

# COURTS A-TWITTER OVER SOCIAL MEDIA

*Next in a series on court media relations authored by members of the Conference of Court Public Information Officers, a U.S.-based conference of court/media professionals that includes members from across the country and the international community.*

During the preliminary hearing for O.J. Simpson's 2007 case in Las Vegas, the courtroom gallery was filled with journalists beating on their phones with their thumbs sending out text messages and emails to their editors in newsrooms worldwide. A few of those journalists updated their blogs while others sent messages, or tweets, to Twitter, a social networking blog.

Digital communication has almost become as commonplace as defendants in a courtroom and its impact is changing how the judiciary interacts with the public. Jurors have been caught texting messages to social networking communities. This has led to new language warning jurors to avoid social media in addition to traditional media. In response to the frequent use of digital tools, court rules have been written detailing the acceptable use of computers, cell phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs) in the courtroom. And court outreach programs are finding ways to reach the pub-

lic through Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other social networking sites.

## **PODCASTS, BLOGS & TEXTS 4U**

Rather than run the other way, judges and courts are increasingly embracing social medium to reach constituents through the use of podcasting, blogs and other tools.

During the subsequent Simpson trial, the *Las Vegas Sun* used a computer to live blog the proceedings on Twitter. The paper was not alone. The Clark County Court's Information Office also updated Twitter with information about the trial, the preparations and upcoming events. Recently in Wichita, Kan., a reporter for the *Wichita Eagle* used Twitter to live blog a federal court case. Judge Thomas J. Marten said allowing the writer, Ron Sylvester, to blog from his courtroom was a matter of transparency. "The more we can do to open the process to the public, the greater the

public understanding," said Judge Marten.

## **NEWS, INFO... AND GOSSIP**

The rise of social media has progressed nearly as quickly as the fall of traditional media. As newspaper readership and television news viewership declined, the number of bloggers and citizen journalists increased. A fragmentation of the media also has occurred with special-interest and niche groups dominating social media. The notion that clubs and comrades tend to share news with each other clearly defines social networking. Courts are finding these special niche groups, from lawyers to court observers, frequently follow social media to obtain news, information and gossip about court cases. This phenomenon allows courts to tap into the news stream delivering content directly to the public and monitor conversations about courts, judges and judicial programs.

Courts are using podcasts,



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essentially audio presentations, and webcasting to showcase court hearings and programs. A number of state supreme courts utilize podcasts to provide the public access to oral arguments and decisions. For instance, Ohio, Texas, Florida and Nevada present podcasts of oral arguments on the web and offer an archive of past hearings. And they are not alone.

The U.S. Supreme Court, through its OYEZ project site ([www.oyez.org](http://www.oyez.org)), also features oral arguments, argument transcripts, and opinion announcements. These are but a few examples of how courts are reaching out to citizens directly to provide them with a better understanding of how the judiciary functions and reaches decisions—and, in the process, bypassing traditional media.

As the use of social media increases, users of these tools and the judiciary have made news in recent months as they questioned whether the technology is outpacing the judiciary's ability to respond to such media.

A jury verdict in Arkansas was challenged after a juror used Twitter during the trial to update his readers on the progress of the trial. A court clerk in Philadelphia was disciplined

when he contacted a juror in an ongoing trial and attempted to befriend her on his Facebook page. A judge in Colorado instructed traditional media and citizen journalists to

users of such sites as Twitter and Facebook tend to seek out organizations that are open and honest, and pummel those that fail to meet the standard. It's the notion that the consumer wants to make a decision without influence or persuasion. Social media users want to make up their own mind. Social media users

are not shy to tell others how they feel and they often believe they have a responsibility to let others know immediately.

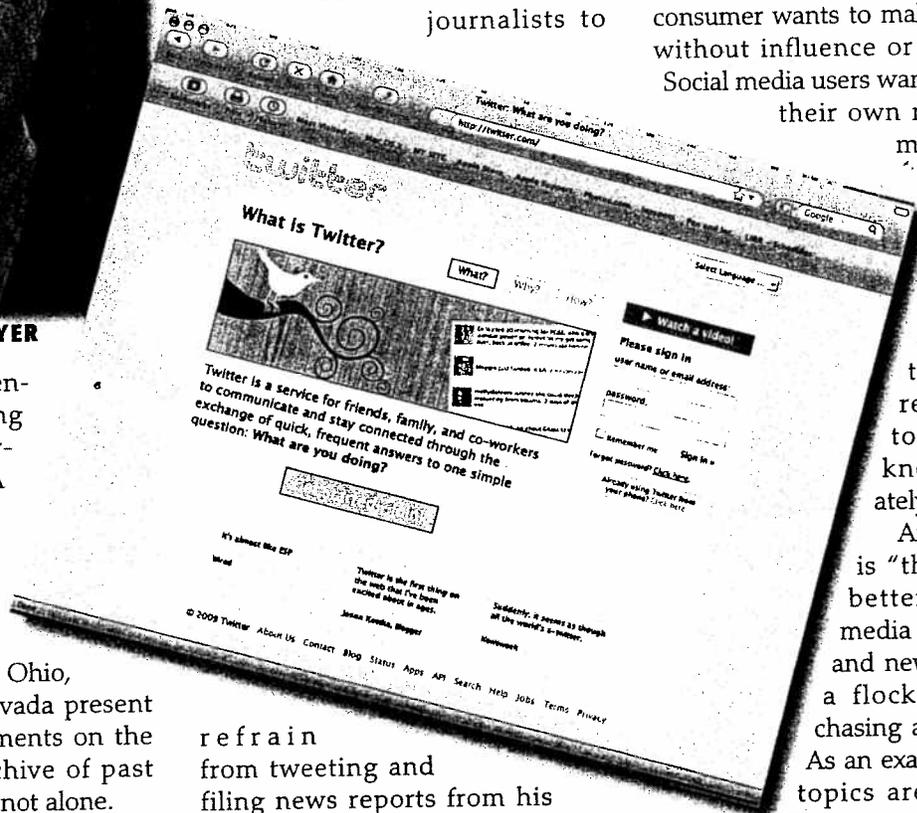
Another tenant is "the faster, the better." Social media follow trends and news faster than a flock of seagulls chasing a breadcrumb. As an example, popular topics are tracked on Twitter and the cloud of

tweets and messages grows as news breaks. In fact, the first picture of the crash of US Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River came from a Twitter account. The rush to tell others first causes individuals to feel like they must share even if it means violating a few rules.

This has led courts to establish rules concerning the use of social media ranging from rewrites of media rules to decorum orders.

## **USING A LITTLE BIRD TO SPREAD YOUR MESSAGE**

Social media can be used to the judiciary's advantage. While newspapers continue to cover the high profile crimes, news of courthouse improvements and programs has



refrain from tweeting and filing news reports from his courtroom during a first-degree murder trial. Defense lawyers in Pennsylvania sought a mistrial for their client, a former state senator, who was found guilty by a jury that included a juror who posted messages about the case on Facebook and Twitter.

Finally, in what has been called the first Twitter libel lawsuit, singer Courtney Love has been accused in the Los Angeles Superior Court of maligning the reputation of fashion designer Dawn Simorangkir. All of these cases illustrate the immediacy of social media and the need for courts and the public to be aware of its power and potential pitfalls.

## **I TWEET THEREFORE I AM**

Transparency is a tenant of social media. Bloggers and social media

## COURT OUTREACH PROGRAMS ARE FINDING WAYS TO REACH THE PUBLIC THROUGH FACEBOOK, TWITTER, LINKEDIN AND OTHER SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES.

declined. The only way to get a message out about court programs and initiatives is to reach out to the public directly. Increasingly, courts are finding the best way to do that is through social media. Immediate, honest and transparent information

can be communicated to many people with diverse backgrounds and interests through the use of social media. Plus, it is an inexpensive way to generate awareness. A Facebook page, Twitter feed, blog or podcast allows a court to bypass the traditional media editors and reach out directly to the groups willing to follow a court's social media message.

exchange of information is encouraged as users contact the court through this Twitter account. News also spreads as users 'Re-Tweet' items, essentially sharing the information with others. The LVCourts Blog communicates important changes in procedure and practice, as well as updating the media on high profile cases in the Clark County Courts. The effect is more individuals learn about the court and its programs at a very low communication cost.

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### 'TWEETING' COURTS

In Fulton County, Georgia, the Superior Court uses Twitter, @FultonCourtInfo, to connect with community organizations and other groups. Don Plummer, the Fulton County Superior Court Public Information Officer, says he also uses Twitter to stay informed about meetings and events hosted by other agencies that might affect the court or the judges. The National Center for State Courts uses a Facebook page to educate individuals about the importance of the judiciary and to showcase efforts by state court systems to improve access to justice and accountability. The Administrative Office of the Courts of Georgia promotes its newsletter and annual reports through Facebook.

The Clark County Courts social media strategy concentrates on communicating directly to individuals interested in the courts. A Facebook Group page is dominated by attorneys and court watchers who seek information about court cases or programs. Attorneys ask the court questions and participate in discussions about court programs. A Twitter account, @lvcourts, is used to point the public to news releases, court calendars, high profile trials and events. A dialogue and

### THE NEW EMAIL

Social media is rapidly becoming the new email and while the buzz surrounding it bears a resemblance to the early days of the World Wide Web, there is no denying that it is becoming a powerful tool for communication. The use of social media will continue to grow as individuals seek out instant information on topics that interest them. The judiciary will be one of those topics as long as it remains a bellwether of the community. The judiciary can remain apart from the conversation, or become a willing participant. However, ignoring social media will not make it disappear or diminish its impact on the courts. Developing strategies now will ensure the judiciary is prepared for digital communication and the growing influence of social media.

*A public relations strategist and writer, Michael Sommermeyer currently serves as the Court Information Officer for the Clark County Courts (Eighth Judicial District Court and Las Vegas Township Justice Court) in Las Vegas, Nevada. Sommermeyer is known on Twitter as @wordymouth.*