

E96 The “Social Web” Autopsy as an Evolution of Psychological Autopsy: The Application of the Method in Forensic Cases in Comparison

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the evolution of the method of psychological autopsy in forensic cases.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by discussing the role of the web community in deaths from murder, suicide, and accident.

Psychological autopsy is a survey commonly used to study suicide deaths through the analysis of the family and social setting with the use of data collection through interviews with family members and psychological analysis of dynamics preceding death. However, to date its application has found an evolution in the era of globalization and for the diffuse presence of the web in the lives of individuals, so this study proposes its application to any forensic case whose dynamics are dubious.^{1,2} In particular, the flow of information through telephone messages and chat and social networks has increased the means of social and environmental influence. Therefore, a web analysis can provide useful data for investigators, which may be unknown even to family members. A search of social networks is very important to investigate the victim’s psychology through the analysis of posts, images, and videos published in the weeks leading up to death. Together with the Personal Computer (PC), the mobile phone is an essential tool for the psychological autopsy.^{3,4}

Reported here are three cases in which an evolution of the method of psychological autopsy was used. The analysis of the environmental, family, and social setting was compared with the evaluation of telephone, informatics, and social profiles of the victims. Furthermore, the data collected were compared with interviews of family members and acquaintances. The first case concerns a girl who was found dead in her home’s garden due to fall from height by suicide. The analysis of the house, in particular the girl’s room, highlighted the presence of drawings depicting stylized “souls” and other drawing proofs. Moreover, from the previously seized mobile phone, daily chats were found with obsessive virtual friendships and manipulative control not known by family members. In the second case, a boy was found dead due to an accidental railway accident. The analysis of the area allowed investigators to understand the dynamics of the event due to the use of the mobile phone to carry out a dangerous selfie with other friends who escaped. The cell phone was found two meters away from the body and was handed over to the police who subsequently analyzed the photos taken by the boy shortly before the accident. Family members did not know about the dangerous selfies, as opposed to schoolmates who did.

In the third case, researchers analyzed a double murder of a couple by firearm by the woman’s ex-boyfriend. The analysis of the social media profiles of the couple highlighted the presence of photos published on social media the day before the murder. The interrogation of the murderer revealed the motive of the crime, preceded by a story of stalking, after viewing the photos on social networks. The use of this method made it possible to answer some questions that clarified the manner, the motive, and the causes of death in all cases. Considering should be given to how much the environment can also influence the genesis of fatal events. Certainly in adolescents, the social-web is crucial in the genesis of accidental and suicidal events, as well as in the adult age group in the context of homicides, especially those with a passionate background. Currently, it is known how important it is to appear and be accepted, not only in everyday life but also on social networks, which often constitute the representation of a false self. This happens most in the adolescent age group where young people are constantly looking for a model to follow that allows them to make an idyllic escape in a parallel world.

This study proposes a method that represents a valid support to better analyze the setting, the manner (emulation), and the causes of similar events. It can be used both for investigative purposes in cases of homicide, suicide, or accidental deaths as well as for preventive purposes in the presence of explicit threats to things or people. During the investigation, it is useful to apply a multi-method approach to compensate for the limits of each and to have a broader view of the facts, thus facilitating the survey and prevention of announced fatal events.

Reference(s):

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Forensic Science, Psychological Autopsy, Social Web Autopsy