

# The Frederick News-Post

## A look at how #KirbyDelauter became a worldwide trend

By Pete McCarthy

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Around Frederick County, Kirby Delauter might be known for being an elected member of the County Council, a family man, businessman, neighbor or friend.

Just how far beyond that his notoriety went before last week is hard to say, but what happened Tuesday was probably something even Delauter never expected.

Social media caught wind of a Facebook post in which Delauter said he no longer wanted to see the unauthorized use of his name in print, and then, after reporter Bethany Rodgers responded, threatened to contact an attorney if *The Frederick News-Post* ever did it again.

*The News-Post* published a story on page A-6 of Tuesday's paper to report the threat, but by then, word had already spread.

Eugene Volokh, who, along with other law professors co-writes a blog for *The Washington Post*, got a tip about the Facebook exchange between Delauter and a News-Post reporter and [posted](#) a mention of it Monday night. A tweet went out a short time later, and so it began.

“I was thinking this is the sort of thing I should be writing about,” said Volokh, who teaches First Amendment and tort law at the UCLA School of Law.

Often, he writes about complicated legal arguments, he said, which have a strong following, but seldom what he saw here. As of Friday afternoon, his post had more than 500 comments.

“This is not complicated,” he said of the legal argument. “This is the essence of American democracy. If newspapers can't talk about politicians without their permission, the entire history of America would be completely different.”

A subsequent opinion piece by *The News-Post's* editorial board that appeared online Tuesday afternoon only fueled an already smoldering Internet flame. The tongue-in-cheek editorial used Delauter's name many times, including the first letter of each paragraph spelling K-I-R-B-Y D-E-L-A-U-T-E-R.

“I think that's what helped make this viral,” Volokh said. “This was pure mockery of something that deserved to be mocked without any real question about who is in the right and without any need to go through complicated legal analysis.”

So what exactly does it mean to go viral?

In this case, the nation, in fact people around the world, suddenly knew the name Kirby Delauter because of tweets and Facebook posts that used the hashtag #KirbyDelauter.

“When we say viral, fundamentally, it's like a virus,” said Ronald A. Yaros, an associate professor at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland. “It's passed on. It's what I would call a snowball effect.”

According to one tracker, #*KirbyDelauter* was used in more than 14,500 tweets by Wednesday night. It slowed after that but continued to get significant attention through Friday.

According to Yaros, the Delauter story had five key characteristics:

- It needs to be novel, unique or absurd.
- It needs to be shocking or controversial.
- It helps to be a current development.
- It helps to have a lot of followers on social media.
- And most importantly, it involves the media — various media outlets reported and retweeted the story.

The traditional way of communicating news to the public has changed, Yaros said.

“A single tweet becomes mass communication,” Yaros said. “With the appropriate viral ingredients, that one tweet could be mass communication. That's the fascinating thing about new technology.”

Here are a few numbers to support what happened in this case.

At any given time, a few hundred people are typically using [www.fredericknewspost.com](http://www.fredericknewspost.com). On Tuesday, editors watched that number creep to more than 1,000, then 2,000. At points Tuesday night, more than 5,000 people were actively on the website. On Wednesday, that number hovered around the 3,000 mark consistently throughout the day.

Between Monday and Friday, FNP stories had a combined 1,065,711 page views, according to analytics. During that same period the week before, stories on the site had 89,798 views.

The editorial “Kirby Delauter, Kirby Delauter, Kirby Delauter” garnered 769,564 page views by Friday night. The original article about the Facebook exchange between Delauter and the reporter had an additional 146,064 clicks.

These surges had a couple of sources. Twitter and Facebook were key, according to analytics, but coverage came from all around. A link from NPR resulted in more than 43,000 referrals to *The News-Post*.

"The Rachel Maddow Show" on MSNBC did a six-minute segment on the controversy, which aired at about 10 p.m. Tuesday — the likely cause of the more than 5,000 people actively on the site.

Maddow's team learned about the story from Volokh's post, according to Cory Gnazzo, the show's executive producer.

"It was a quirky story, but it has some significance," Gnazzo said. "It's not the way that journalists and most people in this country expect to be treated by public officials. ... Certain things just pop, and I think this just struck the right note with a lot of people."

All the attention given to this story and the topic suddenly meant it was trending on social media. What that meant was that if you didn't know about the story, but had Twitter, the name Kirby Delauter was showing up to pique the curiosity of the world.

"Twitter is good at measuring what's happening on Twitter," said Steve Buttry, a journalism professor at the Louisiana State University Manship School of Mass Communication. "It also reacts quickly to the news."

The story began to lose its buzz after Delauter issued a statement and apology Wednesday night on Facebook. By Friday, the number of people actively on The News-Post's website at a given time was back in the hundreds instead of thousands.

So that's how a Facebook post seen by Walter Olson, of New Market, which he sent to his friend Eugene Volokh and two others who are active online, was seen by the world.

"If you had asked me to predict what would happen," Olson said, "I would have said there would have been a post or two from prominent First Amendment people saying (Delauter) doesn't have a leg to stand on. ... Instead, as you know, it turned into something that would've been very hard to predict at the time.

"Everyone could feel their own speech was symbolically being threatened, even though there was nothing he could do to them."

Delauter did not return a call or email seeking comment Friday.