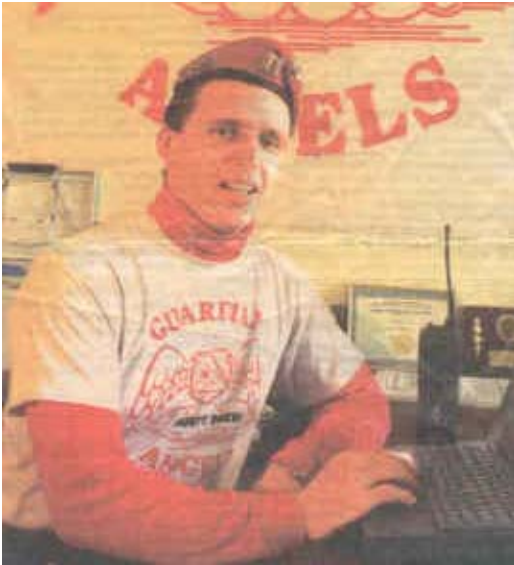


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## The Cutting Edge: COMPUTING / TECHNOLOGY / INNOVATION Rooting Out E-Vil

### Guardian Angels Take on Internet Amid Censorship Concerns

Author: LYNN WALFORD; SPECIAL TO THE TIMES;



The Guardian Angels made their name patrolling the meaner streets of America's cities. But now these self-appointed citizen crime fighters are branching out, establishing a presence in what many see as a dangerous new criminal frontier: cyberspace.

Led by Colin "Gabriel" Hatcher, 37 director of the Guardian Angel' Los Angeles Chapter, the so-called Cyber Angels listen to chat groups, looking for pedophiles who might want to lure children.

They say they've discovered gangs and death threats, and seen children accessing pictures of bestiality and necrophilia. And members of the group have advised the German government in its current crackdown on pornography and neo-Nazi propaganda.



As a worldwide debate over Internet censorship and regulation rages, self-policing efforts such as those being undertaken by the CyberAngels are likely to gain more attention. And just as the Guardian Angels

street patrols have at times been controversial, so the volunteer cybercops will likely draw some fire.

Already, a group of anonymous hackers dubbed "Darkspace" has launched a campaign of electronic harassment against the group.

"We've been getting e-mail bombs for the last eight months," Hatcher said. "The terrorists are forging our e-mail address, subscribing us to e-mail mailing lists. At one point, we had over 13,000 e-mail messages that almost put down our Internet server. We are under attack 24 hours a day."

The motives of these attackers are not clear, and on the surface there is little that's objectionable in the CyberAngels program. Serious crimes such as child pornography are reported to the FBI. Other crimes such as software piracy and fraud are reported to the Internet service provider on whose network the allegedly illegal activities are taking place.

But at a time when a new U.S. law banning transmission of "indecent" material over the Internet has just been passed--and with governments around the world looking at ways to crack down on everything from pornography to political dissent on computer networks--many veteran Netizens are wary of all policing efforts.

"We feel that it is extremely important to protect children of our society in both the real world and cyberspace," said Lori Fena, executive director of the Electronic Frontier Foundation. "Certainly the CyberAngels' attempts to assist is appropriate for any citizen when they have witnessed a crime. However, the boundary between civic responsibility, censorship and freedom of choice is truly what is at issue."

The CyberAngels were formed in June, when Guardian Angels founder and President Curtis Sliwa mentioned his America Online e-mail address on his radio show on WABC-AM in New York. The group received more than 300 e-mail messages from concerned parents.

In August, the group began patrolling America Online and went global in August when it was offered a World Wide Web site by SafeSurf (<http://www.safesurf.com/cyberangels/>), an organization that helps parents monitor their

children's Net surfing by offering a rating system and information about software that can block access to unsuitable sites. Membership in CyberAngels now totals more than 450 people from around the world.

As an example of the group's work, Hatcher cites a case in which a member reported a posting in a teen newsgroup from a 16-year-old girl wanting other 16-year-olds to share their sexual fantasies. Because the language was adult, the CyberAngels were suspicious.

CyberAngels reported it to the Internet provider, which traced it to a school in England, and the school then traced it to a 47-year-old male employee at the school. The school said it would take action.

At the moment, though, Hatcher--a former history teacher at the University of London--said the group's work is being seriously damaged by the mail bombs, and he's asking for help.

"Edmund Burke said, 'All that is required for the triumph of evil is for good people to remain silent and do nothing.' We, the Guardian Angels and CyberAngels, are asking the Internet community to stand up with us," he said. "We are demanding, asking, begging other organizations to stand beside us and support our operation that is being destroyed by Net terrorists."

Caption:

PHOTO: COLIN HATCHER, Director of Guardian Angels' Los Angeles chapter  
PHOTOGRAPHER: CON KEYES / Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: (logo of Guardian Angels)

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