



Volunteers and law enforcement team up to fight cybercrime

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By Sam Handlin
Court TV

When New York lawyer Parry Aftab was asked to head up the Internet safety group Cyberangels, she was hesitant. As a full-time corporate lawyer, she was reluctant to take on additional responsibility. All that changed after her first encounter with one of group's main targets.

"I was an expert on child porn and I'd never seen it. Someone e-mailed a tip about a child porn site. I clicked on one picture link. She was about 3 and a half years old, and she was facing the camera but had her eyes closed, like little girls do when they want to be invisible. And she was being raped," says Aftab. "I cried and vomited for about an hour. Then I picked up the phone and said I'll take [Cyberangels] over."

Now Aftab, who has written a book about Internet safety and testified before Congress about uses of new cybercrime technology, is at the forefront of a swelling volunteer movement to help increase Internet safety. The site she runs, www.cyberangels.org, boasts 9,000 volunteer members, about 600 of whom are law enforcement officers facilitating the organization's work with official agencies.

The organization, started by Guardian Angels founder Curtis Sliwa, has several different wings: an educational group that teaches online classes about Internet safety, an information group that researches and writes about current issues, a help group to aid cybercrime victims, and a law enforcement group that works with government agencies.

This contribution hasn't gone overlooked. Most law enforcement cybercrime task forces work with the Cyberangels, and the group's contributions were recently recognized in a speech by Justice Department cybercrime chief Richard Riley.

Volunteers from all over the world, speaking 12 different languages, are trained to work in one of the groups. While most of the members work on the educational side, activities can include anything from searching the Web for child porn sites to investigating allegations of Internet scams.

The law enforcement group was spun off as an affiliate site, cyberlawenforcement.org, partly to ensure that criminal matters were treated by professionals.

"We wanted a place where law enforcement could come and deal with people who would understand them," noted Aftab. "And we don't want our people just going out and cruising the Internet pretending to be kids."

Badly understaffed, law enforcement agencies that handle cybercrime say they appreciate the volunteers and need all the help they can get. But sometimes overly exuberant and insufficiently principled volunteers can cause trouble.

"It's just like any other community. You've got rowdy people, you've got zealots, you've got people who will go beyond the boundaries that are acceptable," says Bob Breeden, the head of Florida's Computer Crimes Task Force.

Virulent opponents of child pornography have been known to hack offending sites. And some maverick and untrained citizens patrol the Web, posing as children whom pedophiles might try to chat up.

"If you are posing as a child on the Internet, you have to be very careful not to escalate the conversation. You have to be reactive so they can't argue entrapment in court. There have been cases where adults have tried to catch child molesters, and authorities haven't really been able to file charges because they were entrapped," says Breeden.

Issues surrounding child pornography pose special problems. Cybercrime officers say they receive tips all the time from citizens complaining about perfectly legal Internet porn sites. Part of the Cyberangels training involves education about identifying proscribed pictures; Aftab says the group sends law enforcement tips concerning almost 600 child pornography sites a week, weeded out from thousands of tips they receive.

Child pornography and child stalkers might be the safety issues that get people riled up most, but there are a host of other nonprofit groups dedicated to rooting out online crimes of others kinds.

Scambusters.com is a periodical dedicated to informing the public about online hoaxes and fraudulent schemes. Rather than working with authorities, however, they serve as a trade magazine for the cybercrime enforcement community.

"We have many of the law enforcement agencies as readers," says editor Dr. Audri Lanford. "When we write an article they may contact us."

And other institutionalized watchdog groups have established online presences. Fraud.org is maintained by the National Consumers League, the nation's oldest consumer advocacy group. Anybody who gets scammed on the Internet can file a complaint with the Web site and get advice about contacting the right authorities and getting other help.