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Barry Crimmins
Leads fight against porn

Man fights against child porn on Internet

By Michael Heaton
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It was a scene Kurt Vonnegut could have written.

Barry Crimmins, a bearded, 42-year-old, left-wing political satirist from Lakewood, Ohio, was testifying before a U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee investigating child pornography on the Internet. To make matters richer, he had been invited to testify by his newfound ally, the very conservative Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa.

Crimmins, in his suit and Jerry Garcia tie, thought he looked like a "marijuana grower appearing at his arraignment" rather than a man who was one of the first America Online users to alert authorities to the child-pornography trade.

On that day last July, Crimmins sat next to a square-jawed, neatly attired lawyer for America Online, the leading access provider to the Internet with more than 5 million members, and warned the assembled congressmen and women of the dangers of the unregulated porno

graphic trade. The lawyer warned of undermining freedom of speech and privacy with undue on-line regulations.

That only sparked Crimmins' keen wit.

"His privacy? His privacy to what? View the evidence of crimes for lurid purposes? That's like saying you could mug someone and call it performance art."

And then Crimmins went further.

"I am here to tell the American people that not only are their children unsafe on America Online, their children are unsafe because of it."

And then Crimmins told them why.

Seven months earlier, Crimmins had been performing at gigs throughout the country. He was writing for Dennis Miller's talk show and was the opening act for Jackson Browne and comedian Steven Wright. He was busy with benefit shows for causes he supported, including Greenpeace and anti-war groups during the Persian Gulf War.

A friend, who knew of Crimmins' penchant for championing causes, told him about pedophiles who had set up an images-bartering network on the Internet.

Crimmins didn't want to believe it. He decided to check it out himself.

Three-month search began

For three months, Crimmins searched for the electronic gathering places his friend had spoken of. Finally, he found them. They had names such as "Incest is best," "I do dghtr," "Dad4 son incest" and "Preschoolgrls." There were more than 100 such member rooms, all of them teeming with pedophiles trafficking in images of child pornography.

He was sickened. At first he electronically accosted the people in those rooms and told them what they were doing was illegal. Then Crimmins sent electronic messages to America Online, more than 200 of them, but was either sent a polite letter thanking him for his concern or told to press the "ignore" button on the computer, which blocks the transfer of messages between parties.

It was then that Crimmins decided to go undercover. (At the time, Crimmins did not know America Online also was investigating the pornographic images.)

Crimmins gave himself the computer identity of a curious and naive 12-year-old boy named "Sean." Then he returned to member rooms.

As "Sean," Crimmins met people from all over the country, with computer identities such as "No-Shame," "Love Animal," "Demon 36" and "Craver."

Often, Crimmins found, there was no conversation between the parties in the rooms. They were too busy

"downloading" child pornography into each other's computers. The horrific images were bartered between users hourly.

His doubts were erased

If Crimmins ever had any doubts about the problem of child pornography, they were gone now. In one instance, an Internet user sent Crimmins so much unsolicited pornographic material that it took 8½ hours to download it.

"It was an anonymous superstore for pedophiles," Crimmins said. "They were not only increasing the demand for child pornography, thereby ensuring that more children would be raped and abused, but they were creating a community where they could all get together and make themselves feel better about what they were doing."

Crimmins couldn't bear to see the trade in images continue. As a child, he had been sexually assaulted by a stranger. The images he was seeing, from all walks of life, cried out for somebody to do something.

"A lot of it was real grisly work that just filled me with despair. It can be real toxic stuff. I had to inoculate myself. The kids in these pictures, the looks in their eyes ... you just know they're gone, shattered people."

Before his investigation was over, he would spend \$10,000 and more than six months sitting in front of his computer. He collected more than 1,000 pornographic images as well as names, addresses, America Online account numbers and hundreds of pages of conversations between people discussing the abuse of children or soliciting sex.

"It was a dark, troubling time in our lives," said Karen Crist, a 37-year-old Cleveland lawyer who lives with Crimmins. In her private practice, Crist represents survivors of sexual abuse. She thought she could handle Crimmins' investigation.

"He wasn't doing anything but this," Crist said. "I'd be leaving for work in the morning and he'd still be up from the night before and on the computer."

On two occasions, Crimmins showed her what he was receiving over the network. The images shocked her.

"All I can say is that I wasn't prepared," Crist said. "I didn't like it for two reasons. One, I wasn't sure this was healthy for him emotionally. And two, I didn't like it in my house."

Lawmen move in

Crist also worried about the legality of what Crimmins was doing. She contacted Melody White, who supervises the Cuyahoga County, Ohio, prosecutor's Child Protection Unit, and told her what Crimmins was up to. White sent assistant prosecutors Rick Bell and Joe Hoffer to investigate.

Two weeks later, in April, an FBI agent and a Lakewood police officer came to see what Crimmins had collected. Crimmins handed them more than 20 floppy disks containing pornographic images and the names and addresses of those who sent the images.

They took the disks and left. Crimmins never heard from them again.

"After the (FBI) agent left, I just sort of broke down," Crimmins said. "It was easier to keep my emotions guarded up when I was in the heat of battle. I could finally afford the luxury of my feelings. All my life it seems I've been petitioning the government for change. Finally my government responded."

"No normal person can see the kinds of things I've seen and not be transformed by them. It was more than worth it."

Almost two months after Crimmins turned over his evidence, he received a call from Grassley's office in Washington. A friend had told Grassley about Crimmins' work, and Crimmins was asked to testify about his findings.

Testimony before Congress

The testimony began with various senators confessing their unfamiliarity with the Internet. Later, a teen who had been stalked on the Internet testified as did two parents.

Then came Crimmins.

"Rushed and nervous as I was, I think I made my case," he said.

Bill Burrington, America Online's assistant general counsel and director of government affairs, testified that his company was generally opposed to increased regulation.

"Our goal is to educate parents better about the tools available to keep indecent and inappropriate materials out of the hands of computer-literate minors," Burrington testified. Burrington did not return telephone calls seeking further comment.

Crimmins went back home amid a chorus of praise from his friends and a wave of criticism from Internet users.

"He got hammered on the Internet by the censorship people," said Lana Lawrence, editor of *Moving Forward*, a Virginia-based journal for sexual-abuse survivors. "I just think he was incredibly brave to go against the flow and demand stricter enforcement of existing child-pornography laws."

One month after Crimmins' testimony, the FBI made more than a dozen arrests and searched 120 homes nationwide at the conclusion of a two-year investigation into the use of America Online to distribute child pornography and arrange sex with children. The investigation was called "Innocent Images." More arrests are expected, but at least three people tracked by Crimmins were arrested.

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