Social Networking and Law Enforcement Trends

In November, a 19-year-old New York man logged on to his father’s computer around 11 a.m., impatient for breakfast to be served. What he didn’t know at the time was that his next move – updating his status on Facebook to “Where’s my pancakes?” – would serve as his alibi and eventually clear him as a robbery suspect. After a district attorney subpoenaed Facebook to verify that the words were typed from the man’s father’s computer, the New York Times reports, all charges were dropped.

With the explosion of social networking worldwide – Facebook recently reached a milestone 350 million users – sites like Twitter and YouTube offer a wealth of information for police and lawyers to sift through as they alternately pursue criminals or work to defend those accused of crimes.

Denny Powers, Criminal Justice program director at South University’s Columbia campus in South Carolina, says police often find known and wanted criminals on various social networking sites, including gang members who are recruiting new members and communicating with existing ones.

Sometimes, it's easy for law enforcement professionals to find the proof they need via social networking sites, thanks to criminals leaving an electronic trail.

“The individuals are so brazen to have photos displaying illegal activity, use and possession of drugs, weapons, and other contraband,” says Powers, who has nearly 30 years experience in the criminal justice field.

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Social networking has enormous potential for law enforcement, agrees Michael Vallez, a social media strategist at USIS, a firm contracted by the U.S. Department of Defense to complete background checks and investigations. Vallez, who writes the blog Social Media Five O, previously served on the Tampa police force for eight years.

In a recent blog post, Vallez cites the example of the Boston Ten Point Coalition, a neighborhood group that has begun following gang members on Facebook to track their movements and even get them to share information.

Using social networking sites isn’t the “end-all, be-all” to protecting citizens, Vallez says, but it’s still valuable. He encourages police to take the next step and use social media to prevent crime from happening in the first place. The possibilities are endless he says, such as using Twitter to keep locals abreast of current missing person reports or suspicious activity as it’s happening. Police could use Facebook fan pages to post videos of criminals in the act, or to remind users of common crime prevention tips.

"Social media is all about transparency," Vallez says. "I think you're going to see an internet crime squad in every police department. It's not going to be just one guy, it's going to be 10 [or] 20 guys in big cities."

But the places that could benefit the most from sites like Twitter – small towns and cities – are the locations that appear to be the furthest behind.

"I've asked myself, 'Why isn't law enforcement getting it?' or, 'Do they get it and they're just not using it?' " Vallez asks. "I think they're just seeing the beginning of this change that has been happening for over a year."

While the legal community and larger task forces may have tapped into the wealth of knowledge and versatility behind social media outlets, Powers acknowledges that many police forces are lagging behind.

"Some have caught on and are using the technology to their benefit, but many law enforcement agency heads and personnel in the agencies are not computer literate, don't use email, and do not have websites for their departments," Powers says.
Some agencies, though, are ahead of the pack and flourishing. Powers points out that not only has South Carolina's attorney general been successful using social networking to aid its task force on child predators, the office has also taken on giants like Craigslist for the now infamously defunct "erotic services" section of its site.

In December 2009, the attorney general's task force announced it had made its 184th arrest, according to a recent news release. In that case, a man was arrested after police said he solicited sex on the internet from an individual he believed to be a minor girl. In reality, the arrested man was communicating with an undercover investigator.

"Searching out child sexual predators has become common place in many law enforcement agencies," Powers says.