

Google search for human traffickers, drug cartels (Update)

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Forget videos of cute kittens or good deals on iPads. For the past few months, Google has been quietly turning its search capabilities to something far more challenging: criminals.

Drug cartels, money launderers and human traffickers run their sophisticated operations online — and Google Ideas, Google's think tank, is working with the Council on Foreign Relations and other organizations to look for ways to use technology to disrupt international crime.

Officials from Google and groups that combat illicit networks will meet Tuesday and Wednesday in Westlake Village, California, to develop strategies for fighting global crime.

"Google is in a great position to take these on," said Rani Hong, a survivor of child trafficking in India who is now a special adviser to the United Nations. "They're a powerful medium and they have great tools to solve this problem."

Dozens will attend the summit, including Kimmie Weeks, a former abducted child soldier from Liberia; Juan Pablo Escobar, son of slain Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar; assistant U.S. defense secretary Andrew Weber; and Brian Dodd, who directs the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's counter-terrorism and transnational crime efforts.

"It might sound like a different path for Google, but technology companies today have a lot of powerful tools for bringing transparency to these illicit networks, to fight back against corruption and empower those who are trying to combat transnational crime," said Stewart Patrick, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations who helped organize the conference.

"We all know that bad guys use the Internet, but now we're saying the Internet can also help stop these criminals, and help survivors and advocates find each other and work together," said Pardis Mahdavi, an assistant professor of anthropology at Pomona College who is working with Google to put a human face to criminal networks on the Web.

This week's gathering follows a conference held in Dublin, Ireland, last year that brought together more than 60 former gang members to focus on how to end violent extremism.

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