



AFA Journal

PORNOGRAPHY

Behind Every Picture, There's Pain

Justice Department makes long-awaited entrance into battle against child porn

Jason Collum

Writer, AFA Journal

AFA Journal, October 2001 Edition

They lived in an upscale home and owned a Mercedes. They threw pool parties for their friends.

They were like other residents in their Fort Worth, Texas, neighborhood, except they were world leaders – in facilitating the distribution of child pornography.

The secret lives of Thomas and Janice Reedy have been exposed, and more than 140 arrests have been made across the United States as, after years of inactivity, “Operation Avalanche” signals the federal government is once again cracking down on child porn.

And Operation Avalanche is just the tip of the iceberg.

The advent of the Internet has led to an explosion in the trade of child pornography, turning what was once an underground, back-alley business into an international multimillion dollar industry. And though child pornographers have long been a problem in larger metropolitan areas, the Internet has opened a completely new market for the garbage: Anytown, U.S.A.

Organizations around the world have picked up the torch and are doing their part to stem the tide of the heinous problem. As Parry Aftab puts it, every image of child pornography is an image of a crime scene in progress, and, “behind every picture, there's pain.”

Aftab is president of [Cyberangels](#), the world's largest Internet safety and help group in operation since 1995, with about 10,000 volunteers in 76 countries. The organization is a “cyber 911,” and finds and files roughly 600 new child porn web site reports each week with legal authorities.

A huge, ongoing battle

While Cyberangels focuses on the Internet, the fight against child pornography is one that's been raging a long time, and was close to being won as recently as little more than a decade ago.

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, child pornography was emerging. By the '80s, there was an underground of child porn being traded mostly through the U.S. mail. Most of the tracking was being done by big city police and the U.S. Postal Service by scanning advertisements in underground newspapers or magazines, and in open market homosexual publications such as *The Advocate*.

“Those years of the 1980s were where we were trying to change the laws to make it tougher for child pornography,” said Bruce Taylor, an attorney with the National Law Center for Children and Families in Maryland. He said federal and local law enforcement efforts through the 1980s helped remove more than half of the existing collections of child pornography from the U.S.

“It was a lot more than 50%,” Aftab said. “Law enforcement people have told me they were down to only about 1,000 images that kept recirculating.”

But any advances made in the battle were soon erased by technology and a presidential administration that did nothing about the problem.

“Everything changed around 1995 when the Internet became accessible to the general public,” Taylor said. “Pedophiles started throwing whatever child porn they had for free into the Usenet newsgroups so they could replenish their stockpiles.”

Some sites have just a few photos, and some have thousands. Multiply the average 600 sites Aftab's organization reports each week by the number of photos on each site and it easily puts into perspective just how explosive and dangerous child pornography has become.

The federal government's first major move to police child porn on the Internet came with the creation of the FBI's Innocent Images National Initiative, launched in 1995. But, Taylor said, even this didn't do enough. Innocent Images focused on major commercial online service providers, such as America Online's chat rooms, paying particular attention to cases of stalking. Taylor said this allowed many child pornographers to stay under the radar.

According to FBI statistics, between 1996 and 2000 the number of online crimes against children (including child pornography and sexual exploitation) rose 1,264%, from 113 to 1,541. It could be that the Internet poses an insurmountable challenge in the battle, even for the FBI.

“I don't know that anybody's having an impact [on child pornography],” Aftab said. “Even reporting 600 sites per week, child pornography on the Internet is growing so fast we're just a drop in the bucket.”

Aftab said more effort should be placed on making arrests of those involved, like with Operation Avalanche, than with just shutting down web sites. When one site is shut down, another is bound to take its place.

While the arrests of dozens of child pornographers is an important and long-awaited action by the federal government, it isn't the arrests that may be the most important development. “It's significant because [Attorney General John Ashcroft] decided to go out and announce it and indicate this was going to be a priority with him,” said Pat Trueman, AFA's director of governmental affairs in Washington, D.C. “We didn't get that from Attorney General [Janet] Reno.” Trueman worked in the Justice Department from 1988-1992.

Where is it and what is it?

Think it's not a problem in your community, that it only affects larger cities? So did the 3,374 residents in the sleepy rural community of Red Bay, Alabama. But in August a 52-year-old man pleaded guilty to charges of possessing obscene material of children. Of the 67 obscene pictures of girls between the ages of five and 14 that police confiscated from his home, all were obtained from the Internet.

About 40% of the child pornography Cyberangels finds is housed on computer servers in the United States. But sorting the real child pornography from those images which are legal is a major undertaking. Aftab said her organization receives about 1,000 tips per day and tries to identify the real child porn. Many times online vendors use deceptive advertising, such as the wording “young

lolitas,” to lead viewers into thinking the images are of children. Even the word “teens” is used in a deceptive manner, Aftab said, as this usually applies to people 18 or older but who appear to be younger.

Aftab said child pornography is defined as photographs or images of children under the age of 18, or who appear to be really young, who are posed nude with a focus on the genitals, or posed in a lewd or lascivious fashion to evoke a sexual response, or are engaged in actual or simulated sex, either with another child or with an adult.

Though it’s disturbing, “it’s not just naked children [in a photograph that makes the image pornographic],” Aftab said, “although a lot of pedophiles will look at naked children and that’s enough to get them excited. Some of them get just as excited watching kids tie their shoes.” It’s the splitting of these legal hairs about what constitutes child pornography that concerns Taylor.

“There haven’t been as many [prosecutions of] cases of nude pictures of children, and most prosecutors have concentrated on pictures of explicit sex and younger children so there’s no question about age,” he said. “I think if we’re trying to get at a problem and not just win cases, then it’s just as important not to let the pedophiles whet their appetites on 14-year-old boys or girls [in photographs not classified as child porn]. The threat to children comes when pedophiles have been incited to molest when they see nude pictures of older teens just as when they see the explicit pictures of younger ones.

There needs to be some enforcement of nude or lewd exhibition pictures of even older teens when we can prove the ages of those minors. And that’s not impossible to do.”

The typical child pornographer

So who are the people who make, distribute or view child pornography? They may not be who you first think.

The typical Internet child porn user or child molester is a white, upper-middle class professional male who, Aftab said, most often molests children while on business trips.

“[These are] people who would be members of your organization or ours, heads of country clubs or churches, or the people you look up to at your insurance company,” Aftab said. “And that’s what’s made the fight against child molesters on the Internet so hard; these are people who, when they’re arrested, nobody believes would actually be a molester.”

Aftab added that the people who are trading and distributing images of child pornography online are people who normally would never have considered doing it offline. Many of these people first look at child pornography out of curiosity, but then get hooked.

And therein lies the problem. So long as child pornography continues to flourish on the Internet, it will continue to become more entrenched in America and even more difficult a problem to kill. If there’s any light at the end of the tunnel, though, it may be Operation Avalanche, and the Justice Department’s decision to get tough.

Report the site address for child pornography found on the Internet to your Internet Service Provider and your local or state FBI or Customs office listed in your telephone directory. Also, you can report child pornography online by forwarding the site address to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) at <http://www.missingkids.com/>, or to Cyberangels at <http://www.afa.net/journal/october/www.cyberangels.org>.