doesn't care about intellectual copyright. They just go and collect. They don't ask who owns them or not – they just do it. Google does it. NSA does it. GCHQ does it."

As the bot trawls through our personal uploads, extracting whatever pictures it feels fits the brief, Carmen and Domagoj's latest creation asks why big companies are allowed to coldly rummage through our personal data just because they have the capacity to do so. !Mediengruppe Bitnik's work sits within the parameters of the law, skirting between playful creations and caustic technology.

Their constructions will continue to use art as a vehicle for sparking debate, with the occasional political high jinks thrown in for good measure.

[Mediengruppe Bitnik](#) [ecstasy](#) [art](#) [algorithms](#) [dark net](#)
[Art & Design](#)



Caroline Christie

Caroline is the section editor of Art & Design at Little Atoms. She has written for The Guardian, Vice and Dazed & Confused.
[@carolinechristi](#)

Random Darknet Shopper

Polizei beschlagnahmt Ecstasy aus Internet-Kunstprojekt

Eine Künstlergruppe hat ein Computerprogramm wahllos auf einem Online-Schwarzmarkt einkaufen lassen. Für die Schweizer Polizei endet die künstlerische Freiheit bei illegalen Drogen.

20.04.2015, 17:09 Uhr



Die Ecstasy-Pillen kamen in einer DVD-Hülle: Nun hat sie die Polizei vernichtet Foto: !Mediengruppe Bitnik

Die zehn Ecstasy-Pillen behält die Schweizer Polizei. Alle anderen Waren, die ein Roboter auf dem illegalen Online-Schwarzmarkt Agora gekauft hat, sind allerdings mittlerweile zurück in den Händen der Künstler der "Mediengruppe Bitnik".

Im Januar hatten die Künstler den sogenannten [Random Darknet Shopper](#)  jede Woche 100 Dollar in Bitcoin im Deep Web verpassen lassen. Das Computerprogramm kaufte per Zufall alle möglichen Dinge, die dort angeboten werden. Zwischen Ecstasy-Pillen und zollfreien Zigaretten landete zum Beispiel auch der Generalschlüssel der britischen Feuerwehr im digitalen Einkaufswagen - und somit in der Post des Schweizer Künstlergruppe.

Die Einkäufe hatten die Künstler als Installation in der Kunsthalle St. Gallen ausgestellt - die ganze Aktion war juristisch abgesichert und mit dem Gutachten eines Kunstrechtsexperten versehen. Das öffentliche Interesse rechtfertigt die zeitlich befristete künstlerische Aktion, hieß es.

Am Tag nach der Finissage aber [beschlagnahmte und versiegelte die Kantonspolizei St. Gallen](#) die "gesamte Warenausbeute" des Darknet-Bots. Dabei schien es den Polizisten in erster Linie um die Pillen zu gehen, die sie erst untersuchten und nach einem positiven Drogentest vernichteten. Die Staatsanwaltschaft St. Gallen wollte, "dass sich da keiner so einfach bedienen kann".

"Ein guter Tag für den Bot, für uns und die Kunstfreiheit"

Drei Monate später hat die Polizei die Gegenstände nun wieder zurückgegeben und eine Anzeige gegen Unbekannt fallen gelassen.



Die "!Mediengruppe Bitnik" verurteilt in [einer Stellungnahme](#) die Einschränkung der Kunstfreiheit: "Wir sind überzeugt, dass es eine Aufgabe der Kunst ist, Ränder auszuleuchten und zeitgenössische, gesellschaftliche Fragen zu thematisieren."

Die Idee zu dem Projekt stammt von Domagoj Smoljo und Carmen Weisskopf, den Gründern von Bitnik. Sie hatten das Computerprogramm geschrieben, das insgesamt zwölfmal im Netz einkaufen war.

Den guten Ausgang der Verhandlungen [kommentiert die Künstlergruppe so:](#) "Wir und der Randon Darknet Shopper sind von allen Vorwürfen freigesprochen. Das ist ein guter Tag für den Bot, für uns und für die Kunstfreiheit!" **S**

kbl

A Robot That Bought Drugs Online Is Now Free From Police Custody

John Biggs @johnbiggs / 1:27 PM GMT+2 • April 20, 2015

Comment



If that headline doesn't make much sense, welcome to the 21st century when a program designed to automatically buy random items from illegal marketplaces can be arrested by Swiss police. As you'll recall, [Swiss police seized a program](#) called [Darknet Shopper](#), a bot that visited darknet markets and bought random items with [bitcoin](#). Most of the items were mundane – counterfeit goods and the like – but the robot also ordered some ecstasy.

“On the morning of January 12, the day after the three-month exhibition was closed, the public prosecutor's office of St. Gallen seized and sealed our work,” wrote the creators, [Mediengruppe Bitnik](#), in January. “It seems, the purpose of the confiscation is to impede an endangerment of third parties through the drugs exhibited by destroying them. This is what we know at present. We believe that the confiscation is an unjustified intervention into freedom of art.”

Thanks to some forward-thinking judges, however, the robot is now free to buy again. According to a blog post, the police have [released the bot after destroying the ecstasy it purchased](#). They did not, however, destroy the sweet counterfeit Nikes the robot bought. A judge in Switzerland also noted that displaying contraband as an art project is just fine and that the bot was well within legality.

The group wrote:

“At the same time we also received the order for withdrawal of prosecution. In the order for withdrawal of prosecution the public prosecutor states that the possession of Ecstasy was indeed a reasonable means for the purpose of sparking public debate about questions related to the exhibition. The public prosecution also asserts that the overwhelming interest in the questions raised by the art work «Random Darknet Shopper» justify the exhibition of the drugs as artefacts, even if the exhibition does hold a small risk of endangerment of third parties through the drugs exhibited.

“We as well as the Random Darknet Shopper have been cleared of all charges. This is a great day for the bot, for us and for freedom of art!” said the creators.

[via Coinbase](#)

Now that's a cyber criminal! Robot is ARRESTED by police for buying ecstasy on the dark net

- Random Darknet Shopper is a computer bot that randomly purchases an item every week from a hidden part of the internet called the dark net
- Swiss police seized bot after it purchased 10 ecstasy tablets from Germany
- It was later released 'without charge' according to the artists behind the bot
- They designed it as part of an art exhibition to display items bought by the robot over the dark net including trainers, a passport scan and cigarettes

By [RICHARD GRAY FOR MAILONLINE](#)

PUBLISHED: 16:23 BST, 20 April 2015 | **UPDATED:** 17:09 BST, 20 April 2015

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A robot has been 'arrested' by Swiss police after it bought a supply of illegal drugs on a hidden region of the internet known as the 'dark net'.

The automated computer program was designed as an online shopping system that would spend up to \$100 each week by randomly purchasing an item offered for sale on the deep web.

The robot would then have its purchase mailed to a group of artists who then put the items in an exhibition in the town of St Gallen, in north east Switzerland.



The Random Darknet Shopper purchased a number of items for sale on the deep web (pictured) including trainers, jeans, cigarettes, a set of masterkeys and a DVD case (far left) containing 10 ecstasy tablets

The items it bought included a pair of Nike trainers, counterfeit designer jeans, the scan of a Hungarian passport and a set of UK Fire Brigade masterkeys.

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However, it seems the Random Darknet Shopper crossed the line when it purchased 10 Ecstasy tablets, which arrived in a vacuum packed bag hidden in a DVD case.

Police seized the drugs, the computer and the rest of the items it had purchased.

Tests on the tablets later revealed they contained 90mg of the class-A drug MDMA, which the police then destroyed.

The computer and the empty bag the ecstasy came in have now been returned to the group behind the bot, !Mediengruppe Bitnik, along with the other items it bought.

They described the police's actions as an 'unjustified intervention into the freedom of art'.

Writing on [their blog](#), London based artists Carmen Weisskopf and Domagoj Smoljo, who were behind the project, said: 'Random Darknet Shopper has finally been released and is now back in our possession.

'At the same time we also received the order for withdrawal of prosecution.

'In the order for withdrawal of prosecution the public prosecutor states that the possession of Ecstasy was indeed a reasonable means for the purpose of sparking public debate about questions related to the exhibition.

'The public prosecution also asserts that the overweighing interest in the questions raised by the art work Random Darknet Shopper justify the exhibition of the drugs as artefacts, even if the exhibition does hold a small risk of endangerment of third parties through the drugs exhibited.

'We as well as the Random Darknet Shopper have been cleared of all charges. This is a great day for the bot, for us and for freedom of art!'

The Random Darknet Shopper project was set up as an attempt to highlight some of the dilemmas that can be thrown up by dark net markets and anonymous internet use.

It used Bitcoin to randomly purchase items that were offered for sale in the darknet.

They were delivered to the artists by mail and then put on display in an exhibition at the Kunst Halle in St Gallen.

During the weeks it had been running it also purchased a fake Louis Vuitton handbag, a baseball cap with a hidden camera and 200 Chesterfield cigarettes.

The darknet market features more than 16,000 items that are sold in a way that allows the seller to remain anonymous.

It has become notorious as a place to buy illegal pornography, drugs and weapons.

WHAT IS THE DARK NET?

The dark net is a subsection of the deep web - the part of the internet that does not show up in searches or on social media.

Most of the information on the web is far down on dynamically generated sites, unable to be found or seen by traditional search engines, which are rather like dragging a net across the surface of the sea, missing much of the information in the depths.

The dark net is used as a way of sharing information and trading goods, but the anonymous and encrypted nature of it has attracted large amounts of illegal activity.

The Silk Road website and its successor that were recently shut down was used to sell drugs in exchange for bitcoins, the electronic currency.

Other dark net sites allow users to share pornographic photographs, hacked information, credit card numbers and other illegal goods.

The Silk Road used an underground computer network known as the The Onion Router (TOR), which is a matrix of encrypted websites and servers that disguise the identity of users.

It uses numerous layers of security and encryption, hiding the IP address and the activity of the user.

Just 0.26 per cent of the daily internet traffic from the UK accesses this hidden part of the internet.

The robot software bought the ecstasy in October. It was sent from Germany to Switzerland and apparently crossed the border hidden in a DVD case without being intercepted by the authorities.

The drugs were allowed to remain on show in the exhibition until it ended in January.

However, the police raided the exhibition when it came to an end and seized the computer and its purchases on the grounds the drugs were an endangerment of third parties.

Speaking to the Guardian, Mr Smoljo said that they had been told although the computer had purchased the drugs itself, they were the legal owners of the drugs as they had executed the code behind the software.

The case has raised important questions about the use of automatic shopping bots and the use of the darknet.

In the past the artists have used technology to intercept CCTV images and sent a package to Wikileaks founder Julian Assange.

Mr Smoljo and Miss Weisskopf said: 'The Random Darknet Shopper is a live Mail Art piece, an exploration of the deep web via the goods traded there.'

Read more:

[!Mediengruppe Bitnik | Random Darknet Shopper](#)



TECH | MOBILE | SOCIAL MEDIA | ENTERPRISE | CYBERSECURITY | TECH GUIDE

TECH TRANSFORMERS

Robot with \$100 bitcoin buys drugs, gets arrested

PUBLISHED TUE, APR 21 2015 6:32 AM EDT | UPDATED WED, APR 22 2015 5:09 AM EDT

Arjun Kharpal
@ARJUNKHARPALSHARE [f](#) [t](#) [in](#) [✉](#)

This is the curious story of how a robot armed with a weekly budget of \$100 in [bitcoin](#) managed to buy Ecstasy, a Hungarian passport and a baseball cap with a built-in camera—before getting arrested. ([Tweet this](#))

The “automated online shopping bot” was set up in October last year by Swiss art group, !Mediengruppe Bitnik, as an art installation to explore the “[dark web](#)”—the hidden, un-indexed part of the Internet.

Each week, the robot was given \$100 worth of Bitcoin—the major hard-to-trace cryptocurrency—and programmed to randomly purchase one item from Agora, an online marketplace on the dark web where shoppers can buy drugs and other illegal items. The items were automatically delivered to a Swiss art gallery called Kunst Halle St Gallen to form an exhibition.

The robot was christened “Random Darknet Shopper” and its purchases included a Hungarian passport, Ecstasy pills, fake Diesel jeans, a Sprite can with a hole cut out in order to stash cash, Nike trainers, a baseball cap with a hidden camera, cigarettes and the “Lord of the Rings” e-book collection.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the robot and his artistic creators had a run in with the law. In January 2015, the Swiss police confiscated the robot and its illegal purchases.

However, three months later, the Random Darknet Shopper was returned to the artists, along with all its purchases except the Ecstasy (also known as MDMA) tablets, which were destroyed by the Swiss authorities.



!MEDIENGRUPPE BITNIK

The artists behind the robot escaped without any charges.

“This is a great day for the 'bot, for us and for freedom of art!” !Mediengruppe Bitnik said in a blog post last week. “In the order for withdrawal of prosecution, the public prosecutor states that the possession of Ecstasy was indeed a reasonable means for the purpose of sparking public debate about questions related to the exhibition.”

Read More [Google, governments team up to fight paedophiles](#)

The Swiss authorities confirmed that the artists and the robot would not be charged.

“We decided the Ecstasy that is in this presentation was safe and nobody could take it away. Bitnik never intended to sell it or consume it so we didn't punish them,” Thomas Hansjakob, a spokesperson for the Swiss St Gallen police, told CNBC on Tuesday.

He added that the artists had not informed the police before undertaking this project and that the authorities had heard about it from the media.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik said that all the items except the Ecstasy had been returned to them.

Home > Security news

A Robot called “Random Darknet Shopper”, who was arrested for buying drugs online has been released by authorities

By Maya Kamath - April 21, 2015

A Robot that bought MDMA / Ecstasy on line has been finally released from police custody.

Finally, a Robot who was arrested for purchasing drugs online has been released by the Swiss police. We will have to take our memory three months down the lane to understand this bot's arrest. The London based Swiss artists !Mediengruppe Bitnik group created a robot “Random Darknet Shopper” and it used to randomly purchase items online from the illegal markets using bitcoin and deliver the items to the new exhibition: “[The Darknet: From Memes to Onionland](#)” located at The Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, Switzerland.

As per the instructions given by Carment Weisskopf and Domagoj Smoljo, the creators, the bot used to spend \$100 per week to buy items from the darknet markets which enlists over 16,000 items for purchase, however not all of these items are illegal. The bot purchased a Hungarian passport, a baseball cap fixed with hidden camera, fake diesel jeans, a stash can, 200 Chesterfield cigarettes and 10 yellow pills containing 90 mg of drug MDMA each.

As per the creators: “On the morning of January 12, the day after the three-month exhibition was closed, the public prosecutor's office of St. Gallen seized and sealed our work. It seems, the purpose of the confiscation is to impede an endangerment of third parties through the drugs exhibited by destroying them. This is what we know at present. We believe that the confiscation is an unjustified intervention into freedom of art.”

Swiss police confiscated the robot and all the exhibition items, however the artists were left free without any charges against them.

After a long interval of three months the robot has been released from the police custody. The creators mentioned in their website that : “This is a great day for the bot, for us and for freedom of art.” Though police has confiscated the ecstasy and destroyed it; however other items purchased by the robot has been deemed legitimate. Once again the robot is free for online purchases.

Further, a judge also declared that to display contraband as an art project is accepted and that the robot was within legality. Police has withdrawn any further action against the artists. The contended creators said: “At the same time we also received the order for withdrawal of prosecution. In the order for withdrawal of prosecution the public prosecutor states that the possession of Ecstasy was indeed a reasonable means for the purpose of sparking public debate about questions related to the exhibition. The public prosecution also asserts that the over weighing interest in the questions raised by the art work ‘Random Darknet Shopper’ justify the exhibition of the drugs as artifacts, even if the exhibition does hold a small risk of endangerment of third parties through the drugs exhibited.”

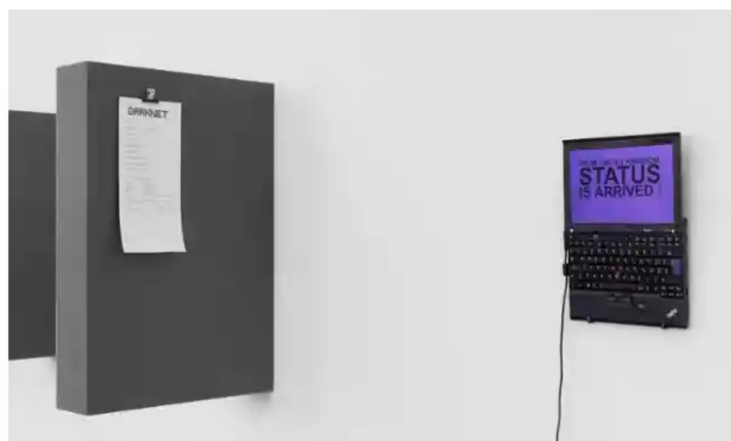
This really seems to be a great day for the artists as well as the robot as it seems art has finally won; however, will this give a chance to people to order the drugs under the name of art, is something which only time will let us know.

Switzerland

This article is more than 6 years old

Swiss police release robot that bought ecstasy online

The robot - which goes by the name Random Darknet Shopper - was part of an art installation meant to explore the dark web



The robot and all of the purchases it made online were returned to !Mediengruppe Bitnik, the art group that designed Random Darknet Shopper. Photograph: !mediengruppebitnik

If your robot buys ecstasy, are you responsible? That is exactly what Mike Power wondered when he reviewed the Swiss exhibition [The Darknet: From Memes to Onionland for the Guardian](#) in December.

The answer: not if it's in the name of art, at least according to a police department in St Gallen, [Switzerland](#).

The police department confirmed on Tuesday it has now released the robot they arrested - er, confiscated - in January after it bought 10 ecstasy pills on the internet as part of an art installation meant to explore the deep web.

The robot and all of the purchases it made online - including a pair of fake Diesel jeans, a baseball cap with a hidden camera, a stash can, a pair of Nike trainers, 200 Chesterfield cigarettes, a set of fire brigade-issued master keys, a fake Louis Vuitton handbag and a [Lord of the Rings e-book collection](#) - were returned to !Mediengruppe Bitnik, the art group that designed the robot, with the exception of the ecstasy pills, which were [destroyed by the police](#).

The robot, which goes by the name Random Darknet Shopper, is "an automated online shopping bot which we provide with a budget of \$100 in Bitcoins per week", !Mediengruppe Bitnik [explain on their website](#). "Once a week the bot goes on a shopping spree in the deep web where it randomly chooses and purchases one item and has it mailed to us." The installation ended the day before the robot was apprehended.

The bot and the artists will not be charged.

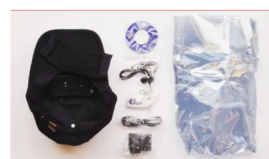
According to a [recent post on !Mediengruppe Bitnik's blog](#), the prosecutors deemed the possession of ecstasy "a reasonable means for the purpose of sparking public debate about questions related to the exhibition".

Jana Kasperkevic in New York

@kasperka

Wed 22 Apr 2015 17:16 BST

Facebook, Twitter, Email icons and 25 comments



What happens when a software bot goes on a darknet shopping spree?

Read more



Happy shoppers: the art collective buying ecstasy on the deep web

Read more



▲ Packaging for the ecstasy ordered by Random Darknet Shopper. Photograph: PR

“We decided the ecstasy that is in this presentation was safe and nobody could take it away. Bitnik never intended to sell it or consume it so we didn’t punish them,” Thomas Hansjakob, a spokesman for the Swiss St Gallen police, [told CNBC on Tuesday](#).

“We as well as the Random Darknet Shopper have been cleared of all charges. This is a great day for the bot, for us and for freedom of art!” [said the art group](#).

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Random Darknet Shopper: Anzeige wurde fallen gelassen

22.04.2015 um 22:46 Uhr - Kathrin Maurer - in - keine Ergänzungen

Der [Random Darknet Shopper](#), ein Bot-Projekt des Künstlerkollektivs [!Mediengruppe Bitnik](#), muss keine juristischen Probleme mehr fürchten. Beim Projekt handelt es sich um einen Bot, der pro Woche mit 100 Dollar in Bitcoin bestückt wurde und wahllos Dinge im Darknet bestellt hat, die anschließend ausgestellt wurden. Die Staatsanwaltschaft hatte im Januar einen Tag nach Ausstellungsende alle Objekte [beschlagnahmt](#), denn unter den vom Random Darknet Shopper bestellten Gegenständen befand sich auch Ecstasy. Nach erfolgter Pillenvernichtung wurden alle übrigen Objekte (z. B. Schuhe und ein Pass) an das Künstlerkollektiv zurückgegeben.

Weitere Details finden sich in einem Bericht des [Guardian](#). Auf der Homepage des Künstlerkollektivs findet sich außerdem die interessante Begründung, weswegen die Anklage (immerhin ging es um Drogenbesitz) schließlich [fallen gelassen](#) wurde: Die durch den Random Darknet Shopper aufgeworfenen Fragen seien von überwiegendem öffentlichen Interesse, das die Ausstellung der erworbenen Drogen gerechtfertigt habe. Die Gruppe selbst sagt dazu:

„ We as well as the Random Darknet Shopper have been cleared of all charges. This is a great day for the bot, for us and for freedom of art!

Auf der kommenden [re:publica](#) wird die [!Mediengruppe Bitnik über dieses](#) und andere Projekte reden (6. Mai, [20 Uhr, Bühne 1](#)).

DU MÖCHTEST MEHR KRITISCHE BERICHTERSTATTUNG?

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EDITORIAL: Internet robot Random Darknet Shopper arrested for selling drugs

Even if you're made of bits and bolts, selling drugs is not a good idea



By THE WASHINGTON TIMES - Sunday, April 26, 2015

ANALYSIS/OPINION:

Sometimes the news sounds like science fiction by Ray Bradbury. We've been asked by a high government official, lately in charge of the State Department, to believe that certain of her emails reside in a black hole in cyberspace. Two scientists – computer geeks, anyway – are working on a computer program to bring a dead man back as a virtual live man for a virtual conversation.

And now for something entirely real: A robot has been arrested for selling drugs. A robot. A moving conglomeration of bits and bolts, conceived and fashioned by flesh and blood men. The good news for the robot (and his handlers) is that it (he? she?) has been "released" from custody. The terms of release, whether on probation or in house arrest, was not made public, though perhaps it was to other robots.

At the time of the crime last winter, "Random Darknet Shopper," the robot's actual name, had a \$100 weekly budget, in bitcoin, that enabled it to purchase a hit of Ecstasy, a Hungarian passport and a baseball cap. The Swiss art group, !Mediengruppe Bitnik, set up the "automated online shopping bot" to explore the "dark web" – a part of the Internet that is said to be hidden and hard to trace. It cannot be found through the usual Internet search engines.

The robot's cyber adventure naturally brings to mind Hillary Clinton's missing emails, and the Clinton not-so-magnificent obsession with money. Random Darknet Shopper deals only in bitcoin, a currency of wobbly reputation, like a wooden nickel.

Every week, with a new allowance of bitcoins, Random Darknet Shopper went on random shopping sprees. Although Swiss police were able to "arrest" the robot – primarily for the Ecstasy – Nike trainers, cigarettes and other illegal items were part of the stash, purchased from Agora, the dark web's online purchasing marketplace and delivered to a Swiss art gallery in St. Gallen where it was supposed to be part of an exhibit called "The Darknet: From Memes to Onionland."

Then the law backed down. "In the order for withdrawal of prosecution, the public prosecutor states that the possession of Ecstasy was indeed a reasonable means for the purpose of sparking public debate about questions related to the exhibition."

Thomas Hansjakob, a spokesman for the Swiss St. Gallen police, told CNBC, "We decided the Ecstasy that is in this presentation was safe and nobody could take it away. Bitnik never intended to sell it or consume it so we didn't punish them."

Random Darknet Shopper's handlers describe the original seizure of the robot as "unjustified intervention into the freedom of art." Carmen Weisskopf and Domagoj Smoljo, two artists, celebrated its release. "We as well as the Random Darknet Shopper have been cleared of all charges. !Mediengruppe Bitnik said in a fit of excited bloggery, "This is a great day for the 'bot, for us and for freedom of art!" And, apparently, for exclamation points.

Mr. Smoljo told the Guardian newspaper that they were advised that although the computer had purchased the drugs itself, they were the legal owners of the drugs as they had executed the code behind the software.

If the case raises questions about automatic shopping robots, the darknet and the state of untraceable cyber transactions, it also illustrates how a society more in control of its Internet use and its currency might behave better. According to CNET, a tech site that describes itself as "the world's leader in tech product reviews, news, prices, videos, forums, how-tos and more," Random Darknet Shopper was "a mystery shopper – a true mystery shopper."

But mysteries rarely remain mysteries forever. We suggest sending all errant robots to the woodshed and paying closer attention to what their human prototypes are up to, too.

ART

Drug-buying bot vindicated, criminal case dropped



The Random Darknet Shopper art project is no longer under investigation, but the MDMA it bought on Agora was destroyed.



"It was an art piece. You should be able to do things within the field of art that you can't elsewhere," Domagoj Smoljo of the art collective [!Mediengruppe Bitnik](#) told Hopes&Fears, just minutes ago over Skype. We'd just learned that Bitnik's MDMA-purchasing bot had been vindicated. "This is a great day for the bot, for us and for freedom of art!" they wrote on [their site](#).



Marina Galperina
Author

Flashback to November of last year, when [!Mediengruppe Bitnik](#) (Carmen Weisskopf, Domagoj Smoljo) [created an automated "bot"](#) designed to randomly purchase goods on a "deep web" marketplace. With a weekly budget of \$100 (in bitcoin), the "[Random Darknet Shopper](#)" crawled through 16,000 items on Agora and indiscriminately purchased goods of various degrees of illicitness -- [10-packs of Chesterfield Blue cigarettes](#) from Moldavia, [a Sprite stash can](#), [a Hungarian passport scan](#), [a spy-gear baseball cap](#), "[Nike air yeezy II](#)" via China and, most problematically, [a "snapback 120mg MDMA"](#) (10 "beautiful yellow round pills with the Twitter logo"), vacuum sealed and tucked inside a DVD case.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik Art collective

Carmen Weisskopf and Domagoj Smoljo are [!Mediengruppe Bitnik](#) (read - the not mediengruppe bitnik). They live and work in Zurich/London. They are contemporary artists working on and with the Internet. Their practice expands from the digital to affect physical spaces, often intentionally applying loss of control to challenge established structures and mechanisms. !Mediengruppe Bitniks works formulate fundamental questions concerning contemporary issues.



All this loot was shipped to the Kunst Halle St. Gallen Gallery in St. Gallen, Switzerland for "[The Darknet - From Memes to Onionland. An Exploration](#)" as part of a group show exploring the outer fringes of the internet. The software's story went world wide, with some [utterly panicking](#) about the ethical implications of this "robot" that had seemed to commit a crime and apparently could not be punished. And then, the bot was arrested. Or rather, the Swiss authorities waited until the day after the exhibition closed, when prosecutors arrived to the gallery and [seized the hardware running the bot](#), as well as [all the artifacts it had collected](#) and subpoenaed the artists.

↑ "Ecstasy 10x yellow Twitter 120mg mdma" as it arrived to the gallery via Agora

Image courtesy !Mediengruppe Bitnik

The MDMA pills were, in fact, real, according to the forensic report by the Swiss authorities. Three months after being confiscated, all items in the art installation were returned to the artists, except for the MDMA, which was removed from its packaging and destroyed. The criminal investigation for the possession of MDMA was dropped, and the artists received an order for withdrawal of prosecution, along with their returned bot, who still had some bitcoins left to spend.



"The prosecutor didn't want to play the card of art being involved," Domagoj Smoljo explained. In the end, legally, it was more important that this project wasn't harming anyone. If charged and found guilty, the possession of such small quantity of MDMA would not lead to a jail sentence in Switzerland, but there would still be a fine.

↑ Random Darknet Shopper installation view on the last day of "The Darknet – From Memes to Onionland. An Exploration"

Image courtesy !Mediengruppe Bitnik

The danger, as the scolding prosecutor explained, was whether the drugs were accessible to others, particularly children. But the artists managed to convince the court that the illicit substance was securely entombed in plexiglass, drilled into the wall and only someone with decided "criminal energy" would be able to get at them through an act of "art robbery." Their installation wasn't harming anyone.



The motive of the purchase played a key conceptual and legal role in the case. The MDMA wasn't purchased for the sake of purchasing MDMA, but for the sake of artistic inquiry (similar to appropriation of corporate logos for art, instead of infringement or false advertising). And it all happened in an experiment set up to observe a semi-autonomous creation going rogue inside a pre-existing, mysterious field of cyberspace. "We were using the function of having something random to get a true picture of reality, which is more accurate if we [consciously] decided to buy something," Smoljo explained. "We create a situation. We don't want to control it. We left that to a bot."

↑ "Random Darknet Shopper" hardware, installation and artifacts, as returned to the artists by the Swiss authorities (minus the MDMA which was destroyed)

Image courtesy !Mediengruppe Bitnik

In the end, the prosecutor "was happy to be part of it," Smoljo told us. "It's conceptual art which is process-based. Reality is part of it."

In what appears to be a landmark decision, the public prosecutor decided "that the possession of Ecstasy was indeed a reasonable means for the purpose of sparking public debate about questions related to the exhibition," according to the [artists' website](#). "The public prosecution also asserts that the over-weighing interest in the questions raised by the art work «Random Darknet Shopper» justify the exhibition of the drugs as artefacts, even if the exhibition does hold a small risk of endangerment of third parties through the drugs exhibited."

“
It's conceptual art
which is process-based.
Reality is part of it.”

When asked if this would have played out differently in other countries, Smoljo explained that the group put a lot of effort into legal research before launching the exhibit and would have done the same, had it taken place in the UK, US, or elsewhere. In fact, !Mediengruppe Bitnik is in discussions to bring a version of the Random Darknet Shopper installation to a major museum in the UK.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik

by Aude Launay



What the Internet can do to Art, and Vice versa, on the Face of it, anyway.

The conceptualization of time has been endlessly evolving over time. There is, indeed, a circular argument here, but it is also true that its history might easily be traced in the history of thought as well as in the history of the arts. While the time of man—intuitive, phenomenological—and the time of science—necessary, relative, and even non-existent—still co-exist, it would seem possible to say that the perception of them that prevails these days is the one that emerges from instantaneousness, whereas, in tandem, we have a perception of the world around us that is less and less direct and more and more mediated. So it is a temporal but not physical immediacy that is from now on best able to define our relation to the world. In fact, given the ten billion odd photos taken every month just by Americans—reaching the point where the idea of a Photo Free Day was even launched on 3 February last—, several issues are now being raised: What are people really looking at? Is taking a photo to be looked at later a way of seeing better or seeing less? Are we capable of looking at the world for a whole day just with our own eyes, without the help of a captivating illuminated rectangle on which to scroll, again and again? Are we capable of enjoying our meal without sharing what it looks like with our hundreds of social friends? Are we capable of swooning in front of our little doggie-woggie's touching gaze without instantly letting the whole planet in on the moment? Can we visit a museum without tweeting even a single selfie?

In 1994, Philippe Parreno was already wondering: "In the Mondrian show at the Museum of Modern Art, visitors desert the exhibition rooms and sit down in front of TV screens. They spend more time looking at the pictures reproduced on video than in front of the originals hanging on the wall. Why?"² According to him, this was a way for visitors to reassure themselves because "on the face of it, people do not know how long to look at a work of art". So it was quite practical for "the museum to manage the visitor's time".

The question of time in the work, of the time of the work, and of the time of art as "real" time was deliberately taken up and stated as such by artists in the 1960s, even though the matter of its representation runs through the 20th century from Muybridge's photographic decompositions and Duchamp's pictorial decompositions, as well as the Dada excursions of the 1920s, to Kaprow's first happening in 1959. Andy Warhol's *Sleep* in 1963, Opalka's first *Details* in 1965, and On Kawara's first *Date Paintings* in January 1966 just before Michel Parmentier's first serial date stamps, then, before long, the conversations about time organized by Ian Wilson and the video experiments of Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham, all erected the time of the clock, timed and rapped out, as nothing less than the subject of the work, aimed, in the same movement, at going beyond that notion of subject, and literally inserting art into the time of man.

"Real time is not a conceptual gadget: it introduces an above all political relation, the interaction governs relations to the world, and artists are more and more aware of this,"³ wrote Parreno again. Twenty years later, and even though he died seven months ago, On Kawara is still tweeting every day: I am still alive #art.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik, *Opera Calling*, 2007. Video still. Courtesy :
!Mediengruppe Bitnik

If you were living in Zurich in 2007 and if your apartment had a land line, you might well have received strange calls which let you hear the shows being put on at that very moment in the city's opera house. Sitting comfortably in your own home, at absolutely no charge, you could thus enjoy arias being sung by sopranos and baritones, at the top of their voices, who were passing through the city, which now houses the largest Google search centre outside the United States. Needless to add, when these events were broadcast on TV and radio, you enjoyed a better sound quality. But would you think of watching an opera on TV? With *Opera Calling 4*, the live broadcast goes straight into your ear, in a way that is completely unexpected and, above all, thoroughly fraudulent. The fact is that this household call service is not the outcome of a cultural democratization proposed by Zurich's city departments, but rather the work of a small group of local artists: !Mediengruppe Bitnik. With the help of bugs hidden in the Opera's auditorium and a computer serving as an interface between the microphones and citizens' telephone lines, they tried to share the relatively inaccessible spectacles put on in that generously subsidized cultural Mecca with as many people as possible. Those ninety-odd hours of "musical pirating" obviously gave rise to threats of court proceedings, which were in fact never taken up.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik, Delivery for Mr. Assange, 2007. Vue de l'intérieur du colis / Inside view of the package. Courtesy : !Mediengruppe Bitnik

!Mediengruppe Bitnik, Delivery for Mr. Assange, 2007. Inside view of the package. Courtesy : !Mediengruppe Bitnik

It is another type of "home delivery", pizzas, which gave them the idea for the project that has earned them worldwide fame: *Delivery for Mr. Assange*. When Julian Assange had just taken refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, and the eyes of the media were riveted on the neat and tidy façade of the brick building, conversations were brisk on 4chan and other forums guaranteeing user anonymity. All of a sudden, someone suggested that Assange must be hungry, and it would be a good idea to order him a pizza. A few minutes later, when scooters bearing Domino's Pizza boxes appeared at the embassy doors watched over not only by formal diplomatic guards but also by plenty of policemen, activists, journalists and curious bystanders, Carmen Weisskopf and Domagoj Smoljo, founder members of !Mediengruppe Bitnik, were struck by something quite obvious: this was where personal history meets the abstraction of geopolitics.⁵ Needless to add, this collision between triviality and the height of a diplomatic crisis that was at once sensational and societal, mixing private matters with international issues, was not a first, but it called to mind the shift to what might be described as "social postmodernity", i.e. the arrival of private life on the public stage, weighing in as never before on political affairs. The no-holds-barred publication of the Starr Report in 1998, during the Monicagate scandal, might have marked "the climax of a disastrous erosion of private life", to borrow the words of the philosopher Thomas Nagel,⁶ but that affair confirmed at the same time the new omnipotence of that weapon that everybody has: privacy. If it is once again this that is rocking the albeit ferociously well-oiled machine set up by the founder of Wikileaks, it is also the breach through which back-up can arrive. The delivery of those pizzas in a zone of diplomatic immunity, ordered by people not personally known to Julian Assange, physically symbolizes the possible and almost instant interaction that the web enables any connected person to have.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik, Delivery for Mr. Assange, 2007. Vue du bureau de poste depuis le colis / View of the post office from the package. Courtesy : !Mediengruppe Bitnik

Keeping tabs on an ordinary postal package can already be quite exciting—within the bounds of common sense, let us hasten to add. That renewed relation with what might have seemed beforehand to be the "postal mystery", that time lapse between the moment when you slipped the envelope into the mailbox and that other moment when you received confirmation that it had reached its destination, today offers the anxious consumers that we all are the relative possibility of being kept informed about the whereabouts of the object dispatched. Monitoring

!Mediengruppe Bitnik, Delivery for Mr. Assange, 2007. View of the post office from the package. Courtesy : !Mediengruppe Bitnik

packages has introduced into the digital network something which, it just so happens, is, on the face of it, the opposite: "material" mail. However, between the information gleaned two or three times at most during the day in question on the tracking site, and an ongoing follow-up which is presented in *Delivery for Mr. Assange*, there lies all the difference which gives the project its piquancy: the exploration of the postal system. In addition to the impression of being able to put yourself in the place of the package object for those few hours of its journey, the viewer/follower has access to a time-frame which seems to differ from the one in which he seems to be plunged. The video is an image-by-image assemblage punctuated by the documentary tweets which go hand-in-hand with each one of them, creating a breakup of the usual continuity of time that we are inclined to perceive. Real time, here, is at once effective and staged.

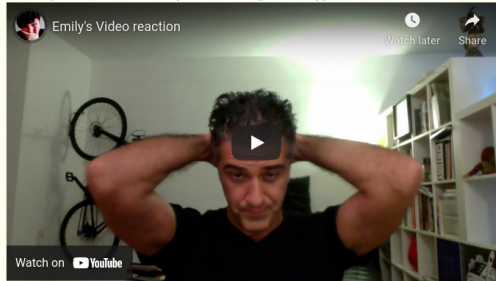


After 30 hours when not a lot happens—as far as the images are concerned—, summed up in seven and a half minutes in the video, the happy outcome brings out sharp fangs, a few words written with a felt-tip pen on blank cards, various images, and then, last of all, two hands emerging from the khaki hoodie offering silent claims, again written on the set of blank cards: *Free Bradley Manning, Free Nabeel Rajab, Free Anakata... Justice for Aaron Swartz, Transparency for the State! Privacy for the rest of us!*

!Mediengruppe Bitnik, Delivery for Mr. Assange, 2014. Vue d'exposition / exhibition view Helmhäus Zurich. Courtesy : !Mediengruppe Bitnik

Who would have thought that a Twitter feed could be so addictive and, when all is said and done, so moving?

Even though the emotion stirred up by the images may not, at first glance, seem like one of the motifs of !Mediengruppe Bitnik's work, it nevertheless also seems to be the subject of one of the key pieces in the exhibition which the small collective has jointly organized with Giovanni Carmine, director of the Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen: "The Darknet - From Memes to Onionland. An Exploration". The piece in question, *Emily's Video* (2012), is a video by Eva and Franco Mattes presented on a vertical monitor casually propped against a post in the Kunst Halle's last room. Produced following an announcement posted on the Internet which offered anyone so wishing a chance to watch "the worst video ever seen", *Emily's Video* starts out like a classic tutorial: a series of people in front of their webcams sit down in front of the screen, saying "I'm about to watch Emily's Video". Some of them boast and brag while others seem a little worried, but, in no time at all, the faces they pull convey the disgust and embarrassment of these viewers, even though they are volunteers. In the end, while some laugh out loud, there are others who look away, hide their eyes, stop the film, start sobbing, and leave the room. Here the New York twosome proposes one of the most trying videos there may be, but without showing anything other than faces of people sitting in front of a camera. Here again, the effect of real time is arresting, bolstered by the fact that we know that we are watching a video which lasts roughly as long as the one watched by the protagonists who are on the other side of the screen. The viewing time for videos on YouTube or any other site hosting film is measured in suspended time, a time of absorption in the medium, in the flow of images, in the zapping which it prompts people to do, but, in many cases, the voyeurism which it introduces—via the propagation of personal videos filmed by webcam for the most part—tends to give it an appearance of "real time".



The images of the video which we shall not see and which is said to have been destroyed after the project, all came from the Darknet, that Internet double supposedly 75% larger than the network which people use every day, with its contents not indexed by search engines and on which !Mediengruppe Bitnik has submitted a computer programme, created for the occasion of the exhibition of the same name—going shopping. This *Random Darknet Shopper* was loaded each and every week that the exhibition lasted with a budget equivalent to \$100 in bitcoins, the aim being to make haphazard purchases on Agora, a black market platform which, if we may so put it, is the equivalent of eBay on the Darknet. Its purchases were then sent straight to the Kunst Halle, and subsequently put in individual display cases. Among its acquisitions were: a scan of a Hungarian passport, an all-purpose kit belonging to London's firemen, and some MDMA—ecstasy—hailing from Germany... This latter was not to the liking of the Swiss police, who seized the *Random Darknet Shopper* on 12 January last, the day after the last day of the show.

The time of the exhibition became muddled here with the lifetime of the piece, which, incidentally, presented a live tracking of the shopper's to-ings and fro-ings on a computer affixed to the wall alongside display cases which were gradually filled, but this simple relation, which was supposed to end with the exhibition, was extended beyond the time earmarked for it as a result of the legal confiscation. The time of the work that was indexed to real time is henceforth dependent on it.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik, *Random Darknet Shopper*, 2014/2015.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik, *Random Darknet Shopper*, 2014/2015.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik, *Random Darknet Shopper*, 2014/2015. Vue de l'exposition / Installation view, « The Darknet », Kunst Halle St. Gallen. Photo : Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, Gunnar Meier.

If what is involved, for the time being, is just the time of the works referred to here, we should nevertheless not cover up the juxtaposition of spaces that they produce. Be it a matter of the Internet, that space that is at once "parallel" to the physical space we live in but which, at the same time, has an influence on it and which it is accordingly harder and harder to describe as "virtual", because of the daily interferences that it has with it, or, in a more prosaic way, of two physical spaces as distant as Zurich citizens' apartments and the city's opera house, or the public place under surveillance by cameras and the space of the person in charge of the surveillance, the works of !Mediengruppe Bitnik usually operate in this type of comparison: from the "drifts" that they propose in cities to the searching of surveillance cameras placed in the public place (*CCTV - A Trail of Images*, 2008) to *Militärstrasse 105* (2009), for which they capture the images of the surveillance cameras of a police station close to the exhibition venue and re-transmit them directly to it, or when, for *Surveillance Chess* (2012), they hack the images of a London Tube station, proposing a game of chess to the security guards. Unlike the other pieces, this one is, above all, intended for a single person, the

!Mediengruppe Bitnik, *Random Darknet Shopper*, 2014/2015. « The Darknet », Kunst Halle St. Gallen. Photo : Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, Gunnar Meier.

agent behind the control screen. In trying to re-establish the balance between observer and observed, *Surveillance Chess* temporarily transforms the surveillance system into a communication tool.

Once there is juxtaposition of distinct spaces, there are connecting interstices which are very often flaws. Underscoring those which exist in the legislation⁹, or re-opening existing discussions, like the one about copyright with *Opera Calling and Download Finished* (2006), a software package for processing films which made the link between the notion of found object and films shared peer-to-peer, !Mediengruppe Bitnik particularly singles out the fact that technology is always a step or two ahead of legislation and that this step ahead, which can also be defined as a legal void, is a search time that is as fertile as it is potentially dangerous. #FreeRandomDarknetShopper.

AI: THE ULTIMATE GUIDE | ROBOT

'My robot bought illegal drugs'



(Image credit: iStock)

By **Rose Eveleth** 21st July 2015

As algorithms and robots start moving around in our world, who is responsible for their actions? Rose Eveleth reports

AI: THE ULTIMATE GUIDE

In October of last year, an algorithm started to go shopping. It got \$100 in bitcoins every Wednesday, and set about perusing the wares on the Agora Market, eventually selecting one at random. That object was then paid for and shipped to Switzerland, to the studio of !Mediengruppe Bitnik. There, artists Domagoj Smoljo and Carmen Weisskopf would open up the packages, and place their contents and wrappings into small troughs, for people to peruse.

The algorithm purchased twelve items – everything from a pair of Air Jordan shoes to ten ecstasy pills

The algorithm, named the Random Darknet Shopper, purchased 12 items – everything from a pair of Air Jordan shoes to a scan of a Hungarian passport, to 10 ecstasy pills. And it was all running smoothly until January. The day after they took down the exhibition showcasing the items their bot had bought, the Swiss police “arrested” the robot, seized the computer, and confiscated the items it had purchased. “It seems, the purpose of the confiscation is to impede an endangerment of third parties through the drugs exhibited, by destroying them,” someone from !Mediengruppe Bitnik wrote on their blog.

In April, however, the bot was released along with everything it had purchased, except the ecstasy, and the artists were cleared of any wrongdoing. But the arrest had many wondering just where the line gets drawn between human and computer culpability.



Should a robot buying pills online be subject to the same laws as a human drug dealer? (Credit: iStock)

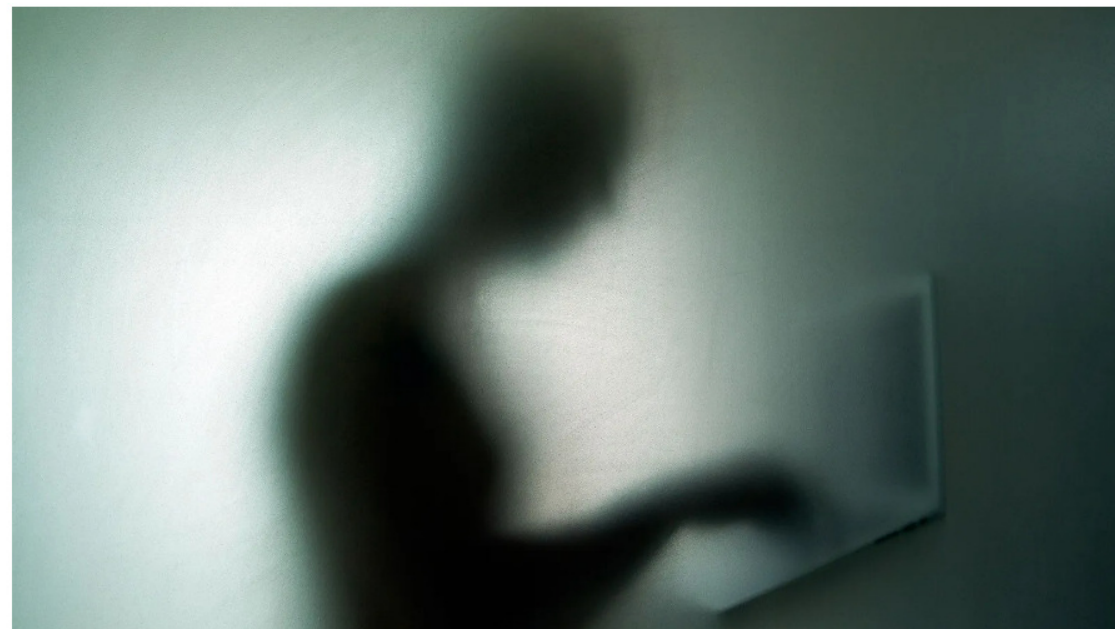
This isn't the first random shopper algorithm out there – people have been playing with these kinds of bots for a while now. But most people who build these bots stay on well-known sites like Amazon or eBay. Weisskopf says they wanted to dip into the darknet for a couple of reasons. “We see the internet as a very important part of our artistic practice – we work with and on the internet.” But the team has also become interested in the ways in which the internet is used by governments and subject to constant surveillance. They point to the Snowden revelations as a major turning point in their work.

In response, Weisskopf and Smoljo decided to start investigating the darker side of the web. “We became really interested in trust. How do you trust people when they're anonymous? They're just nodes,” she says. “We decided to look at the markets because markets are in need of trust. You don't just send someone money hoping they'll send you goods.”

And so the Random Darknet Shopper was developed and unleashed. “The idea was to have a landscape of items from the darknet as examples of what you can hope to find there,” Weisskopf says. Based on the shopping history of the robot, you can find all sorts of things there: Air Jordans from China, Diesel jeans, a decoy letter from “Abington Bank”, a baseball hat with a hidden camera in the front, a Visa Platinum credit card, Chesterfield cigarettes and more.

In Switzerland, the principle of freedom in the arts allows artists to breach certain laws for their explorations

Weisskopf says she wasn't particularly surprised with the police interest. “We did talk to a lawyer before starting with the piece, because we knew that many of the items you find in these markets are obviously things that for one reason or the other are not sold in other places on the internet,” she says. The lawyer, however, **pointed out** that in Switzerland, the principle of freedom in the arts allows artists to breach certain laws for their explorations. (Though that line of reasoning doesn't apply to artists everywhere.)



Strange entities lie in the dark web (Credit: Getty Images)

The question of how culpable a robot or algorithm can be isn't a new one, says Burkhard Schafer, a professor of computational legal theory at the University of Edinburgh. For the moment, the question of liability should be no different than an injury caused by an electric drill, he thinks. "We decide is it the fault of the owner, or the manufacturer," says Burkhard – not the drill itself. "Robots don't change the picture dramatically."

Fundamentally, robots are the creations of humans. They carry out the orders we give them. Until that changes, the actions they carry out are, therefore, the responsibility of the humans who created them. It gets a little more complicated with smart robots, or algorithms that can learn, and that might do something their creators didn't expect. But Schafer says that even in those cases, the creators are generally held responsible.

We already kind of have a legal framework that could work for smart robots: dogs

Schafer points out that we already kind of have a legal framework that could work for smart robots: the laws that apply to dogs. "Normally the answer is if you put something dangerous in the environment you are still responsible for it," he says. People who own dogs are well aware that they cannot possibly control every action their dog takes. But at the same time, if someone has a dog that is dangerous, it is their responsibility to protect others from that dog. "As long as it was foreseeable for you that something you owned was going to cause harm, even if you couldn't force the specific injury and harm, you're responsible for it," he says. And dogs are far more capable, creative, and intelligent than any computer system invented so far.

Even if the legal conversation is the same, our gut reactions to a crime involving a sophisticated robot shopper may be very different, when you compare it to an accident involving a drill or a ladder, for instance. Especially when the robot has been made to act and sound like a person. Weisskopf says that even though the Random Darknet Shopper was simply an algorithm run by a computer, visitors still wanted to turn it into a living entity. "It's not an intelligent piece of software, absolutely not, it can't learn, all these things that some software actually could do, it can't. But it behaves like a human, and visitors would look at the collection of these 12 items and try to think of the personality of the shopper," she says. "Which I think is very typically human to do that."



Who is responsible for a robot's criminal actions - the maker, the owner, or the robot itself? (Credit: Getty Images)

The Bitnik artists have some more projects planned that dig into these questions too. They want to try operating the shopper outside of Switzerland, to see if the results and the reactions differ. How quickly would police in the United States shut it down? How would Indian authorities react? "We find that quite interesting," Weisskopf says, "to have these questions of the different jurisdiction and copyright, it's difficult to have different laws in different countries because the items are globally accessible."

Ultimately, Bitnik is hoping to do more projects like this that ask questions not only about what's accessible on the darknet, but how easy it is to get it, and why. "We're interested in the accountabilities of bots or software, but also questions of anonymity and of mass surveillance," Weisskopf says. "How do we want these digital worlds to look in the future? What do we want to do with them, what do we think should be possible?"

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MOTHERBOARD
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The Random Darknet Shopper Bot Is Back, Doing Its Christmas Shopping in London

After being seized by Swiss police earlier this year, your favorite consumerist bot is back online for a new exhibition.



By Jason Koebler

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AN IMAGE OF THE DESTROYED ECSTASY THE BOT BOUGHT EARLIER THIS YEAR.
IMAGE: !MEDIENGRUPPE BITNIK

The Random Darknet Shopper Bot—which earlier this year raised existential questions such as "[can a robot be arrested?](#)"—[is back online](#) just in time for the Christmas shopping season.

The bot, [created by Swiss artists Carmen Weisskopf and Domagoj Smoljo](#), has already purchased a counterfeit Lacoste t-shirt from Thailand for 0.1101 bitcoins off of the AlphaBay dark web market. Over the course of the next few weeks, it will randomly select items from the market and have them delivered to London's Horatio Junior gallery, where they'll be on display between December 11 and February 5, 2016.

"The Random Darknet Shopper is roaming the Darknets again and has already made its first purchase yesterday," the artists announced in an email. "This is the first time Random Darknet Shopper will be running again, after it was seized by the public prosecutor in St. Gallen, Switzerland in January."

The pair's bot is completely automated, which is why it exists in such a legal grey area. The bot scans through items on AlphaBay, selects one that costs less than \$100, and purchases it. It then sends the seller the address of the gallery. The seller sends the item to the gallery, where it's unpacked and displayed by a curator. No human is involved until that point.



THE BOT'S FIRST PURCHASE. IMAGE: !MEDIENGRUPPE BITNIK

Given the way it works, it's entirely possible the bot could select only legal items to purchase. The genius of the exhibit is that human law enforcement has to figure out what to do if and when it purchases drugs or another illegal item, which happened last time Random Darknet Shopper Bot was live. In that instance, 11 of the 12 items it purchased were legal, but then it bought \$48 worth of ecstasy.

The police seized the ecstasy and never ruled out charging Weisskopf and Smoljo with drug possession crimes. In the end, however, police elected not to file any charges, ruling that robots can legally buy drugs online for artistic purposes.

Now, we may have a second test of the legal system if a similar thing happens in the United Kingdom. It's hard to say how this will play out until the bot purchases something blatantly illegal (this is pure speculation, but London police probably have bigger things on their plate than tracking down one counterfeit t-shirt).

"We never possessed the drugs," Weisskopf said. "Usually possession of drugs means you found drugs in somebody's pockets. This is not the case. What do you do with that? For them, it's a bit of a headache. It's a bit of a headache for us, too, but it's really interesting to ask these questions."

"Mentally, these are questions that will be asked in larger questions in the future," she added. "You have a self driving car that crashes and hurts someone, who is responsible? Is it the driver who has no control, is it the company, is it the programmer?"

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