Social Media & Crime-Solving: How much is too much?

By Jay Osterholm, Founder & CEO, The ODM Group

Social Media in the Workplace

We live in an age that is characterized by a never-ending revolving door of technological innovation and advancement and to see the adoption and integration of social media in the workplace is no surprise. However, when it comes to the workplace and specifically police investigations, how much is too much?

While social media may have pervaded what seems like every aspect of our personal and professional lives, the phenomena is still relatively new in the workplace. There is no definitive line drawn between what is right and wrong, and in most cases, the rules of social media etiquette are still being written. For instance, social media is becoming an increasingly useful tool, not to mention a necessary one, in helping members in all sectors of law enforcement to solve crimes. According to a recent survey conducted by LexisNexis Risk Solutions, approximately four out of five law enforcement officials have already used social media as an aid in crime investigations.

Of course, certain questions arise regarding the integration of social media in police work. Should police have free reign of your social accounts? Is there a privacy threshold that needs to be observed? Such questions also arise in the world of business, e.g., should employers look to potential employees’ social accounts as a prerequisite to hiring? As these questions emerge, and businesses evolve how they incorporate new technologies into the workplace, there is no doubt that social media already plays (and will continue to play) an integral role in how business is conducted.

The Cold Hard Facts of Social Media & Crime-Solving

Members of law enforcement, whether they are federal, state or local, are looking to social media to help solve crimes more than ever before. According to an online survey by PoliceOne.com, the top five investigative activities done via social media include identifying persons of interest and/or their
accomplices, identifying the location of criminal activity, identifying criminal activity in general and gathering photos or statements. A June 2012 survey found that the majority of law enforcement professionals in every sector say they use social media for investigative purposes.

In the same survey, which polled over 1,200 law enforcement professionals, 80% said they were self-taught when it came to using social media for investigations. The complete list of reasons for how members of law enforcement have learned how to use different social media technologies include (in order of highest to lowest percentage):

- Self-trained by getting on & navigating social media sites
- Brought knowledge from personal use
- Working with a colleague who uses social media
- With information from the general media or online
- At a seminar or conference that was dedicated to social media
- Training given at agency

The survey also found that social media use by law enforcement varies by geographic region. Can you guess which region clocks the highest percentage? The Northeast leads the way with 89% followed by the Midwest, West, and Southern regions. Look at the graphic for all the percentages by region.

“Social media is a valuable tool because you are able to see the activities of a target in his comfortable stage,” said one of the survey’s respondents. “Targets brag and post illicit valuable information in reference to travel, hobbies, places visited, functions, appointments, circle of friends, family members, relationships, actions, etc.”
Recently in the News...

While police still employ traditional methods, like DNA testing and fingerprinting, to catch criminals, there is no question social media has a relevant and useful place within the department. Social media is used by law enforcement in several ways, and in the news we have seen some of these ways come to life. For example, in the past few years police have used social media to help make a criminal case, have identified suspects using social media via their posts and have used various social channels to engage the public for tips and updates.

1. Ohio Rape Trial: Police Using Social Media to Make a Criminal Case
   A recent case that has gained considerable traction in the news lately is the rape conviction of two high school boys from Ohio. The boys, well known in their high school for being football stars, stood trial the end of March for the rape of a 16-year-old girl. During the investigation, police collected images and posts via the Internet from social sites, like Twitter, to further incriminate the boys. By doing this, investigators were able to build a strong case, which ended with the conviction of the two young men.

   Additionally, two teenage girls (15 & 16) were arrested in connection with the case because of their online posts following the boys’ guilty verdicts. One of the posts on Twitter, by the 16-year-old, threatened the rape victim’s life. She posted, “You ripped my family apart, you made my cousin cry...it’s gone be a homicide.” Both girls were arrested and charged with intimidation of a witness, which is a third-degree felony. If convicted, the girls could face up to 6 months in custody in juvenile detention.

2. Tax Fraud to Homicide: Police Using Social Media to Identify & Arrest Criminals
   Police frequently use social media to not only build criminal cases after crimes have been committed; they also use social channels to identify suspects committing crimes as they happen. Often, people committing crimes turn to social media to brag about their actions. *The New York Times* reported on several instances where people bragged about illegal activity online. For example, in 2011 one woman posted to Facebook that she was the “first lady of tax refund fraud.” The IRS was not amused, naturally, and authorities made an arrest based on her post. In the same NYT article, authorities also stepped in when a 17-year-old man posted to Facebook about his involvement in an anti-gay murder.

3. Philadelphia, Boston Police Departments: Social Media to Engage Public & Solve Crime
   Another common practice among police departments is using social media to directly connect with the public. Through these interactions, police are able to work with the public for tips and updates on criminal activity happening in their regions. Our own Philadelphia Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey was recently quoted about his department’s efforts to interact with the public through social media, specifically with Twitter alerts. The Philadelphia police use social media as a two-way communication channel, answering questions the public
has and for help with on-going investigations. Ramsey noted that 20% of all crime tips received in the past year came to them via social media.

Most recently, the Boston Police Department was praised by former Communications Director Elaine Driscoll, for their use of social media to collect information from the public regarding the Boston bombings that took place earlier this week.

“The Boston Police Department was able to very effectively use social media to communicate with the public to provide public-safety instructions with necessary immediacy when they might not have had the opportunity to hold a press conference or get that message across,” said Driscoll.

Conclusion

While it may seem like commonsense to monitor what you put online, it appears that people posting illegal doings via social media is not just a once-in-a-while kind of post happening throughout the social sphere. On the blog Happyplace.com, a post was published called, “The Most Idiotic Confessions to Criminal Activity Ever Posted to Facebook.” It is truly amazing what some people will post. The blog features everything from posts about shoplifting to selling someone’s passport to images of marijuana to confessing to drunk driving.

While the incorporation of social media as a way to effectively investigate an on-going crime may raise a number of questions regarding privacy, it is safe to say that this method is here to stay. In this case, the benefits of social media in police work far outweigh the concerns. If you are posting about your illegal activity or bragging about a crime committed, you have to understand the consequences of that post. If I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a million times—If you do not want the world to know your business, even beyond legal activity, then keep it to yourself. The Internet provides police with a powerful platform that has led to arresting convictions. If we as a society using social channels to further keep our streets safe is the case, then I think this one is a no-brainer. What are your thoughts on the integration of social media in police investigations?

References


