

Police, charities, even crime suspects using Twitter to get the message out

May 7 2009, By Michael J. Feeney and Karen Rouse

When state police Sgt. Stephen Jones wanted to track down a car involved in a fatal hit-and-run accident in Hackensack, he decided a Twitter update -- or a "tweet" -- would be the fastest way to reach the public.

Within minutes, his nearly 300 "followers" on the fast-growing social networking site had access to his message: "Troopers looking for green veh w/ front end damage." The quick posting was enough to get critical facts out to the media. "The faster I get this info to the reporter, the faster they get it to the public," Jones said.

[Twitter](#).com -- a social networking Web site where users update their "followers" about what they're doing in postings of up to 140 characters -- started out as an easy way for friends, family, co-workers and celebrities to share messages from cell phones or computers. But it is now quickly spreading to the mainstream, with politicians, [police departments](#) and charities signing up.

Sen. Bob Menendez, D-N.J., is tweeting. The fire department in Oradell is tweeting. The police department in Hasbrouck Heights is tweeting. Even suspects who have been arrested are tweeting: rapper Jim Jones in Teaneck, accused of not paying parking tickets, and boxing champion Kendall Holt in Paterson, accused of money laundering.

"You're going to start seeing more of the law enforcement side (on Twitter)," said Seamus Condrón of Mediabistro.com, a Web site that

features resources for media professionals. "I think you're going to start seeing more criminals being caught because of Twitter tipping people off."

Condrón said Twitter can be a helpful tool for emergency workers, particularly in small towns.

"When you think of neighborhood watches, Twitter is a really good way of keeping people apprised of what's going on in the neighborhood," Condrón said.

Police just need to carefully consider what to put on Twitter, he said. The case of a congressman who tweeted about a secret mission to Iraq is an example of what not to do.

"A detective would never discuss the details of a case with some random person on the street, so they shouldn't do that" on Twitter, he said.

Oradell firefighter Joe Gothelf has been posting messages on the department's Twitter page from his cell phone since February. Among his most recent posts:

- united water repairing water main on elm st near st joes school. numerous hydrants out of service
- cat stuck on the roof ... tower ladder is responding

Oradell Fire Chief Kevin Burns said that while the technology has improved, Twitter serves the same function that yelling "Fire!" with a megaphone once did. "It used to be shouting down the street; now we've evolved with the world," Burns said.

Rutgers University professor Greg Lastowka said Twitter is appealing

because it's faster and easier than other [social networking sites](#).

"Twitter taps into the past 10 years of texting and mobile e-mail culture, where short and simple messages have dominated," said Lastowka, an expert on Internet law. "Twitter has been around for three years or so, but it is only in the past few months that it has become so popular with the media. ... I think many people are using it as a lower-tech, more mobile-friendly version of Facebook or MySpace."

But Martin Bunzl, a Rutgers professor of philosophy, worries that Twitter is feeding "our insatiable desire for voyeurism" and that users are going to Twitter to live vicariously through celebrities.

"I suspect these hard economic times have played a role in this -- it is a cheap form of entertainment!" he wrote in an e-mail.

New Jersey's Senate Republicans use Twitter to steer traffic to the party's Web site and to get more attention for the GOP's point of view, said Andrew Pratt, a spokesman.

"We're ... a minority party, and the minority party doesn't get the same (level) of coverage," he said.

But Twitter alone cannot reach all Republicans, or Democrats for that matter.

"Some people have embraced this technology, and they love it," Pratt said. However, he said there remains "some people you can only reach by e-mail. There are some people you can still only reach by mail or TV. ... There are people who won't pick up an e-mail, but they'll go on Facebook. They'll watch a video, but they won't read a press release."

Melissa Leibe, a 26-year-old Web content coordinator for the Volunteers

of Bergen County, created a Twitter page for the agency last fall. Twitter is ideal for a nonprofit because it's a free tool to market the agency, she said. When 201 Magazine recently featured the volunteer agency in an article, Leibe posted a link to it on the Twitter page.

"We wanted to say, 'Check us out here,' " Leibe said. "It was a bragging right."

Jones, 47, of the state police, said Twitter is most helpful for high-interest stories -- such as plane crashes -- that generate a lot of media interest.

He said the new method of releasing information is handy because he can update his Twitter from a cell phone or a computer. He updated his Twitter page shortly after 23-year-old Amanda Galdo of Wayne was arrested for allegedly robbing a Sussex County bank.

Hasbrouck Heights Police Officer Brian Donohue, who started the department Twitter page about three months ago, said the tool can reach people that the emergency reverse 911 system cannot.

"You can instantaneously send out alerts or updates," said Donohue, adding the Twitter posts can reach people at work or those who have canceled their home phones. "I think the reverse 911 serves its purpose, but to get information out there quicker ... Twitter keeps you right on top of the information and you can keep putting out as many messages as you need."

But Park Ridge cyber cop Lt. Joseph Rampolla urges users to understand that Twitter can both solve crimes and create them.

"Information that sounds to be very non-threatening can put you or your property in danger," he said, encouraging residents to steer away from

posting messages that could give the green light to criminals. For example, information on when you are going on vacation and leaving your home unattended.

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