



Pathology Biology Section - 2012

G112 Applications of Social Network Services in Medicolegal Death Investigation

Ryan Hookano, BS*, Laura D. Knight, MD, and Ronald Brunelli, Onondaga County Medical Examiner's Office, 100 Elizabeth Blackwell Street, Syracuse, NY 13210; and Robert Stoppacher, MD, 100 Elizabeth Blackwell Street, Syracuse, NY 13210

After attending this presentation, attendees will have an understanding of how online social network services can provide valuable information relevant to medicolegal death investigation. This may include information leading to identification of unidentified remains, time of death determination, manner of death, and other relevant issues. Attendees will be aware of specific case examples in which social media has been helpful, and will understand some of the limitations and pitfalls associated with use of these sites for such information.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by introducing the concept of using social network services to gather information crucial to medicolegal death investigation, and furthermore, will illustrate cases in which these media have already been useful.

With the increased popularity of social networking sites such as Facebook[®], LinkedIn, Twitter, and Google[®], a wealth of new resources are available to aid in medicolegal death investigation. Individuals are utilizing these social networking services (SNS) to share public information with the world and, in a sense, are creating a database of profiles that can be searched by anyone having an internet connection. While the information available does depend on the level of security the user has placed on his/her profile page(s), there are a large number of users who post publicly and have little or no security limitations on their information.

The medicolegal death investigator will immediately recognize the advantage of such a searchable public database. Information commonly available on user profiles includes photographs of the user (the owner of the profile page), past education and work history, and a list of friends and family. Pictures on a user's profile on such sites as Facebook[®], MySpace, LinkedIn, and Google[®] can be used for preliminary identification purposes. Users may also have family members and significant others on their Facebook[®] "friends list," Twitter "followers," or Google "circles," which could aid in establishing the next of kin, and finding a way to contact them (via clicking on their profile, and sending a message). The "friends list" can also, of course, provide an idea as to the types of people with whom the decedent chose to socialize, which might be relevant in certain circumstances.

The actual content posted by the user may also be of interest. Suicide threats can be made via a Facebook[®] wall post, Twitter "tweet," or Google "share," just as they have been sent via text message on cell phones in the past. These "tweets" and "shares," updated activity lists on Facebook[®] profile pages, and even comments made by the user on other people's pages ("walls" in the case of Facebook[®]) can help in determining when a user was last at their computer (and/or, last known alive). All of these potential findings can aid in pinpointing a more precise time of death.

Furthermore, the comments left by the decedent user can give a sense of their state of mind, while the comments left by others on the decedent's "wall" or page can reveal aspects of the relationships the decedent had with others. Through the use of comments on profile pages, a user can hypothetically leave a public electronic suicide note while a murderer could also be found to make remarks on a victim's profile page, either before or after death.

There are limitations to the information gleaned from SNS. Some users may share their passwords with others, making it possible that the "user" is not the one updating their profiles or posting comments. Additionally, password-saving features in some computer programs may make it possible for another individual to post to a decedent's account by simply using the decedent's computer. Another issue is that information can be removed at any time by anyone who has access to the account. Furthermore, the "friends list" should be considered with caution, as it may consist of any range of constituents, from just a few closest friends and family for the most conservative of users, up to hundreds of acquaintances and strangers for other users with no concerns for privacy. Finally, it behooves one to remember that people are capable of lying over the internet just as they are of lying in person, and perhaps even more so because of the distancing and semi-anonymity.

This presentation will increase awareness of the usefulness of SNS to the medicolegal death investigator and/or forensic pathologist; describe specific applications to death investigation; and encourage attendees to consider how they might utilize the information available on these sites in their own investigations, while recognizing its limitations and potential pitfalls. Specific casework examples from the Onondaga County Medical Examiner's Office will be provided, with screen captures of relevant pages where available. The presentation will also cover what happens to a user's profile page after the user dies.

Social Network Services (SNS), Death Investigation, Facebook[®]