

Reporters' tweets give instant narrative of trial

'I saw the future on my computer screen'

Several days back, on a Friday afternoon, I sat in my office near the Plaza in Kansas City and had an amazing experience. There was a significant rape trial going on downtown at the Jackson County Courthouse. It was getting close to 4:30. The trial had been ongoing all week and was the subject of much news coverage.

All of the television stations in town wanted to cover the trial because the rapes had occurred many years ago, and it was evident that the conviction would depend on the DNA evidence that had been recovered, preserved and only recently had led police to the alleged rapist. There was little other significant evidence.

As I sat in my office, what was amazing was not what was happening in the courtroom, but what was happening OUTSIDE the courtroom, and that is what has affected me so profoundly.

But let me take you back to January.

Those of you who know me know that I tend to be a technology nut. I'm not an overboard nut, but I love my smart phone, have lived through my laptop for years ("have laptop, will travel") and insisted that Missouri Press install wireless in its office for the benefit of its traveling hotline attorney.

I sat in a session at that time listening to folks from the *St. Joseph News-Press* talk about their technology. Some of you have heard me talk about this before. That session stunned me. Those reporters began talking about using their sports department software to cover trials. My jaw dropped.

I cringed as I thought about the idea that we'd begin covering trials like

sporting events. I could just imagine the response we'd get from the judiciary.

A few months later, I sat in a conference room with Beth Riggert, communications counsel of the Supreme Court, and other folks you know (including Doug Crews, MPA's executive director) and we talked about the current Cameras in the Courtroom rule and whether it needed to be updated.

As I sat and pondered potential changes, I thought about this idea of electronic communication of courtroom happenings, and the fact that I had in the meantime read a blog entry by someone – a blogger who some classify as a "fringe" journalist – who was clearly blogging from his smartphone in the courtroom, and realized that this was the time to bring all those issues to

the table.

I'm now hard at work with a committee of other dedicated folks who are looking at the rule as it now exists, looking at what works and what doesn't work in the rule and how we should make sure it will continue to work in future years as technology changes. It's an exciting challenge.

And, as I sat in my office that Friday afternoon, I saw the future on my computer screen. I have TweetDeck software running all the time on my computer. There are a few individuals whose "tweets" I regularly follow.

As I did that during the trial, I realized that I would be able to read all the tweets about the trial if I followed the "#jacksontrial" thread. And so I did. (Bear with me, those of you who are far ahead of your hotline attorney in tech competency.) And there, on my screen, I



Jean Maneke, MPA's Legal Hotline attorney, can be reached at (816) 753-9000, jmaneke@manekelaw.com.

had the play-by-play coverage of the trial.

No special software required. I knew when the defendant arrived in court, what he wore, who testified when, at what time the court broke for lunch and at what time it started again, the points made by the attorneys in their closing arguments and when the jury left to deliberate, just by catching all the tweets the various reporters were making.

And when the jury returned just before 5 p.m., I knew what the verdict was before it made the evening news. Had I wanted it, there was "live feed" available from the courtroom to where I could have actually heard the jury foreman read the verdict. Amazing!

Later, Donna McGuire from *The Kansas City Star* and I interviewed the Hon. Charles Atwell, the judge who presided over the rape trial. Hearing him talk about dealing with the media was fascinating.

This was a textbook example of a trial in which social media worked.

The future is here, folks! Now we just need to focus on how to use these tools well, how to get the news to those who look to us to provide it to them, and how to do this in a professional manner.

It's really not much different than the days when I would go cover the morning half of a trial for the afternoon paper, read my story over the phone to the desk during the lunch break, and then go back for the rest of the afternoon, filing a story for the morning paper before I quit for the day.

It's just a lot easier for the reporters than it was in those days. And a lot more exciting for those of us who are on the end receiving the information!

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