



Coffee Break Training - Fire Investigation Series

Fire/Arson and Explosion Investigation Curriculum: Use of Social Media in Arson Investigations

No. FI-2013-12 September 9, 2013

Learning Objective: The student shall be able to identify the role of social media in conducting effective arson investigations.

Social network services such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are increasingly being used in legal and criminal investigations. These services and others contain myriad potential leads and evidence that can be used by investigators to help identify suspects and successfully solve and prosecute arson cases. For example, it is estimated that there are approximately 3 million emails sent every second, 20 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute and 50 million tweets sent every day via Twitter.

According to a study conducted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police in September 2011, approximately 88 percent of agencies surveyed indicated that they use social media; over 70 percent use social media for investigations and 58 percent of agencies not currently using social media are considering its adoption. Social media is a valuable investigative tool when seeking evidence or information about individuals or cases. In many cases, criminals leave digital fingerprints all over the Internet as they commit their crimes, brag about them to friends or family and then go about their daily lives. Some criminals have been known to share photos and videos of their criminal acts. The challenge for investigators is to locate these digital fingerprints and use them to obtain sufficient evidence leading to the arrest, prosecution and conviction of the offender(s).



Social media networks and the Internet may contain a treasure trove of investigative leads that can help identify, apprehend and prosecute offenders if investigators know how and where to look for these clues.

The following list contains some of the most common and effective uses of social media in arson investigations:

- Identify firesetting activity.
- Identify location(s) of firesetting activity.
- Gather photos or statements to corroborate evidence.
- Identify suspects and co-conspirators.
- Identify associates of individuals affiliated with suspects or persons of interest.
- Identify/Monitor whereabouts of suspects or persons of interest.
- Solicit tips and leads from the public.
- Anticipate additional fires that may occur.
- Understand criminal networks.
- Use information for probable cause for search warrants.

Despite the widespread adoption of social media, the courts and police are still playing a game of technological catch-up. Research commissioned by LexisNexis in 2012 found that although two-thirds of the agencies surveyed said that they believed social media helped to solve crimes more quickly, 80 percent of investigators were self-taught on how to use social media for investigations. Agencies and investigators should make every effort to develop and take advantage of formal training opportunities in this technological and investigative resource to help increase the solvability rate for arson cases within their respective jurisdictions.

Additional information on the use of social media in criminal investigations can be found in the February 2013 edition of the Federal Bureau of Investigation *Law Enforcement Bulletin* that can be viewed online at <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/law-enforcement-bulletin/2013/february> or by contacting the National White Collar Crime Center via its Web page at <http://www.nw3c.org/Home>.

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