

## *'Predators Are Becoming More Sophisticated'*

Pornographers and Pedophiles Online

**A**mong the witnesses at the April 4, 2006 hearing in the House of Representatives on the sexual exploitation of children on the Internet was New York Times reporter Kurt Eichenwald, whose six-month investigation of online child pornography led to a front-page exposé last December. His testimony is excerpted below.

As a citizen, I was dumbfounded by what I found. As a father, I was terrified. Like most people I gave little thought during my life to the scourge of child pornography. But I now know that we are fighting a losing battle.

The predators are sophisticated in the use of computers and talented in their manipulation of children. They count on our willingness to avert our eyes from the unpleasant to succeed in their pursuit of illegal images of minors. And we have been far too willing to comply. That is part of why the child pornography business has

exploded in the past decade. As many of you noted in your opening statements, it is now a \$20 billion-a-year industry.

Webcam pornography has emerged in just last the few years but is already a significant part of this illicit industry... Hundreds of minors have been lost to the lure of performing in online pornography. I interviewed a number of them. They include children from every walk of life, wealthy and middle-class, poor, honors students and those struggling with their grades, children of divorce and with intact families. The only shared characteristic I found is a loneliness that these minors feel is alleviated by meeting people online and in person through their webcam business.

Entire infrastructures have emerged to sustain this business, including both witting and unwitting corporate participants. You have already heard how

predators have turned the ingenuity of some of our greatest online companies against our children. Wish lists with companies like Amazon.com and American Eagle Outfitters—a wonderful convenience for gift-giving—have become mechanisms for seducing children. Online payment systems such as PayPal.com have been used to facilitate transfers of cash. Communications programs from companies like AOL and Yahoo are used both for direct conversations between predators and children and for the transmission of illegal video images. We've heard a lot today about chatrooms. They're no longer necessary. A predator can reach each child individually through these communication systems. Many of these programs and services can be obtained by children in minutes without requiring accurate identification or proof of either age or parental consent.

But in addition to the unsuspecting companies, there are businesses that know exactly what they are doing. In my reporting, I discovered credit card processors who provided support for webcam child pornography. I found Web-hosting companies that offered servers for the illegal businesses. I even found a company that provided streaming video to sites operated by minors on condition that the company president be allowed to watch the pornographic performances for free.

I also located scores of marketing sites, known as portals, which were used to direct potential customers to the webcam child-pornography sites. These portals—many of which have

temporarily shut down since publication of my article—underscore the scope and magnitude of this business. I have provided the committee with a listing maintained by a single portal of the almost 600 teenage webcam sites that it marketed. Perhaps most disturbing was that major American and international companies advertise on these marketing portals for child pornography. The advertisements, copies of which have also been provided to the committee, appeared immediately above images used by boys and girls to market their pornographic sites. Apparently, these companies were attempting to win business both from customers and the teenage pornographers themselves as they offered services to help efficiently run more pay-sites....

But the for-pay sites of adolescents are only one level of this illicit business. Untold thousands of other children have become unknowing participants in the online pornography industry. These minors perform not for money or gifts but because they have been tricked into stripping and masturbating online for what they believe is a single viewer. These performances are recorded and then posted on for-pay pornography sites without the knowledge or consent of the minor. In my reporting I found websites dedicated to offering webcam videos of hundreds of girls and boys who had been duped into such performances....

There is a business infrastructure for this part of the industry as well. There are people who make their liv-

ing trolling the Internet for children with webcams, luring them into sexual performances and selling the resulting pornographic videos. To aid such people and others in disguising their true identities, there is software available that allows anyone to make a recorded video appear to be a live webcam transmission. The result is that a middle-aged man can portray himself as a teenage boy or girl complete with the video needed to convince any doubters.

In my reporting, I discovered a group of predators who took bets among themselves about how many online approaches it would require to convince a girl with a webcam to take off her clothes, with a resulting recorded video shared among the betters. By the time I found this group, they had played their game dozens of times. They appear to have never failed to convince their target to strip...

To aid in their hunts for adolescents, these adults again use legitimate businesses... Numerous listings of children, including sites such as MySpace.com and BuddyPick.com are now the favored sites, the virtual Sears catalogue for pedophiles. Using these sites in combination, predators can search for children by age, location, and sex. They can obtain enormous amounts of identifying data, including whether a child operates a webcam. I have witnessed conversations among child predators online where they discuss the latest minor located from these sites... Even social-networking sites that boast of being safe engage in reckless behavior, requiring personal data

from minors before allowing access to their sites, reinforcing the children's false view that providing such information is harmless.

When I explained how predators used these systems to the producers for Oprah Winfrey, they asked me for a demonstration. We limited my search to minors within twenty miles of my location, meaning, if I was a pedophile, I could personally meet those minors within the hour. The producers timed me. It took only a minute and thirty seconds before I was in direct contact with a sixteen-year-old girl. By that time I knew her name, address, school, plans for the evening and other identifying information, including her younger sisters' names and ages. We repeated the test searching, for a boy within the same distance. This time, they wanted to make it harder and asked me to make sure the kid had a webcam. I was in contact with a fourteen-year-old in two-and-a-half minutes. In both instances, I told these minors what I was doing and advised them not to speak with strangers online. Both replied, contrary to the obvious, that they never did...

After my story [was published in the *Times*], a university professor e-mailed me and made postings about the Internet to complain that, statistically, few viewers of child pornography become molesters. As you have heard, his statistics are bogus. But his argument, applied to this circumstance is ludicrous. These are not instances where pedophiles are obtaining images of children they cannot identify. Here,

a single child is being fed upon by hundreds of predators, all in direct, daily contact. The entreaties to meet begin quickly. Numerous minors told me of predators pleading for meetings. More than a few, I believe, agreed to go.

I have found oftentimes that adults react to these facts with incredulity. They cannot comprehend how a child could be so easily lured into pornography or speak so readily to a stranger....But you also have to understand the environment where the minors find themselves. They are not being approached by some stranger in the park. Rather, they are in their own homes, feeling safe. They feel comfort-

able on the Internet, in ways we may not recognize. Internet communication has all of the elements of true social interaction but remains shallow. So it is both socially fulfilling and emotionally non-threatening. There is no one else there, just a small, silent device nearby. There is a level of unreality about it and on the part of the minors, a simple lack of comprehension....

Each year, each week, each day the predators are becoming more sophisticated with computers, facilitating the growth and evolution of child pornography. It is why this business is exploding. And my reporting has shown me that we are woefully behind.