# ATHENS SCANNER REVEALED:

## BEHIND OU'S TOP TWITTER ACCOUNT

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**THERE ARE NO BEDS IN BROMLEY 806.**

Instead, plush armchairs and a comfy couch crowd a tiny TV that's usually tuned in to re-runs of "COPS." A Taylor Swift poster sits primly atop the built-in desks, while a "Party in the USA"-era Miley Cyrus guards the doorway — no twerking here. Throw in an American flag, a couple of Ninja Turtles posters, a mini-fridge and a giant, cozy-looking rug that's way too clean for a college dorm room, and you've got the ultimate man cave.

But the room's main feature is a small, handheld device that could easily be mistaken for an old-school walkie-talkie. It slowly sputters to life, but not even the static can hide the dispatcher's Appalachian twang.

"2-4."

Finance major Matt McKnight, then a sophomore, perks up, fingers twitching toward the keyboard. This is High Fest, after all, and chaos is imminent.

"This might be an actual call. She was saying 2-4 to get unit 24's attention."

"2-19, 2-5 again."

He lets out a sigh of disappointment, translating the dispatcher's code with ease.

"Oh, never mind, she just wants them to call back."

There's a brief moment of calm, but the dispatcher might as well be paying room and board, she's such a present fixture here. The little black box crackles again.
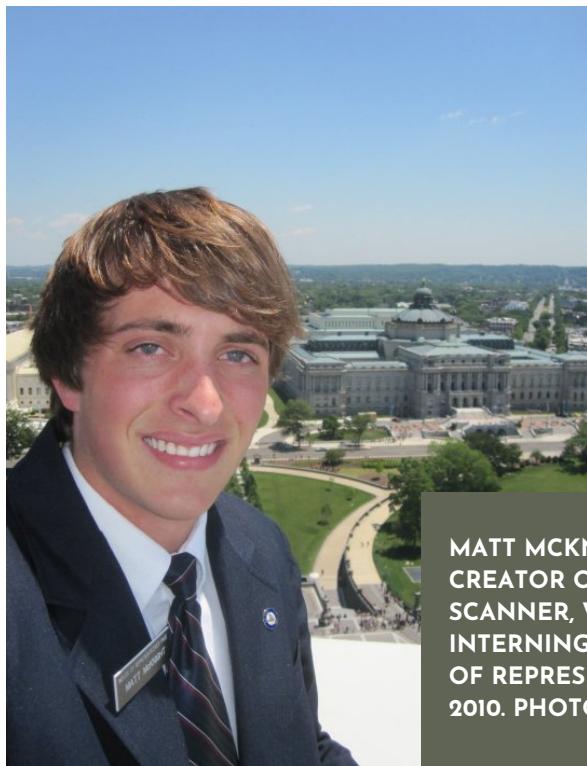


MATT MCKNIGHT, THE CREATOR OF ATHENS SCANNER, WHILE INTERNING AT THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES IN 2010. PHOTO PROVIDED.

"Station 54. Need you to respond to Chestnut St. for an intoxicated person. Your alert time, 13:48."

"If that was in Athens I would tweet it, but it's probably Glouster or something."

This was Athens Scanner HQ, more war room than dormitory. Now that McKnight has moved off campus, its current location remains a mystery, but he spent most of his hours here, listening and tweeting from 1 p.m. to 3 a.m. daily. "On the weekends I have a backpack I put it in," he said. "I have a little secret service earpiece — I just try to keep it real under wraps."

Athens Scanner's much-loved Twitter account currently boasts 8,785 followers, even more than The Post and Student Affairs VP Ryan Lombardi. And their numbers are growing fast — McKnight said he probably gains 20 to 30 new followers on an average day, and a few hundred during major events. The feed hit its first thousand followers during the infamous "fugitive fest," and broke 4,000 during February's water main break. They're well on their way to becoming one of the top news sources in the Athens community.
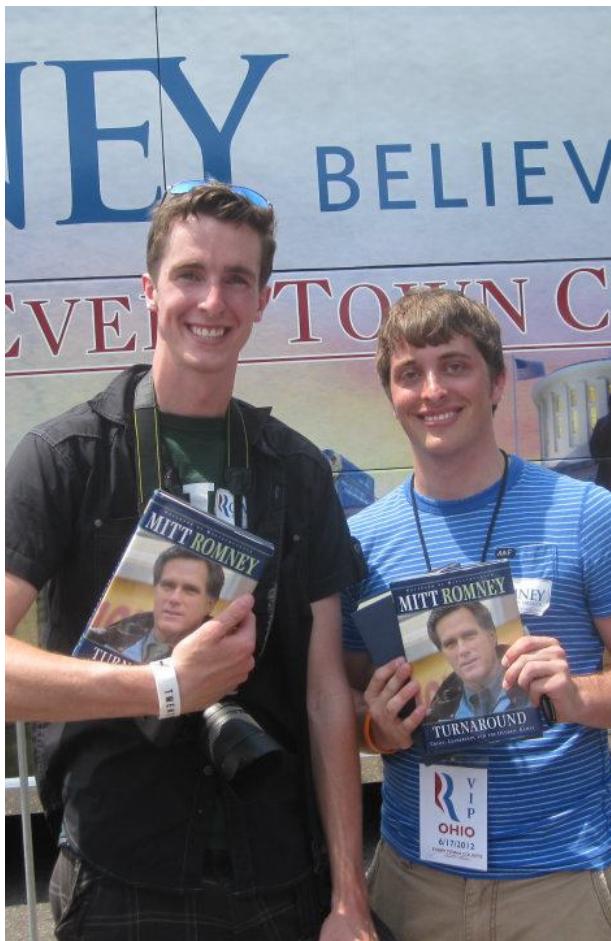
COLBY (LEFT) AND MCKNIGHT (RIGHT) AT A CAMPAIGN RALLY IN NEWARK, OHIO. PHOTO PROVIDED.

After the Nov. 30 Research and Technology Building arson sparked a serious interest in campus crime, McKnight (who has always been a big fan of G4's "Campus PD") stumbled upon the Athens Messenger's online scanner, but was disappointed with its poor quality. After discovering that Athens County is one of only three counties in Ohio that doesn't offer a live stream, he bought a police scanner of his own over winter break. Tweeting was just the next logical step, and he opened the account on Jan. 23.

He enlisted the help of his friend Joe Colby, a Media Arts and Studies major, to help run the feed and handle all graphic design work. "It's a form of public service," Colby said. "I'm fascinated by the idea of getting something to become a trend."

Reception has been overwhelmingly positive. Even OU's Dean of Students Dr. Jenny Hall-Jones called it her favorite twitter feed. "People are interested in what happens in Athens," she said "It's such a small, close-knit town. It's fed into that community feel.

The feed's few detractors are typically angry (and often drunk) tweeters, upset that they couldn't find warnings about busted parties on the Scanner.

One student simply tweeted "fuck you," in response to the Scanner's April 5 tweet about a party that was "raging so loudly that it was impossible to hear the location over the noise." McKnight said that although he gets a kick out of reporting and responding to peoples' drunken antics, it's not quite the level of public service he had in mind.

"The tweets that get the most interest are about drunk people passed out," he said. "It's almost an anti-intellectual following. We respond better to party things than a real incident with someone hurt or in trouble. It's just the OU party culture."

"It comes with the territory," Colby added. "If we didn't like OU then we would be disappointed, but we both love OU, so we expect the reaction that we get."

McKnight's gravelly southern Ohio drawl and cool demeanor stand in sharp contrast to Colby's Zuckerberg-esque enthusiasm for new media. The stoic wisecracker and the skinny-armed idea machine make a great team, but McKnight's unwavering dedication to public access is the clear driving force behind the project. It's easy to see why some students might shy away from a venture that borders on vigilantism, but McKnight has zero regrets, even if he suspects the police might not be all that fond of him.

**"We both love OU, so we expect the reaction that we get."**

"It's completely legal. It's public information so there's not really anything they can do," McKnight said. "I'm sure they'd rather it not be there, they kind of like to keep everything under wraps. But I think people have the right to know what's going on."

On the contrary, Andrew Powers, OUPD's police chief, said he has no problem with the account, and gets every tweet sent to his phone.

"It was a novel idea, and it certainly made our radio traffic much more public than it was," he said. "Even though theoretically it's unregulated, most people didn't listen to it. But now, all of the sudden people are able to monitor what we're doing in a very convenient way."

He still has some reservations, however.

"When our every movement is being tweeted, it reduces the random element of surprise that certainly works in our favor," he said. Powers added that he's impressed with how responsibly the feed is handled, though he's advised his officers to be more careful about what they say.

"When I discovered it my first thought was whether or not anybody had said anything embarrassing that had been retweeted," he said. "Sometimes we forget that the radio traffic can be scanned and sometimes officers make comments that may not make sense to the average person. Taken out of context, they may not look extremely flattering to the police."

McKnight said he feels he has a duty to respect the police, and he's also adamant about keeping personal information out of his tweets — even in the case of an OU faculty member who was arrested for public intoxication March 23.

"Come on," OU junior Julie Vinson tweeted. "Say the name. Public record anyway!"

The response: "Look it up ;)."

Dr. Hall-Jones said she also admires the Scanner's respectful attitude. "People are always ambulance watchers, but at the same time they have this ethical line that they're drawing," she said. "Not only is it informational, but they're kind.

Good-natured as they are, make no mistake: Colby and McKnight are troublemakers. They've toed the line between helping hand and public nuisance long before McKnight purchased his $99 police scanner on eBay. Last year, they took their commercial brand of mischief all the way to the campaign trail — and made national headlines in the process.
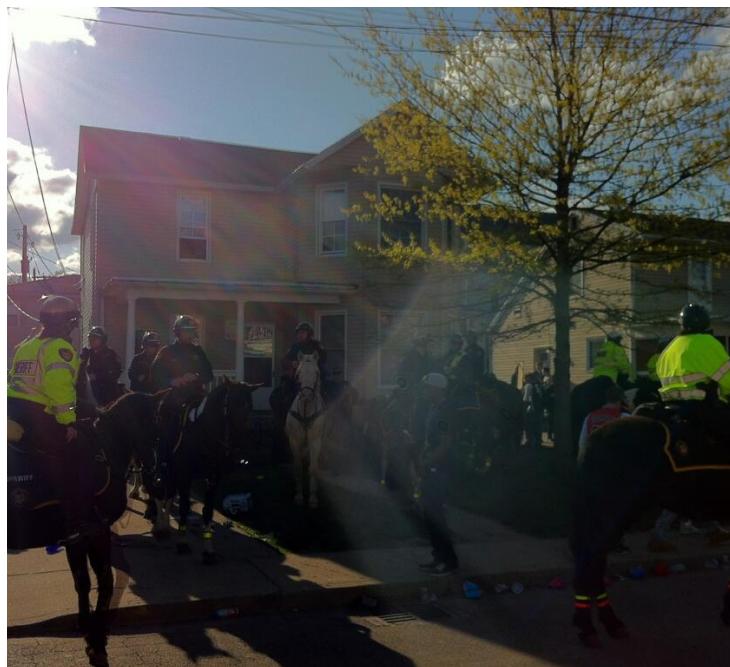


ONE OF THE SCANNER'S PHOTOS OF A POLICE SHUT-DOWN OF A PALMER FEST PARTY THIS YEAR. PHOTO PROVIDED.

Colby was the mastermind behind one of the Romney campaign's biggest unofficial social media failures, a Bobcats for Romney campaign video that featured a remix of indie group The National's "Fake Empire." The band members, longtime supporters of President Obama, were furious, and had the video pulled.

"It kind of backfired, but we didn't mind," Colby said.

"They should have been honored that anyone cared about their band," McKnight joked.

The feud caught the attention of Pitchfork, Spin and Digital Spy. Colby, who's also helped produce music videos for Wacka Flocka Flame and Hawthorne Heights, said he was just grateful for the recognition.

"They thought it was from the Romney campaign, which is kind of a compliment," he said. "They got mad at the campaign first, but then they found out it was us. We were on top of it, we were like, 'Oh, crap.'"

McKnight was a bit more successful in courting the Republican ticket. The moment Paul Ryan was announced as Romney's running mate, McKnight snapped up as many Ryan-related domain names as he could — including PaulRyanSucks.com — which apparently startled campaign leaders.

"Some girl had to stalk my Facebook and screenshot everything and send it to them," McKnight, who ended up donating most of the domains to the campaign team, said. "They were scared because I had all of these negative domains, but I just got them so people couldn't use them against them."

McKnight's dedication to the cause helped him meet the presidential hopeful eight times — his walls were plastered with snapshots from rallies and Romney/Ryan memorabilia — and fostered a growing entrepreneurial spirit.

"It just shows you how easy it is to make national news," McKnight, who appeared in The National Journal and ABC News for his efforts, said. "Anyone can shake things up a bit."

It's his opportunistic attitude that will hopefully take Athens Scanner to the next level. The duo has already assembled a team of student volunteers so they can cover more hours each day, and they plan to expand the twitter feed into a full-blown website next spring.

"We want to create a breaking news organization for Athens that can follow up on the things we tweet," McKnight said. "But it's not something that I'd want to monetize. We're not in the business of selling OU students' eyes to advertisements."

Along with live updates, the new site will potentially feature videos and photo essays inspired by the user-generated content that gets tweeted to the scanner on a daily basis.

"A lot of the stuff that comes out now is delayed," Colby said, explaining his disappointment with traditional campus media. "It would be very cool if we could have on-the-scene stuff, and some way to make it more interactive. We've seen how big it's blown up, it just seems like common sense to expand."

Missing a few calls here and there may not seem like a huge loss, but for McKnight, any tip could be crucial. "We're doing people a service, in my opinion," he said. "There was an armed robber with a knife behind Lincoln in February and I tweeted it out immediately, and then OU sent out a crime alert like 23 hours later. What's the point in that?"

On the surface, Athens Scanner might just seem like the strange hobby of two straight-laced punks, but it's already changed the way OU handles crime.

"We were able to follow up with those people and get witness statements — witnesses that we might not otherwise have had," Chief Powers said. "We ultimately made an arrest in that case in part because of information that we received."

Dr. Hall-Jones said the feed has also affected the administration's inner-workings, especially in regards to off-campus student welfare. Hall-Jones found out about the Feb. 23 Courtside stabbing incident through the Scanner, and hopes to continue to use it to touch base with students who've been affected by crime.

"If things happen off-campus, we don't find out about it until the paper," she said. "It's tough for us to find out about things concerning students that we would want to follow up on. I woke up that Saturday morning and I saw that one of our students had been stabbed, and it was because of the Athens Scanner."

When it comes to more serious incidents, Powers said he's concerned the scanner's influence could do more harm than good. Several years ago, a student reported a gunman had entered Copeland Hall. Police evacuated the building, and the alleged gunman turned out to be an off-duty police officer.

"What would not have been helpful in that situation is if we had a panic in the building," Powers said. "With them tweeting in real time, there's the potential for misinformation to get broadcast."

Despite concerns, it's clear McKnight and Colby's venture has become an integral part of the OU community, and they kept tweeting long since they moved out of their newsroom in Bromley in May. As for those beds, all four were officially relegated to the other half of the suite.

There's no time for sleep in the newsroom. ◆

**Athens Scanner** @AthensScanner — 28 Aug
Update: OUPD was unable to locate the naked male reported near the pond by Clippinger.
Expand

**Athens Scanner** @AthensScanner — 28 Aug
PD responding to a report of a naked man hiding around the pond near Clippinger Hall watching women.
Expand

**Athens Scanner** @AthensScanner — 28 Aug
APD units advised to be on the lookout for a gold Ford Bronco occupied with several subjects making frequent stops.

JUST A TYPICAL DAY IN ATHENS. PHOTO FROM ATHENS SCANNER.