



STOP THE TRAFFIK
PEOPLE SHOULDN'T BE BOUGHT & SOLD



Human Trafficking and the Darknet

Insights on supply and demand

2018

WARNING: some readers may find the content of this report offensive or upsetting

STOP THE TRAFFIK

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Human trafficking and the Darknet

The anonymity offered by the Darknet has created a space for illicit vendors and clients to deal with their business online. Policing this space is incredibly hard, and speculations around the use of the Darknet as an enabler of human trafficking have inevitably been made during the last few years.

Objectives

The scope of this study was to gain insights on the role of the Darknet as an enabler of human trafficking by investigating supply, demand, and users' perception of the trade online.

Due to the nature of the Darknet – which will be highlighted in the next section – it is important to note that there are more doubts than certainties around most aspects of the hidden web. Moreover, this study only covered a small part of what exists on the Darknet, and as a result, it might raise more questions than it can answer.

Background

The Darknet

The Darknet sits on top of what we refer to as the normal internet. It is formed by communication protocols that are designed primarily for exchanging information, similarly to the way in which the internet works, and which are sent through a vast number of relays around the world making it virtually impossible to trace activity back to its origin.

Some of these Darknet protocols are well known, like Tor, some are less well known, and some are completely unknown. They can be used for a variety of reasons: education and research, anonymity within oppressive regimes where mass-surveillance is commonplace, and of course crime and terrorism.

While most commonly associated with crime, it is important to observe that not all activity on the Darknet is malicious. This said, some of the rumours are true, and the worst of society can be found traversing these Darknets.

Darknet users

The Darknet is completely lawless and it hosts a variety of users. Some users may have no connection whatsoever to crime, but wish to maintain anonymity online, while others may be using hidden services to further their criminal activities.

The Darknet is rife with scammers – both those who collaborate on hidden forums to target internet users, as well as those who target everyone and anyone, including fellow Darknet users.

There is a sense of community on the Darknet, and within this community exists a certain sense of hierarchy. Fraudsters will often work together, and it is common for advice to be shared freely within certain circles. However, some aspects of Darknet crime are unanimously condemned.

Child pornography and human trafficking are two areas of crime that are widely condemned by the Darknet community. As such, it is common for phishing links to be deployed across the Darknet – for example, these may claim to be links to explicit child images, but are in fact malware designed to target or expose the individuals seeking to participate in such criminal activities.

Law enforcement agencies are also known to post fake offers designed to catch buyers of slave victims or explicit images.

Paste sites

Most of this research is focused around “pastes” left by users on a specific site. Paste sites are not exclusive to the Darknet. Many of them are, in fact, accessible on the internet where they are routinely used for sharing information. This can include dumps of email/password credentials, other harvested PII (personally identifiable information) such as names, addresses, and phone numbers, to name a few.

Research

In order to carry out this research we tried to identify incidents in which the sale or the exploitation of individuals were advertised on the Darknet. The data collection process started very broadly, with a range of Darknet coverage from Cyjax – a Cyber Threat

Intelligence company collaborating on this project. Together with Cyjax, we then decided to focus on the site DeepPaste - a Darknet paste site where users can post messages, requests, and offers anonymously - to be our main source of information, due to practicality and previous observations on the platform.

All the relevant pastes were saved for a period of three months, between the 1st of June and the 5th of September 2018. Some extra cases were found on the archives of the platform dating as far back as January 2017.

We monitored the DeepPaste site daily. Some of the points recorded include the title of the pastes, their content, replies posted by users, and any identifiable e-mail address. We used text analytics to identify key patterns in the engagement of Darknet users in human trafficking.

Analysis

We collected a total of 90 pastes and 155 related comments.

- 93% of these related comments were made anonymously (without a username)
- 36% of offers by the original posters included some form of child sexual exploitation
- 44% specifically referred to the private sale or rent of children
- 4% referred to the sale organs

Over 40% of the pastes appear to have been created by the same few anonymous accounts – we assume they are the same accounts because some pastes with similar titles point to the same email addresses to further the conversation between potential buyers and sellers. These users posted the same offers daily, sometimes more than once a day. Some of the most repeated paste titles were:

- GIRLS FOR RENT AND SALE
- SALE OR RENT
- Child escorts



Figure 1. Paste titles

As shown in Figure 1, paste titles mostly mentioned the sale and the rent of girls - a deeper look into these pastes revealed that the girls in question are usually aged between 7 and 14. These pastes were followed by untitled offers and offers of child escorts, slaves, and organs.

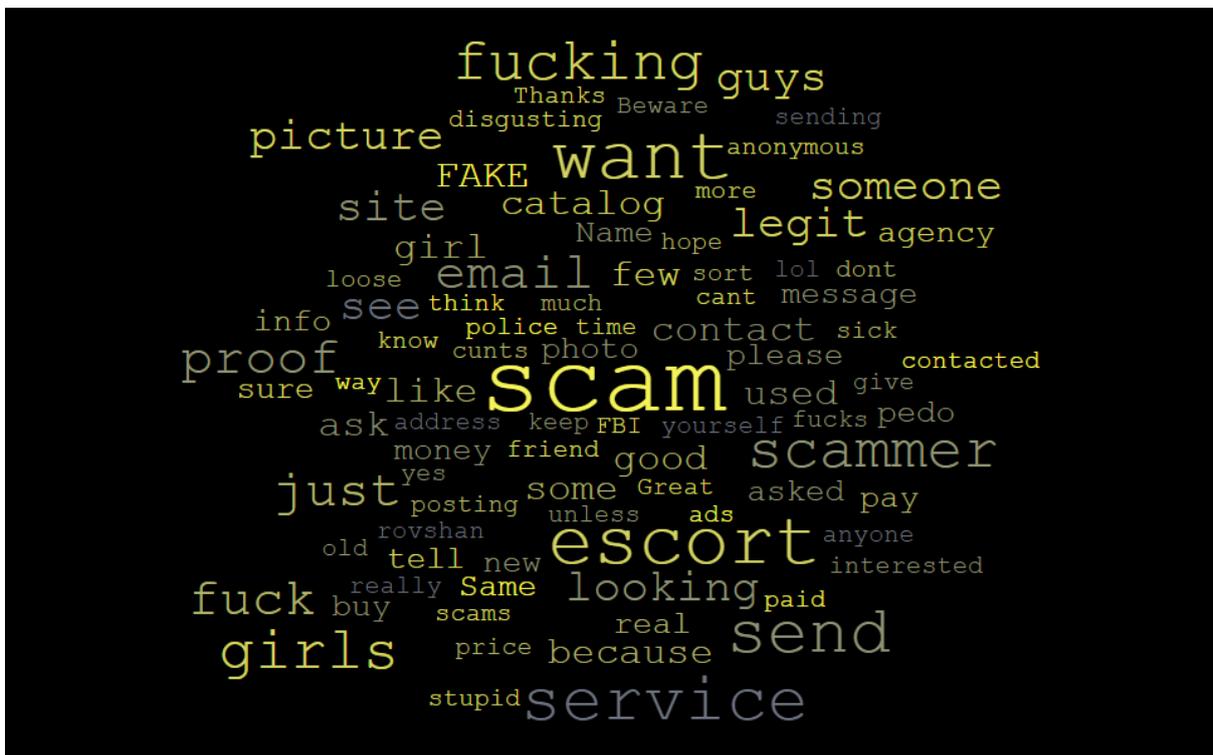


Figure 2. Paste comments

As mentioned above, some things are unanimously rejected on the Darknet. It is therefore not surprising to see that most of the replies to these pastes are negative. As figure 2 shows, replies are largely calling out scams, scammers and fake posts, indicating a general sense of anger and distrust within the community. However, the question remains: is the lack of trust and anger demonstrated in replies to these pastes actually caused by outrage and rejection of human trafficking on the Darknet? To elaborate on this further, we present two examples of users responses to human trafficking related pastes.

Case study 1: *6yo, 9yo, 11yo girls for sale.*

On the 24th of August 2017, an anonymous user posted an offer regarding the sale of three sisters. The original post said:

“Illegal immigrant crossed three sisters over and abandoned them near me. All light complexed with dark brown hair and brown eyes, Hispanic and speak Spanish. Leave your email and make a bid here... No reasonable offer will be refused. additional details to follow...”

The original user posted a few more times, providing more details on the character of the girls, on their price, and to announce that they had been sold. Responses to this paste were varied, however not as negative as what we have observed in Figure 2 above.

The below replies were edited to remove any email addresses shared by users and comments that only contained email addresses. *Anon* is the username automatically allocated to DeepPaste users that do not want to create an account.

Anon How much?

Anon i want the 11yo \$500

Anon fucking cunts

Anon I need PIC befor i pay!

Anon You guys are sick in the head... #TracerMage

Anon Near Anaheim ,California? how long do I have to drive?

Anon you guys are seriously fucked up.

Anon I see guys like you my whole life. You roll into this country, and America, she just spreads her pretty cheeks. Meantime, native sons born of the red, white and blue are left broken, snuffling for your crumbs!

Anon The have been sold. Thank you for your interest.

Anon Fucking sick fucks I hope you all burn in hell.

Anon I could get new girls every few months.. If there is any interest still..

Anon interestet...

Anon send pics hope im not too late

Anon *if you have new girls please send pics with price to*
Anon *If you have a new girls my address is*
Anon *How much?*
Anon *i want the 11yo \$500*

This interaction is a good example of different users' perception of human trafficking on the platform. Only four replies (highlighted below) out of the original 19 condemned the nature of the paste and the interest expressed by other users. The rest asked for more information, made bids, provided their contact details, and overall appeared to engage with the original user.

Anon *How much?*
Anon *i want the 11yo \$500*
Anon ***fucking cunts***
Anon *I need PIC befor i pay!*
Anon ***You guys are sick in the head... #TracerMage***
Anon *Near Anaheim ,California? how long do I have to drive?*
Anon ***you guys are seriously fucked up.***
Anon *I see guys like you my whole life. You roll into this country, and America, she just spreads her pretty cheeks. Meantime, native sons born of the red, white and blue are left broken, snuffling for your crumbs!*
Anon *The have been sold. Thank you for your interest.*
Anon ***Fucking sick fucks I hope you all burn in hell.***
Anon *I could get new girls every few months.. If there is any interest still..*
Anon *interestet...*
Anon *send pics hope im not too late*
Anon *if you have new girls please send pics with price to*
Anon *If you have a new girls my address is*
Anon *How much?*
Anon *i want the 11yo \$500*

Despite this disproportionate amount of apparently positive responses, it is necessary to keep in mind that many of these might have been trying to expose the original user. While some might have been showing genuine interest, there is no way of establishing a real proportion.

Case study 2: @DeepPaste admins: please act now!

On the 20th of August 2018, an anonymous user wrote a paste directed at the admins of DeepPaste with a request to deal with the pastes related to scams and paedophilia. The same pastes that we had been monitoring. The original paste said:

"Dear admins of DeepPaste,

I guess you see the problem with scam artists like "starletsescortagency" and others. They are flooding and spamming DeepPaste every fucking day and making DeepPaste absolutely unusable.

Please find a way to filter spam and scam posts. DeepPaste could be a place to share knowledge and information.

But now iut became a hub for pedophiles and scammers. Everyday we see the same scam artists flooding DeepPaste, you rarely find useful pastes anymore.

Please act if you want to keep DeepPaste a place for darkweb nerds and techies."

The above paste is one of the many that denounced the admins of the site for not taking action in regards to paedophilia and child pornography on the platform. Below are some of the responses found underneath the original paste. Although there are only a few replies, they generally agree with the content of the paste.

- Anon dear admins please put this poster out of his misery. ADRESS THIS ISSUE NOW. ARE PEDOPHILES WELCOME ON DEEPPASTE?*
- Anon did deeppaste admin tell you that deeppaste was for nerds and techies? why dont you open your own since you are a techie. i am going to troll and mock you until deeppaste admin issue a srtatement*
- Anon the starlets escort agency scammer is mad as hell *grabs popcorn* But I agree, to much pedo scum around here. shoudln't be tolerated. It's cancer.*
- [DP-Staff] will publish an update in a few days to conquer bout this shit*

One of the replies was from a DeepPaste staff user, suggesting that they might mobilise to contain pastes regarding exploitation and trafficking. Interestingly, as of October 2018, no changes have yet been implemented to filter these pastes.

This paste, contrary to the one highlighted in the previous case study, shows a more clear resistance of Darknet users against exploitation and trafficking. Even though this paste alone did not receive many replies, all other similar pastes that address the issue reinforce this argument.

So what?

Due to the nature of the Darknet, it is not surprising that few concrete conclusions can be drawn from this project. However, we managed to gain some insight into the use of the Darknet site DeepPaste for the purpose of human trafficking and exploitation. These include:

- Pastes that advertise the sale of people are posted almost daily
- As can be observed all over the Darknet, some or most of these offers are scams aimed at framing potential buyers
- Users either condemn these pastes or show interest
- Some users identify these pastes as scams
- Those who show interest can either be genuine or trying to frame the sellers

One of the most interesting aspects of this project was the sheer number of pastes that were made in reference to human trafficking and child exploitation. It is concerning to think that this was all from a single site, and that there could be many more similar sites with similar levels of activity.

It is difficult to assess how many of these offers are genuine, and how many are not. However, the levels of interest shown by the anonymous users of DeepPaste indicate an underlying demand for human trafficking services on the Darknet. The pastes we analysed could theoretically have all been scams. However, as we know from past experiences with the Darknet, scammers will only create fake listings if there is a demand for them to exploit.

For now, it is hard to say that the Darknet is being used to enable human trafficking. We could say that there is demand for it, and if this is the case - whether it will be on DeepPaste, or on some other hidden site - there will always be someone within the Darknet community who, sooner or later, will find the supply to match the demand.

Future and more in depth research can help us gain a better understanding of these dynamics, and in the long term, perhaps help us build a strategy for prevention.



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