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Periscope

CRIME

A Google For Cops

AS ANY CRIME fighter worth his tights will tell you, it takes a nerd to beat the bad guys. Spider-Man wouldn't even be spinning webs if it weren't for that science-loving Peter Parker. So it is in real life that a geeked-out computer-science professor just might revolutionize law enforcement in the 21st century. Working at the Artificial Intelligence Lab he founded at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Hsinchun Chen is the inventor of a high-tech crimefighting tool with a name straight out of the comic books: Coplink.

Dubbed by its creator as "Google for law enforcement," Coplink is really nothing more glamorous than computer code. It's based on an aching simple, but frustratingly elusive, premise: if the sundry databases used by crimefighters could talk to one another, the importance of seemingly inconsequential pieces of information would become more readily apparent.

Had Coplink been up and running during last fall's sniper investigation, it would have



MISSING LINK: Coplink could have flagged D.C. investigators

quickly flagged investigators to the multiple times that police had stopped John Muhammad and Lee Malvo near a shooting scene, say law-enforcement officials. The system is now being used to help build the federal and state cases against them.

Chen has been touting Coplink since he developed it with the Tucson Police Department in 1998. But it's been only

in the last two years that it's caught on. The CIA and the National Science Foundation are now looking at ways to use the software, and police departments in a half-dozen states either have it already or have signed up.

"I think everyone realizes we need to share information," Chen says. The once ferocious turf battles between

law-enforcement agencies have cooled off—squabbling over who gets credit for cracking a case seems petty when dealing with the war on terror. Currently, Chen is working with the Department of Homeland Security.

"With law enforcement, you have all these computer databases—sex offenders, speeding tickets and so on," says Bob Griffin, president of Knowledge Computing Corp., the Arizona company that produces Coplink. "This system automatically finds those patterns." Case in point: Griffin says Coplink could have almost immediately pointed to the man accused of kidnapping and murdering 5-year-old Samantha Runnion last summer in southern California. "He was a convicted sex offender, he had previously been accused of molesting another child who lived in the same complex, and they got a partial license-plate number," Griffin says.

Chen hopes his efforts will do much more than capture suspected kidnappers. In the days after September 11, the country learned that small warnings were buried deep in various agencies' files—puzzle pieces waiting for someone to decipher the big picture. With Coplink on the case, the pieces might fall into place a lot faster next time.

—SETH MNOOKIN