

Deprecation of the Private Web

A Brief Analysis of a Recent Report

By Jonathan Carriel

I recently read a very long article in *Wired* magazine (May 2022 issue), entitled “[Caught By Crypto](#),” by Andy Goldberg. It’s a fascinating, informative, but often very annoying piece.

It focuses on the efforts of a couple of heroic cop-bureaucrats to take down an international kiddie porn ring. The organization had a TOR-based onion site featuring some half-million child-porn – always designated child *abuse* – videos. Some of the descriptions were truly nauseating: babies and toddlers, for god’s sake. (There was never any indication of what percentage might have involved “children” of late adolescence, who might well have been independently sexually active.)

Now I abhor any form of human coercion, and the coercion – including the psychological coercion of kids by adult authority figures – is utterly reprehensible. Where an anarchist should stand on legal prosecution of same ... *oy!* But no alternatives to government sanctions were even suggested, of course.

But the “good news” of the story was that the feds managed to catch up with the culprits following an intense, two-year investigation into their payment method: Bitcoin. The chief culprits and all the users took for granted the belief that their cryptocurrency exchanges were *impossible* to trace. “Happily,” that was entirely incorrect. Seems the Bitcoin (Bitcoin only?) blockchain leaves an extensive electronic paper trail that, with enormous effort, can be reconstructed and followed directly to each user. (No mention was made of how much this international effort might have cost the taxpayers, of course.) Over 300 users – including some up-loaders who might have coerced the children into the videos – were outed, prosecuted, and many jailed. At least one committed suicide.

The thrust of the article strongly suggests that the onion-based private net and cryptocurrencies in general are *entirely* devoted to kiddie porn, child abuse, terrorism, illicit drugs, and – *horrors!* – money laundering. There was no hint at all that hard-working citizens of Venezuela or Zimbabwe or any other country might look to cryptos for desperate help in preserving their life savings. Nor that cryptos could vastly improve the speed and convenience of international and local commerce. No, no: ’tis entirely the work of the devil!

One might wonder why this particular illicit on-line activity was selected to receive significant taxpayer funding. Could it be that, of all federal crimes, child-abuse is the most likely to hit the general public with a visceral repugnance? And that effective conflation of kiddie-porn with all truly private exchanges would help to legitimize government prosecution of less shocking infractions such as inflation evasion?

Now: If a crypto can be found (or already exists?) that is *not* traceable – genuine anonymous *cash*, in other words – will perverts and abusers and terrorists make use of it? (*Sigh!*) Yes, of course it will happen, probably with about the same frequency that such nefarious deeds have *always* happened, using other tools. However, millions of honest people will also use the new services for entirely legitimate purposes. You can't have one without the other. Society will have to work out a new way to bring down the vicious without destroying valuable assets of the vast majority. (End of sermon!)