

Case Study: Interpol Working with Broadcast Media, Operations VICO and IDent

In 2004, police in Germany were conducting a criminal investigation which resulted in the service of a search warrant on a storage locker. The police discovered several hundred pictures of a man engaged in sexual acts with young boys. The photos were also discovered online and the abuser's face was obscured by a swirl.

Specialists from the Bundeskriminalamt (BKA) in Germany, working with INTERPOL's Crimes against Children unit, were able to use new technology to "un-swirl" the photographs and produce an identifiable image. Despite extensive global efforts to identify and locate this individual through INTERPOL's network of (then) 186 National Central Bureaus and specialist units, the man's identity and nationality remained unknown.

The decision was made to enlist the support of the media and the public to identify the abuser. A risk assessment was carried out identifying both the pros and the cons in launching the campaign, as this would be the first time INTERPOL had conducted such a public appeal.

On 8 October, 2007, the appeal went live. Both the original and 'un-swirled' photographs of the suspect were published on INTERPOL's website and issued to media as part of a press release. The response was immediate and global. All major television broadcasters were carrying the story and showing the images, in addition to online media also reproducing the image and linking to INTERPOL's website.

The appeal attracted worldwide attention with millions of hits on INTERPOL's website - 20 times more than the average daily audience for the website – and more than 350 people contacted INTERPOL with potential leads.

It was as a result of information provided by five different sources from three continents, that the suspected child abuser labeled 'Vico' was identified as Christopher Paul Neil, a man teaching English at a school in South Korea.

Within just three days of launching the appeal, working with its National Central Bureaus around the world, INTERPOL had established the suspect's name, nationality, date of birth, passport number, and current and previous places of work.

Neil fled South Korea in an attempt to evade capture, but was arrested by the Royal Thai Police in a northeast province of Thailand on 19 October – just 11 days after the appeal started. He was subsequently convicted and sentenced to six years and six months in prison. He was then sent back to Canada where he was arrested by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) under Canada's sex tourism laws.

Following the success of Operation VICO in 2007, INTERPOL's General Assembly – the Organization's supreme governing body - approved a resolution empowering the organization to publish information to request the public's assistance in child sex abuse investigations.

In 2008, INTERPOL was once again asking for media and public assistance in identifying a man pictured sexually abusing children in a series of images found on the Internet and retrieved from the computer of a convicted pedophile in Norway in March 2006.

The man, whose name, nationality and location were unknown, was featured in approximately 100 images in a series of around 800, which were believed to have been taken in Southeast Asia. The images depicted the sexual abuse of at least three boys aged between six and 10 years old.

Once again the media and public responded in a big way. Within 48 hours, and as a result of three separate tips provided to INTERPOL Headquarters in Lyon, France the suspect Wayne Nelson Corliss, 58, from Union City, New Jersey, was identified, located and arrested in Union City by Special Agents from US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Both appeals highlighted the results which can be used when engaging the media in public appeals.

As INTERPOL's Secretary General Ronald K. Noble said at the conclusion of the operation; "Two days ago, this man's nationality, identity and location were totally unknown. All we had to go by were a series of graphic photographs in which the suspect was seen sexually abusing young children and our confidence that the public and police worldwide would once again respond to INTERPOL's call for assistance. That two days later, the primary suspect is now in custody is an outstanding achievement and a credit to the citizens, media and law enforcement worldwide who responded to INTERPOL's call."
