Smartphones, laptops easy to trace but hard to recover

March 16 2012, By Matt McKinney

The stolen laptop sent its owner a hopeful message just hours after it had been spirited out of his south Minneapolis home. The message included the exact spot where the laptop had been taken and, conveniently, a photo covertly shot by the MacBook's webcam of the man now using the computer.

Anti-theft software on the laptop kicked into gear when the owner reported his computer stolen. Now the police would simply go get it back, thought the man, a Web developer.

Instead, he watched online as his laptop traveled from an apartment complex in Coon Rapids, Minn., to an apartment in Mounds View, Minn., and then, weeks later, to the University of Ghana, in Africa. It sent photos and locations at every stop along the way.

In an age of ever-sophisticated technology, it's possible for laptops, iPhones and other devices to reach back to their owners after they've been stolen with GPS coordinates, photos and links to help the owner save their information, if not the device.

The rising toll of tech thefts is spawning tales across the Internet of "geek justice" that tell how savvy victims use Wi-Fi signals, webcams and software to track down people who steal their stuff.

Yet, in the real world, where real police officers want hard evidence, it doesn't always work out that neatly. Some victims find justice, others

frustration.

Conor Smith's [iPhone](link) was swiped Feb. 6 from a bathroom at the University of Minnesota. Using the device's built-in anti-theft features, he located it at a St. Paul, Minn., address.

He submitted a report with the Minneapolis police on the department's website but never heard back from anyone. He called the St. Paul police, but they said it was a Minneapolis case.

A reporter from the Star Tribune went to the St. Paul house that Smith's phone listed. A man who answered the door there said he didn't have the phone and doesn't go near the University of Minnesota.

A police spokesman said someone in Smith's position should go to the neighborhood where they're getting reports of their phone or laptop and then call 911.

The police have recovered phones this way recently, said Sgt. William Palmer. Charges usually don't get filed, he added. "They couldn't prove who stole it or anything," he said.

So what if the homeowner doesn't confess, or doesn't allow the officers to search the house?

A search warrant based on the iPhone or laptop's reports isn't out of the question, said Assistant Hennepin County Attorney Pat Diamond. A warrant would require that the phone send a fairly specific location of its whereabouts, not an entire city block, he said. Even if the phone gets tracked to a duplex, Diamond said his hunch is that most judges would approve the warrant.

Not everyone waits for a warrant. Search the Internet and it's not long

before you find cases like the man in Los Angeles who tracked his stolen iPhone to an apartment building, then sent messages to the phone that made it set off an alarm as he strolled the building's hallway listening for it. A short confrontation with the thief later, he had his iPhone back.

In another case, a New Jersey man thought his iPhone had been stolen and used his son's phone to trace his own.

Thinking he was near his phone, he saw a man standing on the street talking on an iPhone and confronted him, eventually knocking him to the ground and punching him. It turned the man was an innocent bystander. The case led to criminal charges against the puncher.

In Minneapolis, Melissa Slough did some of her own detective work when her iPhone was stolen from a bar bathroom Nov. 27, but she called in the police when she got near her target.

Soon two Minneapolis officers were knocking on doors in the Minneapolis neighborhood that her iPhone was listing as its location. Their search came up empty, but a day or two later the phone sent out a new location in Columbia Heights, Minn. She was on her way when a police officer called her to say someone had anonymously turned in the phone at the Columbia Heights police station.

No charges were filed. Slough said she was just happy to get her phone back.

"The police were really proactive," she said.

Not when it came to the stolen laptop that was sending its owner locations and photos of the people using it. According to the owner, Minneapolis police looked over the photos and eventually told him they weren't clear enough to get a warrant. A department spokesman, told

about the investigator's response, said it seemed like a slam-dunk case and was puzzled why no one had acted on the evidence.

Using the information collected by the owner, the Star Tribune went in search of the thieves.

Hours after it was stolen, the Apple [MacBook](#) sent its location as the Parkview Estates in Coon Rapids.

A manager there had no comment about the case when asked about it by the Star Tribune, saying the location could have been wrong. She wouldn't say whether she recognized the man pictured in the webcam photos sent to the owner.

Days after it was stolen, the laptop sent a new location, an apartment building in Mounds View. It also sent a photo of another man typing at its keyboard along with a screen shot of a Hotmail account belonging to someone named Eric Yankson.

Eric Yankson, contacted through his Hotmail address, agreed that he lived at the apartment complex, and, upon meeting with a Star Tribune reporter, identified himself as the man photographed by the computer. He also said he had recently sent a laptop to his son, a medical student at the University of Ghana.

Yet he insisted that he never had a stolen computer.

"I have nothing to hide," he declared. He answered some of the reporter's questions, but a few days later he would no longer cooperate.

The laptop owner, meanwhile, who asked not to be named for fear the thieves would retaliate, got another photo in his e-mail inbox.

This one was from Ghana, and it appeared to show a young man peering into the laptop's screen.

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