

# Probing the criminal mind's memory

A regional lab in Radnor analyzes computer data to catch lawbreakers

fall under a separate budget, and each is ostensibly run by the heads of a group of participating agencies.

FBI supervisory special agent J.P. McDonald, who works as the director of the Philadelphia Regional Computer Forensic Lab, has a large office with a desk, sofa, table and chairs and a

**By Sam Strike**

Not surprisingly, one just can't stroll into the Philadelphia Regional Computer Forensic Lab in the Radnor Financial Center.

In the office lobby, a friendly if not guarded face greets you

behind a plate of bulletproof glass, high-security doors surround you and cameras silently survey you.

It is in that office in Radnor where digital information technologies like computers and cell phones are taken apart and searched for information as part

of law-enforcement investigations and legal cases from all of Eastern Pennsylvania.

Opened last year, it was the 11th such lab opened in the United States (there are now 14).

These forensic labs are somewhat affiliated with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, but they

SEE LAB, PAGE 2A

## Computer forensics lab takes byte out of cyber crime

LAB, FROM PAGE 1A

flat-screen television, split-screened between CNN and the nine camera shots throughout the office.

Decorative adornments in his office include photos from his time in the Navy, and a "Happy 40th Birthday" letter from President George W. Bush.

After a career in the Navy, McDonald joined the FBI in the mid-1990s, working on computer crimes and, shortly later, the burgeoning sector of computer forensics.

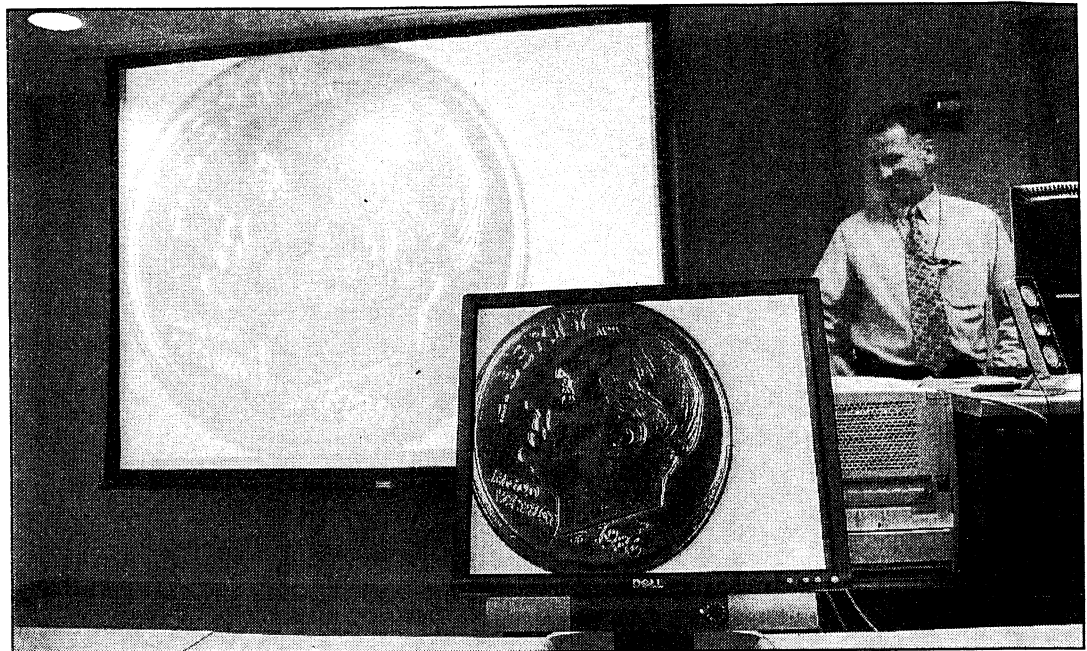
The Regional Computer Forensic Lab program started as a pilot program in San Diego in 1999, and since then, local FBI offices (like the one in Philadelphia) have been able to apply for a regional lab.

There is a goal to expand the program, but there are no new labs currently scheduled to open, according to an FBI spokesperson.

"Participating" agencies of the Philadelphia Regional Computer Forensic Lab are, in addition to the FBI, the district attorneys' offices of both Montgomery and Delaware counties and the police departments of Philadelphia and Lower Merion.

McDonald oversees the lab but also still performs actual forensic work. When the lab opened last July, there were only four people doing such work, including McDonald.

Now there are 11 examiners there, some specializing in technologies like cell phones, various computer operating systems and encryption.



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J.P. McDonald, director of the Philadelphia Regional Computer Forensic Lab in Radnor, demonstrates the technology available for local law-enforcement agencies in the lab's training facility. The lab mainly provides digital forensic services to local agencies, but also allows use of the training room.

To be sure, every examiner remains technically employed and paid by his or her respective agency, and is assigned to a full-time, three-year detail in the lab including one year of training.

Examiners need to be detail-oriented and able to follow directions, McDonald said.

But to be a participating agency, one has to be able to pay for and yet spare an employee — something that is not easy to do in a small-sized agency like the Radnor Police Department, for example.

The concept behind these labs is to provide capabilities to

state and local law-enforcement offices that would not be able to afford such a luxury — but one that is becoming more of a necessity in law enforcement today.

The labs are a testament to sharing resources and working together, McDonald said.

Such synergism aids investigations into terrorism or child pornography, for example, but the lab does not do any "investigating" of its own other than within the technologies submitted.

The lab simply provides a function to agencies in Eastern Pennsylvania by performing the forensic search, interpreting the

information and, if necessary, providing testimony in court.

McDonald himself has testified in court, and has been privy to many interesting investigations, seeing the power of computer forensics to find a variety of evidence, but also seeing some very "disturbing" things, he said.

"Everyone can't have capabilities like this," McDonald said. And "The need for computer forensics is not going to go away."

The Web site for the Philadelphia Regional Computer Forensic Lab is [phrcfl.org](http://phrcfl.org).