## Inside Criminal Justice

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**By K. Daniel Glover**

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# Facebook Patrol: The Social Police Beat

SPECIAL REPORT

For 24 hours in early April, residents of Dunwoody, Ga., got a call-by-call glimpse of what it's like to patrol the Atlanta suburb. Police in the city, which is home to about 46,000 people at night and 100,000 each workday, reported calls on Twitter as they happened.

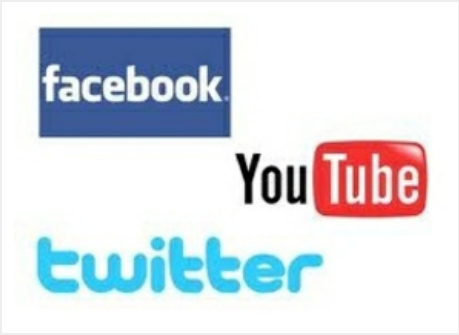



Photo by Asthma Helper, via Flickr

From the first call of the day (a traffic stop that resulted in a verbal warning) to the 111th call at 6 a.m. the next morning (a report of a suspicious person who was gone when police arrived), the department kept its citizens in the loop on every move officers made. Domestic disputes, child neglect, burglaries, gunshots, drugs, fights, car accidents, road hazards, noise complaints, 911 miscalls, false alarms — you name it, the police broadcast it in as close to real time as possible.

"We're still trying to really connect with our community and to let people know what we do, and also to provide some transparency in our efforts," Chief Billy Grogan said of Dunwoody, which was incorporated in 2008. "This is just another way to really try to reach our community."

Dunwoody is not alone. Dozens of police departments across the country — and around the world — are moving into the social-media space, both to connect with citizens and to search for criminals. These community leaders even have a conference geared toward them, Social Media in Law Enforcement, which was held last week in Chicago.

Several police departments have Facebook pages. For a sample list click here.

**Community Policing Moves Online**

Law enforcers have online communities of their own, including the video site BluTube, which launched in 2007, and the location-based service Nixle, which lets police send alerts to citizens via cell phone, email and the Internet. But these days, agencies are gravitating toward social networks that are popular with the public, especially Facebook and Twitter.

The appeal of social media to law enforcement is much the same as it is for the courts. Departments use it both for community engagement and outreach and to report the news directly to the public, minus the challenges and aggravations of filtering information through traditional media.

Grogan said his department periodically holds citizen police academies in part to help Dunwoody citizens personally connect with officers. The 24-hour Twitter coverage achieved the same goal. "If you follow the department all day … you can connect with [the officers] a little more," Grogan said. "They're not so impersonal."

Lauri Stevens, producer of the SMILE conference and founder of the LAwS Communications media consultancy for police, said on her blog ConnectedCOPS that many police officials have an "ah-ha" moment about social media when they grasp the media aspect of it. The benefits include "getting stories out that the

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traditional media won't cover [and] having the means to balance the scales when they do cover them but get them wrong."

The police department in one British town conducted a "tweet-a-thon" to report the outcome of cases long ignored by resource-strapped local newspapers. The goals were to "give people a flavor for the range of offenders we deal with, an insight into the court system and, importantly, peace of mind that justice is being done," an official told USA Today.

Social networks also are excellent tools for sharing police news in real time. The winter 2010 issue of TechBeat, a publication of the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center, listed two examples in Baltimore, one positive and one negative. Police there use Facebook and Twitter to tell residents immediately of violent crimes in their neighborhoods. And the department once used Twitter to correct misinformation about gunshots at a hostage barricade situation that people were spreading by tweet.

Sometimes online networking by police leads to arrests. The Polk County, Fla., sheriff's office recently identified a suspected wallet thief thanks to an anonymous tip on its Facebook page — and subsequently thanked the Crime Stoppers allies who "like" the page.

To keep their audiences interested and engaged online, some police departments offer more than a strict diet of hard news about hard crime. Dallas Police, for instance, solicit public recommendations for officer commendations via Facebook. Police in Boise, Idaho, posted historical photos of years past in the department. And Bedford, Va., officers recognize colleagues across the country who die in the line of duty.

"It really takes the whole community-policing philosophy … to the communities that people participate in online," said Nancy Kolb, who heads the Center for Social Media at the International Association of Chiefs of Police. "For law enforcement to have a presence there, it's really reaching people where they are."

**The Dangers of Social Media for Police**

But social media is a two-edged digital sword for police. For starters, criminals are using the tools against law enforcers. As attendees heard at the SMILE conference, cornered suspects monitor police activities in real time, and gangs keep tabs on the police.

The police don't exist to settle online spats.

As more people network and inevitably squabble online, police also are being pulled into the disputes. SMILE conference founder Stevens said via email that police are unprepared to respond, both because it's tough to know when actual crimes have been committed and because when they have, the crimes may involve people in different jurisdictions.

But for now, self-inflicted wounds via social media — be it an indiscriminate Facebook post or an officer caught on tape, and exposed on YouTube, crossing an enforcement line — are the biggest problem. Stevens said such incidents number "in the hundreds."

"I think you'd be hard-pressed to find an agency of any size that hasn't had to deal with at least one breach of code of conduct," she said. "If they haven't, they're just not paying attention."

One of the more noteworthy breaches occurred in Albuquerque, N.M. Det. Trey Economidy described his job as "human waste disposal" on Facebook and later was involved in a fatal shooting. The department disciplined Economidy (he's now back on duty) and implemented a social-media policy that includes assigning one officer to watch what others are doing online.

The IACP created its Center on Social Media in October 2010 in part because members started asking questions about social media — questions sparked by issues in their own departments. Kolb remembers one episode that received significant media attention, the story of "The Officer Who Posted Too Much On MySpace" and arguably cost prosecutors a felony conviction.

"There were some things on his MySpace page that planted some seeds of doubt in the jurors' heads in terms of his credibility, the type of officer he was," she said.

The IACP center is working to educate and train police so they don't make such mistakes. The website offers an array of fact sheets, case studies, reviews of relevant case law and more. The publications include a model social-media policy for law enforcement.

"Social media is here to stay," Kolb said. "It's become an integral element into society, and law enforcement agencies are really at the point where they need to understand it, embrace it to a certain extent and learn how to use it."

**ED NOTE:** Nancy Kolb will be speaking at a special Roundtable discussion on social media networking tools for New Jersey Law Enforcement and the Press at John Jay College in New York. Please check Inside Criminal Justice at TCR tomorrow (Thursday) for coverage of the event.

*K. Daniel Glover is editor of* Capitol Hill Tweet Watch Report. *The full version of Tweet Report is available here. Glover was a 2011 John Jay-HF Guggenheim Reporting Fellow.*

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