

Social-networking sites increasingly play a role in solving crimes, police searches

August 28 2009, By Joel Hood

While rescue crews intensify their search for a Chicago doctoral student missing in a remote region of Costa Rica, help is coming from an unlikely army of online supporters from around the globe.

In the week since friends created a page for the missing student on the popular social networking site Facebook, nearly 1,100 people have logged on to raise money, share research and pressure U.S. officials to get involved. Last week, military helicopters affixed with infrared sensors were sent to scan the dense forested region of Rincon de la Vieja national park in northern Costa Rica.

In the rapidly changing Digital Age, the same [social-networking sites](#) that are often derided as places to trade gossip and waste time are increasingly being used to solve crimes and aid police in the hunt for missing persons. Yet police and private investigators say they've only begun tapping into the resources on sites such as Facebook, [Twitter](#) and MySpace, where millions of people from around the world instantly share information at the click of a button.

Within hours after the parents of David Gimelfarb, 28, landed in Costa Rica on Aug. 13 to begin searching for their son, friends back home set up the Facebook site to bring attention to the case. Before long, hundreds of supporters had joined the site, urging each other to contact the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica and to pester elected officials stateside to use military resources to locate Gimelfarb.

"Please badger your (Senators) and (Representatives)," read one post. "Phone calls, e-mails, faxes. Don't let up on them until the Embassy takes action -- it is the only way these political appointees will move."

In the groundswell, some began researching private search-and-rescue organizations with specialized skills and more advanced technology. Others set up online accounts where supporters could donate money. A few offered to fly to Costa Rica to join volunteers on the ground. One Chicago artist opened an online shop where proceeds from her sales went toward the search.

"There are so many people that it becomes like a critical mass and decision-makers find it hard to resist," said Roger Hyde, multimedia manager for London-based ResQglobal, a private search-and-rescue operation now involved in the hunt for Gimelfarb. "I don't know that we would have been made aware of it had it not been for Facebook. Without social media, none of this would have happened."

There are now hundreds of sites on Facebook and [MySpace](#) devoted to missing children, teens and adults.

In May, Facebook played a central role in the search for Craig Arnold, a well-known poet, who'd gone missing while hiking a volcano on a tiny island in Japan. For days, Arnold's friends, family and well-wishers followed regular updates on the "Find Craig Arnold" page on Facebook as authorities in Japan searched the ravines and rugged trails leading up to the volcano. Authorities finally decided that Arnold had fallen off the side of a steep cliff, and subsequent updates detailed family's efforts to bring his body home.

When a Canadian man was allegedly abducted for ransom recently, Facebook worked with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to track down information from an account where the threats had been sent

from, leading to the man's safe return. When two California teens ran away from home with a family member's car and wallet, Facebook tipped off police that the teens had logged into the site from Colorado, leading to their return.

"[Police](#) departments and private individuals around the world are using the tools Facebook provides to help solve crimes," Facebook spokesman Simon Axeton said in an e-mail. "People have found this to be an effective strategy because ... messages can be broadcast quickly and easily to wide audiences and receive immediate feedback."

Gimelfarb, a Chicago resident and a third-year doctoral student at the Adler School of Professional Psychology, was on a solo trek through a popular national park in Costa Rica when he vanished Aug. 11. After Gimelfarb's abandoned SUV was found by park rangers, his parents flew to Central America to organize local authorities and the Red Cross in a search.

Despite the large search party on the ground, Luda Gimelfarb, the student's mother, was critical of officials at the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica for not lending air support and military-type infrared equipment. Days later, however, after countless calls and e-mails from Gimelfarb's family and supporters online, the embassy relented.

By Aug. 18, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Ill., had arranged for two U.S. military helicopters with infrared sensors to begin searching the 35,000-acre park. Kirk downplayed the Web site's role, saying, "It's particularly appropriate for the U.S. military to provide support in this kind of a search. We have a lone American under deep jungle canopy. Time is of the essence."

Gimelfarb's friends are convinced that urgency would not have been there had so many people not been called to action through Facebook.

"I don't think the U.S. government would have gotten involved had there not been so much pressure and attention generated online," said Kevin Owens, a close friend of Gimelfarb who set up the Facebook site.

Rathna Koka, a family friend who spent five days in Costa Rica last week helping search for Gimelfarb, said the entire scope of the rescue effort changed when news of the disappearance began to spread online.

"None of this would have been possible without Facebook," said Koka. "The time and energy that so many people have put into this, people who don't even know (Gimelfarb), has just been amazing."

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