

Cyberstalking arrests increase as social media expands

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Although it is not an every-day occurrence, cyberstalking is becoming more prevalent in Lowndes County and Columbus. According to Police Chief Magazine, cyberstalking is defined as "an escalated form of online harassment directed at a specific person that causes substantial emotional distress and serves no legitimate purpose. The action is to annoy, alarm, and emotionally abuse another person."

Officers with the Columbus Police Department arrested Joel Dudley Jones, 21, 413 Springdale Road on Monday and charged him with cyberstalking. Officials say his arrest stems from alleged witness tampering.

"Jones was arrested for allegedly threatening a witness in a case in which he is involved," CPD Public Information Officer Glenda Buckhalter said. "The threats were allegedly made over the internet." Jones is being held in the Lowndes County Adult Detention Center while his bond and initial court appearance are set. Jones was arrested in June for his alleged involvement in a shooting at 1106 Ash Street. Two men were injured in the shooting and both were transferred to Baptist Memorial Hospital Golden Triangle. Jones was charged with two counts of aggravated assault. He has not yet been to trial for his June arrest.

Jones is the ninth person arrested by CPD or Lowndes County Sheriff's Office since May 2011. CPD Chief Selvain McQueen said although his investigators take cyberstalking seriously, sometimes the threats are hollow.

Cyberstalking is a felonious crime, clearly defined in Section 97-45-15 of the Mississippi Code of 1972.

Section 97-45-15 states, " (1) It is unlawful for a person to: (a) Use in electronic mail or electronic communication any words or language threatening to inflict bodily harm to any person or to that person's child, sibling, spouse or dependent, or physical injury to the property of any person, or for the purpose of extorting money or other things of value from any person; (b) Electronically mail or electronically communicate to another repeatedly, whether or not conversation ensues, for the purpose of threatening, terrifying or harassing any person; (c) Electronically mail or electronically communicate to another and to knowingly make any false statement concerning death, injury, illness, disfigurement, indecent conduct, or criminal conduct of the person electronically mailed or of any member of the person's family or household with the intent to threaten, terrify or harass and (d) Knowingly permit an electronic communication device under the person's control to be used for any purpose prohibited by this section." The federal cyberstalking statute prohibits using a computer to engage in a course of conduct that causes substantial emotional distress to a person or places that person in reasonable fear of death or serious injury (18 US Code 2261A).

Convicted first time offenders are subject to a maximum of two years in jail and a \$5,000 fine. Second time offenders, offenders whose charges are deemed malicious enough and offenders who are violating a court order can be sentenced up to five years and forced to pay up \$10,000.

District Attorney for the 16th District Circuit Court Forrest Algood said his office has not prosecuted anyone for cyberstalking.

"More than one in four stalking victims reported that some form of cyberstalking was used, such as e-mail (83 percent of all cyberstalking victims) or instant messaging (35 percent), according to US Department of Justice statistics. " Electronic monitoring of some kind was used to stalk one in 13 victims. Video or digital cameras were equally likely as listening devices or bugs to be used to track victims."

Activity that could be considered cyberstalking by the DOJ includes repeatedly sending harassing or threatening messages using e-mail, chat rooms, message boards, forums, newsgroups, instant messaging services, or some combination of these forums. Other forms of cyberstalking include leaving harassing or threatening messages in the guestbook on the victim's website, sending inappropriate electronic greeting cards, posting personal advertisements in the victim's name, creating websites that contain messages that threaten or harass the victim or that are made to look as if the victim created the site and that often contain provocative or pornographic photographs, most of which were altered, sending viruses to the victim's computer and using spyware to track the websites the victim visits or record the keystrokes the victim makes.

"I would be willing to bet that a large percentage of the threats made online are by people that would never make them to someone face-to-face in real life," McQueen said. "They think that it's OK to make them from the safety of their homes, but they are wrong. A threat is a threat. Cyberstalking is a form of bullying. I encourage people not to say things on Facebook and other sites that they wouldn't say to their pastor or parents. Threatening someone on the internet is serious offense and it could carry some prison time if you are convicted."

McQueen said the implementation of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter has created an environment that allows cyberstalking incidents to increase.

"People need to be very careful what they are putting on Facebook and other sites," he said. "Once something is in cyberspace, it's there forever. You can't curse people, threaten people or bully people on the internet through emails or social media sites. These social media sites have made it much easier for cyberstalking to prevail. But cyberstalking isn't the only way someone can get to you on the internet. People are using the information they see on Facebook to plan home burglaries, identity theft, sexual predators -- be careful what you place on the internet."