Social media ratchets up the pressure on a routine police call

By Ian Duncan
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The arrest of a Baltimore blogger this weekend showed how a normally mundane bit of police work — the serving of a warrant — can be complicated in an age of Twitter and Internet radio. It briefly put a national spotlight on what normally wouldn't even make the local news.

Frank James MacArthur, 47, a steady presence as an observer at city crime scenes and a cab driver by trade, took to Twitter and an online radio service to stream his dealings with police at his home Saturday to execute an arrest warrant connected to 2009 weapons charges for which he had received probation before judgment.

A spokesman for the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services confirmed that MacArthur was being held without bond, after being taken into custody late Saturday.

MacArthur's case tested the standard approach for crisis negotiators who aim to contain a situation, cutting off the subject from outside voices, something that was easy to do in the era of land line phones but much harder now, when almost anyone can get involved in the dialogue between police and a suspect.

"You don't want this person communicating with a lot of outside people who are going to get them riled up," said Justin P. Borowsky, who has studied the relationship between hostage takers and negotiators. "Social media is going to undermine the officer's ability to do that as effectively as police have been able to do in the past."

Police said they serve dozens of warrants a week. Taking MacArthur into custody should have been routine, but in the days leading up to his eventual peaceful arrest, he had been using threatening language toward police online and suggesting that he would not go quietly.

"Poor guy I take out might have a family. He probably just following orders..." MacArthur posted as police approached his Waverly home.

Police were cautious carrying out the job Saturday night and confirmed Sunday that they had found a sawed-off shotgun and ammunition at MacArthur's home. Police also said they are recommending new gun possession charges because MacArthur is disqualified from owning firearms following a 2002 weapon conviction.

With a helicopter watching the situation unfold from above, police sent in a SWAT team and closed down the block of McKewin Ave. where MacArthur lives. For his part, the blogger took to an online radio platform he has been using in recent weeks and streamed live his conversation
with a police negotiator, making public what is usually a private conversation in which an officer tries to build a rapport with his subject.

Francesco Baschieri, chief executive of Spreaker, the radio platform, said at the peak of MacArthur's broadcast 1,000 were tuned in and a total 10,000 people heard at least part of it. Late Saturday, the MacArthur case was a trending topic nationally among on users on Twitter. At one point, he exchanged Twitter messages with CNN commentator Roland Martin who urged him to give himself up.

Anthony Guglielmi, a spokesman for the Baltimore Police, said the department's first responsibility is to ensure the safety of the public and police and MacArthur's use of social media did not stop officers following normal procedures.

"At the end everything worked out last night," he said.

While MacArthur's use of social media was particularly extensive, other recent incidents have seen hostage takers use Facebook to communicate with the wider world. In September a man took a hostage in a Pittsburgh office building and posted regular updates. That time, the Facebook page was ultimately shut down, the Associated Press reported. In a Utah case, a man's friends allegedly tipped him off to the location of police officers using the social network.

Borowsky, an assistant professor of speech communication at Central Oregon Community College, said access to social media is a "double-edged sword," that can complicate negotiations, but also provide police with opportunities.

While negotiators try to silence outside voices for fear they provide conflicting advice, having independent observers on hand can smooth the critical final stages of a negotiation, when people fear what will happen as they are taken in to custody.

Mixed in with the bravado on his Twitter feed, MacArthur had written repeatedly about his apparent fear that police would shoot him during his arrest and posted on Twitter that he wanted cameras on hand when he gave himself up.

"That's expressed in hostage incidents pretty regularly — how do I know you're not going to hurt me?" Borowsky said.

Del. Jill P. Carter, an attorney who had been in contact with MacArthur before his arrest, said she also sees value in documenting police activity in real time because it could help to avoid abuses.

"I think so many times, all people really want is to be able to tell their story," she added. "I think that could have been a part of what went on."

But Arthur J. Lurigio, professor of psychology and criminology at Loyola University, Chicago said that while holding officers accountable is useful, if only bad stories come to light, that can worsen the relationship between police and the community.
"People pay more attention to negative information," he said. "We pay more attention to tragedy. We're hardwired to because survival meant pay more attention to things that are dangerous."