

Could Your Next Tweet Land You in Criminal Court on Hate Crime Charges?

With the advent of **hate crime** laws in the United States—and the rise of social media—could what you say on Facebook or what you tweet on Twitter come back to haunt you in criminal court?

The Associated Press reports:

“One teenager made offensive comments about a murdered child on Twitter. Another young man wrote on Facebook that British soldiers should “go to hell.” A third posted a picture of a burning paper poppy, symbol of remembrance of war dead.

All were arrested, two convicted, and one jailed – and they’re not the only ones. In Britain, hundreds of people are prosecuted each year for posts, tweets, texts and emails deemed menacing, indecent, offensive or obscene, and the number is growing as our online lives expand.

Lawyers say the mounting tally shows the problems of a legal system trying to regulate 21st century communications with 20th century laws. Civil libertarians say it is a threat to free speech in an age when the Internet gives everyone the power to be heard around the world.

‘Fifty years ago someone would have made a really offensive comment in a public space and it would have been heard by relatively few people,’ said Mike Harris of free-speech group Index on Censorship. ‘Now someone posts a picture of a burning poppy on Facebook and potentially hundreds of thousands of people can see it. People take it upon themselves to report this offensive material to police, and suddenly you’ve got the criminalization of offensive speech.’

Are you more careful about what you post online in the wake of U.S. hate crime laws and the large public forum social media offers? Are you concerned that what you post among friends could be shared or retweeted across the Internet and cause you to lose your job or worse? Discuss.