

Social media a mixed bag for law enforcers

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Special to the Chronicle

The weapons of law enforcement have definitely changed and they are no longer just guns, bullets and guile.

These days, law enforcers — including those at the state level — have another ally: cyberspace and social media.

University of Connecticut police, however, are taking a wait-and-see approach to utilizing this tool.

An example of police-sponsored social media working is the Connecticut State Police's "Wanted Wednesday," a popular feature on the state's Facebook page.

State Police Trooper Tyler Weerden, who works in the public information office, said the department has closed numerous cases after posting suspects' photos there.

Some of those who see their photos actually message the police, turn themselves in and ask for their photos to be removed.

The state police have joined police departments throughout the country that are making social media an integral part of their community relations plans.

Weerden said the various state

police posts on Facebook and Instagram and tweets on its Twitter account range from the lighthearted and engaging to important public service messages.

They, even, include requests for help in snagging suspects. The department has about 52,000 Facebook page likes.

Besides its Facebook following, the Connecticut State Police have more than 22,000 Twitter followers and 10,000 on Instagram.

"We use the triangle of legitimacy and social media is right in the middle of that," Weerden said. "That is how we tie together direct contact and social media."

The International Association of Chiefs of Police in 2013 found that 95.9 percent of agencies surveyed use social media, with 84.4 percent saying it helps solve crimes and 73.1 percent saying it improved their community relationship.

Despite enthusiastic support for these online communication platforms by the state police and so many other departments, the University of Connecticut Police Department remains off the grid when it comes to social media.

While students say social media is their prime communication tool, UConn Police Chief Hans Rhyhart said his department has not yet taken the Facebook plunge.

Instead, he said, it is keeping community outreach and human interaction as its community relations priority.

"What we want to do is the 'keep it simple' philosophy," Rhyhart said.

The department is planning to begin using Facebook in the future, but it would likely be reserved for community interest pieces and photographs and not necessarily for emergency communication, he said.

UConn police currently use a texting and e-mail platform to communicate emergency information, but some students complain about this method, saying they rarely read their e-mail alerts.

Other universities in the area have a similar primary emergency alert system, but say they also are warming up to the use of social media.

"The university has an emergency alert system and everyone can sign up for it," said University of Rhode Island Police Sgt. Erica Vieira. "They choose how they would like to receive the messages. We try to keep up on alerts, but sometimes we get too busy, so our internal emergency alert system is the official way of receiving those type of messages."

Rhyhart said when the UConn department introduces a Facebook page, it likely will be centrally

controlled and he wants to be sure whoever is assigned the task of posting has enough time for it.

There are 54 UConn officers on the Storrs campus alone.

"We are looking at more of a centralized process, because I am very concerned about quality control and making sure that we are putting out an appropriate message and that we are putting out factual information," Rhyhart said.

While UConn has no plans to use social media for breaking crime alerts, many police departments have had success using social media for both tackling crime and connecting with their communities.

The Waterford Police Department, a department of 47 officers in a shoreline community of about 20,000 residents, has earned a reputation as a leader in the use of social media, for example.

"We try and blend both community outreach, crime prevention and crime solving in our page," said Waterford Police Chief Brett Mahoney.

The Waterford Police Department's Facebook page has almost 9,000 likes and posts about anything from petty thefts to sexual assaults to fundraising events.

"We do a lot of events as a police department, so we want to let people know what we are about to do, so that we can get a good crowd," Mahoney said. "We like to solve crimes out of it. We like to post closed circuit television pictures of people that have stolen something or been in a robbery."

On Dec. 2, for example, Waterford police posted a surveillance photo of someone suspected of stealing items from Target, along with a photo of a car the person was suspected of leaving the parking lot in.

Also, on Nov. 29 pictures of two separate larcenies in Waterford were posted — one at Crystal Mall and the other at Wal-Mart.

Mahoney said he believes social media has better connected the police to the community.

"I think that it has strengthened our community bonds, because we are always showcasing what we do," he said. "People want to see what their taxes are paying for and social media allows them to do so."

Rhyhart said although UConn has no plans to use social media to solve crimes, it is always considering ways to improve.

"We never think that we have all the answers or that we are where we want to be at," Rhyhart said. "We are continually learning how we can do a better job adjusting our programs."

Currently there are numerous programs aiming to better connect campus police to the community.

These include sponsoring a citizens police academy, having officers play a role in freshman year experience and orientation classes, sponsoring active threat classes and hosting social events such as "Coffee with a Cop," "Pizza with a Cop," office hours in the library and providing students with snacks during final exam weeks.

"Our main theme is that we want people to understand that we're human," Rhyhart said. "When a person with a uniform comes in, there's a certain level of authority and order that hopefully comes from that. We want people to see us as human, we want people to interact with us."

There is evidence this face-to-face emphasis is succeeding.

"I really appreciate a personal interaction. I think seeing a friendly face around the center consistently is really good," said Julia Anderson, a graduate assistant at the UConn Rainbow Center Higher Education Student Affairs.

"This is a physical space and to be physically present is important in order to interact with the community. The personal interactions have been very beneficial."

Editor's note: The writers are University of Connecticut journalism students.

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