

# Tweeting the News: Criminal Justice Agencies and their Use of Social Networking Sites

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## Abstract

In recent times we have seen an increase in the willingness of criminal justice agencies to engage with new media technologies and social networking sites, not only as a tool for the investigation of criminal activity, but also as a new way of communicating with the public. Sites such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook are experiencing a growth in their use as communication tools for criminal justice agencies. What is interesting, however, is that different criminal justice agencies are employing these sites in very diverse ways and with distinctive agendas. This paper aims to explore some of the ways in which local and international criminal justice agencies are engaging with new media technologies and social networking sites.

## Introduction

As has been explored previously (McGovern 2009), Australian policing agencies are increasingly becoming involved in a range of new media initiatives, particularly in the realm of reality television programs. The trend for police engagement in such programs has only continued to expand over the past twelve months, reaching a saturation point of screening of police reality television shows. More recently however, new developments in police media work have come to the fore and we now see an increasing involvement of policing agencies both in Australia and overseas in online communications. More specifically, police and other criminal justice agencies have enthusiastically embraced social networking sites, with a wide range of criminal justice agencies around the globe now using them. In this paper I consider some of these new forms of media being employed by criminal justice agencies worldwide.

## A Changing Media Landscape

The branching out of criminal justice agencies in terms of their media work should come as little surprise given the evolving media landscape. At the broad level, this changing media landscape has had an effect on all modes of communication. For example, dwindling budgets, decreases in advertising revenue, and an increased focus on cost effectiveness within media outlets have had implications for staffing levels and access to resources (Putnis 1996; McGovern and Lee 2010). The arrival of the internet and other new technologies have also challenged traditional media formats, and the demand for immediate news content and shorter deadlines for journalists mean that we now operate under a 24 hour news cycle (Mawby 2010; Goldsmith 2010; Lewis, Cushion and Thomas 2005). On top of this comes the increase in public relations and marketing content in media outputs, the move towards cheap media content and the decline of traditional news and current affairs formats (Davis 2000; Cottle 2003).

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When looking specifically at the impact of change on the communication of criminal justice matters, we can identify that there have been a number of more apparent and direct changes to the communications environment. For example, the digital encryption of police, fire and ambulance radios (Pearson 2005; McGovern 2008; Morri 2008; Morri and Jones 2010; Hollins and Bacon 2010) has changed the way in which journalists obtain information about crime events. No longer can journalists 'eavesdrop' on emergency services radio transmissions as a live information source for their stories. Instead, they now have to rely on agencies like the police to supply them with information about breaking events through systems such as the Police External Agencies Transfer System (PEATS), an online information system operated by the NSW Police Force that transmits the details of policing activities to official news media organisations.

There has also been a decline in specialist crime and police reporters (Mawby 2010), leading to the greater use of generalist reporters to cover crime matters. With the competing demands on journalists, and lack of opportunities for engaging in investigative reporting and establishing sources for stories, it has been argued that the quality of journalism has suffered, with an overreliance on official sources and press releases now commonplace (McGovern and Lee 2010). There is also a greater surveillance of criminal justice agencies. Citizen journalism is increasing and even encouraged by media outlets in their search for more content and audience (Goldsmith 2010; McGovern 2009).

Obviously these changes to the media landscape have implications for the communication of criminal justice information. For criminal justice agencies in particular it has led to new challenges and opportunities for not only maintaining, but improving, public confidence in the criminal justice system. New technologies and social media tools are increasingly playing an important role in the communication priorities of policing agencies. This is evidenced by the rate at which criminal justice agencies are heading into the online environment created by sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, examples of which will now be explored.

## Social Networking and the Courts

One arm of the criminal justice system embracing new media technologies is the judiciary. The use of the internet and associated technology is becoming increasingly common, particularly in the United States. The development of the internet has broadened capabilities so that legal information is available via official databases, giving interested parties and the general public access to case information, court transcripts and even video footage (Chan, Goggins and Bruce 2010). Such online facilities allow people to access information that in the past would have only been accessible either via the traditional news media or through their own attendance in the courtroom setting.

The utility of social media, however, is a new realm for the courts, with some wholeheartedly embracing the available technology, while for others there are still concerns about these new forms of communication. It may be argued that stepping into this form of online environment opens courts up to a range of risks, including prejudicial publicity and commentary, and more than one court has faced problems with jurors using sites such as Twitter to discuss their involvement in trials in real time (Schwartz 2009; Hylton 2009). There are, however, a number of courts in the US that are making use of social media sites Twitter and Facebook, or blogs and RSS feeds, to communicate with the public. Web sources claim that in over half of US states at least one court is using at least one of these media, but there is very little official or academic documentation to support such claims.

Some courts use the sites as just another way of connecting people with already publicly available court materials such as transcripts and daily court listings, whilst others actually engage in dialogue with followers on various aspects of the courts or court process. The New Jersey judiciary, for example, is heralded as being one of the forerunners in the use of new media technologies in the US. The acting administrative director of the courts is quoted as saying that:

Our court users rely heavily on social media to stay informed and connected. We are responding to their expectations for timely information that maximises the convenience of the Internet and of cell phones and other devices (NJ Courts Online 2009).

With upwards of 1500 fans for their Facebook page, which is used to broadcast press releases, court information and photos and videos of court events, it seems that at least some of the community is being reached by this format. Beyond this, however, the New Jersey judiciary also uses SMS alerts to notify the public of court closures and other important 'real time' information; Twitter, to alert 'followers' to breaking court events; RSS feeds to broadcast news, notices and court opinions; and YouTube for educational videos about aspects of the court system and procedure. In this way, the reach of the courts goes far beyond that which traditional media formats allow for.

## Social Networking and the Police

By far the most significant presence on social networking sites and online is the police, and it is this arm of the criminal justice system that the remainder of this paper will focus on. The uptake of online tools and platforms by policing agencies globally is growing daily, as is the audience for such media (see for example National Police Web Managers Group 2010). Preliminary research has been revealing about the range and form of online and new media activities being undertaken, demonstrating that policing agencies in Australia and the UK are adapting in both convergent and divergent ways to changing media landscapes. The initial inquiries undertaken by McGovern and Lee seem to indicate that, broadly speaking, police agencies have approached their forays into the social networking world and their online media presence in one of three ways. First, some agencies have been quite strategic in how they have managed their entry into the online environment. For example, West Midlands Police in the UK have enthusiastically embraced social networking as a method of communicating with the public, with West Midlands Inspector Mark Payne quoted on the BBC online news service as saying:

This is not about abandoning the traditional ways ... More and more people are using social media to communicate and, if that's where people are talking, that's where we need to go (BBC News Online 2009).

Secondly, other police agencies have found themselves inadvertently engaging in the online environment, taking up opportunities that present themselves. For example, the NSW Police Force's involvement in Twitter came from an incident where a PR company, Mentally Friendly, set up a fake Twitter account purporting to be the NSW Police (McGovern 2009). The company's ploy came to the attention of the police when they tweeted that they were 'enjoying the new secret search powers', in reference to increased search powers granted to the NSW Police Force through terrorism legislation. The inappropriate nature of the tweet was said to have concerned police, who sought to locate the fake tweeter and take control of the account (Moses 2009).

Thirdly, though, some police agencies are yet to be convinced of the benefits of using online and social networking environments in other than the most basic formats, such as for the distribution of media releases via official police websites.

In exploring the ways in which police use and engage with these formats, it is interesting to note the different ways in which communication occurs across both platforms—such as Facebook and Twitter—and jurisdictions—Australian and UK police forces. In the Australian context, sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are being used by high-profile police organisations such as the NSW Police Force and Victoria Police. Recently, Victoria Police enlisted police recruit Stephanie Attard to tweet about her experiences while training at the Police Academy<sup>2</sup>. The establishment of this recruit's Twitter account is said to be an attempt to improve public awareness and understanding of the process of training recruits. This development mirrors some of the ways in which Twitter is being used in the UK. For example, while most social networking accounts in Australian jurisdictions are

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<sup>2</sup> <<http://twitter.com/vicpolrecruit>>

managed and maintained by media information officers<sup>3</sup> and public relations staff, there is a distinct trend in the UK for police to sanction the use of Twitter by individual officers while carrying out their jobs. For example, Harrogate PC Ed Rogerson has gained national (BBC News Online 2009) and international (Gibson and Jacobsen 2010) attention for being the most popular police officer on Twitter<sup>4</sup>. Rogerson is one of a growing number of UK officers being encouraged by their superiors to communicate with the public in a more personal and conversational fashion, something which is yet to gain traction in the Australian context.

With police being arguably the most visible or public face of the criminal justice system, and with potentially the biggest stake in obtaining and maintaining public confidence in their activities, it is perhaps not surprising that they are embracing these communications tools. Furthermore, with other activities, such as reality television programs appearing to engender community support for their work, the movement of police into the social networking environment seems to be a natural progression. In fact, police are increasingly becoming more proactive about the ways in which they communicate with, and foster support from, the community. As Chan et al (2010) and Ericson and Haggerty (1997) have argued, new technologies have extended the capacity of police to communicate (Chan et al 2010:655). On top of this, many of these new technologies enable police and their media units greater efficiency in such interactions, often in a more user-friendly and cost-effective way, meaning that much more can be achieved without police having to necessarily expend any significant additional costs or resources (that is not to say that some forces do not direct any money towards these technologies. Some UK forces are now employing staff specifically to deal with new media strategies and communications). Furthermore, these technologies can be used to enhance the professional status and legitimacy of police organisations, as well as their claims of transparency and public accountability (Chan et al 2010:656). As argued elsewhere (McGovern and Lee 2010), these sorts of public relations activities within policing organisations, as with other public sector agencies, are part a broader project of governance which sees police organisations engaging in the business of promoting the state's capacity to govern, as well as maintaining their credibility and evoking popular support (Garland 2001).

## Conclusions

So what are the consequences when traditional media are taken out of the equation and criminal justice communication becomes direct with the public, such as in the ways outlined in this paper? Does it mean the death of independent journalism, and the projection of PR and spin directly onto the public's computer screen? Given the relative infancy of the research being conducted, it is too early to make any in-depth analysis of the myriad issues these new developments raise, but we can reflect on them in the context of the media work being carried out by criminal justice agencies more broadly. Previous research on the growth of public relations and media units within policing agencies has argued that there has been a tendency for researchers to simplify the relationship between the police and the media (McGovern 2008; Mawby 2002a, 2002b), crediting one or the other with holding a monopoly on the power in the relationship. Instead, it may be argued that the relationship between the police and the media is much more complex and fluid than this, with the power balance shifting between the two depending on the situation and circumstances at any given time (McGovern 2008; McGovern and Lee 2010, Mawby 2002a, 2002b).

Many have argued that the emergence of the internet, and the spaces it has created for communication and debate, has opened up the public sphere and made it easier for alternative and competing discourses to operate in response to, or despite, official government rhetoric. Some may argue that with the involvement of criminal justice agencies and other government departments in these previously alternative online environments, once again this public sphere is being challenged and vertical forms of communication once again being established. While it is early in the

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<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Attard's Twitter account being the one exception.

<sup>4</sup> <<http://twitter.com/hotelalpha9>>

development of such thoughts, it could be argued again that this is somewhat simplifying the media effect. It is true, for the most part, that the community does not get its information about crime from personal experience but from the news media and perhaps increasingly the online media (Marsh and Melville 2009; Surette 2007; Jewkes 2004). It would be too simplistic however, to say that the involvement of criminal justice agencies such as the police in the online environment threatens the notion of the public sphere and its ability to contest dominant discourses of justice as advanced by these agencies in these new environments. If anything, perhaps it could be argued that more space has been opened up for debate and discussion. It is much easier to attempt to engage with a Facebook or Twitter message than it is with a media release. What has been uncovered in the research so far demonstrates that this feedback is very important to criminal justice agencies that are concerned with their image and with community confidence in the work that they do. Continuing research into these developments hopes to go further in understanding the impact of new media and social networking tools on criminal justice communications.

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**ANZCCC: The Australian and New Zealand Critical Criminology Conference 2010**  
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The Institute of Criminology would like to thank the University of Western Sydney as co-sponsors of the ANZCCC.

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