



Cyber-spy shares her know-how tracking terrorists

Shannen Rossmiller, a former judge from Montana, has posed as Muslim militants to infiltrate extremist chat rooms. Now she wants to expand her one-woman operation, she says at an FBI conference.

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<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-cyberterror11-2009jan11,0,7148230.story>

Reporting from New York — The nervous woman in a gray suit clicked on a photo lineup on an overhead screen labeled "Jihadi Martyrs." It flashed to mug shots of men with names like Abu Issa, an Al Qaeda recruiter, and Abu Jabber, a trainer.

A man in one photograph was pointing a machine gun.

"They are all me," said the blond mother from Montana, speaking before an audience of computer experts, law enforcement agents and investigators at the first International Conference on Cyber Security, held last week in New York. "These are all individuals I acted as on the Internet."

Shannen Rossmiller, 39, is a cyber-spy and former judge who taught herself Arabic after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, then began infiltrating websites and chat rooms to hunt for terrorists.

"I learned to act like them," she said. "I learned to be them."

As her children slept, she spent nights and mornings posing as more than two dozen Muslim militants from her home computer to gain information about planned attacks and terrorist cells across the world. Her investigations have led to two terrorism-related convictions in the U.S., and she has provided intelligence in dozens of other international cases -- many leading to captures.

Now she is trying to expand her one-woman operation by creating a "cyber corps" of experts in language, data-mining and technology, dedicated to helping the government track terrorists. Rossmiller unveiled the idea at the FBI-hosted gathering of 400 from 40 countries at Fordham University.

With 5,000 terrorism-related websites operating at any given time, it's overwhelming to try to monitor all of them, Rossmiller said. "As soon as you take one down . . . they can upload the contents on another server in another part of the world. In a day or a couple of hours, they can be up again. It's kind of like playing Whac-A-Mole."

She asked the audience: "How do we supplement what the government is already doing?"

Experts from Bulgaria, the Netherlands, China and the U.S. spent three days at the New York conference tackling the issue of cyber-crime -- including terrorism, child pornography and the underground economy in which passports, bank accounts and Social Security numbers are stolen, bought and sold.

U.S. counter-terrorism agents are increasingly convinced it is important for countries' leaders to share experiences fighting cyber-crime. FBI Special Agent Anthony J. Ferrante was part of the New York squad that in 2006 reported uncovering a plot to blow up the PATH commuter train tunnel beneath the Hudson River. Law enforcement agencies lurked on Internet jihadi meeting rooms, monitoring chatter about the plans. "That case involved targets scattered in 22 countries," said Ferrante.

"Clearly, the Internet is a tool for recruitment, radicalization and raising money for terrorists," said FBI Special Agent Thomas Nicpon. "Working on our mission, it has become apparent to me that many of these countries do not possess the cyber skills we have in New York."

Even so, law enforcement is limited in its manpower and rules, Rossmiller said.

"I'm just a private citizen," she told conference attendees. But by working within the confines of the law, her information led to the 2007 conviction of Michael C. Reynolds, who was accused of going on terrorist websites looking for money to blow up the trans-Alaska and transcontinental pipelines. Rossmiller posed as a jihadist, tricking him into revealing his plan.

She also helped convict Ryan Anderson, a National Guardsman embarking on an Iraq tour, who planned to sell U.S. military secrets to Al Qaeda and kill U.S. soldiers. Anderson revealed his plans to Rossmiller's fictitious personality online.

But she does not encourage untrained amateurs to take the risks she has. Rossmiller has received numerous death threats and has been forced to move her family for safety. In one incident, her home was broken into and her car was stolen. Police later found it riddled with bullets.

"I'm not out there saying, 'Sure, join up the effort, do it from home.' . . . You might find yourself in legal trouble. You might mess up something ongoing and not realize it," Rossmiller said.

Her life has changed in the last seven years, but watching the recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India, unfold on TV reminded her of how important the sacrifice is.

"I feel it's the right thing to do," she said. "If you have something to offer that is valuable or helpful, why not offer it? If more people did, can you imagine what a different world it would be?"

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