

Abstract

This paper discusses the important role social media platforms play in not only helping law enforcement solve crimes but, how it has changed the flow of information from law enforcement to the public. There are many social media platforms that aid in criminal investigations but, Reddit and Facebook are the two examples that are highlighted within this text. Reddit is shown to be helpful as the users on the platform gather evidence on certain crimes and discourage vigilantism. On the other hand, there is Facebook which has been proven to help law enforcement solve crimes and has also helped in improving community relations. Lastly, this text touches on how criminals have found a new medium on which to post/display their crimes. If it were it not have been for social media platforms giving them this affordance, these criminals may have never been caught.

Social media has now been integrated in most people's lives as an everyday reoccurrence. It has connected friends, families, and even strangers to each other across the globe and it has even brought some fame and fortune. For the average person, social media might be a place where they share photos of their summer vacation or the meal they are eating. However, for some people, social media platforms are places they go to talk to fellow citizen sleuths to try and unravel and solve cold true crime cases or to solve an ongoing investigation. It is important to note that these online communities are not part of law enforcement, they are normal everyday citizens that have an interest in true crime and a thirst for justice. These amateur investigations have even proven helpful to law enforcement in certain cases. Platforms such as Facebook and Reddit act as hosts to these communities which have helped investigators in the cases that were active at that time. Social media has changed the way law enforcement is solving crimes in the 21st century in that police have a lot more access to different groups of people to help solve an investigation. This back-and-forth communication between law enforcement and the public is useful. The reason for this is that citizens are able to voice their opinion to the police in a very direct fashion, and law enforcement is now also able to give out information to a large amount of people almost instantaneously. The flow of information between law enforcement and the public has drastically changed because of social media. Before social media platforms the public was not really able to voice their concerns the way they are able to now. Social media has incited social change as it is not only a tool that helps law enforcement fight crime, but it has also changed the way they get messages out to the public.

It has already been proven that social media is a powerful tool and driving force for social change within communities. In their text Smith et al. (2010) mentions a study done in the state of Montana in the United States to see if social media adverts depicting the adverse side effects of using meth would actually decrease the amount of meth users in the state. The results of the study were promising.

Although the campaign was aimed at teenagers, it also reduced adult meth use by 72 percent and meth-related crime by 62 percent and moved the state of Montana from the fifth-highest rate of meth abuse in the nation to the thirty-ninth. (Smith et al., 2010, p. 26)

A specific example of a social media platform being used to solve crimes is Reddit.

Reddit is a discussion-based website that utilises forums through which users communicate. Myles et al. (2016) focused specifically on one forum on the website called the “Reddit Bureau of Investigation” or the “RBI”. The authors explain that:

The official aim of RBI has developed over the years, from using “the power of Reddit to solve crimes/mysteries and stop criminals” to the setting up of “an organized group of Redditors interested in solving crimes/mysteries and helping people in the process.” (Myles et al., 2016, p. 11)

The forum consists of people asking the internet sleuths of Reddit to help them identify others who have committed a crime against them. May it be a robbery or something more sinister. This forum is accessible to anyone, including law enforcement, and the conversations and clues gathered on the forum could be used as evidence to convict someone. The internet is a goldmine of information, and because of this, people are more easily found than they were before the internet existed. This can prove to be a blessing

and a curse. This is because either, the wronged party can take the evidence gathered by the Reddit sleuths to the authorities or, they can enact their own revenge on the accused as a form of vigilantism. Myles et al. (2016) touches on this in their text stating that:

Our observation of RBI activities has rapidly shown that they have little in common with the characteristics associated with vigilantism, like the use of force, a logic of vengeance and/or shaming, and the will to take the law into one's own hands. (Myles et al., 2016, p. 17)

According to the text the forum does not condone, nor does it encourage vigilantism. It exists purely as a place where crimes and mysteries are discussed and where people go to seek help.

Another example of a social media platform that internet sleuths use to communicate is Facebook. The platform has 2797 million users as of 4th quarter 2020 (Statista, 2020). Because of the sheer numbers of people on the platform there is massive potential for law enforcement to get in contact with large amounts of people almost straight away. In their text, Mirmajlessi (2013) saw this opportunity and did a study on an anonymous police department in the state of Ohio in the USA. According to the Mirmajlessi:

In this study, Facebook was rarely used as an interactive tool between police and civilians to fight crime. In fact, Facebook was used by the department as an informative based tool to keep the community aware of ongoing investigations and crimes that effected their neighborhoods. (Mirmajlessi, 2013, p. 76)

Mirmajlessi (2013) found that Facebook in this case is not necessarily helpful in fighting crime or solving investigations. However, it is important to note that the platform was

helpful to the police in keeping citizens updated on important information regarding ongoing investigations. Be that as it may, there was another study done in the state of Arkansas, USA that states the contrary. Beshears (2017) concluded that; “Recommendations were made for Arkansas sheriffs to increase the frequency of social media communications. Since frequency, based upon findings has been determined to be a benefit to law enforcement community relations and crime solving” (p. 499). Beshears (2017) had a sample of 52 sheriff offices volunteering for the study, and the overall consensus stated that because of the use of social media applications and platforms the investigations of crimes in the area were actually helped by the communications the investigators were having through social media. Having said that, it is worth mentioning that Beshears’ study was done four years after Mirmajlessi’s. Social media platforms go through many changes very quickly, so it could have been possible that within the four-year gap between studies that some changes were made within the applications/platforms that made it easier for citizens to communicate with law enforcement. It should also be noted that Beshear’s sample size was larger, which could have affected the results. Nonetheless, it would not be presumptuous to say that social media indeed is an especially helpful tool in solving crimes.

There is a very well documented case of when internet sleuths were an especially important part of an investigation. *Don’t F**k With Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* is a docuseries released by Netflix that interviews members of an internet sleuth Facebook group who were instrumental in catching an infamous killer (Lewis et al., 2019). The story follows the killing spree of Luka Magnotta in which he initially released footage of

him torturing and killing cats which sparked the internet sleuths' investigation and ending with him releasing footage of him killing 33-year-old, Lin Jun (Lewis et al., 2019). The Facebook sleuths knew Magnotta's identity before he committed the murder, however it proved to be a challenge to apprehend Magnotta as he kept changing his location (Lewis et al., 2019). Even so, when Magnotta finally did commit his first (and last) murder, the evidence gathered by the group of Facebook sleuths was integral in his conviction (Lewis et al., 2019). It is interesting to see how with the advances in technology and the affordances of the internet, criminals are now filming/livestreaming themselves committing their crimes and making it almost easier for law enforcement to find them. A good example of a criminal livestreaming his heinous acts is the 2019 Christchurch shootings that left 51 people dead (Macklin, 2019).

Extreme-right activists have regularly utilized livestream, albeit in other contexts. Militias on the U.S.-Mexico border have integrated it into their activities, transforming their confrontations with migrants and refugees into a form of "reality TV." Tarrant's atrocity was the first time, however, that an actual terrorist attack has been filmed via livestream. (Macklin, 2019, p. 20)

Although snuff films are hardly a new concept, with livestreaming now being a readily accessible feature on many social media platforms, criminals now have a new medium to showcase their crimes which could actually assist in their downfall. In the case of the Christchurch shootings, there was a high possibility that Tarrant would have been caught regardless of whether or not he livestreamed the event. However, because he chose to livestream his crimes, it was much easier to convict him in a court of law as there was actual footage of him committing the crimes, leaving absolutely no questions as to who

did it. With saying that, there is an understanding that not every criminal is going to film or livestream their crimes on social media. However, for those criminals who do, do that there is a higher possibility that they would be caught because of the way social media platforms/sites are programmed. It could be argued that social media can hinder investigations because of the sheer amount of information available and some individuals may use the platforms to make false claims or lead law enforcement away from the actual criminal. Be that as it may, the information that social media platforms possess is tremendous, and to some investigations it acts more as a benefit than a hinderance.

From these facts one may conclude that social media has changed the way our society communicates and helps law enforcement. There is a plethora of groups online who specifically exist to help solve crimes, and these group discussions are easily available to law enforcement to gather evidence. There are many instances that have proven that social media is an extremely helpful tool, whether it be the suspect themselves uploading their crimes to the site, or the site itself knowing the criminals' whereabouts with location tracking software within the application. Before social media existed, the flow of information from law enforcement to the public was more of a top-down pattern.

Whereas with social media, the playing field is a bit more level as the public can directly communicate with law enforcement. This is a massive social change, and it is affecting how law enforcement is solving crime and interacting with citizens. It is for this specific reason that this essay is submitted to the Online Networks & Social Change stream of this conference.

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