

## ISPs take major step in curbing child porn

Three major firms agreed June 10 to purge images from their Web servers.

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Washington  
6/11/08

US law enforcement officials have some new deputies in their efforts to control child pornography: big telecommunications firms that provide Internet service to millions of Americans.

On June 10, New York state Attorney General Andrew Cuomo announced that Verizon, Sprint, and Time Warner Cable have agreed to block access to child pornography and eliminate it from their servers. The move will affect customers of these companies nationwide.

In the past, Internet service providers (ISPs) have been reluctant to block specific content, arguing that they were portals, not hosts – and that the freewheeling nature of the Web would blunt any attempt at such regulation.

But controlling explicit images of children via pursuit and prosecution of individual users is a slow and tedious process, note experts. Knocking out the means of distribution of child pornography may be a better approach.

"I hope it works," says Janis Wolak, an assistant professor at the Crimes Against Children Research Center of the University of New Hampshire.

The agreement between New York state authorities and Verizon, Sprint, and Time Warner grew out of an undercover investigation of child-porn newsgroups, Attorney General Cuomo said. In the past, he has used similar probes and the possibility of bringing charges to extract concessions on Internet safety.

Last year, for instance, he reached agreement with the social networking sites MySpace and Facebook to toughen protections against online sexual predators.

As part of the pact announced Tuesday, the ISPs will also donate \$1 million to a fund to help remove online child pornography disseminated in the past by their users.

The firms themselves said they acted immediately to shut down offending sites after being contacted by Cuomo's office.

"There are people doing whatever they do on the Internet all the time, and we can't possibly scan every user group," said Verizon spokesman Eric Rabe. "But there are some things we can do and as soon as it's brought to our attention, we work very quickly."

Eliminating material that flows through an Internet service provider is not quite as easy as, say, eliminating offensive magazines from news dealers, however. It might even prove to be as difficult as

trying to regulate the contents of conversations carried by voice phone providers.

### **Further underground?**

The June 10 provider pact might slow down child pornographers for awhile, says Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank near Washington. But in the end it might simply cause them to operate in a more surreptitious manner, perhaps by encrypting their images.

Meanwhile, law enforcement has now taken a step that might serve as a bad precedent, says Mr. Harper. Child pornography is difficult to defend. But what happens if officials decide to move further, into other areas of conduct or even speech?

"Before too long you don't have an open, free-wheeling Internet," says Harper.

Harper says that to stomp out child pornography, law enforcement really needs to continue to pursue end-users, although such efforts are necessarily international in scope and require a great deal of work.

Ms. Wolak of the Crimes Against Children Research Center, however, says that finding ways of hitting the child-porn distribution market in the end would be a more effective approach.

There is certainly a free speech concern in trying to eliminate distribution of child-porn images, she says. But she adds that it is easy to draw a line on this issue because there is nothing borderline or gray about much of the offensive material.

It often features very young children who are obviously being physically abused, she says.

"In many cases you look at this material and it is clear that it is illegal," says Wolak.

### **Access to websites barred**

Under the agreement with New York state, service providers will be required to bar access to explicit websites flagged by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. In addition, a library of images of child pornography amassed in the course of New York's undercover investigation will be used to try to track new sites. Many of these images are posted over and over at different online locations.

"The focus here is on the worst of the worst. This is not protected speech," says Ernie Allen, president of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Also on June 10, France signed an agreement with ISPs similar to that reached by New York officials. French authorities will compile a blacklist using input from users who identify child pornography sites, said French Interior Minister Michel Alliot-Marie.

All service providers have agreed to block those sites, said Mr. Alliot-Marie.

"We have come to an agreement: Access to child-pornography sites will be blocked in France. Other democracies have done it," said the minister.

Britain, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Canada, and New Zealand, among others, have implemented similar

measures.

In a press conference, Attorney General Cuomo said his investigators had found 88 newsgroups devoted to child pornography. Companies had acted immediately when told of New York's concern, he said.

- *Material from the Associated Press was used in this report.*