Jefferson cop cracks overseas porn library

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Staff Writer

A computer-pornography library with pictures of toddlers having sex with adults was uncovered this week in Birmingham, England — by a Jefferson County policeman sitting at a computer terminal in Louisville.

Lt. William Baker, who had never heard of the English porn network, got a tip and hacked his way into it. He was so appalled by the pictures he found there that he spent 2½ months in an undercover investigation with British authorities to bring down the secretive operator of the library.

Baker is an expert in telecommunications fraud. Every three months, the U.S. Treasury Department flies him to Glynco, Ga., to teach federal agents about catching criminal computer hackers.

He doesn't get paid extra for teaching the classes. In fact, his normal duties have nothing to do with computers. He supervises patrol platoons at the county's A District police substation in Middletown.

On his own time, Baker polices the far-flung international-computer network called the Internet, which connects 2½ million computers and 20 million users in government offices, universities, businesses and homes. He said he does it because he thinks law enforcement in this country and across the world is being blindsided by criminals at computer consoles.

Some drug dealers, for instance, are giving up selling drugs and are

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getting into computer crimes because "you can make as much money at it and nobody shoots at you," he said. "This is where all the bad guys are going if they are smart."

Baker's primary expertise, however, has been in tracking down people who steal long-distance phone service or break into banks and credit-card companies via computer to get money. He helps other law-enforcement agencies with their cases when he's asked.

But the Internet has always had a prurient side. Computer zealots are overwhelmingly male, and most pornography is directed at men. Because of this overlap, computers — like every other communication-technology breakthrough before them, according to a recent New York Times story — became a popular means of distributing pornography and even arranging illicit sex.

Policing the Internet's red-light district, however, did not interest Baker, and he knew little about it.

But after seeing those terrible pictures pulled from the computer at the University of Birmingham — with children of his own ages 4 and 8, the pictures made him nauseated and angry — Baker decided to educate himself.

He found that child pornography is a world all to itself, where sets of pictures are traded like baseball cards.

He became a regular user of the porn network, and his computer presence became familiar to other users of the system.

Meanwhile, Baker made dozens of phone calls to try to get in touch with the right authorities to shut down the network. It was a bureaucratic maze almost as complicated as the computer system itself.

With each call, he had to explain the whole story behind the pictures. He would be referred to someone else and have to explain the whole story again. These difficulties are one of the reasons policing the Internet is so tough, he said.

"On the law-enforcement side, it crosses multiple jurisdictional and even international boundaries, so it makes prosecution extremely difficult," Baker said. "You can't imagine the problems you encounter."

Through the U.S. Customs Service, Baker's information was given to New Scotland Yard's Obscene Publications Branch, and he began working undercover for the British. Together, they found out that the operator of the porn network had excluded anyone from England who tried to access his network.

So Baker downloaded nearly 400 pictures and sent them off to the British as evidence. He also trolled the electronic messages sent to the network. Most of the messages described the pictured children.

"They like to know the name of the kids," Baker said. "That enhances it for them."

He happened upon a message left by the network's librarian asking how the network's users liked some recent photos he had added to the collection. The message had a return address, and Baker had his man.

Police in the East Midlands executed search warrants Tuesday and brought in for questioning a 25-year-old research associate in the University of Birmingham's department of metallurgy. They seized thousands of pictures of children as young as 2 engaged in obscene acts that were stored on the university's $4.5 million computer system.

As soon as the pictures are cataloged and examined, Baker said, charges will be filed against the research associate — who apparently never charged fees to any users of his system. University officials told British reporters they were shocked at the whole episode and would not rehire the researcher.

Meanwhile, Baker is back on his hacker patrol — a rare cop on the electronic frontier.