

MAJOR ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE OPERATION LEADS TO 368 ARRESTS IN EUROPE

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[Press Release](#)

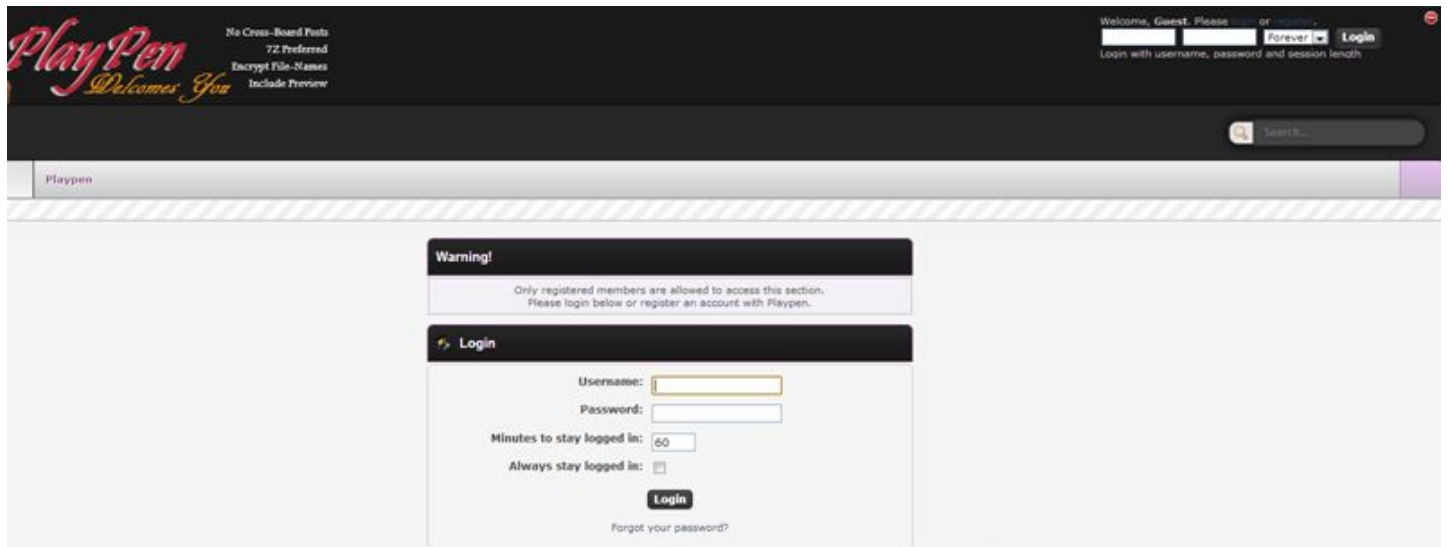
Yet another example of the need for international action to tackle online child sexual abuse



Earlier this week, the lead administrator of Playpen, one of the world's largest child sexual abuse websites with more than 150 000 users around the world, was convicted to serve 30 years in prison in the United States. The takedown of Playpen led to Operation Pacifier, one of the largest and most complex investigations ever undertaken in this field. So far, in Europe alone, 368 suspected child sex abusers have been arrested or convicted.

Playpen was a website on the Darknet, part of the internet where the users' identity and location are concealed from analysis through anonymisation techniques. A few months after the website was created, in December 2014, the FBI seized a copy of the website and arrested Playpen's three administrators. The lead administrator was sentenced to 30 years in prison earlier this week in North Carolina; the two others were each convicted to 20 years imprisonment.

The Playpen site was structured to allow its users to easily access a wide range of child exploitation and abuse material. As members of the forum users could search for videos and other content relating to the abuse of girls and boys under different categories, through links provided by other users. One section focused exclusively on toddlers, another on incest and many others on various fetishes involving children. The posts themselves and the latest updates to them were published in an index where descriptions made the content obvious and were intended to draw in those with such interests.



Operation Pacifier

In January 2015, with the support of Europol and many other law enforcement agencies worldwide, the FBI and US Department of Justice launched Operation Pacifier in an effort to track down Playpen's thousands of members. Hundreds of follow-up investigations were started all over the world.

Europol's role was to crosscheck, analyse and complete the data received in order to identify offenders mainly located in Europe. Intelligence packages were prepared and disseminated to law enforcement authorities in countries including Colombia, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Ireland, Italy, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

This has so far resulted in 368 arrests or convictions in Europe alone (870 worldwide) and at least 259 sexually abused children identified or rescued from their abusers outside of the US; some of the investigations are still ongoing. Some of the seized material was analysed in the [Victim Identification Taskforce](#), recently held at Europol, with experts from around the world identifying victims of child sexual abuse and exploitation using advanced techniques, software, and their knowledge and expertise.

Because of the size of the data seized and its presence on the Darknet, Operation Pacifier was one of the largest and most challenging ever in the fight against online child sexual exploitation.

Steven Wilson, Head of [Europol's European Cybercrime Centre](#) said: "Those individuals involved in

the sexual abuse of children are becoming increasingly forensically aware and are actively using the most advanced forms of anonymisation and encryption to avoid detection. Law enforcement needs to be able to use proportionate means to tackle this threat to our children. The internet has no boundaries and does not recognise borders. We need to balance the rights of victims versus the right to privacy. If we operate 19th century legal principles then we are unable to effectively tackle crime at the highest level."

Europol's Executive Director, Rob Wainwright added: "Europol is pleased to have played its part in what ranks as one of the most important investigations of online child sexual abuse ever conducted. I applaud the great work of the FBI and our many other law enforcement partners in Europe and beyond for their cooperation on a global scale to tackle such a serious and challenging public safety issue. As the operation shows the investigation of criminal activity on anonymised platforms has now become an essential part of law enforcement's fight against serious and organised crime, something to which Europol remains firmly committed."

European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship Dimitris Avramopoulos said: "The sexual exploitation of children is a heinous crime against every moral value in our societies, and it should never go unpunished. Online sexual child abuse is a fight that we must fight together, and I welcome the crucial transatlantic cooperation between the FBI and Europol in this operation. It is precisely by working together that we can make a difference, by protecting our children and punishing those who are behind this revolting crime."

EU Commissioner for the Security Union Sir Julian King said: "A hugely significant blow has been struck against one of the most heinous of crimes, arguably the worst of all, thanks to the excellent transnational cooperation of Europol with the FBI and US Department of Justice, as well as other law enforcement agencies around the world. As a result, hundreds of sexual abusers who prey on innocent children are behind bars or on their way to incarceration and hundreds more child victims have been rescued. The growing sophistication of the use by criminals of the internet cannot be understated and it is truly heartening to see how, by working globally, we are able to strike back and to protect our citizens."

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