

‘Google’ for Cops Software Helps Police Search for Cyber Clues to Bust Criminals

By Jim Goldman, Tech Live Silicon Valley bureau chief

April 15 Detectives Tim Petersen and Jim Schultz of the Tucson, Ariz., Police Department were investigating a brutal crime in which the victim was shot, stabbed in the neck, and run over.

But aside from the gruesome forensic evidence and the nickname of a potential suspect, they had little else to lead them to whodunit. "We had 'Shorty' and not much else," says Schultz, remembering the case and the scarcity of investigative leads.

That was until they plugged in some of the data on their computers.

Within a few hours, the detectives nabbed their suspect.

Sound impossible? It would have been, if not for a new software package that is helping law enforcement take big bites out of cyberspace.

Like Google, But for Cops

The software they used is CopLink, made by Knowledge Computing, which lets the police link their databases together and search them simultaneously, even across different departments.

Company CEO Bob Griffin walked a visitor through the process.

"This is the way police would actually be using CopLink," he says, typing in the nickname of a suspect. Police simply type in some clues — a nickname, a location of the crime, a weapon used, even what seems to be the most insignificant piece of information. The program will then search out any relevant matches.

"It has a set of analytics that allow you to understand that this person has a relationship to this person who may have a relationship to this vehicle that may have a relationship to this gun," says Griffin.

Hsinchun Chen, an artificial intelligence expert and professor at the University of Arizona, says CopLink's capabilities are astounding. The software uses specific algorithms that build a kind of digital bridge, according to its creator, from one platform to the next.

"From data to information, information to intelligence, and from intelligence you can derive knowledge," he says.

"A search previously I might have been able to do in two or three weeks time, I can now do within two or three minutes," says Petersen. "It's just phenomenal."

More CopLink Users, More Arrests?

The Tucson Police Department was the first in the nation to use the technology. Several more have signed on since, and now dozens of other jurisdictions are examining whether they want to deploy it. Even the FBI and CIA have expressed interest.

Washington, D.C.-area law enforcement officials say software like this could have dramatically cut down the time it took to arrest the sniper suspects last year. That's because police could have simply typed in the

locations of all the shootings and asked the software to return any relevant data connected to those locations.

Knowledge Computing's Griffin says police would have instantly seen that the two suspects later arrested in connection with the sniper killings had been stopped for unrelated incidents at several of the locations where victims had been shot. It would not have named the two men who were later arrested as suspects in the sniper case, "but it would have given police a place to start. It would have turned them in their direction," says Griffin.

As more agencies sign on to use the system, the bigger the searchable database becomes, making the software even more valuable to investigators.

"It is a blessing," says Schultz.

CopLink won't solve the puzzle, he admits, but it should give him all the pieces he'll need.

As for "Shorty," who had been released from prison only 24 hours before the Tucson attack, he's back in an Arizona prison, serving an additional 16 years for the attempted murder.

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