

Police crack global child porn ring

By Suzanne Smith

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Police agencies around the world are now sifting through 400,000 pieces of evidence after they cracked a major online child pornography network that used a sophisticated encryption code.

'Operation Achilles' was initiated by Queensland police task force Argos and it is alleged that a core administrator of the highly secret website was a 29-year-old Queensland public servant.

For years, a network of men scattered across the world had reached what they considered to be the pinnacle of success.

Seasoned paedophiles, they believed their sophisticated knowledge of computer encryption had made them untouchable, and in that safe zone, they commissioned, made and traded images of the youngest children involved in the worst sex acts.

FBI executive assistant director J Stephen Tidwell says the pornography ring used highly specialised techniques to hide from law enforcement authorities.

"We have found ourselves now, as this case demonstrates, that we have groups as sophisticated as any other criminal organisation, that have the wherewithal, that have the means to literally pursue children and to exploit children at a level that has surprised us," he said.

Legal documents obtained by ABC1's *Lateline* program show just how at ease the men were as they messaged each other offering pictures.

"I have a few five-year-old Taras that you do not have," one said.

"These girls are heavily drugged ... to move or resist. Three girls, the first one being the youngest, around eight or nine years old," another said.

Another writes his assessment of the importance of the child sex network.

"My thanks to you and all the others that together make this the greatest group of pedos to ever gather in one place. I'm honoured just to be part of it," he said.

Penetrating the network

This paedophile network had more than 400,000 child abuse films and images on their computers. Many of the images were sadomasochistic.



The pornography ring used highly specialised techniques to hide from law enforcement authorities. (ABC News)

But what the men didn't know was that their group was about to be destroyed from within, because the world's police had finally caught up with their computer techniques.

In the end, it was a group of Queensland police that brought the downfall of the network and cracked the case open for the FBI.

Operation Achilles began with a series of secret events in New Zealand and Australia.

It was December 2005 when New Zealand's Department of Internal Affairs made an extraordinary discovery, which cannot be disclosed as the investigation is continuing.

The New Zealanders passed their information to task force Argos in Queensland.

In January 2006, task force Argos began one of the most complex child paedophile investigations ever undertaken, in co-operation with the FBI, Interpol, Europol, German, British, New Zealand and Canadian police.

By July 10, 2006, covert operatives had broken through the security apparatus that protected the paedophile ring.

Rescuing children

At this point, task force Argos made a shocking discovery. A video was being offered for sale to the network.

It turned out to be what is now being dubbed, 'the Daphne and Irene' video, which shows the repeated rape of two girls aged 11 and nine, by their 35-year-old father.

On July 27, the father was arrested and the house of the Italian webmaster, Sergio Marzola, was raided in Italy. He was found to have 150,000 euros in cash stashed in his stereo speakers.

When Daphne and Irene's father was finally arrested in Belgium, he had 150 separate videos of his children.

Europol officer Menno Hagemeyer says many of the videos were tailor-made.

"Individuals were willing to pay hundreds and hundreds of euros if, for example, their favourite model would do their particular pose," he said.

"We have found pictures of the models, in which the model is holding a piece of paper with the name of the customer - a personal trophy."

In Queensland, nine men were arrested and charged for buying the video, and a four-year-old Australian girl was found and rescued.

Then, Operation Achilles found another predator, this time in Germany.

The man, who appeared in court two weeks ago, has been sentenced to 10 years in jail for the rape of his two daughters. One is six years old, the other one is just three years old. He filmed and broadcast his crimes live via his webcam.

Watching the video, police recognised the theme of a local radio station playing in the background and they heard the unusual names of the two girls. German police tracked down the location and rescued the children.

Local crimes

As task force Argos and their international partners mapped the network, they were able to crack the ring's encryption codes.

They found the secret passages of what appeared to be legitimate websites, opening the secret door into the paedophiles' hellish trading room.

They also unearthed the paedophiles' pseudonyms, the screen names that hide an abuser's identity.

They saw in the networks communication that group members were tested on photo recognition. Every paedophile knows intimately all the photos that have been traded. New members are questioned about traded photos to test their trustworthiness.

At this point, task force Argos made a very significant discovery - the man they now believe was the key administrator of the group actually lived in their own state - in Townsville, in far north Queensland.

Police believe the alleged Townsville predator was responsible for the security and administration of the group. Experts in these networks say an administrator plays a critical role.

Task force Argos operatives and their international partners watched and listened to the network for 18 months, until they had enough evidence to move in and arrest the predators.

On February 26 this year, John Rouse, the man who had cracked the ring, briefed colleagues on their targets, and their pornographic material. On February 29, simultaneous raids occurred across six countries.

Standing trial

Detective Superintendent of Queensland Police, Ross Barnett, says police feel they have achieved a great result for the victims of the network.

"We're very confident that we have got all of the major players in this group, and that's a really pleasing result for law enforcement," he said.

"But probably even more important than the arrest of these offenders is the fact that along the way we've been able to rescue 20 children around the world from ongoing sexual abuse."

The 14 American alleged child abusers will be tried in June by the grand jury. The indictment obtained by *Lateline* says some of the victims were as young as five years old.

If convicted, the US predators are likely to get tough sentences - more than 15 years each.

But that is only the start of this operation Achilles.

FBI agents will now have to sift through many thousands of clues that they have recovered from the predators' hard drives.

And there will be some children that they will never find.

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