



Pathology/Biology Section - 2016

H139 Social Media and Medicolegal Death Investigation: Logged in ... to the Morgue

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the usefulness and potentiality of social networks in forensic practice.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating how social networks can be used to clarify certain aspects of medicolegal death investigation, with special attention paid to establishing the postmortem interval, mental/emotional state of the victim prior to death, and the circumstances leading up to a fatality.

A social network is a website that allows you to connect with friends and family, share photos, videos, music, and other personal information with either a select group of friends or a wider group of people. According to the statistical data of July 2015, the most popular social network sites are Facebook® (with 1.44 billion active users), followed by Twitter® (with 302 million active users). Social network services stimulate users to create a list of “friends,” to update their “status,” to upload photos, to comment on other users’ statuses and contents, to indicate that they like another user’s content, to send private messages, and to share the current location in their profiles. All these data are usually available to the user’s contacts and friends. Sometimes, users decide to make their profile available for all other social network users, sharing with them all of their personal and demographic information.

In this study, the investigative narratives stored in the Cook County Medical Examiner’s Office electronic database (LabLynx eLab solution) between August 2014 and July 2015 were searched for the following keywords: Facebook®, Twitter®, Tweet, Instagram™, IG, LinkedIn®, Snapchat™, and YouTube®. The word “Facebook®” was found in 15 reports including five suicides, four homicides, four accidents, and two natural deaths. The word “tweet” was found in one report regarding a case of suicide. No other matches were encountered. All of the reports were useful in either establishing the postmortem interval or elucidating upon the circumstances surrounding death. Specifically, they assisted the investigators in documenting intent for suicides, predicting natural deaths, detecting subjects who bragged about committing homicide, identifying instigated confrontations leading to homicide, and establishing altered mentation through bizarre postings in cases of overdose.

The incredible amount of freely available data on social media platforms can be integrated into a thorough medicolegal death investigation. Reviewed postings from decedents may assist the investigator in refining: (1) time of death, because every comment, status update, post or other activity is time stamped. Activity means the victim was alive at a given moment; (2) circumstances surrounding death, as postings may be used to reconstruct a timeline leading to death, provide evidence of intoxication, or elucidate motivation for violent acts; and, (3) manner of death, as “virtual suicide notes,” complaints about ill health or symptomatology, and statements regarding fear of potential assailants may be encountered.

Social networks are a relevant tool for the death investigator, despite the possibility of online impersonation (false profiles) and potential difficulty in evaluating the actual authenticity of the messages. The forensic investigator must be aware that not all information found on profile pages is accurate but, despite these limitations, “cyberbiographical data” on social network sites should be integrated into a thorough medicolegal death investigation.

Social Media, Medicolegal, Death Investigation