



Social Media and Organized Crime

BUILDING A SAFE AND RESILIENT CANADA

Persons suspected of organized crime involvement do not tend to display their illicit activities on their social media profiles, but instead use social media to keep connected to their friends, families, and to share their interests. Police, on the other hand, employ social media to connect to the communities that they serve and as an investigative tool.

Social media tools help to link people with common interests, and facilitate a wide variety of activities in the legitimate sector; it follows that such popular communication and business tools may also facilitate work in the illegitimate sector, perhaps even the work of criminal organizations. This research complements existing empirical information regarding the use of social media by criminal organizations and by police by way of literature review and interviews with police and social media experts.

The goals of law enforcement use of social media as identified by respondents were to connect to and interact with the community, and to proactively monitor the community for disruptive events and activities. Respondents reflected on the challenges they faced when conducting such investigations online. These included the ability to find the correct person among the large number of online social media users, the procedural difficulties associated with acquiring private information from social media data owners, and the time consuming nature of following forensically sound procedures when collecting online evidence, particularly when it is done in such a way as to not leave behind traces of police activities.

One recurring recommendation from respondents, which also appears in the literature, is that police officers need more basic training on using computers and the Internet for open source intelligence gathering. Respondents suggest that it is important that police have access to different computers, websites, and

software so that they can be more fluent with them and utilize a variety of tools. Respondents indicated that police need to accept that officers will want to use online social media sites for personal reasons. But, they warned that separating police work from personal work is a mandatory requirement. They expressed concern that many police officers do not understand the danger of posting photos and personal information on online social media sites (OSMS), even if they have strict privacy settings.

Some respondents suggested that a set of principles be created and followed regarding how police should and can obtain evidence and what they should (not) do at a crime scene where a computer is involved. Respondents suggested that such a guideline would allow police to be more effective and consistent in gathering evidence from computers. Moreover, such a guideline may help minimize trails left by police during investigation.

The intersections between the demographic characteristics of persons who use social media and those of persons involved with organized crime may be useful for targeting investigation and communication efforts. In general, persons involved in organized crime tend to be late-onset offenders, older than those who frequent social media sites, and may perhaps be less likely to use social media. Exceptionally, the two blog sites described in this report, Blogger and Wordpress, were shown to have an older cohort of users. It is possible that members of criminal organizations, like the older general public, may be more attracted to blog sites than to Twitter, FaceBook, or MySpace, and as such may be users or consumers of such social media. Unlike the typical social media user, women involved in criminal organizations tend to belong to a visible minority group, with disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. As such, it is possible that female organized crime offenders are even less likely than their male counterparts to use social media sites.



Frank, Richard, Connie Cheng, and Vito Pun. (2011) *Social Media Sites: New Fora for Criminal, Communication, and Investigation Opportunities*. Ottawa, ON: Public Safety Canada.

For more information on organized crime research at Public Safety Canada, please contact the Organized Crime Research Unit at ocr-rco@ps-sp.gc.ca.

Organized Crime Research Briefs are produced for Public Safety Canada and the National Coordinating Committee on Organized Crime (NCC). The NCC and its Regional/Provincial Coordinating Committees work at different levels towards a common purpose: creating a link between law enforcement agencies and public policy makers to combat organized crime. *Organized Crime Research Briefs* supports NCC research objectives by highlighting evidence-based information relevant for the consideration of policy-development or operations. The summary herein reflect interpretations of the report authors' findings and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Public Safety Canada or the National Coordinating Committee on Organized Crime.