

Presentation title:

Lawless but not normless – An explorative study on formal and informal control in Darknet forums

Speaker: Tove Gustavsson (Lund University, Sweden)

Darknet constitutes a part of the internet with a reputation for allowing deviance and criminality. In short, it is often understood as a place where anything goes. Current research on Darknet tends to focus on illicit cryptomarkets, however in this ongoing doctoral research project, I explore how user posts and behaviors are informally and formally controlled and shaped on Darknet forums. Moreover, I reveal the social rules at play and how they are implemented and upheld. The empirical material collected centers on observational data gathered from Darknet forums and transcripts from interviews with admins, moderators and other users of Darknet forums. Preliminary results indicate the presence of rules that users and moderators must follow, similar to social rules and codes of conduct in everyday digital life. Penalties and sanctions are in place if these rules are broken, such as reputational ruin or forum exclusion. Punishment appears to be associated with specific rule transgression, with leniency employed in certain rule deviations. Humor, humiliation practices and insults are used as tools to regulate and control rule transgressions when the offense is not severe enough to warrant forum exclusion. At the current stage the analysis reveals that Darknet constitutes a context where social rules should be followed, mirroring norms in wider society. Hence, rather than anything goes the Darknet should be understood as an intricate system of social mechanisms.