

# Twitter takes Washington by storm

March 2 2009, by Chris Lefkow

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The halls of the US Congress are alive with the sounds of Twitter. Members of the Senate and House of Representatives -- or their aides -- are tapping out dozens of the micro messages a day on cellphones and computers from offices, committee meetings and even the floor of the legislature.

Just such "tweeting" from the august House chamber got one senator, Claire McCaskill, in a bit of trouble last week -- with her mother.

The Democrat from Missouri issued an apology of sorts, on Twitter of course, after firing off a message to her Twitter "followers" during President Barack Obama's speech to a joint session of Congress.

"Ok ok. Mom's upset that I was rude at Pres speech re:tweets. For the record I tweeted bfor, at very beginning, & after speech. I wanted to listen," McCaskill wrote in the abbreviated style adopted by many Twitter users.

McCaskill is one of the more prolific congressional "Twitterers," writing 250 messages since joining in January, and has over 11,500 followers, making her the second "most followed" member of Congress.

Describing her attraction of the service, she wrote: "The best part is being able to directly talk to Missourians about my day without reporters editing!"

A website, [tweetcongress.org](http://tweetcongress.org), keeps track of the representatives and

senators who have taken to sending out the messages of 140 characters or less and ranks them in terms of their number of followers and messages sent.

Senator John McCain of Arizona has the most followers by far -- more than 106,000 -- cashing in on his name recognition as the Republican presidential nominee rather than his Twitter proficiency.

The 72-year-old McCain is an infrequent Twitterer and acknowledges getting a little assistance. "YEs!! I am twittering on my blackberry but not without a little help!" read one recent message.

McCain's missives range from dismay over a rash of injuries to members of his hometown NBA team, the Phoenix Suns -- "steve nash hurt? amare too! what now for the suns!" -- to concern over spending in the economic stimulus bill.

"\$650,000 for beaver management in North Carolina and Mississippi - how does one manage a beaver?" he asked.

Representative John Culberson, a Republican from Texas, is one of the most tech-savvy members of the House and is believed to be the first member of the 435-strong body to adopt Twitter, having started using it nearly a year ago.

"There may have been others using it before me but I'm not aware of it," Culberson told AFP. "To my knowledge I'm the first member of Congress to adopt it and use it."

Culberson leads the pack in terms of messages sent -- some 2,000 or nearly four times as many as the next person on the list, Representative Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic speaker of the House from California whose Twitter feed mostly consists of links to press releases.

Culberson said Twitter, which is used by more than six million people and is growing rapidly, and other social media tools are "opening the door to a true revolution that will transform our government.

"These new technologies give people a chance to take back control of our government by letting us see and hear how our laws are made and participate in local, state and federal government in a way we never could before," he said.

"I'm convinced that the use of social media that we see today is just the tip of the iceberg," Culberson added. "The use of social media will become as commonplace in our everyday lives as flipping on a lightbulb or as natural as breathing."

More Republicans than Democrats are currently using Twitter but it has been embraced on both sides of the aisle -- from Democratic Representative Dennis Kucinich, the former presidential hopeful from Ohio, on the extreme left to Republican Senator Tom Coburn of Oklahoma on the extreme right.

Unless he is talking about himself in the third person, Kucinich, however, is one of those congressmen whose messages are obviously composed by aides.

"Dennis will also be on BBC Newsnight at 5:30 pm, again about Iraq troop withdrawal," read one such recent message.

For Mark McKinnon, a one-time media adviser to former president George W. Bush and Senator McCain, the discovery of Twitter by Congress is a sign it may no longer be cutting edge.

"If members of Congress are Twittering, we can be fairly certain it won't be hip much longer," he wrote in a blog post on The Daily Beast

website.

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