Catch crooks in action on RazorTV

Police seek netizen tip-offs by posting crime videos on ST portal, Facebook

BY TAN WEIZHEN

SINGAPORE'S police have deployed new weapons in the fight against crime: The Straits Times' RazorTV and social networking site Facebook.

In seeking the help of netizens to help nab crooks, police have begun posting videos of criminal acts, as well as details of the cases and descriptions of the perpetrators, online.

The latest video - now up on RazorTV, Singapore's first Internet television platform, and Facebook - shows a few loan sharks caught on camera terrorising victims at HDB flats.

The move by police is not simply an online version of the regular TV programme Crimewatch, which features re-enactments of crimes. The RazorTV medium allows viewers to interact directly with journalists who host the shows, and also allows them to post comments.

The Straits Times understands that 12 videos will be aired in the series, called iWitness, for a start. They feature different crimes that police want to bring to the public's attention.

Taking advantage of Facebook's interactivity, updates on the progress of the manhunts will also be posted, so "fans" can keep track of each case. In a message posted online, police called on the community to work with them "to bring illegal loan sharks to justice".

Already, the sites are a hit. The police videos on RazorTV have received 3,259 views since they were posted on April 11, while the Singapore Police Force community on Facebook already numbers 3,778.

The use of new media to track down criminals has been gaining popularity elsewhere recently. Last October, Canadian police posted videos of assaults on Facebook and YouTube, and appealed for witnesses. The culprits were caught less than a month later.

In February, Philadelphia police tracked down two men suspected of starting fires. They had found videos of their acts and details of the men, and posted these on Facebook. The suspects were arrested after police received tip-offs from netizens.

To terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna, using websites and other new media tools that have a wide reach is a logical step for law enforcement agencies.

Dr Gunaratna, head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), said governments have to harness different platforms to raise public awareness of criminal and terrorist threats.

"Unless the government uses these attractive and appealing methods, it would not be able to reach out to different segments of society," he said.

Retired police officer Richard Lim said online videos have an advantage over shows like Crimewatch.

"Online, the public can watch it again and again, even drawing new viewers. But if they miss Crimewatch on television, they just won't bother to find out what was telecast," he said.

Another advantage: Web videos can be produced much faster than TV shows.

This means they can reach their intended audiences quicker, while a case is still "hot".

Said Mr Lim: "In the past, police officers had to go to the ground and look for potential witnesses. But there's a chance we might miss them. By the time we find them, days would have passed and the trail would have gone cold.

"But Facebook immediately reaches many potential witnesses."

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