

Unlikely pairs

by Gavin Thompson

Collaboration leads to the Child Exploitation Tracking System

WHEN MOST CANADIANS think of the police, they envision officers on the street, keeping Canadians safe. When those same people think about Microsoft Canada, they think of a technology company that sells software for their home or work computer. While law enforcement and Microsoft may seem like an unlikely pairing, unlikely pairs are often the most powerful ones. Their collaboration led to the creation the Child Exploitation Tracking System (CETS) – a cyber tool to fight criminals adept in the cyber world.

In early 2003, Paul Gillespie, at the time a detective sergeant in the Toronto Police Services Sex Crimes unit was at the end of his rope. Exasperated by the growth of online child exploitation and the rapid evolution of technology, he emailed Bill Gates asking for help. The email made its way to Microsoft Canada and within weeks an entirely new and exciting partnership was created.

The police's problem was complicated by the fact that they couldn't keep up with the criminals who were becoming increasingly tech savvy. In the wrong hands, the Internet allows pedophiles relative anonymity and easy access to those they seek to victimize. With increases in broadband capability, the proliferation of wireless technology, massive gains in storage capacity and the affordability of web cameras, online child exploitation had grown exponentially.

In 2003 alone, the Toronto Police Service seized over three million pictures and videos of child sexual abuse. Of all the images seized in Canada, only 50 of the children had been identified. And the situation is no better internationally. Globally, fewer than 500 of the estimated 50,000 children captured in online child abuse have been identified. That's roughly one percent.

To make matters worse, Microsoft Canada research shows that children don't always understand the risk. Twenty-five percent of children feel safe getting together with a person they have only met online and talked to for a long time online. Eleven percent have been asked by a stranger for personal infor-

mation (such as their full name, home address and phone number) while online.

Part of the challenge for police is that traditional policing is geographical. Every police agency has jurisdictional borders, whether municipal, provincial or national, beyond which they do not operate. But Internet child exploitation is borderless. This creates a gap between what criminals can do and how police can respond.

This is the challenge. Microsoft Canada with the assistance of the RCMP and the Toronto Police Service, helped Canadian law enforcement, and now law enforcement agencies from around the world, tackle it.

After months of collaboration, the RCMP, Toronto Police Services and Microsoft created the blueprint for CETS – the Child Exploitation Tracking System. CETS gives law enforcement the power to work seamlessly across borders and, using the best



Paul Gillespie, Detective Sergeant (retd), talks about the partnership created between the Toronto Police, the RCMP and Microsoft to develop the Child Exploitation Tracking System.

technological tools available, gives law enforcement a unique advantage in their battle with cyber criminals.

Before CETS was created, the process was arduous. Gillespie likened it to parking a boat in the middle of the ocean and waiting for the fish to jump in. Police officers had to manually sort through files and photos, making it almost impossible to share information. CETS allows police agencies to manage, search, analyze, and share huge volumes of information and evidence, cross-reference obscure data relationships and use social-network analysis to identify individual offenders and communities of offenders

One of the particularly compelling things about CETS is its functionality and ease of adoption. It is built on open standards and is platform independent, meaning that it allows different police services – regardless of jurisdiction, regardless of geography – to engage in the fight head on.

In just two years, every provincial Internet child exploitation unit and major municipal police agency that investigates Internet facilitated child sexual exploitation in Canada has adopted CETS. The “made in Canada” innovation has also been adopted globally. In June 2006, Indonesia became the second country in the world to adopt CETS and in October 2006, the United Kingdom’s National Criminal Intelligence Service, Spain’s Cuerpo Nacional de Policía and Italy’s Polizia di Stato implemented the system. Brazil followed in November, and Chile has announced its intention to adopt CETS.

In March 2006, CETS was credited with linking investigators on three continents that led to the uncovering of an international online child pornography ring. CETS played a part in helping investigators arrest 27 suspects in four countries for their involvement in the production and distribution of online child pornography. To date, CETS has assisted with 64 arrests and the rescue and identification of 43 victims worldwide.

The goal is for CETS to evolve into a global database, allowing for even greater integrated investigations and policing. The work is ongoing. Microsoft Canada and various law enforcement agencies continue to combine their expertise to develop a system to help police tackle these heinous crimes.

Sometimes unexpected partnerships yield unexpected results. No one, including Detective Sergeant Paul Gillespie and Microsoft Canada, could have imagined what would result from the email he sent to Bill Gates in 2003.

Today, Microsoft is working to replicate this model of cooperation, with a specific focus on using technology to solve pressing public policy problems. Partnerships include one with children’s hospitals across Canada to bring technology to the bedside of gravely ill children so that they can remain connected to their social networks, friends and school. Others involve working with underserved neighbourhoods in Toronto to create a digital arts centre to excite and inspire children to careers in the digital arts or working with organizations that teach basic IT skills to job seekers so that no one is left behind in the digital revolution.

At the core of each of these partnerships is a combination of passion, commitment and expertise – and a common goal. For Microsoft Canada that means to do the right thing, to be a responsible corporate leader and to ask “what can we do to help?”

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