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POLITICS : SECURITY

Behind Enemy Lines With a Suburban Counterterrorist

By Jack Hitt 10.23.07 | 12:00 AM



Counterterrorist Shannen Rossmiller monitors jihadist chatter online.
Photo: Todd Hido

"Look," Shannen Rossmiller says, pointing at her computer screen. She's in an online chat room, and the name Terrorist11 has just popped up. "He's one of the more popular guys."

To get here, she signed onto alfirdaws.org. Then she clicked into the Paradise Jihadist Supporters Forum. The site is in Arabic, so she turns on the basic Google text translator that renders the discussion into clumsy phrases.

"Take a charge with caution," warns one jihadist posting, "this thread is monitored." Meanwhile, Terrorist11 is praising the 2004 Madrid train bombings and posting videos of the dead for other jihadist wannabes to enjoy. Old news, terrorism-wise. Rossmiller flips her blond hair. She looks bored. "They are just flaming, ranting and raving," she says. "Do you want to see some blood and guts? Let's go find it."

In her small, one-chair home office in Montana, I sit beside Rossmiller on a little tiled table normally reserved for a lamp. Outside, the vistas stretch across Big Sky Country to the Elk Horn Ridge Mountains. Inside, Rossmiller shows me what she does as perhaps America's most accomplished amateur terrorist hunter.

We're monitoring jihadist chatter, and she has warned me that we're not likely to come across anything too dangerous. Home-brew cyber-counterterrorism, it turns out, is a lot like most police work — weeks of tedious beat patrols punctuated by occasional bursts of excitement. And the section of the Internet populated by terrorists is a lot like the rest of the Internet — only instead of commenting on, say, a video of 1,500 prison inmates performing Michael Jackson's "Thriller," everyone's chatting about the death of Americans.

Rossmiller hopes to find some people discussing an actual upcoming plot and then join the conversation. But it's mostly just idle banter today. We come upon a thread in which participants are discussing a Baghdad sniper who has been killing US soldiers. "They call him Juba," Rossmiller says. She suspects there isn't a single sniper but rather a cell, and that the thread is designed to create an identity for Juba, a hero who might attract others to the cause.

It's hard for me to pay attention to Rossmiller. I'm distracted by a little GIF that pops up at the end of one person's posts. It's a 1.5-second cartoon of an American GI poking up from the hatch of a tank, getting shot in the head, and slumping over dead. Rossmiller is rushing to the next page, but I ask her to scroll back so I can stare at the clip again. The little GIF's repetition has an adolescent playfulness to it, so loopy and horrifyingly goofy, so Internet-y, I can't stop staring. Hatch, headshot, slump. Hatch, headshot, slump. Hatch, headshot, slump. Hatch, headshot, slump.

Shannen Rossmiller grew up on a Montana wheat farm. She is blond and slim: When she was a cheerleader in high school, she typically wound up at the top of the human pyramid. Her husband runs a wireless Internet company, and they have three children. After college, she was appointed a local judge in a small Montana town, where she and her family still live and which she'd rather not identify. Although she's happy to talk about what she does, she fears for her safety: She has received phone threats, and her car got shot up once, an incident she attributes directly to her counterterrorism work.

Now 38, Rossmiller spends her weekdays in Helena working in the civil litigation department of the attorney general's office. She gets up at 4 am and does her hunting predawn. On the weekends, she tracks down killers while relaxing in the bosom of her family. Some days she's at the computer when her kids — two young daughters and a son who graduated from high school earlier this year — wake up. "I'll say, 'You get your own breakfast; there's a Jimmy Dean sausage in the kitchen.' Meanwhile, back in Kurachi... "

She has long had an attraction to criminally deviant minds. In the seventh grade, Rossmiller made a poster for school that explored the "mind of the serial killer," from Vlad the Impaler to Ed Gein, who had a habit of wearing the tanned skins of his victims. Now she can pursue her childhood obsession with a utilitarian twist: She goes right inside the minds of killers, and, if it works out, she catches them.



Photo: Todd Hido

Rossmiller developed her remarkable talent for chatting up terrorists after September 11, when she started going into online forums and cajoling valuable information from other visitors. She has passed along numerous case files to federal authorities. Her information has led US forces abroad to locate Taliban cells in Afghanistan, discover a renegade stinger-missile merchant in Pakistan, and help another foreign government identify a ring of potential suicide bombers. She has also assisted in nabbing two domestic would-be terrorists and seen them both convicted of felonies: National guardsman Ryan Anderson received five concurrent life sentences, and Michael Reynolds, convicted in July and awaiting sentencing, faces a similar fate. Timothy Fuhrman, special agent in charge of the FBI's Salt Lake City office, says Rossmiller was "instrumental in the successful outcome of those cases."

Rossmiller succeeds by exploiting a fundamental flaw in al Qaeda's famously decentralized organization. The absence of a strict hierarchy makes it pretty easy for a cunning person to mix among the terrorists. So she poses as a potential al Qaeda soldier looking for like-minded comers. She creates multiple characters and uses her older and more respected personae to invite the new ones into private forums. There are other self-taught counterterrorists like her, but they tend to translate and discuss, lurk and report. Rossmiller works the terrorism boards as if she were playing a complex videogame. Her characters come complete with distinct personalities and detailed biographies that are as richly conceived as any protagonist on an HBO series. She keeps copies of everything, time-stamps files, and takes screenshots. She has an Excel spreadsheet that details the 640 people with whom she has had contact on these boards since 2002.

Czegel, Barbara (1998). *Running an effective help desk (2nd Ed.)*. New York: Wiley.

NOTE: I'm not abstracting the entire book, just the parts on Tracking, Help Desk Tools, and The Internet.

TRACKING

Build and maintain a problem/solution knowledge base

If you keep track of how you solve problems, you will be able to use that information if other people experience similar problems. Ideally this will be stored in a database so when a customer calls you can scan the database for information on similar past problems. Such databases range from simple relational databases to complex expert systems.

Identify recurring problems

US debt that communication between help desk staff. otherwise, each person might be getting similar calls but be unaware that others are receiving the same types of calls. it wastes time if each person invests time to fix the problem independently.

Identify major problems before they occur

Early detection and correction of problems tends to lessen their severity. Monitoring the network can help you notice degradations in performance, enabling you to fix the systems before they generate additional help calls.

Identify candidate processes for automation

You'll get the most "bang for the buck" by automating the problems that generate the largest numbers of help calls. automating routine calls frees up your staff to focus on more complex calls and to make improvements to help desk service.

Measure help desk performance

Tracking held you measure the performance of your help desk. How many calls you answer, the number of users you are supporting, your rate of successful resolution, etc. remember that an important part help desk service is customer satisfaction. sometimes it appears as though you're successful because you are getting fewer calls, but this may be because customers are going to places other than your help desk for support!

Provide information necessary for chargeback

Tracking your data can give you leverage--- knowing which persons and/or departments are benefiting from your service helps you in dealing with the administration of those departments.

Identify opportunities for training

Help desk workers commonly complain that customers don't know the technology they are using. Such customers ask the same questions over and over again, ask very simple questions or ask questions that make it clear that they do not understand the basics of the software. Tracking these kinds of calls will help you identify groups of customers that need training. For every one of these callers that you successfully get into training, you are decreasing your help desk load.

Keep customers informed

Notify your customers into the impending problems, maintenance, or shutdowns---in advance. This prevents help calls.

Integrate tracking data

"The information you track is most valuable when you can integrate it." That is, the more systems know about each other and can talk to each other, the more powerful they become---the less you have to type, the less chance there is of error, and the faster your house can be resolved.

TOOLS

Components of a basic help desk management system

- Call logging
- Call database
- Call routing
- Call escalation
- Basic reporting
- Queries

Plug-ins

- Voice integration
- Knowledge bases
- Expert systems
- Remote diagnostics
- Asset management
- Change management
- Internet access
- Work order management
- Forecasting/scheduling
- Performance analysis
- Network management
- Software distribution
- Customized reporting
- Customer training

You are not alone: forums for learning and idea exchange

- The Help Desk Institute (HDI)
- Software Support Professionals Association (SSPA)
- Association of Support Professionals (ASP)
- Helpdesk User Group (HUG)
- The help desk FAQ site (<http://www.duke.edu/~pverghis/hdeskfaw.htm>)
- Online discussion groups
- Vendor web sites
 - Magazines on the Internet
 - Service News
 - Support Management
 - LTI Technomedia
 - Network computing
 - PC Week

Tools for communication

- White boards
- Voice mail
- Email
- Electronic displays of system status for customers

A basic help desk management system

- Capturing and logging call information
- Routing and escalated calls
- Generating queries
- Generating reports

Telephone related technologies

- Computer telephony integration (CTI): e.g., caller ID lookup, fax-on-demand, intelligent call routing
- Automatic call distributor (ACD): i.e., call queue
- Automated attendant: i.e., voice mail options.
- Interactive voice response (IVR): e.g., fax-back, specific pre-recorded information

Problem resolution tools

- Knowledge bases and expert systems
- Definitions
- Remote diagnostic software
- Internet access

Asset management tools

Management aids

- Change management
- Work order management
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Network management tools

Tools for customer training and self-help

THE INTERNET: CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

The Internet allows easy, quick, and (virtually) free access to a huge knowledge base of product and support information. Vendor sites offer help for specific products, FAQs, etc. It allows us to transmit new software, updates, and fixes electronically. It allows us to gather information from customers. It gives us the ability to access help desk software from anywhere. Customers can use FAQs and knowledge bases to solve their own problems, or check on call status via the Internet.

All this transfers into reduced calls to the Help Desk, improved service for the calls that go through, and more room for improvements (plus it's cheap!).

Challenges of Using the Internet for Help Desk Functions

- Rampant growth
- Skyrocketing expectations
- Concerns about security and confidentiality
- Unreliability of information
- High volume of information
- Legal issues (e.g., copyrights)
- Exposure to viruses
- The Internet adds a layer of increased complexity for the environment being supported

The Internet Can Be:

- The main point of contact for your small business's help desk
- A knowledge base
- A distribution tool
- A publishing tool

- A means of accessing your help desk software

Things to Include on Your Web Site

1) Information: services, hours, etc.

2) Documents

- Policies
- Terms & conditions for product use
- Standards
- Procedures
- Service agreements

3) Training

- Tutorials
- Interactive training
- Links to other sites with tutorials
- Schedules for classroom training

4) Ways to Help Customers Resolve Problems

- FAQs
- Hints & Tips
- Knowledge Bases
- Links to other sites

5) Problem submission Forms

6) Customer Feedback

7) Registration

8) Free newsletter

Statistics to Track

- Number of calls
- Personnel
- Number/percentage of calls resolved at point of call
- Number/percentage of a specific type of call
- Resolution times for calls not resolved at point of call
- Number of calls left unresolved
- Delivery time for services
- Promised vs. active resolution times

Others that might be interesting

Break down the above statistics by origin, personnel who resolved, various time periods.

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