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## Report Details Courts' Use of Social Media Tools

For the second year in a row, the District of Columbia court system's annual Law Day festivities on May 1 included an hour-long Twitter Q&A session with the chief judges of the city's trial and appellate courts. A new survey shows local judges aren't alone in getting more comfortable with social media, although they aren't in the majority, either.

The Conference of Court Public Information Officers released its fourth annual survey of new media use in the courts earlier this month. Just under half of the judges, court staff and other court-related personnel who responded to the survey said their court system didn't use any social media tools. Twenty-nine percent of respondents said they didn't know if their court system used social media. Of the courts that embraced social media in some way, the most popular tool was Twitter.

Courts have had a complicated relationship with social media. On the one hand, the survey shows public information officers and judges viewed Twitter and other tools as a way to better communicate with the public. At the same time, those same tools have created a host of new problems for courts, from tweeting jurors to fears that mobile devices could be used to take pictures or otherwise threaten the safety of witnesses or jurors in sensitive cases.

According to the survey, 86 percent of respondents said it was essential for court personnel to learn about social media tools in order to serve the courts. That number dropped from the previous year, however, when 96 percent of respondents agreed. Forty-two percent of respondents said they didn't think social media was essential for public outreach; 24 percent were neutral and 34 percent said it was essential.

The survey didn't offer a breakdown of results by jurisdiction, but given the small percentage of respondents who reported their court systems used particular types of social media—Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn and Flickr—the D.C. courts likely fell into the plugged-in minority. The local court system has an active presence on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, and recently launched a separate news website.

"The idea behind all of them is just expanding the avenues we have towards reaching out to different parts of our community," said Leah Gurowitz, director of public relations for the D.C. court system.

According to the survey, courts' use of Facebook nationwide went down slightly over the past year, from 13.2 percent to 11.3 percent. Twitter was the most popular tool, with 14.3 percent of

respondents saying their court system used it. The least popular tool was the photo-sharing site Flickr.

As of today, the D.C. courts' Twitter account, @DCCourtsInfo, had 1,680 followers. Gurowitz said that regardless of the medium, she'd gotten positive feedback on the courts' willingness to engage online, whether it was sending thank-you messages to Twitter users who posted about jury service-assuming they weren't tweeting during a trial-or responding to messages sent via Facebook.

Gurowitz said the court is looking into expanding its presence on YouTube, which she sees as a useful vehicle for posting tutorials on basic court functions such as filing new cases. "There's constant analysis to see what works for people," she said.

According to the report, more courts reported taking steps to control the use of mobile devices inside courtrooms. Courts in the District, Guam, Puerto Rico and 45 states reported having policies regulating at least one type of social media tool.

In D.C. Superior Court, an administrative order adopted in 2011 requires most people going into a courtroom to turn off their phones or other mobile devices, although there are exceptions for pro se litigants, lawyers and others in court on official business. Judges have discretion to allow reporters or other litigants to use their phones.

Of the judges who participated in the survey, a small percentage said they used social media tools for professional purposes. Around five percent of judges said they posted content on Facebook in their official capacity, while only three percent used Twitter professionally to share information. Only one D.C. Superior Court judge, Judge Herbert Dixon Jr., is known to use Twitter. Dixon, who presides in Superior Court's special technology-enhanced courtroom, writes and speaks regularly on technology issues affecting the courts.

A copy of the survey is available [here](#). It was a joint effort between the Conference of Court Public Information Officers, the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University and the National Center for State Courts.

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