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Child porn scanner averts cop burnout

Victoria police acquire software to flag images based on large database

BY ROB SHAW *Times Colonist staff*

Every day, Bob Elder turns on his computer and sees some of the worst humanity has to offer. It's his job to scan the hundreds of thousands of child-porn pictures and videos that Victoria police find on computers around the city.

Flipping through a never-ending series of images of exploited young children, often captured performing sex acts, can be a horrific task, even for a veteran cop.

"I don't get personal," said Elder, a detective in the computer forensics department. "If you get personal, it eats you up.

"I view the images as pieces of evidence. But at the same time, in each of these images there's a victim behind it."

To combat the growing flow of child pornography, the Victoria Police Department has bought Elder some big-time help — a new piece of software that automatically scans many of the images so he won't have to. "The goal is to be able to take away 75 per cent of my workload and reduce 75 per cent of the child porn I see," said Elder.

The department hopes reducing the number of images cops have to view will help relieve the psychological stress of one of the toughest jobs in the force.

"That's what the big deal is with software like this. It will allow us, hopefully, to stay in this job longer," said Elder.

The software, called ADF Solution's Triage-ID, is already being used by the FBI and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Elder said Victoria is the first Canadian department to buy the program — at a cost of \$3,000 — although the Ontario Provincial Police have developed similar software.

Victoria police first saw Triage-ID's potential when Elder visited the New York Police Department's forensic crime lab in January and viewed the program.

It works by scanning the unique data string found in every image and video file — the equivalent of an electronic fingerprint. The software compares those fingerprints to a huge library of known childporn data, which is frequently updated by police departments. The program can definitively flag known child pornography without Elder ever having to open it.

However, new custom-made pornography must still be viewed at least once and entered into the library. It will take about a year for Victoria to build such a library and use the program to its maximum potential.

Another key feature is the program's small size. Instead of taking a duffel bag of computer forensic equipment to a crime scene, Elder can bring the entire program on one disc and the necessary libraries on a portable memory stick. With just those two things he can boot any computer to a Linux-based operating system and dig into whatever files are stored on the hard drive.

Elder said there is a surprisingly large and growing volume of child pornography in Victoria.

Victoria police handle, on average, about three or four child-porn files a month. Elder is the only computer forensics officer to investigate such cases.

"There's one I'm doing now where there's 362,000 images," Elder said. Before the software, he had to open those files one by one.

Most of Victoria's child-porn cases come from other police jurisdictions. Typically, police bust someone and the subsequent investigation of that person's friends, contacts, traders, buyers or suppliers points to a suspect in Victoria.

Darren Stone/ Times Colonist



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