

The new weapons in crime fighting: YouTube and Facebook

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As the centrepiece of a midmorning police press conference trolling for help last week in an unsolved shooting that seriously wounded a Toronto bus driver two years ago, the shiny, battered 9 mm Browning pistol was not much to look at.

But by lunchtime, courtesy of the video-sharing website YouTube, the gun was on its way to becoming famous.

Later in the day came another YouTube call for tips, in English, Mandarin and Cantonese. This time, it was from homicide detectives probing the death of 47-year-old Hou Chang Mao, killed by a stray bullet Jan. 17 in Toronto's East Chinatown.

A continuing human-trafficking investigation, meanwhile, also has a current spot on YouTube, with an appeal from a Russian-speaking officer attached to downtown 14 Division. Step forward and speak to us, the message entreats women - totalling at least a dozen, police believe - lured to Canada, ensnared in a prostitution ring and now living in the shadows.



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Toronto Constable Scott Mills of Crime Stoppers, seen here last week, regularly uses YouTube, Facebook and e-mail to stay in touch with contacts and solicit information about crimes. *(JIM ROSS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL)*

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The chief architect of this cutting-edge blend of technology and outreach is Constable Scott Mills, Toronto Crime Stoppers schools officer, who on most days visits at least one high school or middle school to talk about Internet safety and other topics.

"It's basically like having my own TV channel," he says of his YouTube clips, often created with his \$150 camera.

In this instance, the request for information clearly paid off. Several tips resulted, including at least one to Crime Stoppers, and yesterday an arrest on a charge of attempted murder was triumphantly announced.

But videotaped calls for help on <http://www.youtube.com/1800222TIPS> - just one of several police-sponsored web sites - tell only part of the story. Constable Mills also has his own Facebook account, conduit for a flood of comment and feedback from school visits.

"In my mind, he's a pioneer, he's taken the detail of what I do and put it on the ground," said Kevin Cameron, executive director of the Canadian Centre for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response. The centre, based in Lethbridge, Alta., organizes seminars for teachers, police officers, social workers and other professionals who interact with young people.

"We have to use the Internet as a violence-prevention tool, not just to go out there and ask for tips," says Constable Mills, who at age 40 has two small children of his own, and has spent much of his police career working with young people.

"So my Facebook account is for dialogue, to help the kids, and I've got people around the world e-mailing me."

Cybertips bring the same monetary rewards and same guaranteed, court-protected anonymity - custom-made software strips away address communications - as the traditional telephone call to Crime Stoppers.

And by coincidence or not, Toronto's Crime Stoppers operation fielded a record number of tips in 2007, a number that may grow when encryption-protected text messages become part of the landscape later this year.

So as a bridge between police and community, Constable Mills's cyberspace work might seem like a no-brainer. Certainly, Toronto Police Chief Bill Blair thinks so.

Constable Mills's sole complaint about his work, which constantly takes him out of Toronto - next month he visits the tough Akwesasne Mohawk reserve near Cornwall, Ont. - is that he is increasingly swamped by the workload.

Yet the rest of the world seems slow in catching on to a program that appears to have no police counterpart anywhere.

Mr. Cameron perceives a big generation gap.

"Anything new takes a while to get on to, and the problem is, the people we want to connect with kids are all generally 30, 40 or 50 years old and they often don't want to get involved with technology," he said.

Cyberspace remains an innately anarchic environment, where positive and negative energies constantly compete and sow mistrust.

But there is no deceit in this line of work. For Constable Mills, who borrowed the notion of YouTube appeals from a Hamilton, Ont., homicide detective, who in turn got the idea from his children, a bedrock value in his cyber work involves being straightforward.

"I never trick anybody with my YouTube and Facebook," he says. "I am completely a police officer out there."

And while nurturing anonymous crime tips is core to what he does, so is preventing crime.

He cites a Facebook posting, involving Earl Haig Secondary School in North York, that he is sure led to a stabbing being thwarted last year.

"The result was not that somebody walked out of that school in handcuffs, the result was that the knife was no longer there," he said.

"We now know why it was being brought to school and we were able to deal with it."

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