

CASE STUDY



Explicit Content in School *An innocent teacher is exonerated*

Client
School District

Service
Digital Forensics

The Situation

We were retained to investigate accusations that a special education teacher had been browsing the internet for adult content, including suspected child pornography. The school's web traffic monitoring software had flagged a site the teacher had visited. Given the severity of the accusations, the school executives wanted to verify with certainty that the allegations were accurate.

The Challenge, Part I: Find the Contraband

We were asked to determine definitively if the teacher had attempted to access material that violated school policy or the law. The first step was to search for explicit material in his direct possession.

The Solution

We obtained the teacher's work computer and personal devices, as well as logs from the web monitoring software. The devices showed no explicit content in unallocated space, temporary internet files, or saved locally. The browsing history did not show search terms or sites visited that would suggest inappropriate activity. The only evidence was two tiny thumbnails that may have been explicit; it was unclear due to the image size.

The Challenge, Part II: Explain the Discrepancy

We determined that the teacher was not in possession of explicit material, but to clear him completely, we needed to explain why his search activity had been flagged by the web traffic monitoring software.

The Solution

We obtained the monitoring software logs and cross-referenced them with the browsing history. We discovered that the flagged URLs did not correspond to sites in the teacher's browsing history. We examined the source code of the image search and conducted tests of Bing, the search engine the teacher had used. We determined that when a user enters search terms, Bing generates additional suggested search terms, with accompanying thumbnails. While performing a benign and work-related search, the teacher unknowingly triggered additional background searches, some of which returned adult content. The monitoring software scanned everything indiscriminately and flagged the two tiny thumbnails we had found, the result of automatic searches conducted by Bing.

The Outcome

We showed definitively that the teacher had not made any attempt to search for explicit or illegal material. After several weeks of administrative leave, the teacher was cleared of all wrongdoing and returned to the classroom.

From the Attorney

"I wanted you to know how much the [client] and I appreciated the work done by you and your team to resolve the mystery involving [the teacher]'s computer. The fact that you didn't simply accept the easy explanation — that he must have searched for pornography and hid it so well that you couldn't find it — and doggedly pursued the truth, avoided what might have been a serious miscarriage of justice that could have resulted in [the teacher] losing his job, his reputation and maybe his freedom. You should also know that being under this cloud of suspicion has overwhelmed [the teacher] and, while he will take some time to recover, he is extremely relieved to have been exonerated. And the professionalism and expertise of you and your co-workers relieved [client] of the horrible burden of mistakenly taking action against an innocent man."