



Social Media and the New Generation of “Computerated” Criminals

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Abstract

It is nothing new to point to the rapid societal changes brought about with the advent of social media and smartphone technology since 2007. Governments now have to come to terms with privacy issues and a host of new cybercrimes. This brief article summarizes what is known about the use of social media as a preferred victim targeting network for sexual predators. It also highlights needed areas for future research in criminology and forensic science related to offender behavior that can practically be used to inform an evidence base for criminal investigation.

Keywords: Cybercrime; Criminal investigation; Internet; Sex offenders; Justice; Victim; Social media

Abbreviations: SVTN: Social Media Victim Targeting Networks; CRC: Child Rescue Coalition

Introduction

The world of cybercrime has transformed significantly over the past ten or twenty years. Early concerns focused on the vulnerability of the financial industry, including crimes of identity theft and hacking. However, in recent years, cybercrime has evolved to include crimes of harassment, child pornography, rape, “cyber terrorism” and even murder. Although not receiving significant research to date for practical reasons, digital forensics investigations have become increasingly intricate and controversial. It is now necessary for law enforcement agencies to enhance not only their knowledge base on cyber security and crime but also create new innovative methods in understanding offender and victim behavior on the net. Along with the evolution of internet-based

criminality, there is a need for further study and understanding of new and effective forms of investigating emerging violent crime trends involving the internet; there is a critical need for an evidence-base to help investigators profile offenders based upon what is known about these new cyber-criminals. As such, the authors have embarked on new research to understand social media victim targeting networks (SVTN), and their impact on crime scene characteristics. An important consideration here is the extent to which these offenders are similar to other sex offenders, outside of their choice of preferred victim network.

The anonymity and limited available law enforcement on social media sites leaves predators with a large pool of vulnerable victims. Although their research is still underway, this paper will summarize what is already known about the expansion of victim targeting networks to social networking sites using case examples. Future

completed research related to this new and evolving criminality will offer criminal justice practitioners more practical techniques to investigate and respond to the unique and disturbing challenges of this form of criminality.

The new criminality - "The computerized criminal"

A computerized individual refers to an individual who is computer literate. This obviously represents a leveled continuum based on the knowledge, experience, time and practice of an individual [1]. The exponentially increased ability for strangers to reach potential victims with minimal effort or risk has blurred boundaries for investigations and evidence collection. Victim and witness accounts have further perplexed criminologists with new criminal behaviors that are hidden behind a computer screen [2]. John Edward Robinson was dubbed the Internet's first serial killer in 2001 after he committed over eight homicides through the use of the Internet. With the expansion of the internet, it is now common for people to read about criminal activity directly associated with social media and the web. Crimes that originate from dating sites and open forums such as Craigslist, no longer shock the public. They have now become part of a new normal of criminality. Criminologist Jack Levin specifically attributes Craig's List for the increase in 'stranger' homicides [3].

Those in the field of criminal justice & criminology know the new trends, but more effort needs to be made to bring this knowledge and evidence-based best practice to the field of criminal investigation. Eighty-one percent of internet-initiated crimes involve social networking sites, with 78% of burglars using social media sites as their platform to scope victims. In other words, social media sites have become the preferred victim targeting network (VTN) of some due to its anonymity and ease of access. Thirty-three percent of internet-initiated sex crimes were linked with social media and in particular, dating sites. It has been documented that in 76% of cases, juveniles or adolescents have first contact with a predator in a chat room [4]. Eleven percent of adolescents have shared naked pictures of themselves online or with text messages, with many believing the person they send to does not share that information with anyone else [5]. Current estimates hold that over 750,000 child sexual predators online worldwide since 2012 [6]. This makes increased research attention to developing a research-base for these crimes even more imperative.

Why are so many participating in criminality online?

The concept of anonymity is a powerful tool online. Predators can engage, have conversations with, lure, and set up meetings with victims by lying about their profiles and their true intentions. There is also a vulnerable supply of victims available for them. Social media apps such as Grindr and Tinder offer an explicitly anonymous forum to strangers for casual encounters. When a first meeting is experienced on-line, there is no face-to-face interaction, so it is not possible to calculate and observe body language. Without the important cues of voice, tone, and other physical gestures, a possible victim is more likely to interpret what they perceive as true. Social media gives individuals a platform to expose themselves in a different way. They can reveal parts of themselves online than in a face-to-face exchange. The web has created a veil of anonymity. This undoubtedly exposes them to creative forms of criminality and makes them "cyber prey". Social media has permanently changed the shape and mode of communication in the world. Outlets such as Facebook, Craigslist, Snap chat, etc. have not only made the world smaller, but also provided us with a false sense of security. A "Friend" on Facebook that one may not know formally will engage in lengthy discussions threads like old friends. Dating sites like Match.com, OKCupid.com, and Lavalife.com match individuals based on likes and personality characteristics. This can give someone an idea that they already have so much in common. This "comfort ability" can lead a person to ignore warning signs and safety recommendations by cyber experts.

Where do we go from here?

Areas such as the Dark Web present communities with a myriad of problems and challenges to law enforcement, in particular. Law enforcement needs to continue vigilant patrolling of the internet, especially sexual criminality. As stated, social media provides an open access to potential victims. Child predators "groom" their victims by falsely presenting themselves or using compliments and encouragement. In Texas, four men used Grindr to entrap gay men by falsely portraying themselves as homosexuals and then beating and robbing their victims [7]. However, without a clear profile of victim and offender behavior, law enforcement has very little to proactively work from either reactively in investigations or proactively in prevention efforts. Prostitution has also become more sophisticated and elusive with the extensive use of social media. From an investigative perspective, the on-going monitoring of prostitution activity, including interviewing victims, witnesses and tracking behavior are now extremely difficult to conduct effectively [8]. Online prostitution is also more likely to include much higher levels of violence and new and rare forms of additional deviant and criminal acts. Images and videos of extreme violence draw deviant individuals to look to the internet,

and can serve as a pathway to these new troubling forms of sexual violence and other oddities.

Although some dating sites have responded with better screening and warning recommendations and protocols for users of these sites, who monitors the meeting and the exchange between users? This is an uphill battle for law enforcement, investigators, forensic scientists, cybercrime experts and computer administrators [2]. For criminal justice practitioners, expanding investigative resources for digital forensic examiners and law enforcement should be prioritized [9]. More collaborative endeavors between agencies is also needed given the increased chances for cross jurisdictional "linkage blindness" in these cases. In 2018, Magnet Forensics (known for digital investigative software) partnered with Child Rescue Coalition (CRC) in efforts to assist law enforcement with capturing offenders on the internet. By using a software technology, forensic examiners are allowed to analyze and report on digital evidence from cloud servers to smart phones to even third party forensic images [10].

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research

As noted, more research is needed related to the complexities of preferred victim targeting networks and their relationship to crime scene and victim characteristics. Often typologies and categories of criminal behavior are seen as an academic exercise, supporting theory and pedagogical techniques in the classroom. Although available evidence suggests that offender profiling has many limitations, more understanding of victim targeting patterns and related crime scene characteristics with cyber criminals can offer investigators important additional tools in an even more complex form of sexual offending. The authors are currently completing one such study. Research can also aim to better understand the behavior of both victims and offenders in cyberspace as a guide to future investigators. The contribution of such knowledge with only support law enforcement initiatives as well as assist in the prosecution, conviction and treatment of offenders. Early

research on the more general serial murder phenomenon can be utilized, tested and applied with internet predator typologies for criminal behavior or consideration as an investigative tool.

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