On the Web, Pedophiles Extend Their Reach

Phillip J. Distasio, who has been charged with raping two boys, has argued on the Web in favor of legalizing sex with children.

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At first blush, the two conversations — taking place almost simultaneously in different corners of the Internet — might have seemed unremarkable, even humdrum.

In April, with summer fast approaching, both groups of online friends chatted about jobs at children’s camps. Did anyone, one man asked, know of girls’ camps willing to hire adult males as counselors? Meanwhile, elsewhere in cyberspace, the second group celebrated the news that one of their own had been offered a job leading a boys’ cabin at a sleep-away camp.

But participants in the conversation did not focus on the work. “Hope you see some naked boys in your cabin,” a man calling himself PPC responded. “And good luck while restraining yourself from doing anything.”

The two groups were made up of self-proclaimed pedophiles — one attracted to under-age girls, the other to boys. Their dialogue runs at all hours in an array of chat rooms, bulletin boards and Web sites set up for adults attracted to children.

But it is no longer just chatter in the ether. What started...
online almost two decades ago as a means of swapping child pornography has transformed in recent years into a more complex and diversified community that uses the virtual world to advance its interests in the real one.

Today, pedophiles go online to seek tips for getting near children — at camps, through foster care, at community gatherings and at countless other events. They swap stories about day-to-day encounters with minors. And they make use of technology to help take their arguments to others, like sharing online a printable booklet to be distributed to children that extols the benefits of sex with adults.

The community’s online infrastructure is surprisingly elaborate. There are Internet radio stations run by and for pedophiles; a putative charity that raised money to send Eastern European children to a camp where they were apparently visited by pedophiles; and an online jewelry company that markets pendants proclaiming the wearer as being sexually attracted to children, allowing anyone in the know to recognize them.

These were the findings of a four-month effort by The New York Times to learn about the pedophiles’ online world by delving into their Internet communications. In recent months, new concerns have emerged about whether the ubiquitous nature of broadband technology, instant message communications and digital imagery is presenting new and poorly understood risks to children. Already, there have been many Congressional hearings on the topic, as well as efforts to write comprehensive legislation to address the issue.

But most of those efforts have focused on examining particular instances of harm to children. There have been few, if any, recent attempts to examine the pedophiles themselves, based on their own words to one another, to gain a better recognition of the nature of potential problems.

Last week, that world attracted new attention after reports that John M. Karr, who was arrested last Wednesday as a suspect in the 1996 murder of JonBenet Ramsey, apparently used Internet discussion sites intensively in efforts to communicate with children, sometimes about sex. In e-mail messages to a journalism professor that investigators believe were written by Mr. Karr, statements about children seemed to echo the online dialogue among pedophiles.

“Sometimes little girls are closer to me than with their parents or any other person in their lives,” the e-mail messages say. “I can only say that I can relate very well to children and the way they think and feel.”

The recent conversations among pedophiles that were examined by The Times took place in virtual rooms in Internet Relay Chat, a text-based system allowing for real-time communications; on message boards on Usenet, which has postings by topic; and on Web sites catering to pedophiles.

In this online community, pedophiles view themselves as the vanguard of a nascent
movement seeking legalization of child pornography and the loosening of age-of-consent laws. They portray themselves as battling for children’s rights to engage in sex with adults, a fight they liken to the civil rights movement. And while their effort has brought little success, they celebrated online in May when a small group of men in the Netherlands formed a pedophile political party, and they rejoiced again last month when a Dutch court upheld the party’s right to exist.

The conversations themselves are not illegal. And, given the fantasy world that the Internet can be, it is difficult to prove the truth of personal statements, or to demonstrate direct connections between online commentary and real-world actions. Nor can the number of participants in these conversations, taking place around the Internet, be reliably ascertained.

But the existence of this community is significant and troubling, experts said, because it reinforces beliefs that, when acted upon, are criminal. Repeatedly in these conversations, pedophiles said the discussions had helped them accept their attractions and had even allowed them to have sex with a child without guilt.

Indeed, law enforcement officials say that the refrain of justification from online conversations is frequently voiced by adults arrested for molestation, raising concern that such conversations may lower pedophiles’ willingness to resist their temptation.

“It is rationalization that allows them to avoid admitting that their desires are harmful and illegal,” said Bill Walsh, a former commander of the Crimes Against Children Unit for the Dallas Police Department, who founded the most prominent annual national conference on the issue. “That can allow them to take that final step and cross over from fantasy into real-world offenses.”

Still, in their conversations, some pedophiles often maintain that the discussion sites are little more than support groups. They condemn violent child rapists and lament that they are often equated with such criminals. Many see themselves as spiritually connected to children and say that sexual contact is irrelevant. Yet the pedophiles consistently return to discussions justifying sex with minors and child pornography.

Many of these adults described concepts of children that veered into the fantastical — for example, at times depicting themselves as victims of predatory minors. A little girl in a skirt reveals her underwear by doing a cartwheel; a boy in a bathing suit sits on a bench with his legs spread apart; a child playfully jumps on a man’s back — all of these ordinary events were portrayed as sexual come-ons.

“It really is like going through the rabbit hole, with this entire alternative reality,” said Philip Jenkins, a professor of religious studies at Pennsylvania State University who wrote “Beyond Tolerance,” a groundbreaking 2001 book about Internet child pornography.

The conversations also demonstrated technological acumen, with frequent discussions about ways to ensure online anonymity and to encrypt images. That underscores a challenge faced by the authorities who hope to combat online child exploitation with technology. For example, in June, Internet service providers announced plans for an alliance that will use new technologies to locate child pornography traders.

Pedophiles were undaunted. Within hours of the announcement, their discussion rooms were filled with advice on how to continue swapping illegal images while avoiding detection — months before the new technologies were to be in full operation.

**Portraits of Pedophilia**

In a sense, the creation of the pedophiles’ online community was a ripple effect from the success of government efforts to crack down on them.
Washington’s efforts in the late 1970’s to stamp out child pornography by declaring it illegal were enormously effective, closing off traditional outlets for illicit images.

But the Internet soon presented an alternative. In the early 1980’s, through postings on bulletin board systems, pedophiles went online to swap illegal images. From there, they could easily converse with others like themselves, and they found theirs to be a community of diverse backgrounds.

In the conversations observed by The Times, the pedophiles often discussed their personal lives. Their individual jobs were described as being a disc jockey at parties (“a high concentration of gorgeous” children, a man claiming to hold the job said); a pediatric nurse (“lots of looking but no touching”); a piano teacher (“I could tell you stories that would make you ... well... I’ll be good”); an employee at a water theme park (“bathing suits upon bathing suits!!!!!!”); and a pediatrician specializing in gynecology (“No need to add anything more, I feel”).

The most frequent job mentioned, however, was schoolteacher. A number of self-described teachers shared detailed observations about children in their classes, including events they considered sexual, like a second-grade boy holding his crotch during class.

The man relating that story held up that action as an expression of sexuality; he was not dissuaded when another participant in the conversation suggested that the boy might have just needed to go to the bathroom.

Some pedophiles revealed that they gained access to children through their own families. Some discussed how they married to be close to the children from their wives’ previous marriages. Pedophiles who said they were fathers described moments involving their own children, such as a man who told of watching his sons change for swimming in a locker room, complete with details about the older boy’s genitals and emerging pubic hair. Others insisted they would never feel any interest in their own children, but commented on the benefits presented by parenthood.

“I have a daughter and have never been attracted to her,” a man with the screen name jonboy wrote. But, he added, “I did find her friends very attractive.”

Pedophiles chafe at suggestions that such comments reflect risks to minors. They point out, correctly, that family members and friends — not strangers — are the most frequent perpetrators of child sexual abuse. They never note, however, that the minors mentioned in their online discussions are most frequently those they know well, like relatives and children of friends.

**Justifications Online**

In the pedophiles’ world view, not all sexual abuse is abuse. There is widespread condemnation and hatred of adults who engage in forcible rape of children. But otherwise, acts of molestation are often celebrated as demonstrations of love.

“My daughter and I have a healthy close relationship,” a person with the screen name Sonali posted. “We have been in a ‘consensual sexual relationship’ almost two months now.”

The daughter, Sonali wrote, is 10. Whatever guilt Sonali felt for the relationship was eased by the postings of other pedophiles. “I am so happy to find this site,” Sonali wrote. “I thought having a sexual attraction to my daughter was bad. I now do not feel guilty or conflicted.”

In that, Sonali was demonstrating what experts said is the most dangerous element of the
pedophile Internet community: its justification of illegal acts. Experts described the pedophiles’ online worldview as reflective of “neutralization,” a psychological rationalization used by groups that deviate from societal norms.

In essence, the groups deem potentially injurious acts and beliefs harmless. That is accomplished in part by denying that a victim is injured, condemning critics and appealing to higher loyalties — in this case, an ostensible struggle for the sexual freedom of children.

Pedophiles see themselves as part of a social movement to gain acceptance of their attractions. The effort has a number of tenets: that pedophiles are beneficial to minors, that children are psychologically capable of consenting and that therapists manipulate the young into believing they are harmed by such encounters.

“Every human being, no matter the age, should be allowed to have consenting mutual sexual relations with anyone they wish,” a man calling himself Venn wrote. “All age of consent laws must, and forever, be abolished.”

Those same types of comments online are now turning up in court. For example, a man known by the screen name Brother Peteticus is among those who have argued online for legalizing sex with children. In real life, he is Phillip J. Distasio of Rocky River, Ohio, who was arrested last year on charges of raping two autistic boys who were his students. In court this month, Mr. Distasio, 34, portrayed himself as following the dictates of his own religion, and made arguments frequently expressed by the online community.

“I’ve been a pedophile for 20 years,” Mr. Distasio said at the pretrial hearing, “The only reason I’m charged with rape is that no one believes a child can consent to sex. The role of my ministry is to get these cases out of the courtrooms.”

In the days that followed, some pedophiles supported that position online, agreeing with Mr. Distasio that mentally handicapped, prepubescent boys could consent to sex with their teacher.

That same logic is applied by the pedophiles to child pornography, which many of them said should be legalized. “Where is the problem?” from child pornography, a pedophile who used the screen name Writer said in an online posting. “Once again, the underlying issue is the repressive belief that sex is intrinsically sinful.”

In making these arguments, pedophiles often demonize parents and other adults as cruel, unloving people who exert authoritarian control over children and stand in the way of minors’ sexual freedom. “Anti-pedophiles are NOT about protecting children,” a man who called himself Christopher wrote. “They are usually the ones who are beating (they call it spanking) or emotionally neglecting their children.”

But their arguments often seem contradictory. While maintaining that they can be trusted with children, some pedophiles said they would not allow minors in their lives to be with other adults attracted to children. “I guess coming from the inside, I know a bunch of the bad stuff that can happen,” one man wrote.

Many pedophile sites conduct surveys to learn about the attitudes of their contributors. While none of these surveys are scientifically valid, they do reflect the thinking of some people who traffic in these sites. And not surprisingly, a large number of the surveys are about sex.

For example, on one site, pedophiles were asked if they would “have full intercourse with a little girl.” Seventy-four members responded. Only 17 replied no. The same number said that they might. The largest group — over 54 percent — said that they would.

Some attached comments to their survey response. One man provided descriptions of the
acts he would repeatedly perform on an 8-year-old to prepare her. The words — too graphic to be printed here — raised no criticism on the site.

But in other discussions, pedophiles cautioned that some comments were too dangerous. When one man described in lurid terms his fantasies about molesting an infant girl, the response was quick. “This is best not discussed,” a man calling himself garvy wrote, adding that someday, pedophiles would need evidence proving that they cared only about children’s best interests.

“Such posts,” garvy concluded, “will be very damaging to the Cause.”

A Web of Deception

The booklet — recently circulated through a Web site for pedophiles — had been written, it said, “for any boy who is old enough to be able to read it.”

Called “Straight Talk for Boys,” it is an 18-page discussion of sex, particularly between children and adults, from the pedophiles’ viewpoint. Such encounters are depicted as harmless, even beneficial. The document criticizes parents and therapists. And it encourages boys to wear Speedo bathing suits and shower naked in public places.

But it repeatedly returns to one message: boys should never tell about sex with adults. “Older boys and men may be frightened about getting caught having sex play with you, because they can be put in jail,” it says. “So you have to think of ways to 'signal' your interest in another person without openly saying what you want,” adding that “nobody else can know about what you agree to do.”

The booklet comes with instructions, advising pedophiles on how to distribute it. “The best and safest way is to leave quantities of the booklet in places where boys in the 8 to 14 range can find them, and where adults will not discover them too quickly,” the instructions read. “Obviously, you don’t want to be observed placing the booklets in your chosen locations.”

The booklet reflects how pedophiles can use the Internet to advance their interests in the real world. Like many of those efforts, this one involved deception: the booklet does not reveal, for example, that it has been written and distributed by men who are sexually attracted to children, but instead portrays itself as objective fact.

Using deception to gain access to children is a recurring theme. For example, on a site for adults attracted to boys, someone calling himself Vespucci asked in June whether a single man could become a foster father. The respondents cautioned Vespucci to disguise his pedophilia.

“You better have a darned good excuse why you never married, such as your fiancée died in a car wreck,” replied a man calling himself simply “d.” “I highly recommend you date women for several years and keep at least a couple of those relationships going for at least a couple of months. Around the women, make a point of being nice to children.”

The deception would be worthwhile, d wrote. “It will help out in the reference-check dept. when you apply.”

Pointers on ways to get close to children were frequent topics. One man posted an Internet “help wanted” advertisement from a single mother seeking an overnight baby sitter for her 4-year-old daughter; another recommended shopping at weekend estate sales, since plenty of bored minors showed up accompanying inattentive parents.

Some participants in these conversations claimed to have established charitable efforts that put them in contact with children. For example, an organization called BL Charity said it
was seeking money to send Eastern European children to camp.

The charity’s site, which recently closed, showed scores of images of children at camp and in their homes, supposedly taken by the men running the site. The effort was organized by pedophiles; BL is the online term for “boy-lover.” It eventually shut down, largely from a lack of money, according to a posting from the site’s operators. After the site closed, further details of BL Charity could not be learned. Not every organization and effort of the pedophiles is directly tied to trying to reach children. For example, pedophiles have created Internet radio stations for the purpose of providing support for one another and encouraging their perceived social movement.

It is not known how many such stations exist, nor the size of the audience. The most prominent station appears to be Sure Quality Radio, which on its home page proclaims, “From all levels of society you will find us, not as predators but as human beings, loving and caring for boys or girls or both.” The site has a program schedule and an online store selling mainstream music and movies featuring children.

People who work with Sure Quality Radio did not respond to questions e-mailed to them from The Times, although one person with the online name of boystory replied by saying he was immediately severing all ties with the station.

There are also online podcasts, recorded talk shows of 60 to 90 minutes featuring discussions among pedophiles. The discussions, as described online, deal with topics like “benefits of age difference in sexual relationships”; “failure of sex offender registries”; “children’s sexual autonomy, practices and consequences” and “the misrepresentation of pedophilia in the news media.”

With the chat rooms, radio stations and other organizations, pedophiles’ views are continually reinforced. But some realize that this online echo chamber can warp reality. For example, a man calling himself AtosW reported to fellow pedophiles that he had been chatting on a game site frequented by boys. A conversation began about the Dutch pedophile party, AtosW said, and the minors reacted with threats of violence.

AtosW was perplexed. “Why are posters THAT young so angry about it?” he asked. “It is after all THEIR rights that they are pushing for.”

A man calling himself Ritter responded. “Your post is a typical example of what happens when you spend too much time in the online BL community,” he wrote. “Believe it or not, most young children are NOT anxious to have sex with adult men.”

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