

Cyberangels watch over kids online

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by Daniel Keegan

(IDG) -- The Child Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), which regulates how commercial sites can interact with young surfers, is almost impossible for the Federal Trade Commission to enforce alone. To help out, a citizens' group called Cyberangels is taking a systematic look at sites that collect information about children and blowing the whistle on those that do not comply.

The new legislation, in effect since April, prohibits sites from collecting information from minors without their parents' consent. Critics argue that it is a logistical nightmare and will be impossible to administer.

"Those who are waiting for the U.S. Federal Trade Commission to take action won't have to wait long," said Parry Aftab, who heads Cyberangels. A test case will not only put certain sites out of business but will motivate others to follow the proscribed guidelines, Aftab predicted. "They are going to start coming up with some enforcement actions, and it will happen all at once."

If a site is found to be noncompliant, it will essentially be put out of business, as parents will take their kids somewhere else, Aftab said. Literally thousands of sites are in this category, which gives parents a choice but makes Cyberangels' task a daunting one. The organization trains its volunteers - 5,000 so far - to review Web sites. The Cyberangels judge a site's compliance or lack thereof, and enter information into a database that is sent on to the FTC.

"There are certain sites that aren't going to pay attention - they will always skirt the law," Aftab said. "Then, some others will eagerly comply because it will be good for their business. But we are most interested in those who are not in compliance and don't care."