RTCC Operations and Technologies

When considering the breadth of technologies that might be integrated into Real Time Crime Centers (RTCCs), there is considerable potential for broader and expanded access to additional real-time and archived information and data. Access to new and nontraditional technology and data can generate unexpected consequences and concerns. Below is a discussion of some technologies that are being and will be integrated into RTCCs and some of the difficulties that might arise from the use of these types of data/technology.

Body-Worn Cameras

The increased adoption of body-worn cameras (BWCs) in law enforcement has generated some preliminary discussions about the feasibility of allowing RTCC detectives to access BWC feeds (potentially in real time). Providing access to this data has a number of pros and cons. For example, BWCs offer access to real-time video information about a scene or a suspect in locations where other stationary cameras are not available. Offering BWC access also would allow RTCC personnel to begin working on developing intelligence and background information while an officer is still talking to a suspect/victim. For example, if a victim mentions a particular vehicle or suspect, RTCC personnel could begin searching proximal cameras, LPRs, EM databases, and other sources while the officer is still engaged with the victim. The access of RTCC personnel to live body-worn cameras feeds also can provide officers with an additional set of eyes during a contentious interaction with a suspect. This extra set of eyes can, of course, result in additional liability, since the RTCC personnel are not on-scene, or, for example, if they access the feed mid-interaction.

The integration of body-worn cameras into RTCCs has the potential to offer a valuable tool, but a number of possible issues need to be worked out prior to the use of this video footage by RTCC personnel. A range of useful resources on BWC adoption and implementation are available at the National Institute of Justice, the COPS Office (also Implementing a Body-Worn Camera Program), the Arnold Foundation, and the American Civil Liberties Union.

Facial Recognition Software

Law enforcement agencies have started utilizing facial recognition software in their communities. Some facial recognition work is not conducted in real time, and it often relies on analysts running a suspect's picture (e.g., from a surveillance camera) through FBI or third-party software to search booking photos for a match. Potential matches are then passed from an analyst to a detective. Conducting facial recognition searches in real time could become more valuable to management and solvability of top-priority calls in the future. The more quickly information about a suspect is provided to a patrol officer, the better prepared and safer that officer can be when responding to an event. Facial recognition information also will allow for quicker suspect identification if a suspect has left the scene, without having to wait for follow-up from crime analysts, since crime analysis is often focused on longer-term problem solving and is often unavailable during non-workday hours.

Facial recognition software presents a number of ethical and privacy issues that should be proactively considered. Although a number of police departments utilize this technology, it has been scrutinized by others. For example, in 2013 the Boston Police Department tested, but decided against implementing, facial recognition software because of ethical concerns. San Diego, California, which launched its Tactical Identification System (TACIDS) in 2013, is currently utilizing facial recognition software but has received some criticism. In 2015, the San Diego Police Department made its facial recognition protocols publicly available. The Albuquerque Police Department uses facial recognition software in its RTCC but also has discussed some of the privacy issues associated with utilizing this emerging technology. Finally, the American Civil Liberties Union has a question-and-answer section on facial recognition in law enforcement.

Social Media Applications

The utilization of social media applications for law enforcement purposes has been discussed as another potential tool for efficiently responding to and preventing crime. The difficulty with accessing the full potential of social media for law enforcement purposes is that it is often difficult to sort through the vast amount of information produced by these applications and platforms. Many of the tools utilized by law enforcement are not specifically aimed at accessing this data in real time; rather, detectives are constantly scraping social media for particular terms or phrases that might help them solve or prevent a particular crime (see the Lexis Nexis report for social media use in law enforcement).

When considering how social media could be utilized by an RTCC, it is important to consider how the real-time nature of social media could be accessed for quick information and response. One potential way that social media could be integrated into an RTCC is providing personnel with access to tweets, posts, and other messaging applications and utilizing both the geolocation and the actual content of the posts. Access to geolocation data would allow detectives to more accurately and quickly access social media posts for a location (or person) of interest (e.g., immediately following a shooting) rather than sorting through a large number of posts, reposts, or hashtags. In some instances, privacy concerns and complaints have led to internal and/or external investigations about how authorities are monitoring social media accounts for social and activist movements.

Integrating Other Public and Private Video Feeds

An additional avenue for expanding a community network of cameras is utilizing cameras owned and operated by other public and private entities. The Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy at George Mason University has developed a best-practices section for the use of CCTV. The Urban Institute also developed a guide for the use of CCTV for crime-control purposes, which includes private cameras and discussions of a broad range of relevant ethical and privacy issues. Integration of these additional cameras can substantially expand the areas of a community that are visible to law enforcement in real time versus having to contact a company/organization to access a video feed after a crime has occurred.

Seamless Integration of Multiple Applications for RTCC Personnel

A piece of technology currently being integrated into the RTCC in Charlotte, North Carolina, is a software overlay that integrates the majority of RTCC personnel's applications/resources into one interface. Prior to this software integration, personnel had to log on to multiple websites/interfaces to access necessary information and then toggle between the various applications while conducting searches or accessing hundreds of cameras. This constant transition through varied programs and platforms caused delays in real-time response and also required a large number of active computer screens functioning simultaneously. For example, prior to the integration of the software, if an RTCC detective received a priority 1 robbery call and wanted to assist, he or she would need to log on to an internal database that allows the RTCC to assess the location of assets, patrol cars, cameras, etc. to see what resources were in the area. The detective would then have to switch to various camera feeds manually and pull up the LPR program on a separate screen. If the detective also wanted to access NCIC, the electronic monitoring database, or other resources, those would require additional log-on time and monitor space. The new integration software allows detectives to directly access the video feeds seen on screen, as well as integrate the additional programs and databases seamlessly. Overall, the software integration application makes it more likely that the RTCC is truly responding in real time.