Twitter's uses extend to law enforcement

June 23 2009, By Jerome Burdi and Paula Mcmahon

Call it a wanted poster for the Digital Age, in 140 characters or less: "Can you ID this armed robbery suspect?"

The message, sent out via the Web site Twitter by Boynton Beach, Fla., police recently, led recipients to online surveillance footage of a gunman robbing a gas station.

The message, so far, hasn't helped solve the May stickup, and investigators say it's too soon to know whether Twitter will prove to be an effective crime-fighting tool. But it and other social networking Web sites are increasingly becoming yet another channel for law enforcement agencies, nationwide, to reach out to the public, promote their departments and locate people who may have relevant information or tips.

"It's an easy way to reach people very quickly," said Seamus Condron, community manager of mediabistro.com, an online media and training Web site. "This is a really large set of eyes and ears that police can call into action."

Police in Boynton Beach and Boca Raton, Fla., were among the first to embrace Web sites like Twitter.com, Facebook.com and MySpace.com as an additional way to connect with their communities and enlist residents in the fight against crime.

Both departments began sending out messages on Twitter in the past year, and each has since attracted more than 850 followers.

The Broward Sheriff's Office has a fan page on Facebook.com and launched a Twitter-like system called CyberVisor, which distributes citizen alerts and safety tips via e-mails or text messages.

Since the CyberVisor service went public in April, about 4,000 people have signed up at sheriff.org to receive it.

Dani Moschella, a Sheriff's Office spokeswoman, said the agency chose CyberVisor because its staff was already using the system to distribute news releases to the media, and officials are confident it's secure. Agency supervisors can transmit public alerts about anything they choose, including bad traffic accidents, looming tropical storms and crimes in progress.

Investigators and supervisors say they monitor public feedback, but caution people should still call 911 in an emergency.

"We definitely want people to call 911," Moschella said. CyberVisor, she said, "is just another way to remind people in the community that we want to hear from them and to let them know that any information they have could be relevant."

Police can use the Web sites as a two-way street to put out information to the public and get tips, anonymous and otherwise, in exchange, said Michael Scott, a professor at the University of Wisconsin Law School.

"The sites have "proven to be pretty effective in finding missing people or wanted people," Scott said.

But these new tools may eventually create problems of their own, Scott said.

"With thousands of citizens sending e-mails and Twitter messages, if

police don't have capacity to respond to those things, you have to wonder: What is the value?" he said.

That deluge of public message traffic hasn't happened yet _ even the national response to the FBI's social-networking effort _ more than 7,250 followers on Twitter _ seems modest."We're trying to keep up with the times," said Jason Pack of the FBI's national press office. Twitter and Facebook, both free services, started as tools for Internet users eager to keep in touch with family and friends. Twitter, with some 5 million users overall, allows users to blast messages of no more than 140 characters, commonly known as "tweets," to the computers and cell phones of everybody who has signed up to get them.

"Within seconds we can post our message," Stephanie Slater, a Boynton Beach police spokeswoman.

That swiftness means law enforcement can alert the public almost instantaneously of a crime or a missing person.

On Facebook, users can post information about themselves and send messages to contacts who register to receive them. The site, launched in 2004, has about 60 million users in the United States.

Among the large agencies already using social networking sites are police in New York City, Boston and Baltimore. Many campus police departments, including the University of Miami's, employ the sites as well to communicate with students.

Several agencies in South Florida, including police in Boca Raton, Davie and Miami, are testing a new system named Nixle, which is similar to Twitter but designed for government use.

"Agencies want their information out and they need an online and instant

vehicle to do it," said Craig Mitnick, Nixle's CEO.

The social networking phenomenon has its doubters, who consider it a passing fad. Even advocates admit it's not yet clear that spraying information into cyberspace really helps police solve crimes.

In Boca Raton, police credit social networking with helping them make at least one arrest after a surveillance video posted on the police department's MySpace and Facebook Web pages led to an anonymous tip.

The tipster thought he recognized the young man shown taking a $600 television from the Town Center mall in February.

The information led detectives to the suspect's own MySpace page, which had photos of him wearing the same sort of black and white checked flannel shirt the suspect had during the robbery.

Darien Downey, 20, was arrested and charged with grand theft.

If it weren't for social networking Web sites, "that kid would probably be out there watching (the stolen) TV right now," said Boca Raton police spokesman Mark Economou.

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