Matthew Ebnet’s “Vigilantes Patrol Cyberspace” first appeared in The Kansas City Star June 8, 1997. What Ebnet reports is that in the absence of laws for the Net, vigilantes, comparable to neighborhood patrols, have become netizen police, enforcing actual law in cyberspace and imposing online order.

KANSAS CITY, Mo.-Randall Sluder stared at his computer screen almost in a trance as the man who just entered an online chat room said he was looking for sex with young girls.

Then it came to Sluder: He could catch the man.

It was fairly simple. Sluder logged off his computer and created a false profile of a 13-year-old girl, Maggie284. When he logged back on, he was bombarded with prurient messages; some men sent him kiddie porn. For days Sluder swooned and flirted and played, until he started a relationship with a man on the Internet who was interested in fooling around.

It didn't take long: The man asked Maggie284 to meet him and suggested that they would "play together." Sluder called the police.

"It felt so good," he said.

Officers in Kissimmee, Florida, arrested a Johnson County, Kansas, businessman on a charge of using a computer to solicit sex from a minor. Billy Charles Burgess of Stilwell is awaiting trial in August.

Sluder, who lives in St. Cloud, Florida, and works at Walt Disney World, is an example of a trend that experts say is the latest step in the evolution of the Internet: Civilians are taking it upon themselves to impose law and order on a largely unregulated Internet. Cyber crime has galled computer users into forming virtual "special forces" to show bad guys that there is a sheriff in town.

From a woman in Federal Way, Washington, who used an online service to catch a man she believed molested her son, to the computer enthusiast who "mail bombs" an especially fiendish "spammer," computer users are justifying their actions by asking the same question Sluder did when he appointed himself a quasi cop: "Who else is going to do it?"

"The Internet especially depends on people who are willing to do the right thing," said Colin Gabriel Hatcher, the head of Cyberangels, an offshoot of the New York City Guardian Angels. "You also need to have some people out there who are willing to go out of their way to do the right thing. There are two issues: one is law, and one is moral conscience. One is hard to enforce; one is absolutely necessary."

In the past year, several Web pages-such as whoa.femail.com (Women Halting Online Abuse) or webpolice.org (the Web Police)-were created to spy on chicanery on the Net. The Web Police has hundreds of members. There are roughly more than a hundred other groups, but they are more informal. A few outposts fade on- and off-line to keep their vigilante creators anonymous.

Some are trying to turn a profit, but most self-styled Internet police said they're doing it for the greater good and don't want money.

"It's personal," said Katherine Griffis-Greenberg, a lawyer who teaches a course about Internet harassment. "This is the mentality that enables people to go out and fight back with the same energy. Their knee-jerk reaction is to fight back. It's personal."

Donna Parker, who lives in Alabama, represents perhaps the largest contingent of Internet police: those who are out to protect women and children. Parker said that after she puts the kids to bed, she gets online to look for pedophiles. She adds them to her America Online Buddy List,
which informs her when another user is signed on. "I always make sure I know where they are.... If I see a connection, I'll call the DA," she said. "Nothing can replace good, old-fashioned detective work."

Sluder is no fusspot. The Internet probably will always traffic in dirty pictures, he said, and that won't send him screaming for the cops. But then again, he said, what he saw wasn't just dirty pictures.

Masquerading as the 13-year-old, Sluder found that men didn't bother with niceties like romance and woo. They demanded what they wanted in no graceful terms. Several sent him pictures of nude children or themselves. Sluder was horrified.

But it wasn't his disapproval that led him to try to catch a man looking for unlawful sex with kids. Earlier, a customer service representative for his online service refused to help, and Sluder also knew from his neighbor, a law officer, that police departments often don't have the time to catch Internet villains.

"It upset me and my morals," Sluder said. "It's kind of your patriotic duty. I felt like I had to do it. Nobody else is going to do it."

He's probably right. Law enforcement officials say police and the FBI have a difficult time keeping track of the Internet, which is by design an abstract maze of computer connections and data bits.

Jeff Lanza, an FBI special agent in Kansas City, said many police departments don't have enough people to handle traditional police work. A department with enough officers who are Internet savvy and able to spend time surfing the Web is rare.

"We are behind the power curve;" Lanza said.

Said Detective Alan Lacy in Mercer Island, Washington: "There never seems to be a cop around when you need one. So they said, 'I'll just be a detective.'"

Not everybody is hopeful about the idea of self-regulation. Dennis Derryberry, one of the founders of the Electronic Frontier Foundation in San Francisco, said that, for the most part, people on the Internet shouldn't be trusted to act unselfishly.

"Responsible behavior in real life is hard enough," he said.

What's more, self-styled Internet Police are notorious in the cyber community for being too aggressive and often self-righteous. Experts wonder whether, in the end, they will ever accomplish anything.