

Social Media Investigations White Paper

Information on nearly any subject is at our fingertips. We simply log on to our computer, open Google, enter what it is we are looking for and “BAM!” there are the results. It has gotten even easier now that we can simply ask Siri or Alexa and they spout back the answer right to you. It sure beats the days when I was growing up and had to go to the local library and read through encyclopedia’s and micro phish to find information and articles on whatever subject I was researching.

What about when it comes to researching people that are not celebrities or have information that is not readily accessible? Back in the day a private investigator would take what information a client would give them about a subject, then go about trying to physically locate the subject, learn their patterns and try to start up a conversation with acquaintances that may provide some sort of information on the subject that the investigator could use to get close enough to get whatever it was the client wanted. Nowadays, thanks to Social Media, an investigator can dig up all sorts of information in moments on a subject that used to take days, weeks and months to obtain.

PINow.com describes a social media investigation as one that “looks into social media posts, status updates, photos and conversations of an individual”. Social Media investigations are used in numerous, legal, ways by an investigator. The subject is more often than not willfully putting their information in a public forum for consuming by anyone that may have a means to view the information being provided. This information can be used for anything from court cases, risk assessments or active monitoring by an investigator. Employers are implementing them when considering whether to hire candidates for employment. Voters comb through social media profiles when considering the credentials of a political candidate.

When conducting a Social Media Investigation what exactly is an Investigator looking for? While exact metrics vary from case to case there are any number of things that a social media profile can provide an investigator that could be useful in a case. Let’s look at a few of the features of a social media profile on the Facebook platform that may be useful in an investigation.

In most cases you are probably going to know the name and city of where your subject may be located or was located at one time. I would encourage an initial background check prior to conducting a Social Media Investigation as part of the layering of authenticity to ensure you have the right subject. The initial background check is going to provide addresses, cities, emails, family members and associates that can help ensure that you are looking at the right subject. Remember, there are a lot of John Smith’s and Jane Jones’ out there.

People love pictures. People love posting pictures on social media. Pictures give an investigator clues into a subject. Are other people tagged in the photo’s? They may be an accomplice or associate of the suspect being investigated. Is the location tagged? This may put the suspect at a location relevant to the investigation or help give a profile of where to find the suspect. Are there comments associated with the photo? These comments may also be clues that assist an

investigator. How often does the subject post? Most posts are date stamped with the day and time they were posted that may give an investigator an idea of what the subject was doing at a certain time and date. When it comes to photo's keep in mind that Facebook owns Instagram and allows cross posting between the two sites. I would encourage a separate review of Instagram and not rely on the cross-posting feature when investigating a subject.

One of my personal favorite features of Facebook to use when investigating a subject is the "About" tab. This little collection of information can give an investigator all sorts of information on a subject. The "Overview" section can provide places the subject has worked, where they went to school, places they have lived, contact information, birthdays and more. Reviewing a subjects "Friends" can help an investigator with relationship diagrams that may tie subjects together. If I am having trouble locating a suspect, I often use known associates or family members and track the suspect back from there to locate their social media profile. Photo's and Videos are also located here, which we discussed above. We also discussed "Check-In's", which are also in the "About" tab. Check-In's can be associated with photos, posts, or anything where the subject either tagged, or was tagged to a location. It is very important to review "Check-In's" to see if a subject was at a location at a time when they may or may not were supposed to be there. You can also find out what Music, Movies, TV shows, Books, etc. that the subject may be into. It's a great way to build a profile of a subject.

Much like email addresses, people tend to use the same user id on most social media profiles. If you view the URL at the top of the page you will find a user id within the URL. If looking for a subject on Twitter or Instagram you may want to try to search for the subject by using the same ID. It doesn't always work, but oftentimes it will lead you directly to your subject and help verify you have the subject you are searching for.

While Twitter is not as widely used as Facebook, it can also provide various levels of information on a subject to an investigator. Twitter may provide a whole different list of "followers" and who the subject may be "following". It also gives an investigator another idea as to posts that may interest the subject. Much like Facebook, Twitter provides plenty of photo's and videos for an investigator to view on a subject. The other thing to look at are hashtags. If the subject is using hashtags or tagging other users in a post an investigator can use these links to find others that may be following the subject, or that the subject may be following.

Something to be very careful of if not an actual investigator is Social Media Stalking. Stalking is borderline illegal and definitely unethical and unhealthy. Social Media is a powerful tool that can provide useful information to aid an investigator. It is important that the tools and knowledge an investigator has, along with the information within this white paper, be used for legal and ethical purposes in the course of an investigation.

We have mentioned Facebook and Twitter predominately and just touched on Instagram. There are a lot more social media sites out there that can aid an investigator when hired to investigate a subject. There are not just personal profiles either, most businesses are also on social media and

can provide a treasure trove of information to an investigator. We have discussed “going down the rabbit hole” before when conducting investigations and it is easy to do when using social media in an investigation. We would encourage anyone to hire a professional social media investigator should the need arise to investigate a subject. From our experience, most social media investigations average around 4 hours to conduct over several weeks or months. Patience is important when it comes to social media investigations.