

EVIL IN THE VIRTUAL EDEN

by Elena Curti

The internet is a modern miracle of communication, so one family thought, until the police raid of their home. One of them had succumbed to its corrupting powers. The internet has torn down barriers to communication, and made the sum of man's knowledge accessible to all. As such it has proved a tremendous force for good, by, for example, enabling courageous people in Zimbabwe to expose the injustices perpetrated by Robert Mugabe's regime. However, the internet can also be a deeply corrupting influence.

Scarcely a week passes without news of an appalling crime in which it has played a part. Recently there has been the homosexual cannibal in Germany, Armin Miewes who met a willing victim by placing an advertisement on the internet; the case of Graham Coutts who murdered the teacher Jane Longhurst, after spending hours looking at images of rape and strangulation on the net; and most recently the former US Marine, Toby Studabaker, who befriended a 12-year-old girl through an internet chat-room, engineered a meeting, then abducted her.

These cases are regular reminders that the net, through images and opportunities for contact, can encourage people to realize their darkest fantasies. What is becoming apparent is that there is a much broader appetite for images of the most extreme forms of sexual perversion and violence than we ever realized. Websites offering pornography are those most visited on the net, so much so that they are putting many of the top-shelf magazines out of business.

It was revealed last month that a total of 3,022 people were cautioned or charged in connection with child pornography offences in England and Wales between 1988 and 2001 – an increase of more than 33 per cent each year. That this increase is happening now suggests a possible causal link between these offences and the proliferation of child pornography on the internet as well as the ease with which it can be accessed. And those caught are likely

to be a fraction of those looking at this material. Research in the United States has found that as many as one in three people found in possession of such images also directly abused children. But what about the remaining two-thirds? Until a year ago, I would have believed that all such individuals posed a serious risk to children. Then, a few weeks ago my husband was sentenced for viewing child pornography on the net and is now serving a three-month prison sentence.

It began in 1999 when he was employed by a national newspaper to edit its online edition. He spent hours surfing the net both at home and at work, becoming convinced that the internet heralded a bold new future for the world. He was equally concerned about its potential to encourage all manner of evil, and began planning a book with the working title *Virtual Eden*. He believed there were parallels between the Garden of Eden and the internet, but in his book proposal he pointed out an essential difference.

‘In the Garden of Eden, God told Adam and Eve that they must not eat the fruit from a certain tree. With the internet, there is no supreme being telling us what we can and cannot access. The internet is a Godless Eden. It is down to the individual’s conscience what they do and do not look at and delve into. Individual nations’ attempts at regulating and censoring the net will fail,’ he wrote.

Soon his research led him to spend more time looking at indecent images than on developing his book proposal. There were depictions of sexual violence and child pornography which he later told me he found repulsive, but for the first time in his life, he found himself drawn to pictures of pubescent and pre-pubescent girls in states of undress, and started to seek them out on the internet. He thought he could stay within the law if he accessed only websites which in their small print classified their material as ‘art’ under US law rather than pornography or if they promised that their models were over 18. Some of the sites were Japanese where such material appeared to be legal and a relatively mainstream taste. For four years he surfed the net, usually paying by credit card to view sites for limited periods. He did not save illegal images or communicate with anyone about them. His was a solitary occupation, usually conducted late at night in his study, often with a bottle of wine at his side.

All I noticed was that he was drinking too much and not getting enough sleep. If I woke during the night, I would often find he was downstairs 'working'. During the day, he often appeared preoccupied and distant, both with the children and with myself. When we were around, he spent much of his free time either sleeping, reading or listening to music. This pattern of behaviour remained essentially the same over four years. It was brought to an abrupt end by a ring on the doorbell at 6.20 a.m. on a bitterly cold morning last March. Five police officers arrived with a warrant for his arrest. They searched the house and found nothing incriminating, but then took away the hard drives from our computers.

My husband's arrest formed part of a major police investigation called Operation Ore. It began in 2002 when the US Postal Service seized a list of names and credit-card details of people who had accessed child pornography websites run by a company in Texas called Landslide Productions. There were 7,272 UK-based subscribers on the list. My husband – a senior newspaper executive – was one of those named, and a police source immediately leaked news of his arrest to the press. Stories appeared the next day and he resigned from his job. We were told Social Services would be in touch about our children and we waited for the phone to ring.

My overwhelming desire was to discover how the man I loved and thought I knew so well could have done such a thing. He did not seem to know the answer himself. Our elderly parish priest was the only person who would listen calmly and understand. He has had little to do with the internet, but the story of a man who is tempted to do evil, then falls under its control, is only too familiar to an experienced priest. 'Is my husband a bad man?' I recall asking my priest as I dropped him home after his first visit to our house following my husband's arrest. 'No, he is not a bad man. He has been weak,' was his reply.

Addiction to internet pornography is a morality tale for modern times. These images of depravity, both legal and illegal, had acquired an extraordinary hold on my husband. Prior to his arrest, whenever he was alone in the house, he could not resist going online. We were continually bombarded with unsolicited 'spam' emails advertising child pornography websites. The same sites continually inserted themselves into our 'Favourites'. When I asked my

husband about them he would say his email address had been sold to thousands of companies and denied that he had looked at pornography of any kind.

Once, late at night when I was working on the home computer for a change, the screen froze and, as I tried to sort out the problem, a new and unfamiliar desktop appeared. It consisted entirely of lurid icons linked to child pornography sites and gave me a terrible fright. It felt like a manifestation of pure evil. Why didn't I go upstairs to wake my husband and show him what was on the screen? I am still angry with myself when I think about it today. As it was, I left it until the morning and was only too willing to believe his denials.

The police technicians recovered 6,000 images of legal adult pornography and 245 classed as child pornography. Among them were 10 images viewed between 1999 and 2000 that showed images of children being abused by adults. I agree that viewing those images is in effect 'child abuse by proxy', and that those who pay to look at them are fuelling demand for such pictures and therefore indirectly contributing to further abuse of children. But it is also absolutely wrong that those 10 pictures and thousands like them can be accessed in minutes by anyone via an Internet Service Provider (ISP), a search engine and a credit card.

Within days of his arrest, my husband had begun to face up to his addiction and arranged to see a consultant psychiatrist every week for three months. The psychiatrist helped him to take responsibility for what he had done, but also to understand that stress at work, depression, insomnia and alcohol had all played a part in his addiction. My husband also came to believe that the problem of child pornography and other illegal material on the internet cannot be solved solely by arresting and punishing those who create a market for it. He hopes that he can help mobilise a campaign for the regulation of the internet. In a statement he prepared to be issued after he had been sentenced he drew an analogy with the war on illegal drugs. 'I became one of the addicts,' he wrote, 'An addict's habit is fed by dealers.' The dealers in this instance are often major corporations who in their role as Internet Service Providers sell consumers a gateway to the internet and, through their search engines, facilitate the search for illegal material.

Self-regulation by the ISPs in co-operation with the police has failed to prevent the child porn industry from expanding. Earlier this year the COPINE Project, a leading academic research group based at University College, Cork, reported that new images depicting hundreds of abused children were now appearing from eastern Europe and South America. The project's director, Professor Max Taylor, and researcher Dr Ethel Quayle say that the ISPs are not working hard enough to limit access to child pornography, because they would lose money. What hampers elimination of child pornography from the internet is the system's own structure, which defies any attempt at regulation or censorship. There are an infinite number of sites and an infinite number of users.

No one doubts that effective strategies to trace and close down child pornography sites would be costly. But the ISPs also worry that unwelcome public attention might then switch to adult pornography. This is probably the most lucrative industry on the internet, generating billions of US dollars. It is regarded as a legitimate business, but the dividing line between adult and child pornography is often very fine indeed. Even the most mainstream 'adult' images often seek to excite by emphasising the youth and apparent innocence of those portrayed. It has long been regarded as titillating, for instance, for adult models to be photographed dressed in school uniform. According to Taylor and Quayle's research, the route from adult to child pornography is one that is often taken by offenders. They write about a process of 'escalation' in which habitual users of pornography progressively seek more extreme images.

In November 2002, Lord Justice Rose, Vice President of the Court of Appeal Criminal Division, said that increased access to the internet had greatly exacerbated the problem of child pornography by making it more easily accessible 'and increasing the likelihood of such material being found accidentally by others who may subsequently become corrupted by it'. And so it has proved. The police are struggling to deal with all those on the Operation Ore list. In January, the Home Office Minister Paul Goggins said only one in 20 of them had so far been convicted. A mere 10 per cent had ever been charged.

Over the past year I have read many newspaper accounts of cases where men of previous good character have become caught up in this terrible evil.

The extent of their habit varies considerably from looking at relatively few indecent images of children, to building up huge collections of pictures and exchanging them with others.

While the secular experts are right to demand more research about this phenomenon, Christianity offers an explanation which I have never understood as well as I do now; all human beings are to a greater or lesser extent drawn towards evil, and once we succumb it is hard to break free. But there is the hope of redemption and a new beginning. In our own case, it felt entirely appropriate that we should ask our priest to bless the house again after what had happened, and that we should renew our marriage vows on our 20th wedding anniversary. There is something to celebrate when my husband returns home next month. He is free in more senses than one.

*The Lucy Faithfull Foundation runs **Stop it Now** – a helpline for adults who are worried about their own or others' behaviour towards children. The number is 0808 1000900. There is also a website: www.stopitnow.org.uk This article was first published in The Tablet Saturday, 28 February 2004 and is reproduced with permission.*