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Woman fears computer pal lured away daughter, 13

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In the shadowy frontier of cyberspace, where the names are assumed and the addresses have no real estate, Lisa Noble is searching for her 13-year-old daughter.

A week ago, Tara J. Noble ran away from her St. Matthews home. Lisa Noble thinks her daughter boarded a Greyhound bus headed west, rolling toward a rendezvous with someone she met through a "chat room" on America Online.

And now her mother — who said she was "computer illiterate" before last week — is using the same home computer to try to track Tara while she waits for word of her.

It's not certain that Tara Noble's computer connections played a role in her disappearance, but police believe the evidence points in that direction.

"The computer — that's what started this problem," said Norm Mayer, chief of the St. Matthews Police Department, which is investigating the case. "And

that's the only real lead we have."

Over the past week, Lisa Noble and her ex-husband, Sam Noble of Pleasure Ridge Park, have turned their daughter's room upside down in search of information about where she might be. They found telephone numbers from across the country, people Tara had met during the dozens of hours she spent chatting on computer networks.

And for hours on end, Lisa Noble has worked at the Packard Bell home computer she bought about two months ago.

She runs down online directories that become blind alleys. She wades through a series of sexually explicit images that found their way across the Noble family's modem during the dozens of hours her daughter spent online since April.

"I'm like, 'How can this stuff be on a computer?'" she said yesterday.

She downloads clues. Saturday night, for example, she found that her daughter

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Tara Noble's disappearance might be linked to a computer "chat room."

Did online pal lure girl away?

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— reportedly last spotted in Odessa, Texas — was still communicating with computer acquaintances through America Online.

"Tara was last known to use a computer on the 3rd of June," Lisa Noble said yesterday. Noble hopes that police can determine where Tara was at the time.

Pam McGraw, a spokeswoman for America Online in Vienna, Va., said yesterday that the company is cooperating with authorities who are investigating the Noble case.

The company releases information about its users only in cases where it receives a subpoena or a court order, she said. "We have received a subpoena," McGraw said.

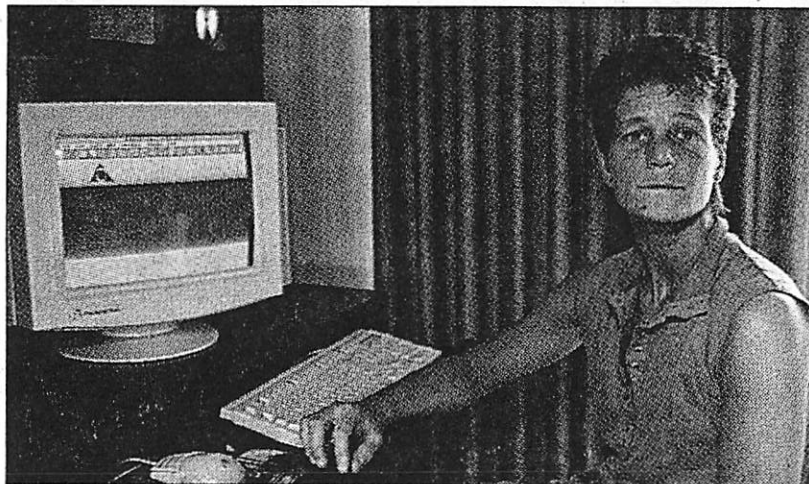
She declined to say whether America Online's records could help pinpoint the site from which Tara Noble used the service on Saturday.

McGraw said that the company provides "parental controls" that allow parents to prevent their children from using chat rooms.

Lisa Noble said she didn't know about them before her daughter disappeared.

Both Lisa and Sam Noble were stunned to learn what had come into their daughter's computer.

Always a standout student in science, Tara had begged her mother for the computer, Lisa Noble said. She then spent hours on it — ultimately prompting her mother, an electrician, to remove the telephone jack she was using. Still, both parents were glad that Tara was so enthusiastic about it.



STAFF PHOTO BY PAT McDONOGH

Lisa Noble, who described herself as "computer illiterate," is now using this computer to search for her missing daughter, Tara.

"We encouraged her," said Sam Noble, 37. "We didn't know she was talking to men all across the country."

Over the weekend, police downloaded the explicit material that Lisa Noble, 34, found stored in the computer's memory.

"People talk about the information superhighway — in my opinion, it ought to be regulated," Sam Noble said.

Legislation in Congress would extend existing protections against using the telephone for harassing, obscene and indecent calls to cover computer networks. The measure, sponsored by Sen. Jim Exon, D-Neb., has passed the Senate Commerce Committee, where Sen. Wendell Ford, D-Ky., voted for it.

An aide to Ford said yesterday that Ford would vote for the measure again when it comes up for consideration on the Senate floor in one to two weeks. A spokesman for Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., declined to comment on whether

McConnell would support the measure, but said McConnell generally agrees with the protections it would provide.

America Online and other online operators "do not support governmental regulation of online speech," according to a statement the company issued yesterday. Others have said the measure might run afoul of constitutional guarantees of free speech.

But Russ Rader, an aide to Exon, said courts have upheld regulation of content in media in which children have "unique access." And "children often have more knowledge about how to operate a computer than parents do."

Meanwhile, Lisa Noble is waiting for word.

"It's nerve-racking," she said yesterday as she sat by the humming computer. As the computer's disk turned, an image appeared on the screen to signal that the computer was busy.

It was an hourglass.