

# Politicians using Twitter in growing numbers

March 5 2009, By James Oliphant

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John McCain took to the Senate floor Monday and talked about twittering. For the increasingly popular networking tool, it was either a moment that marked the technology's full-bore entry into the cultural mainstream -- or an undeniable sign that Twitter is now about as hip as Pac-man.

It was just last year that McCain, then the Republican nominee for president, was frequently mocked by late-night talk show hosts for barely knowing how to flip on a computer. But McCain 2.0 is now plugged in, sending multiple tweets, as twitter messages are called, several times a day.

"We have the most followers out of any congressman," boasts his spokeswoman, Brooke Buchanan, "topping over 122,000." Tweet, follow, or get out of the way. That seems to be the new mantra that has consumed Capitol Hill in early days of the Obama administration.

While the rest of the nation is following the stimulus debate and the bank bailout, the city's political and media classes have become obsessed with Twitter, the social networking site that allows you to send short messages to followers, who view them on a Web site or on their cell phones. Dozens of members of Congress have been using the service.

They say it helps connect them directly with constituents. The value of that, of course, depends on how much unfiltered comment you really want from your elected officials.

"Jindal is weird," tweeted Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., while watching the Louisiana governor speak on national television last week in response to President Obama's address to Congress. "I can't believe Jindal. Such a sad contrast with President. Doesn't even look or sound good, to say nothing about content." Blumenauer was twittering throughout Obama's speech, as were several other lawmakers, including Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., who later, she told her followers, was upbraided by her mother for it.

"OK, OK. Mom's upset that I was rude at Pres speech re: tweets," McCaskill later tweeted. "For the record I tweeted bfor, at very beginning, & after speech. I wanted to listen."

Twitter's very nature means that elaboration is impossible. Messages can't exceed 140 characters. But you can transmit them instantly to your followers. Rep. Pete Hoekstra, R-Mich., was slammed by some for sending tweets during a trip to Iraq and Afghanistan last month that critics said compromised the delegation's security. Hoekstra said he revealed no sensitive information.

Some members such as McCaskill frequently tweet about their daily lives, but others simply use the medium for sending out information you would find in press releases.

Why do they do it? Here's McCaskill's explanation in her own, uh, words: "Try to tweet 3-4 times a day. Combo of policy, personal, schedule, politics. Want to be candid and give a real glimpse of my life and job." McCain, who began twittering last month, spent Monday tweeting lists of what he called "pork" in the omnibus spending bill under consideration in the Senate.

"\$1,427,250 for genetic improvements of switchgrass -- I thought switchgrass genes were pretty good already, guess I was wrong," the

senator tweeted.

Congressional tweets range from the mundane -- "Happy to announce nearly \$4 million in the recovery package for the Willimantic, Torrington, and Norwalk community health centers," tweeted Sen. Chris Dodd, D-Conn., -- to the confusing: "Great afternoon watching ski-joring in Wisdom, Montana," wrote Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich is a regular twitterer, and he believes it is a useful political tool. "Using Twitter to bypass traditional media and directly reach voters is definitely a good thing," Gingrich said in an e-mail interview. "Members should avoid twittering from the House floor, though."

Don't twitter on the floor. Wonder what Henry Clay would think of that advice?

"OMG. Spinning in grave," Clay might have tweeted.

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