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Take that $%!@ Off Our Site!

David Oliver reached his social media breaking point last month.

As chief of the Brimfield, Ohio police department, Oliver is used to vulgar tirades against the police, especially from criminals and the company they keep. But he won't tolerate such nastiness on the department's Facebook page.

Hosting the page hasn't presented many problems for Oliver in the year since it has been online. The department has deleted only three posts and banned four users. But two of the department's posts on Jan. 23, one of them being a picture from a methamphetamine lab, triggered a flurry of foul language and personal attacks against officers.

Oliver deleted the offending content and then laid down the social media law.

"This is a police department [Facebook] page," he wrote. "I am the chief here, which means I take responsibility for the entire content. … If you get offended because a 'friend' gets arrested, tough luck. Get new friends. Whatever you do, it will not involve bashing officers, me or the community on this page. It will not involve incoherent swearing."

Oliver's post earned nearly 300 "likes" and sparked 70 comments, far more engagement than usual on the page.

Most people cheered him for taking a hard line. But the status update also revealed a key concern facing police departments across America as they get more social: how to balance the community benefits of public interaction with the risks of creating an open, public forum.

"That's the biggest challenge that most of us face," said Sgt. Steve Hauck, who administers the social media channels for Utica, NY police department. "There's a fine line between free speech and vulgarity and what's offensive. It's always a judgment thing."

No Personal Attacks

Generally speaking, police officials who manage social media channels won't allow defamation, personal attacks or comments that violate social norms. They don't delete all vulgarities, a practice that could violate the U.S. Constitution, but they do intervene when the obscenities breach the "community standards" principle set forth by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1972 decision *Miller v. California*.

"Swearing and acting foolish in a public setting is a character issue in my book and does not need to be witnessed by those who do not subscribe to that character," Oliver said in an email interview.

Hauck also draws the line at people advocating illegal activity.

He said Utica's Facebook page used to be a target for advocates of drug legalization every time the department posted information about a drug arrest.

Such debates "might have a place in society, but it's not on a police department social media page," Hauck said. "I'm not going to let them promote illegal activity."

Comment moderation is a greater concern on Facebook than other social networks. Information moves so quickly on Twitter that individual tweets are not in the stream for long, and YouTube's comment section is more reactive than interactive, so some police agencies disable comments altogether.

The problem with Facebook, if you want to call it a problem, is that police officials who try it tend to "like" it.

"It's such a great community builder," said Sarah Boyd, a public relations specialist for the Kansas City, MO., police force. "It humanizes the department, and it helps people build a relationship with us."

Criminals on Facebook

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The downside is that criminals, Internet "trolls" and other troublemakers use Facebook, too. Their comments are more visible than they would be on other forums and can be accessed more easily long after they are posted.

The public also can post content directly to police news feeds, including links to inappropriate material, if departments enable that feature.

Some governments are so concerned about Facebook that they won't let their police departments use it. Police in Juneau, Alaska, only use Twitter—primarily to promote the –department's "Ask a Dispatcher" website feature.

"Our city management will not allow us to have forums like [Facebook] because of the perceived problems," said Cindee Brown-Mills, the administrative manager for the Juneau police.

Lauri Stevens, founder of the annual Social Media, the Internet and Law Enforcement conference, also has heard of police departments that prevent Facebook comments because of the misguided legal belief that officials cannot selectively delete comments.

They can, she said, so long as they are transparent about the rules and enforce them consistently.

'Takedown Policies'

She recommends that all police departments adopt "takedown policies" for Facebook and display them prominently.

"They can't be removing comments just because they don't like some and not apply the same criteria to someone else's," says Stevens, who has a sample takedown policy on her website. "That's where they could get themselves into trouble."

Nancy Kolb, who heads the Center for Social Media at the International Association of Chiefs of Police, observes that negative comments are rare on police Facebook pages.

"It happens, but it's the exception rather than the rule," She says.

And Kansas City's Boyd says that when it happens, page administrators don't always have to intervene. "On Facebook, we have found [the community] to be kind of self-correcting," she adds.

According to Stevens, the key to police success on online is strategic planning.

"A social media strategy needs to be incorporated as part of an overall communications strategy and needs to be planned to align with an agency's culture and goals," she says.

"If they do that, and also plan for major events, when someone starts making negative comments, they will be ready."

An editor and writer in Washington, D.C., K. Daniel Glover served as a 2011 -Harry Frank Guggenheim Reporting Fellow at the Center on Media, Crime and Justice, at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. He welcomes comments from readers.