

Countering Illegal Drug Trafficking on the Internet: Topical Issues

Anatolii V. Movchan¹, Mykola O. Yankovyi², Karen Yu. Ismailov³,
Elena O. Melnikova⁴ & Oleksandr M. Zaiets⁵

Abstract

The relevance of the study is based on the shift of activity of organized criminal groups involved in distribution of psychoactive substances to the organization of the mentioned activities through the Internet. One of the problems of counteracting such crimes is that in Ukraine, the mechanism of blocking or limiting access to Internet resources through which criminal offenses are committed or where there is prohibited content is regulated by law. The purpose of their search is to study current problems of combating drug trafficking on the Internet by way of contactless sale of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances. It is necessary to strengthen the analytical component of law enforcement activities in the detection and analysis of content on the Internet through implementing information technologies and spreading knowledge of OSINT (Open-source intelligence). The results of the manuscript are of practical value for the average reader who is interested in the issues of financial crime, online crimes, and drug countering as well as for the higher education graduates of police specialties, police officers of the criminal block and specialists in the field of operational search activities.

Keywords: Drug Trafficking, Narcotics, Online Shop, Stash, Analytical Intelligence

Introduction

Drug addiction and drug crime are a complex problem of modern Ukrainian society that includes social, economic, legal, medical and other aspects. Effective counteraction to drug addiction and drug crime in the current environment is possible only through a comprehensive approach to solving two urgent problems. On the one hand, ensuring the appropriate level of legislative regulation of the drug-distribution, psychotropic substances and drug precursors, which would protect the interests of

¹Department of Operational and Investigative Activities, Lviv State University of Internal Affairs, 79007, 26 Horodotska Str., Lviv, Ukraine. movchan8120-6@acu-edu.cc

²Department of Forensic and Psychology, Odesa State University of Internal Affairs, 65014, 1 Uspenskaya Str., Odesa, Ukraine

³Department of Cyber Security and Information Support, *Ibid*

⁴*Ibid*

⁵Department of Forensic and Psychology, *Ibid*

Ukrainian citizens, quality medical care for people suffering from drug addiction. On the other hand, it is necessary to create an effective system for preventing drug trafficking and using prohibited substances, psychotropic substances, and drug precursors not for medical purposes.

Analyzing the relevant literature sources, we found out that many scholars have been studying the issues of drug countering and crime prevention from different perspectives over recent years. Thus, Tenti and Morselli (2014) studied illegal market activities and in particular organized crime. They also analyzed structural models of joint crime between different ethnic criminal groups involved in the drug trafficking network. In addition, they drew attention to the aspect of ethnicity in intergroup crime.

In his work, Calderoni (2012) explored the tasks, statuses, and structures of social networks of two criminal groups in southern Italy. The author draws attention to the fact that both groups showed a special organizational structure with a clear division of tasks and signals of status differentiation between members, which proves that was a criminal leader. This positioning strategy has minimized risks and ensured effective management of smuggling operations without a chance of exposure. Piza and Sytsma (2015) also noted that drug dealers adopted the principles of opportunity theory to protect themselves from law enforcement, in particular, by acting as guardians and administrators on their own behalf. It was stated that their criminal activities were largely related to geographical conditions and time of day as well. This mostly applies to the placement of stash spots and setting.

Felson and Bonkiewicz (2011) paid attention to the analysis of the relationship between the possession of weapons and the nature of the offender's participation in the drug market. Khrytenko, Zayets, Ismailov, Lefterov, Polyakov and Shurat (2019) developed guidelines on the specifics of detecting and documenting crimes related to the drug trafficking using modern telecommunications technologies.

European Union legislation introduced the concept of “new psychoactive substances” in 2005 and a system of information exchange regarding such substances (Council Decision..., 2005). In the current circumstances, the distribution of new psychoactive drugs marketed as illicit drugs such as cannabis, meth, cocaine, ecstasy, heroin and benzodiazepines are turning into a global problem. The number of such substances is increasing rapidly each year, exceeding the capacity to control them nationally and internationally (EU Drug Markets Report, 2016).

That is why the main tasks of the State Drug Policy Strategy for the period up to 2020, approved by the Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine No. 735-p

(2013) are aimed at solving systemic issues of medical, social, economic character and law enforcement. It should be noted that in the field of drug-distribution, psychotropic substances and precursors, Ukraine adheres to the following principles in shaping the state drug policy:

- public health is a priority of public policy, so drug addicts are provided with the necessary set of preventive and curative measures;
- ensuring that the population has access to vital medicines, including painkillers;
- abandoning the punitive approach to drug users; and
- improvement of the activity of law enforcement agencies in the fight against organized drug crime, money laundering obtained from the illegal drug trafficking (Degree of the Cabinet..., 2013).

Today, there is a process of informatization of the society, which is accompanied by an increase in the number of direct and hidden illegal actions of offenders in cyberspace. For example, electoral interference (USA, France, Germany), computer viruses (Wanna Cry, MiniDuke, BlackEnergy), or cyber fraud (vishing, smashing, skimming, trapping, phantom, tent, shimming, trashing, phishing). Now, the activities of organized criminal groups involved in the distribution of new psychoactive substances, fundamentally different from the activities of “traditional” organized groups of drug business engaged in the sale of drugs of natural origin. Unlike drugs such as heroin, the production of which is a lengthy process, synthetic drugs are manufactured quickly in simple laboratories, and the formulation of their manufacture is available on the Internet. It is quite difficult to bring criminals involved in the distribution of new psychoactive substances to criminal liability because these substances are either out of control or masked under uncontrolled substances, and their identification is difficult or often impossible.

One of the most pressing problems in combating drug trafficking is that non-contact sales of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances via the Internet, but also through channels in the Telegram messenger, have become quite widespread in recent years, with a view to marketing laws, drug advocacy. For example, the Telegram channel @DrugStat has 48.000 subscribers and provides clear guidance on how to organize a drug business on the Internet, detailing the responsibilities of each group member, location, and other useful information for people who engage in or want to engage in illegal activity. The mentioned organizational and methodical information is provided along with quite interesting statistics and easy-to-read texts. Although the

channel itself states that it is a research project, it does not call for use and even warns of criminal responsibility for the sale of drugs (Telegram DrugStat, 2019).

It should be noted that in accordance with Art. 17 of the Constitution of Ukraine, information security is the most important function of the state along with the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity and ensuring the economic security of the country (Constitution of Ukraine, 1996). Therefore, based on the existing threats, the executive bodies of Ukraine should have a proper organizational and legal mechanism to restrict the dissemination of illegal information on the World Wide Web, and the legislature should accordingly create the appropriate legal framework for this.

The purpose of this work is to investigate the current problems of combating drug trafficking using the Internet. To achieve this goal, a number of methods were used, namely, theoretical – to study and analyze statistical information, scientific and methodological literature, generalization of information to determine the theoretical and methodological bases of the study; logical analysis – to formulate basic concepts and conduct classification; specifically historical – to demonstrate the dynamics of development; dialectics – to determine the content and features of the constituent elements; empirical methods – to summarize the experience.

Material and methods

Considering the multidisciplinary approach to the analysis of the activities of organized criminal groups involved in the distribution of psychoactive substances via the Internet, the study used several research methods, namely general theoretical, empirical, and abstract-logical. With a view on the specifics of the study, the materials for the analysis were the regulatory framework of the State Service of Ukraine for Medicines and Drug Control, the Code of Ukraine on Administrative Offenses and Criminal Code of Ukraine decrees. As a result of using the empirical research method, the current problems of counteracting drug trafficking on the Internet through the contactless sale of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances were clarified. Using the abstract-logical research method, a number of recommendations were developed on how to improve the work of law enforcement agencies, legislation to combat and monitor the spread of drugs and other psychotropic substances prohibited by law via the Internet.

The study was conducted in three stages. At the first stage, the theoretical generalization of the existing theoretical and methodological approaches presented in the legal literature on the outlined issue was carried out and the normative legal acts in Ukraine were analyzed. At the second stage, a set of conditions that determine the

activities of organized criminal groups, schemes of activities and examples from practice were determined. At the third stage, the results of the research were summed up, conclusions were formed, the obtained results were generalized and systematized.

Results and discussion

During 2019, the Anti-Crime Unit of the National Police of Ukraine documented 421 facts of sale of drugs and psychotropic substances via the Internet. It revealed 13 groups and 34 drug groups, which organized the scheme of illicit drugs sale online, in particular, through popular messengers. Most often, online drug stores offer their services in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa, Dnipro, Mykolaiv, Kherson (Yarovy, 2020). In particular, in July 2019, a criminal organization for the sale of synthetic "designer" drugs were discovered by a staff of the National Police of Ukraine's Department of Drug Crime through a dedicated Internet resource. It was found that the leader of the criminal organization was a 37-year-old resident of Kyiv who established direct deliveries of highly concentrated new psychoactive substances from the People's Republic of China to Ukraine and recruited his relative from the IT technology field.

The latter has created a special site for the implementation of new psychoactive substances and a channel in the popular messenger to ensure their constant work and administration. All the defendants adhered to strict conspiracy, constantly changing places of dislocation and storage of psychoactive substances. High-level communication channels were used to communicate with members of the organization. During the final stage of the special operation, 8 members of the criminal organization were detained, 26 searches were conducted and nearly 100,000 doses of drugs and psychotropic drugs were withdrawn, kilograms of new psychoactive substances from which 30 kg of psychotropic substances can be made, worth almost 9 million UAH. Also, more than \$150,000, €12,000 and \$350,000 worth of cash obtained from the sale of narcotic drugs, 47 bank cards, office equipment, 2 weapons, 8 vehicles were seized (Police have exposed..., 2019).

In Mykolaiv, in September 2019, employees of the Office for Combating Drug Crime liquidated the supply channel of drugs and psychotropics worth over one million hryvnias. The figures in the group supplied the customers with drug stash by hiding them in nuts. They also received deliveries, disguised as postal delivery of goods from an online store. During a series of searches at the place of residence, in the car and in the apartment, law enforcement officers seized more than one kilogram of amphetamine, 150 drug stashes, one and a half hundred ecstasy pills, 77 LSD blotter papers, cannabis, salts, about one kilogram of drug precursors, and other drugs as well

as bank cards and cash (In Mykolaiv., 2019). In November 2019, law enforcement officers conducted a large-scale special operation to eliminate the activities of the narcotics ring, during which two organizers were detained (one of them was a current member of the united territorial community) and 17 members of the criminal group. Earlier in the case, law enforcement officers from the Republic of Belarus detained two other members of the criminal organization.

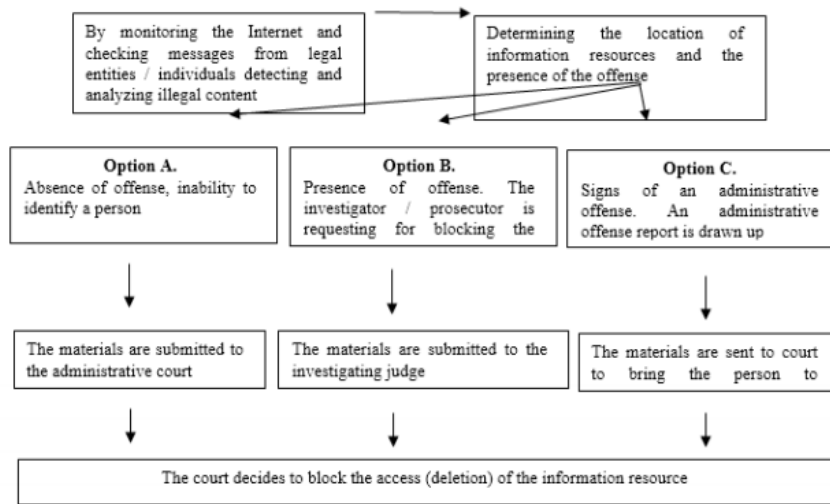
For the sale of manufactured goods, receiving and paying for orders, the attackers used an online store. Payments were made through a digital payment platform, e-wallets or using cryptocurrency. For a conspiracy purpose, the wallets were removed, and new ones created after a few days. For the proper control, functioning and security of the criminal organization, there was a clear hierarchy and division of roles: control over the functioning of laboratories, their protection, “chemists”, “financiers”, online store maintenance, delivery of products to storage depots, “couriers”, drug stashes, etc. According to preliminary estimates, through the online store, drugs and psychotropic substances were sold for almost UAH 21 million. According to the results of almost 100 simultaneous authorized searches, the police seized more than 46 kg of drugs and psychotropic substances, as well as 170 liters of drug precursors worth 25 million hryvnias. In addition, \$24,000, €1,100, and \$38,000, more than two dozen of bank cards and mobile phones, weapons and ammunition, “draft” records containing data on “movement” of dealers, “customers” as well as 6 premium cars were seized (As a result..., 2019).

In order to attract potential buyers for online drug sales, sellers use specialized sites, forums (chats), ad sites, social networks, viral spam ads, which provide information about drug or psychotropic drug sales, as well as email addresses, codes, conditional terms by which you can contact the seller. In this case, information about an advertisement or offer to buy narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances may be placed in an open or veiled form. In addition, the placement of hand-painted or screen-printed drug-supply signs (so-called street graffiti) on various sites of the city's infrastructure remains quite popular. Most often you can see the words “meth”, “amph”, “spice”, “booze”, “dope”, “pot”, “acid”, “drug stash”, “grass”, “JWH”, “MDMA”, website addresses, popular messenger numbers (Viber, WhatsApp, Telegram, Skype, Jabber), etc. In view of this kind of drug trafficking, there is a very interesting project of the Kharkiv National University of Internal Affairs, whose staff has developed a @StopDrugsBot chat bot that brings people together to counteract illegal drug

trafficking to block chat bots that distribute drugs or narcotic substances (Chat bot., 2019).

By hiding traces of their illegal activities, criminals use special techniques that substitute information about the actual addresses of their network activity and create network resources on servers located in other countries. For example, we use a TOR browser, a proxy server that allows you to establish an anonymous traceable network connection, as well as VPN connectivity technology that creates an encrypted additional “black” network for data transmission on the Internet. When using mobile carrier numbers, sellers systematically modify their contacts to avoid possible identification. A person who wants to buy drugs through the Internet or mobile messengers contacts the seller and places the necessary order. In return, they receive a message from the seller with a bank account number or e-wallet number for online settlement (WebMoney, Qiwi, PayPal, Q-Cash, EasyPay and others) and pay. This kind of communication can be done in various ways: online via the programs such as ICQ, Skype, Viber, WhatsApp, Telegram, through online correspondence in forums (chats) or using e-mail, social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), etc. (Fig. 1).

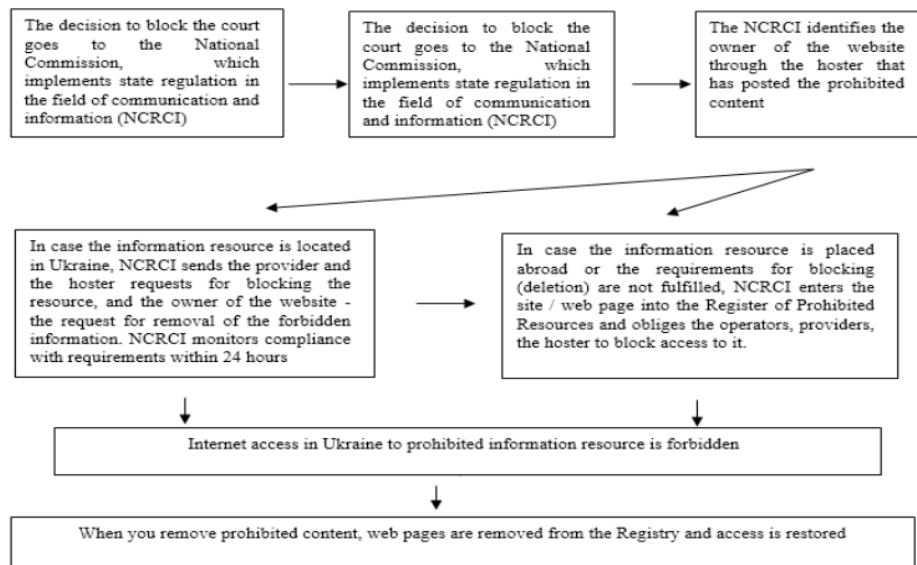
Figure 1. The mechanism of blocking the Internet resource



Source: Ismailov&Siforov, 2017

Once the Court has decided to block or remove an information resource, it is necessary to proceed as follows (Fig. 2).

Figure 2.The mechanism of execution of the court decision on blocking the Internet resource



Source: Ismailov&Siforov, 2017

After confirming the transfer, the buyer receives a message from the seller with the address of the drug stash placement and the specific place where it is hidden (usually the message is confirmed with a photo or geotag). Sometimes, criminals use Ukrposhta and private courier services (Nova Poshta, Intime, Autolux) to receive online drug orders. After sending such parcels, the seller provides the buyer with the number of the departure declaration. Recently, for complete conspiracy and anonymity, online marketers have started using “chatbots”, or in other words, virtual auto-messaging through mobile messengers that distribute drug ads via messaging and be able to support correspondence, receive orders, and answer questions.

There are a number of issues when documenting crimes in this category. One of them is that the mechanism of blocking or restricting access to Internet resources through which criminal offenses are committed or where there is prohibited content is

regulated by legislation in Ukraine at an insufficient level. Thus, when detecting illegal content, law enforcement officials should be held criminally or administratively liable. This issue is of particular relevance today, especially after the President of Ukraine signed Decree No. 133/2017 of May 15, 2017 “On the Application of Personal Special Economic and Other Restrictive Measures (Sanctions)”, which is intended to protect the information space of the country and reduce cyberattacks for business (Decree of the President..., 2017). This requires a clear legal mechanism for the actions of persons authorized to do so, which is reflected in the scheme below.

Once the Court has decided to block or remove an information resource for its implementation, it is necessary to proceed as follows. According to paragraph 9 of Art. 38 of the Law of Ukraine “On Telecommunications”, telecommunication operators and providers have the right to disconnect, based on a court decision, terminal equipment if it is used by a subscriber to commit unlawful or threatening public security interests (Law of Ukraine., 2003). However, such an algorithm is not effective enough because there is no single authority with the power to enforce court decisions to block or restrict access to illegal websites.

Once you have opened the website that allegedly distributes narcotics or sells drugs, you need to find out where this website is technically located, and which company provides the hosting service to its owners. According to the register of the National Commission, which implements state regulation in the sphere of communications and information, there are more than 7,000 Internet providers operating in the territory of Ukraine. Thus, there are certain problems in rendering a court decision requiring the blocking of illegal Internet resource (Register of telecommunications., 2019).

If the Internet resource from which the drugs were being traded is outside Ukraine, in addition to the court order, a request for international legal assistance is also sent to the competent law enforcement agencies of foreign countries. This procedure also lacks a clear mechanism and can take a long time. In addition, in Ukraine, upon receiving a court order, telecommunications providers may report that they lack the technical capacity to block or restrict access to Internet resources. However, the legislation does not require that such equipment be requested from providers. Telecommunication operators are obliged, only at their own expense, to install on their telecommunication networks the technical means necessary measures for carrying out by the authorized bodies of operative-investigative, and to ensure the functioning of these technical means and to facilitate the conduct of operative-investigative measures

and preventing the organization of investigative measures within the limits of their powers (Law of Ukraine., 2003).

There is also no mechanism to hold telecommunication providers accountable for failing to comply with court decisions to block websites or restrict access to prohibited content. The Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine has registered a Draft Law “On Electronic Communications” (2019), which is to replace the Law of Ukraine “On Telecommunications”. In our opinion, it would be advisable to include the rules on temporary blocking of access to a certain information resource for the execution of the decision of the investigating judge and the court in accordance with the requirements of the criminal procedure legislation, as well as the storage of electronic data by the operator, provider.

It is essential to enhance the effectiveness of the fight against drug crime on the Internet by establishing full cooperation between drug and cyber police units and developing clear mechanisms to identify such crimes. In particular, cybercriminals should provide all necessary support to the local counter-narcotics units to identify both the seller and the consumer. Today, criminals are no longer using analog communication channels and classic storage sites. Increasingly, they are using cloud-based storage services and resilient hosting that is not controlled by government agencies. Therefore, it is important for National Police units to use state-of-the-art high-tech tools to produce evidence (Demediuk, 2019).

Based on the above, the issue of identifying information on illicit drug trafficking becomes more relevant, so let us look at the basic techniques for finding and analyzing information based on open sources. For example, extended use of well-known search engines. As of 2019, Google.com is the most effective search engine for domain name index coverage criteria in Ukraine. Google's search engine has a User Agent-Googlebot, which is the main tool that scans the content of a page for a search index. In addition, there are several specialized robots. Google supports search in PDF, RTF, PostScript, Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, Microsoft PowerPoint, etc.

An important achievement of the search engine is the use of search filters and advanced search operators. Advanced Search Filters: web pages, language, country, date of update, website or domain, word placement, Safe Search, complexity of the text, file format. Advanced image search filters: size, shape, color filter, type of images (portrait, animation, etc.), website or domain, file format, safe search. There is also a refinement of searches using operators (search keys). For more accurate results, it is advisable to use special characters or words in your queries:

- search on social networks: enter the symbol @ before the word (for example, @twitter);
- price search: enter the symbol \$ before the amount of money (for example, \$40 dope);
- search by hashtag (or meta category): enter the symbol # before the word (for example, #Drugs);
- exclusion of results with certain words: put “-” before the word to be excluded (for example, speed dryer – appliance);
- find the exact word or phrase: a word or phrase in quotation marks (for example, “Arcadia drug”);
- search for unknown words: enter a * character in the place of an unknown word in the query (for example, “methamphetamine * measure”);
- search within the specified number range: put a hyphen between two numbers (for example, drugs 500-1000 hryvnia);
- query join: enter the word “OR” between queries (for example, Olympics OR olympiad);
- search for a specific website or data on the specified website: put the “website” before the website address or domain name (for example, website: youtube.com or website: .gov);
- search for the websites with similar content: enter the word “related” before the desired web address (for example, related: ukr.net);
- getting information about the website: put the word “info” before the web address of the website;
- search for website cache: enter the word “cache” before the website URL.

Verification systems in many well-known mail services also allow you to retrieve phone numbers from mailboxes or remove part of a phone number. Also, during special events, it is possible to establish the availability of social network accounts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) if there is the subscriber's telephone number (Hrytenko et al., 2019).

Conclusions

Workers of the Department of Combating Drug Addiction need to respond to the challenges of today quickly, effectively, and comprehensively and to qualitatively document the facts of distribution of drugs and psychotropic substances using modern information and telecommunication technologies, promptly check information from

citizens about the activities of online drug stores. In addition, in order to improve the mechanism of blocking the Internet resource, it is necessary to develop and legislate conceptual and categorical tools, responsibilities of legal entities and individuals in the sphere of information dissemination on the Internet, as well as to amend the laws of Ukraine “On Information”, “On Telecommunications”, The Criminal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code, the Code of Administrative Offenses, the Code of Administrative Justice to prevent artificial obstacles in the exercise of their functions by executive authorities in the area of control over content on the Internet as part of a democratic society.

To strengthen the analytical component of law enforcement in the detection and analysis of content on the Internet through the introduction of information technology into law enforcement activities, the dissemination of knowledge about OSINT (search and analysis of information based on open sources) and in general, the introduction of a new philosophy of crime and law enforcement. Thus, the materials of the article are of practical value for the average reader interested in the issues of financial crime, online crimes and drug countering as well as for the higher education graduates of police specialties, police officers of the criminal block and specialists in the field of operational search activities.

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