

# Blackberries, Tweets, and YouTube: Technology and the Future of Communicating with Congress

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**F**rom the establishment of the United States Postal Service and the invention of the telegram, to the introduction of C-SPAN and the explosion of the Internet, the development of new communication technologies has always affected the functioning of Congress. Not surprisingly, recent innovations such as e-mail and social networking have spurred Congress to alter the way it operates as an institution, and rethink the manner in which it engages the public. In this brief examination, I discuss recent changes in congressional behavior and practices due to technological innovation, specifically the proliferation of social networking Web sites. Then, I cautiously predict future trends in the use of social networking and related technologies as they become more integrated in congressional offices and increase the capacity for more robust internal and constituent communications over time.

Technological advances have precipitated several recent developments in congressional operations. Perhaps the most significant phenomenon of the past decade is the widespread use of e-mail, which has dramatically altered how congressional offices function. Not since the first live television broadcast of House and Senate floor proceedings has Congress experienced such significant changes to its basic operations. E-mail sparked a revolution in the way that members of Congress communicate, both among themselves and with their constituents.

Longitudinal statistics concerning constituent mail are available.<sup>1</sup> The last year without widespread e-mail use in Congress was 1997. That year, the House and Senate received approximately 30.5 million pieces of posted mail. By 2007, postal mail had dropped to 18.6 million pieces. However, e-mail traffic for both the House and Senate totaled close to 473 million in 2007. The grand total for 2007—for both e-mails and postal mail for Congress—was 491.6 million. In 10 years, Congress went from receiving 30.5 million pieces of communication to 491.6 million. That is a significant development, and it has profound implications for how Congress functions as an institution.

Technology has also changed how members communicate with each other. The House now has an electronic “Dear Colleague” system that enables members to send communications to other members about proposed legislation, committee action, briefings, events, chamber procedural changes, administrative activities, and other issues. In 2003, when an e-mail-based Dear Colleague system was created, a little over 5,000

Dear Colleagues were sent. In 2007, over 12,000 such communications were recorded. In 2009, a centralized Web-based Dear Colleague system went into use, making it even easier to distribute such communications. Over 17,000 Dear Colleagues were issued in 2009 (Straus 2009; see also Straus 2010).

On the heels of the e-mail revolution, Congress is currently being affected by the proliferation of a relatively new technology—social networking Web sites. After decisions by the Committee on House Administration and the Senate Rules and Administration Committee, members of Congress are now able to use social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook, and on their official Web sites they can post links to YouTube. Members have used these new tools in different ways, and several are pushing the envelope.

For example, one House member hands visitors to her office a slip of paper with her YouTube address. They are informed that their meeting will be filmed, and may appear online. Visitors are also invited to tape their own 30-second spots, which are posted on YouTube. A recent YouTube entry televised the farewell party for the departing interns, culminating in the singing of “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow,” with the congresswoman urging viewers to “come intern with us.”<sup>2</sup>

In another example, a House member recently experimented with “crowdsourcing,” turning to the public to redesign his congressional Web site. Once finalists were selected, his constituents, along with a Web vendor, chose the winning design, which became the member’s new official House Web site. In the press release announcing the winner, the member stated, “Instead of viewing the public as a customer, I believe that we should empower citizens to become our partners in shaping the future of our nation.”<sup>3</sup>

Social networking Web sites possess the greatest potential for changes in constituent communication strategies. In particular, I wanted to know how members of Congress collectively used Twitter, which is among the most widely trafficked social networking Web sites.<sup>4</sup> To do this, I coded every individual message, or “tweet,” registered by a member of Congress for two non-successive weeks from late July 2009 through mid-August 2009. I followed a total of 158 members, which included 31 senators and 127 representatives.<sup>5</sup> The data collection resulted in a total of 1,187 tweets during the two weeks. Out of the 1,187 tweets, I found that 828 originated from House Republicans—which is 69.8% of the total. House Democrats issued 166 tweets collectively, amounting to 14.0% of the total (Glassman, Straus, and Shogan 2009).

The tweets were also categorized to determine how members used Twitter as a mechanism to communicate with constituents and the general public: of the 1,187 tweets, 557, or 46.9%, either provided links to other Web sites or called attention to media activities of the member, such as being on a radio or television show; 298, or 25.1%, described an official action the member had taken on the floor, in committee, or as part of his or her representational duties; and 147, or 12.4%, were position-taking messages. Only 17 of the tweets, or 1.4%, were direct replies to other tweets.

As the minority party, Republicans currently use Twitter more frequently (Vogel 2009). Not only did more House Republicans use Twitter than their Democratic counterparts, they also tweeted more frequently. House Republicans, who constitute 54% of members registered with Twitter, sent approximately 74% of all tweets during session and approximately 64% of tweets during recess. Despite the partisan disparity in the House, there is no substantive difference between the frequency of tweets of Senate Democrats and Republicans (Glassman, Straus, and Shogan 2009, 5).

Along with other social networking Web sites, Twitter provides a new set of data for congressional scholars to examine and consider. As of September 30, 2009, approximately 38% of all members are on Twitter, and the number continues to grow. Additional examinations might consider why some members participate in social networking Web sites while others do not. Further analysis might also determine the effect of Twitter and other similar Web sites on members' representational behavior and constituent expectations of such duties.

It is more difficult to answer how congressional operations will transform in the future as technology becomes an increasingly integrated component of American life. The technological developments discussed earlier have one common element: they all potentially alter the way in which many members communicate—either with each other or with their constituents. This means that technology may change how members engage in their two most basic functions—as architects of national policy and as representatives of their constituents. As technology enables more frequent communication with constituents, one might imagine that the trustee model of representation will wither. If members hear more frequently and loudly what their constituents want, it might become difficult for them to vote in opposition without suffering electoral consequences.

As access to technology widens, congressional staff responsibilities may shift to handle an even higher volume of constituent communications. Consequently, it may become challenging for staff in a personal office to focus on anything but the responses to those who live in the member's district or state. Those who were hired to work on policy might find the majority of their day is spent answering constituent communications. Over time, this might mean that policy expertise will become progressively concentrated within committee staffs and leadership offices. Also, we may see a greater reliance on outside policy expertise, including think tanks, lobbyists, and, of course, the Congressional Research Service. This trend already exists on Capitol Hill, but a wider dissemination of existing technologies and the

advent of new crosscutting technology could intensify this development.

In addition to multiplying the volume of messages sent by constituents to their representatives in Congress, changes in technology may eventually facilitate a two-way dialogue. Right now, most of the information still flows in one direction. For example, some members use Twitter or other social networking Web sites to transmit information about their official actions or policy positions to the general public. There are fewer examples of technology enabling the transmission of information or facilitating a dialogue about policymaking or pending legislation that encourages a back-and-forth exchange. This was evidenced by the data collected from Twitter; only 14 tweets of the 1,187 were replies to other tweets.

Members of Congress are likely aware that technology has largely facilitated a one-way transfer of information and ideas. But some members are now experimenting with electronic town hall meetings, which enable the representative or senator to exchange ideas with constituents, even when they are physically in Washington, D.C., rather than at home. There have also been limited experiments with some members asking constituents to contribute ideas or participate in drafting sessions on proposed legislation via Web-based applications (Vaida 2007). Nonetheless, even the most technologically savvy members of Congress may still be cautious about relying too heavily on technology to facilitate communications with their constituents due to concerns about the widespread availability of access to the Internet.

These concerns may disappear in the next decade or two. At a recent technology conference in Europe forecasting the digital revolution in 2030, one expert predicted that the cost of Internet access and wireless devices will drop significantly in the future, enabling comprehensive usage (COST 2009). If this is true, the barriers that currently exist for members to communicate virtually with their constituents may diminish greatly in the future.

More interactive dialogue between members and constituents would likely produce models of policymaking quite different from current standards. For example, the "iron triangle" of power, with focal points residing in congressional committees, interest groups, and the executive branch, might need to develop into a four-sided structure to incorporate direct input and pressure from the public. Interest groups could see their influence weaken as members rely on technology, rather than lobbying intermediaries, to receive information from constituents and mobilized public groups.

Although technological developments have the power to change the behavior of members and how Congress operates, it is worth mentioning that there are still some institutional traditions that refuse to bend. The best example is the ban on laptop computers on both the House and Senate floors. Despite floor use of laptops by members of state legislatures across the country, both houses of Congress have refused to allow members to bring computers with them to their respective chambers. In addition, the Senate does not allow use of Blackberries on the floor, either by members or staff. While cellular phones are banned in the House, the use of Blackberries to send and receive e-mails is permitted. Within the next

decade, it is hard to predict whether the use of computers and Blackberries will be allowed in both chambers. However, if social networking Web sites and other electronic communications continue to play a bigger role in the fulfillment of a member's representational duties, the demand to allow laptops and personal electronic devices will become louder and broader.

The last observation I will make about the impact of technology on Congress is that constant communication requires constant work. The age of Blackberries, cell phones, and Twitter means that members and staff are expected to respond to questions and negotiations outside regular office hours. A former colleague of mine in the Senate slept with her vibrating Blackberry under her pillow. Most people cannot keep up that pace for very long. It is generally accepted that the tenure of Hill staff has gotten shorter, and turnover has increased.<sup>6</sup> Additional reliance on technology and the perpetuation of the "24-hour workday" will likely encourage such trends to continue.

One thing is certain—technology will continue to evolve, and as it does, it will surely affect how Congress operates. In particular, for those of us who provide professional policy analysis for Congress, the role that technology plays will likely affect how we deliver our products, the level of demand for such expertise, and the speed in which we deliver it. At the very least, those currently involved in congressional policymaking who want to remain relevant in the future must pay attention to these key benchmarks. ■

#### NOTES

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1. Data provided to the Congressional Research Service from the Chief Administrative Office of the House of Representatives and the Secretary of the Senate.
2. See the member's YouTube channel at <http://www.youtube.com/user/IleanaRosLehtinen#p/u> (accessed on January 29, 2010).
3. Press release available at [http://honda.house.gov/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=772&Itemid=110](http://honda.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=772&Itemid=110).
4. Twitter is a Web-based social-networking Web site that enables users to send and read short messages of up to 140 characters. Similar sites include Pownce, Jaiku, and FriendFeed.
5. A Web site called TweetCongress was used to code the data. The Web site is available at <http://tweetcongress.org/>. TweetCongress encourages more members of Congress to use Twitter. It tracks every member who uses Twitter, and replicates all congressional posts in an ongoing stream. When I initially collected the data, approximately 30% of all House members and Senators used Twitter.
6. There is little data available on the demographics of congressional staff. See the Congressional Management Foundation for an example of such information at [http://www.cmfweb.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=26&Itemid=](http://www.cmfweb.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=26&Itemid=).

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