

6 Ways Law Enforcement Uses Social Media to Fight Crime



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From felons on Facebook to tips through Twitter, social media is being used more and more by law enforcement agencies, and not just to fight Internet-related crimes. We're talking about solving crimes that are happening on the street and in your community.

According to Lauri Stevens, founder of [LAWs Communications](#) and organizer of the [SMILE \(Social Media In Law Enforcement\) Conference](#) being held in Washington D.C. this April, adoption of social media is still in the "very, very, early stages," but she sees it making an upward turn. "I expect 2010 will be a monumental year," she said.

But many police departments that have embraced social media are still trying to figure it out.

"Most agencies ... are not significantly proactive with keeping up with content and updates," said Terry Halsch from [CitizenObserver.com](#), developers of the tip411 system for police agencies. "There are some limitations because of uncertainty of how secure information is, how can it be efficiently maintained, [and] the risks and liabilities of entering the world of social media."

Below are six different ways law enforcement is utilizing social media and real-time search to enhance tactics, disseminate public information, and ultimately prevent criminal activity.

1. Police Blotter Blogs

A police blotter is the record of events at a police station. Traditionally, a desk sergeant kept a register of these events. Nowadays, [Twitter](#) feeds, blogs, [YouTube](#), and [Facebook](#) Fan Pages are

being used by captains and chiefs to put out the digital equivalent of the police blotter in real-time.

Publishing a register of crimes and arrests in an area has been an online activity for a while now, especially through local newspaper websites. But social media is allowing many police officers on the scene to report the publicly available details of a crime for themselves. Reporters are getting their facts directly from a stream of real time-data and blog posts coming from the department.

Individual cops aren't about to turn into citizen journalists anytime soon, but the police are able, through social media and real-time updates, to provide essential information that the public and news gathering agencies need to know. Journalists today often use the web for their first line of research, and rely on web-based police reports for many of the details they need for a story.

“We don't just release the police report; we write our own story and post it to our website,” said Mark Economou, the Public Information Manager for the Boca Raton Police Department in Boca Raton, Florida in a [post on ConnectedCops.com](#). “Even more interesting, we are finding the media is just cutting and pasting our stories to their sites, both in television and print.”

The Boca Raton Police Department has developed their own branded web platform that they call [Viper](#). Social media is a very important part of their strategy, and like anyone adopting social media into a plan, they use it to support and enhance the work they already do.

2. The Digital “Wanted Poster”



The image shows a Facebook page for the Boynton Beach Police Department. The page header includes the department name and a "Become a Fan" button. Below the header are tabs for "Wall", "Info", "Notes", and "Photos". A section titled "Boynton Beach Police Department + Fans" shows the department as a fan of itself. The main content area features a post from the department about a car restoration project. The post text reads: "Boynton Beach Police Department Members of BBPD, along with students from the Youth Violence Prevention Program, are restoring a 1953 Buick in honor of the police department's 90th anniversary. Follow the progress here!". Below the text are three small photographs showing the restoration process: a person working on the car's interior, a close-up of the car's engine, and a person working on the car's exterior.

In the vein of an Old West “Wanted” poster, displayed in the most trafficked area of town, modern-day law enforcement agencies are posting descriptions of criminals on today’s most trafficked spots — namely the social web.

With millions of users, extraordinary reach, and the lightning-fast exchange of text, photos, and video, platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are ideal for getting the word out about wanted persons with up-to-the-minute updates.

The Boynton Beach Police Department is a good example. On their [Facebook Fan Page](#), the department put up a [post](#) with the headline, “Police need help identifying motorcyclist who robbed man at ATM.” In the post there was a photo from the ATM machine of the crime in progress. The department also cross-posted the information to their [Twitter page](#).

In the UK, the [Leicestershire Constabulary](#) is one of a number of police departments focusing on being hyper-local and involved with the community through social media. Their website has a section titled “[Can you help?](#)” which is formatted like a blog, and contains posts about ongoing criminal investigations, and a “Wanted Poster” and “Missing Persons” area with photos and requests for residents to respond with any leads they might have.

The stories are also fed to a [Facebook Page](#) that is very interactive and updated constantly. They also maintain a [Twitter profile](#), a [YouTube account](#), and the department offers the ability to subscribe to their news feed via RSS. It’s an impressive mixture of social media tools that seems to work fluidly and update automatically.

3. Anonymous E-Tipsters

Tips from the community have been a time-honored way that citizens have worked with the public to fight crime.

Consulting companies are developing very sophisticated ways for the public and the police to interact online. The [tip411](#) program developed by the CitizenObserver Corporation is marketed to law enforcement as a web-based notification toolset. Citizen participation has always been a big part of fighting crime, and the people at tip411 stress that social media “acts as a ‘force multiplier’ by empowering your community to get involved.”

“Anonymous text tip systems are gaining significant traction because they enable young people to provide information without fear of retribution, i.e. ‘Snitches get Snitches,’” said CitizenObserver’s Terry Halsch.

The program allows tipsters to send information anonymously through a variety of means including “anonymous web chat, text tips and secure social media publishing.” Filtered alerts can then be pushed out through a police department’s central location to other web mediums. Bundled with other offerings, tip411 can then be published with [Google Maps](#) to create a clickable, interactive crime “heat map” of sorts where others can click on links directly to add

more information and tips based on location. This program is meant to encourage increased interaction between the police and the community through real-time web tools.

“It doesn’t matter to us where the information comes from,” said Detroit’s Chief of Police, Warren Evans, a tip411 user. “We just want the information so we can act on it. I want people to know that they can feel safe using this system to communicate with us directly.”

4. Social Media Stakeout

Social media advocates stress listening as a part of any brand’s online marketing strategy. Listening to the bad guys doing bad things has always been a part of police work. It’s important for police to search the real-time web to target particular keywords and phrases being passed around on social media. Use of social media monitoring has a strategic, tactical and operational application for law enforcement.

Boston Police Department Superintendent John Daly spoke about [using Twitter search to monitor chatter](#) around the Boston area in real-time. He’s very sensitive to the implications of engaging in this type of search, as many police departments are.

(VIDEO LINK HERE)

“We have to be very careful because there’s a Big Brother aspect to this,” Daly said.

He stressed that they were not looking at “everyday messages,” as he put it, but specific tweets that signaled something they should be looking into.

“But when people start saying, ‘What’s that smoke coming from the Hancock Tower?’ or ‘Why is everybody running around Copley Place — is something going on?’ — if two or three things come in we look at patterns, trends, something maybe we should be paying attention [to]. So it’s sort of an early warning system.”

5. Thwarting Thugs in the Social Space

Myspace, Facebook and Twitter are popular with gang members, and police use this to their advantage. Law enforcement has been able to infiltrate street gangs by posing as fellow gang members online, making connections, and intercepting criminal communications as they happen. Information like photos, videos, and friend links help law enforcement understand the dynamics of gangs when investigating their activities.

“Investigators build phony profiles to ‘friend’ gang members either within YouTube, Facebook or Bebo, and then may migrate that friendship to another platform and gain trust and get their ‘friends’ to share useful information,” said SMILE conference organizer Lauri Stevens.

According to an [article in 219magazine](#), police in Cincinnati used Facebook and MySpace to follow more than 20 members of a local gang, the “Northside Taliband.” The evidence they gathered helped law enforcement connect members to a multitude of crimes, including a possible homicide.

Other agencies have employed these tactics as well. The NYPD is using the Internet to monitor gang activity, as well, and in a [story reported in the Daily News](#), cops said that gangs have been communicating on Twitter. They think that one Twitter exchange between gang members may even have resulted in the shooting of a youth. The police seek out code words and slang used by individual members to follow gang members online who are organizing illegal activities.

“It is another tool ... just like old phone records,” a police source said in the article.

6. Tracking and Informing with Twitter

**BUILDING FIRE: 45 Adams St in
Dorchester, avoid the area.**

12:38 PM Mar 4th via web



Boston_Police
Boston Police Dept.

As we all know, Twitter has plenty of uses for individuals and companies. Law enforcement also uses the service to communicate with the public.

Stevens told us that she follows at least 700 law enforcement agencies worldwide on Twitter alone. Not all of them are active, but some have found unique ways to incorporate Twitter into their police tactics. “The LAPD used Twitter to monitor crowds during the Michael Jackson funeral,” for example, said Stevens, and the Boston Police have been [using Twitter](#) to alert followers of evolving situations in real time.

Sergeant Tim Burrows does media relations for the traffic services unit in the Toronto Police Service. Tim saw his traffic safety messaging hampered by the mainstream media’s editing time lines, so he started [using Twitter](#) to talk to the local media about ongoing situations and inform the public. He considers his tweets about traffic safety information a valuable public service.

The [Broward County Sheriff’s Office](#) took things a step further. When the police wanted to utilize social media they, like many agencies, felt that existing public sites were too unsecured and vulnerable for a system-wide roll out within the department. So inspired by Twitter, the department took things into their own hands.

“[CyberVisor](#) was my vision of Broward County Sheriff’s Office’s own controlled Twitter,” said Lynne Martzall, External Affairs Manager, who worked with webmaster Tony Petruzzi to create it.

Since it was rolled out, CyberVisor has been used to broadcast information about unfolding situations, such as crimes in progress, to put out information after a bank robbery and when the Sheriff’s Office was looking for an escaped convict. For now, the public can’t respond to CyberVisor — it’s broadcast only — but it has still be effective.

In one instance, they alerted followers to someone in South Broward County impersonating an officer. In another, they sent out a missing child alert from a local elementary school with a detailed description of the child’s physical appearance and where the child was last seen.

Showing 15 of 15 comments



[Rob](#) ★ [2 weeks ago](#)

- There was a great radio show on BBC last night about the government spreading unsourced stories to the media as part of the propaganda war in the conflict with the IRA.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00rdxm1>

Surely police and secret services are using more active methods on social media than just listening. Beware of unsubstantiated rumours

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[crazymikesapps](#) ★ [3 weeks ago](#)

- Great article and I am so glad the premiere website on social media is beginning to chronicle the impact social media is having on law enforcement. Laurie is on the forefront of bringing this cultural communication change to light.

thank you

Mike

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[romar](#) ★ [3 weeks ago](#)

- A twist on #3 eTipsters: [ushahidi.com](#) is a private effort started in Africa to report incidents which might *not* otherwise be monitored/followed-up by law enforcement. In the absence of law enforcement after the Haiti earthquake, <http://haiti.ushahidi.com> was able to begin accepting and mapping crisis information the very next day, mapping reports of crimes, urgent needs, etc. Cities all over the world would do well to study Ushahidi as a model for "neighborhood watch" on the web: graffiti, crime reports, etc.
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[Sally](#) ★ [3 weeks ago](#)

- The internet is.. no doubt.. a crime infested place... but hopefully they wont get too caught up in being internet police because what goes on out there in the real world is about 2000x scarier and needs to be taken care of even more so :o

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<http://bit.ly/cOzSk0>

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[Jasper Blake](#) ★ [3 weeks ago](#)

- One area not really touched on in the article was the potential for community engagement - that is, a way for local neighbourhood communities to really engage and get to know their local community police officers and personnel. All too often police are viewed from an 'us & them' point of view and social media is a great way to break down those barriers and get some real interaction with local residents, and not just when they need to call the police to some incident or other. By building such relationships with their local 'beats' I am sure the local community police would get much more engagement, information and knowledge from local residents as a result. It is merely an ongoing & logical extension of the outreach that they do with local communities on a day to day basis anyway. With all the new geo-tagging capabilities coming into play on social media platforms and the mobile web there is a great opportunity to get very targetted and local when it comes to local law enforcement issues - perhaps tying in with local neighbourhood watch schemes & their online presence. I did venture to suggest such an idea to my local Glendale, AZ police department last year but never got a reply.
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- I keep filling in the form and get back that they already have the request, and yet the page is still not verified. And I can tell you, there are phony "imposter" PD accounts on Twitter. Again, check in with the PD if you're suspicious.
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- It's nice to know that the police are "fighting fire with fire," so to speak. Criminals have been using social networks for years to commit their crimes, so it's about time the police followed suit. I echo the concerns from MayaTao, though. Credibility is important in these cases.
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- It is great to know that the police enforcement are trying to utilize various social medias in some of their cases and at the same time, these medias have provided help as well. This is just one of the ways in order to keep up with the latest trend in technology while trying to solve crimes.
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Trious ★ [3 weeks ago](#)

- Tips with no names should not be given that much credibility as rumors and fake gossip are rampant online
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lauristevens ★ [3 weeks ago](#)

- MayaTao:

You're right to be concerned. Police departments need to take special care (and most do) to identify the officers or staff members who are administering the page to provide their contact information. You should feel free to check in with them and verify that it is in fact the official PD page. The best ones even have their actual officers, with their identities revealed, commenting and giving input on the page.

There is a problem with Twitter. I've been waiting FOR MONTHS to get a client twitter account verified. I keep filling in the form and get back that they already have the request, and yet the page is still not verified. And I can tell you, there are phony "imposter" PD accounts on Twitter. Again, check in with the PD if you're suspicious.

As a citizen, if you're concerned, it takes just a few second to check with the PD and ask. They'll be more than happy to tell whether it is or isn't their page. Even before that, check their official agency webpage, nearly all of them are going to have links to their REAL social media sites from their webpage.

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obilon ★ [3 weeks ago in reply to lauristevens](#)

- I would say the same for police that I usually say for any other account to verify if it's authentic. Before there was the Verified badged on Twitter, I'd go to the official

website for that person or organization. Ex. If you want to know if a local police force's Twitter account is authentic, go to their official webpage and look for a link to a Twitter account from there. That would be the official one. If you don't find a link then be suspicious.

Really for any organization (especially government and emergency services) when engaging in social media they absolutely must make sure there's a clear link from their official site (preferably on their home page in a visible area) to all their social media accounts so people don't waste time hunting down and worrying about authentication.

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[Tim Burrows](#) ★ [3 weeks ago](#)

- The Toronto Police Service can be mentioned in every category of Social Media. Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, YouTube, Skype, Podcasting...they are everywhere in SM. They don't just send information out, they also get the idea of the strength of Social Media...they actually talk to the public.

Send them a message, a human gets back to you. Ask them a question and you get an answer. They educate, inform, raise awareness and engage.

Way to go Toronto Police!

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[MayaTao](#) ★ [3 weeks ago](#)

- I appreciate the police's effort in exploring social media, and i'm glad it does work sometimes. I would also be very concern with its credibility tho, to be specific, how am I gonna know if the police facebook page is really operated by the police.
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[eitrem](#) ★ [3 weeks ago](#)

- Unfortunately people, especially children, go missing every day. There are a great number of methods in place to help find the missing BUT one very obvious method is totally ignored, not to say impossible until WrapMail (www.wrapmail.com) developed its

technology: email. Not email-blasts BUT using the emails people send every day anyway (one-on-one emails)!

Corporate and Government employees send emails every day, these emails go to the public, business and government agencies but when they arrive they are plain black on white.

Each of these emails could have a wrap surrounding the email that in addition to information and links to the respective websites also could feature pictures of missing adults and/or children. WrapMail, Inc.'s technology allows for dynamic rotation so that every single email that is sent out could feature new missing kids so that all the missing is exposed to the receiving audience. There are already RSS feeds out with data on missing kids that can be incorporated into a WrapMail. This is the milk carton of the 21st Century!

These pictures have embedded hyperlinks that lead to pages with more details (such as more pictures, last seen, clothes worn, last seen with etc).

There are about 50 billion emails sent every day; one-on-one emails that is, every one of them could be looking for missing children.

The bottom line is that these emails are sent every day anyway – why not use them for something good? WrapMail offers their solution for free for approved organizations (organizations that focus on finding missing adults and children) as they, like everyone else, send external emails every day. WrapMail further offers its clients to incorporate this feature for free either with just an amber alert or a rotation of missing people with every outbound email.

Please also see this article: <http://www.canadafreepress.com/2007/cover082907...>

WrapMail looks for missing Florida children with every email sent by one of our employees.

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eitrem ★ [3 weeks ago](#)

- Companies invest a great deal in their website which in many cases is their only “store” where they showcase products and services. The challenge is to drive people to the website but as we all know, more people in the store will lead to more sales. Corporate employees send emails every day to clients, prospects, friends and others but these are plain emails that do not generate any traffic to the website. WrapMail – www.wrapmail.com - offers a solution that does not require any installation but that seamlessly adds interactive letterheads (designed by the client) to every outgoing email so that each and every one becomes a promotional piece for the company and when clicked delivers the reader to the website. Furthermore the solution tracks the clicks and reports who is clicking on what and when (also in real time), turning the system into a research tool.

This “hidden” advertising medium is probably the most viral available and the least costly, WrapMail only charges \$5 per user per month.

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