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Police use social media sites to reach public


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Social caps (Daily Press / April 21, 2011)

By Ashley Kelly, akelly@dailypress.com | 757-247-4778

10:42 p.m. EDT, April 21, 2011



Hampton police received a tip last month about a man wanted for breaking and entering on Briarfield Road. But the tip didn't come over the phone.

It came through Citizen Observer, a notification system used by Hampton police to send text messages and e-mail to residents.

Systems such as Citizen Observer and social media sources are giving police another tool to solve crimes by directly reaching the public. Hampton and many other police departments in the region also have Facebook and Twitter accounts, which are used to quickly disseminate information on recent arrests, crimes, wanted individuals and to offer crime prevention tips.

"Technology is the way our society is going," said Cpl. Jason Price, spokesman for Hampton police. "We have to be in tune with society. If people are getting their news from social networks, that's where we need to be."

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The anonymous Citizen Observer tip led to police charging 46-year-old Minyard Cass Davis with burglary and grand larceny. The tip was e-mailed through the system after police sent out a news release on the crime. The person knew Davis by name and where he was staying.

"They gave us everything we needed to know," Price said.

Lauri Stevens is founder and principal consultant with LawS Communications, a Boston-area firm that provides Internet consulting services to law enforcement agencies. Stevens said

Mug Shots



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social media sites are especially helpful for police when it comes to public awareness.

"They have their own direct line right to their constituents," she said.

While social media can be used to reach everyone, an approach that is often overlooked is to tailor the site to a particular demographic.

"Whenever you can attract a specific audience to a topic that a greater audience may not be interested in — that is really a smart use," Stevens said.

The Suffolk Police Department recently created a page to get clues about a homicide.

The page, titled "Catch Katina's Killer," attracted more than 1,300 people. Single mother Katina Jones, 31, was killed on Nov. 7, 2010, shortly after reconnecting with Larry O'Neal through Facebook. The two knew each other from high school.

City of Suffolk spokeswoman Debbie George said the page was an attempt to locate the 32-year-old O'Neal, when police learned he had fled the area after Jones' death.

On Nov. 10, police posted a picture of O'Neal on the Facebook page and identified him as a suspect in the case.

After the picture was posted one of the page's fans wrote, "He won't get away with this. We know his face, and if the cops don't get him, someone else will."

O'Neal turned himself into police Nov. 19 in Roanoke. Initially he was charged credit card theft, credit card fraud and obtaining money by false pretenses, related to O'Neal's alleged use of Jones' credit card after her death. Last month, police charged O'Neal with first-degree murder.

George said the page didn't lead directly to O'Neal's arrest, but helped spread information about the case.

Law enforcement isn't just using social media sites to post upcoming events, press releases and recent arrests. Conversations documented through emails are also being used as evidence.

Suffolk investigators used information shared between O'Neal and Jones on her personal Facebook page as evidence in the case. Police were able to access Jones' account because her family gave them her password. A search warrant would have been required without the password, George said.

"Law enforcement gets it enough to know that they can't ignore it anymore," Stevens said. "In the beginning it was more like a thorn in their side. Now they are realizing some of the benefits."

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