

Cybercops and robbers growing trickier on World Wide Web

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In the biggest sting operation of its kind in the history of the Internet, a German-led sweep this autumn smashed more than 30 child pornography rings and netted some 26,500 suspects in 61 countries.

The secretly coordinated raids marked one of the most impressive victories against Internet crime to date, and heralded the gradual emergence of long overdue international cooperation in cyberspace law enforcement.

When the World Summit on the Information Society convenes in Geneva December 10 to 12, leaders will seek to build on their success in developing better cross-border guidelines to fight online crime.

Investigators say child pornography is just the tip of an ever-growing iceberg, in which organised crime rings and terror groups are using the Internet to expand their reach and exploit the web's anonymity to stay one step ahead of the law.

Online crime busters are forging two main trails to face their massive task: intergovernmental initiatives under the auspices of organisations such as the United Nations and Interpol, and grassroots projects.

Industrialised countries have long been putting pressure on developing nations - many of which have no legislation against e-crimes such as hacking - to overhaul their law books for the information age.

David A Gross, US Coordinator for International Communications and Information Policy, said: "Many countries, including our own, have been updating and changing their laws so that they reflect the realities of the cyber-world that we now live in."

"Having said that, of course, there is a lot of work still to be done. As the nature of the threats change, so too laws have to always be revised," said Mr Gross, who is leading the US delegation to Geneva.

While such global initiatives can be slow moving, local community groups have stepped into the gulf, banding together online to help police fight crime.

The CyberAngels, a web-based offshoot of the Guardian Angels neighbourhood watch force, have launched web patrols with volunteers worldwide and a hotline service to help online victims.

Director Katya Gifford said that the Pennsylvania-based group had recently been able to help a Texas couple.

"A father called me absolutely frantic. His 15-year-old daughter had been writing e-mails to someone telling them that she was unhappy, that her parents didn't love her," Mr Gifford told AFP in a telephone interview.

The father learned his daughter had been offered a plane ticket by her online pen pal, whose age and identity were a mystery.

Mr Gifford said that the CyberAngels were able to trace the e-mails back to a 47-year-old man who police later said was on a list of known pedophiles.

"We were able to step in at what might have been the last minute," Mr Gifford said.

"There are thousands of Internet-related cases every year where girls just disappear."

Yet despite the severity of such crimes, Internet experts are particularly concerned about the potential for "cyber terrorism" in which the Internet is used to shut down computer networks, potentially disabling vital infrastructure at banks, airports and emergency services.

"It is not at all unusual for a regional conflict to have a cyber dimension, where the battles are fought by self-appointed hackers operating under their own rules of engagement," said Dorothy Denning, a cyber terrorism expert at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California.

"A rash of cyber attacks have accompanied the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the conflict over Kashmir, and the Kosovo conflict, among others."

Ms Denning said that for now, however, studies indicated that anything more than irritating cyber attacks were still difficult for most extremists to mount, although the future could hold more technically savvy terrorists.