Online Child Pornography/Child Sexual Exploitation Investigations

The FBI's Response to Online CP/CSE investigations

While investigating the disappearance of a juvenile in May 1993, FBI agents and Prince George's County, Maryland, Police detectives identified two suspects who had sexually exploited numerous juvenile males over a 25 year period. Investigation into the activities of the suspects determined that adults were routinely utilizing computers to transmit images of minors showing frontal nudity or sexually explicit conduct and to lure minors into engaging in illicit sexual activity. Further investigation and discussions with experts, both within the FBI and in the private sector, revealed that the utilization of computer telecommunications was rapidly becoming one of the most prevalent techniques by which some sex offenders shared pornographic images of minors and identified and recruited children into sexually illicit relationships. Based on information developed during this investigation, the Innocent Images investigation was initiated, in 1995, to address the illicit activities conducted by users of commercial and private online services as well as the Internet.

The central operation and case management system for all FBI online CP/CSE investigations is located at the Maryland Metropolitan Office at Calverton, Baltimore Division. The Innocent Images field supervisor and investigative personnel work closely with the Innocent Images program manager at FBI Headquarters in investigative, administrative and policy matters involving the initiative. All FBI field offices forward copies of text and images obtained in all online CP/CSE investigations to the Baltimore Division for incorporation into the Innocent Images case management system. The Innocent Images initiative provides for a coordinated FBI response to a nationwide problem by collating and analyzing information and images obtained from numerous sources and avoids duplication of effort by all FBI field offices.

The FBI's national initiative focuses on individuals who indicate a willingness to travel for the purpose of engaging in sexual activity with a juvenile; producers of child pornography; and major distributors of child pornography (defined as one who appears to have transmitted a large volume of child pornography via computer on numerous occasions to numerous other subscribers), in violation of the following Sections of Title 18 of the United States Code:

- Section 2251 - Sexual Exploitation of Children/Selling or Buying of Children
- Section 2252 - Sexual Exploitation of Minors
- Section 2253 - Criminal Forfeiture
• Section 2423(b) - Interstate Travel with Intent to Engage in a Sexual Act with a Juvenile.

The FBI and the Department of Justice (DOJ) review all files and select the most egregious subjects for prosecution.

The FBI has taken the necessary steps to ensure that the Innocent Images national initiative remains viable and productive through the use of new technology and sophisticated investigative techniques, coordination of the national investigative strategy and a national liaison initiative with a significant number of commercial and independent online service providers. Innocent Images has been highly successful. It has proven to be a logical, efficient and effective method to identify and investigate individuals who are using the Internet for the sole purpose of sexually exploiting children.

The Beginning of Innocent Images

During the early stages of Innocent Images, a substantial amount of time was exhausted on commercial online service providers which provide numerous easily accessible “chat rooms” in which teenagers and pre-teens can meet and converse with each other. Through the use of chat rooms, children can chat for hours with unknown individuals, often without the knowledge or approval of their parents. Investigation revealed that computer-sex offenders utilized the chat rooms to contact children as a child does not know whether he/she is chatting with a 14 year old or a 40 year old. The chat rooms offer the advantage of immediate communication throughout the United States and provide the pedophile an anonymous means of identifying and recruiting children into sexually illicit relationships. The FBI has investigated more than 70 cases involving computer-sex offenders traveling interstate to meet juveniles.

The investigative operation involves undercover agents (UCAs) subscribing to various commercial online service providers, the Internet and various bulletin board systems (BBBs) utilizing fictitious screen names and engaging in real-time chat or E-mail conversations. UCAs do not “surf the net” and all areas of online service providers or the Internet are predicated prior to FBI entry. Predication can be by citizen complaint; complaint by an online service provider; or self-predication by virtue of title, i.e., alt.pedophilia.sex, alt.children.sex, alt.boys.sex, alt.girls.sex. Each undercover contact conducted over the computer is handled as a consensually monitored telephonic conversation. All contacts between UCAs and potential subjects are captured and archived on electronic media, to include, all conversations and images downloaded to the UCAs.

The Innocent Images investigation demonstrated the need for a mechanism to track subject transactions and to correlate the seemingly unrelated activities of
thousands of subjects in a cyberspace environment so the Innocent Images case management system was developed which has proven to be an effective system to archive and retrieve the information necessary to identify and target priority subjects. All relevant data obtained during an undercover session is loaded into the Innocent Images structured and full text retrieval case management system by Intelligence Research Specialists (IRSs). The IRSs update, review and analyze the information contained in the case management system on a daily basis to identify priority subjects. Once an individual has been targeted as a potential or priority subject, subpoenas are issued to the relevant online service providers to obtain all available identifying information. A subject is given a priority status based on any indication that he/she is a preferential child molester or is willing to travel for the purpose of engaging in sexual activity with a minor. Once a subject has been targeted for investigation, an IRS prepares a lead packet for the appropriate FBI field office. The packet contains copies of all evidence collected by the FBI, to include, UCA chat and session logs, relevant investigative reports, all electronic conversations between the UCA and the subject and all illicit images uploaded to the UCA. The lead packet is sent to the appropriate field office for further investigation and presentation to the U.S. Attorney's Office for prospective action.

The Progression of the Innocent Images Initiative

Innocent Images has expanded to include investigations involving newsgroups, Internet relay chat and file servers.

Internet Newsgroups

A great deal of child pornography is regularly posted on Internet newsgroups which are electronic bulletin boards to which anyone with an Internet Service Provider (ISP) and news access can post messages, with or without attachments (sometimes taking the form of pornographic images). Anyone with an ISP can access newsgroups and download any posted messages and/or attachments. From an investigative standpoint, subjects who post to newsgroups are extremely difficult and labor intensive to investigate because it is hard to identify who they really are. Unlike online service providers, such as America Online, there are no unique screen names associated with each account. Each time a subscriber signs on with an ISP, he can assume any identity he wants but, through consultation with persons who are extremely proficient on the Internet, Innocent Images personnel have discovered a way to identify persons who post child pornography to newsgroups.

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) Channels

IRC channels are similar to chat rooms. They are places on the Internet where people can go to communicate with people who have similar interests. The
communications are real time, just like telephone calls or face to face communications. The threat that they pose to children is similar to the threat posed by chat rooms. IRC channels can be dedicated to any topic including the trading of child pornographic images or the recruitment of children into illicit sexual relationships. The difference between IRC channels and chat rooms is that subscribers, to online service providers providing chat rooms, have unique and traceable screen names assigned to them. IRC users can assume any screen name they want and change it at any time they want. They can assume one identity during one IRC session and another identity during another IRC session just minutes or hours later which makes identifying and tracking IRC users much more difficult.

**File Servers ("FServes")**

FServes are a feature of IRC channels. An IRC user can set up an fserve that allows other users to access and download files from particular directories on his hard disk. It is a mechanism that child pornography collectors are using to build their collection. FServes enable computer users to program their computers so that visitors can download a certain number of bytes in exchange for uploading a certain number of bytes. In other words, it is an automated, computer programmed, trading system. The person who sets up the fserve (the host) can establish the parameters of the trading. He can restrict the visitor to certain directories on his hard disk. He can give the visitor a credit of a certain number of bytes or no credit at all. Once the visitor uploads the minimum number of bytes, he can download a preset number of bytes, selecting from the file names listed on any of the directories made available by the host. Most often, a host programs his computer and leaves it on in his absence. The trading is then done automatically by his computer using the parameters the host previously established. Identifying people who establish fserves is done in the exact same way as identifying other users of IRC channels.

**The Growth of Innocent Images**

The Innocent Images initiative has been "franchised" to the FBI's Los Angeles Division and it is anticipated that other FBI field offices, located at strategic locations around the country, will eventually operate Innocent Images franchise operations. The well-defined administrative and operational protocols established by the Baltimore Division will greatly assist in the expansion of the Innocent Images initiative by other FBI field offices. All of the franchised field offices will operate in close coordination with the FBI's Baltimore Division, FBIHQ and the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section (CEOS), DOJ.
For further information concerning Innocent Images....

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