

Congress joins Twitter craze

April 13 2009, By Diana Marrero

This is what you get when politicians keep their comments to 140 characters or less: "We need to cut spending! Holy Cow! A novel idea in Washington."

"Have u noticed your take-home pay has gone up? Stimulus at work."

"Some think I'm on vacation. I voted against recessing for 2 weeks."

These short missives are possible thanks to [Twitter](#), an increasingly popular social networking site that is taking Congress by storm. As of last count, 121 members of Congress are "tweeting." It's the new media answer to long floor speeches, and anyone who's anyone on Capitol Hill seems to be doing it.

Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., is an avid "twitterer," posting 48 comments in his first two months on the site. He has around 2,000 followers, or people who have signed up to receive his [tweets](#).

But don't worry, you still can get access to Ryan's more verbose remarks if 140 characters fail to satisfy. Ryan, who twittered about the novelty of fiscal restraint in Washington, also attached a link to a recent speech on the House floor, where he amplified his thoughts on runaway federal spending.

Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., is twittering as part of his re-election efforts, sending supporters notes on everything from current events to his favorite music. He has posted only 17 tweets since January but

already has almost 3,000 followers.

Lawmakers who use the micro-messaging service say it's just one more way to stay in touch with constituents.

"I'm not one of these people who need to say I've had a banana this morning, or I'm walking to the Capitol," Ryan said. "It's a way of communicating ideas and day-to-day messages to people."

Ryan has two [Facebook](#) accounts, two Web sites and an RSS feed. He also often posts links on his sites to videos using YouTube. Ryan said those tools help him reach young people who often don't read the daily newspaper or show up at town hall meetings.

The social-networking technology also lets him bypass traditional news reporters or commentators to communicate directly with others. "It's a way of getting through and around the filters and getting straight to the people," he said.

Feingold admits that he still is trying to get the hang of Twitter, saying in an e-mail that he is "clearly not the most advanced Twitter user on the planet." But he noted that the instant feedback that he gets using the site helps him do his job better.

One of Feingold's recent posts on Twitter announces the three-term senator's new project "FeinTunes" and asks campaign supporters to send their iTunes suggestions his way. He plans to give video shout-outs to his favorites every now and then. His first pick: Eau Claire's own Justin Vernon of the band Bon Iver.

Sen. John McCain, by far the king of the congressional Twittersphere with more than 370,000 followers, said he especially enjoys the response that he gets to his frequent musings. "A lot of people are very clever,

some show some passion, some with four letter words in it," said the Arizona Republican, who was ridiculed by Democrats for admitting to his computer illiteracy during his run for president. "It's really a fun thing to do."

Tweeting, however, has landed a couple of members in trouble. Rep. Peter Hoekstra, a Michigan Republican, caused a firestorm on the blogosphere and prompted a policy review by the Pentagon when he sent a tweet about his whereabouts through Iraq and Afghanistan earlier this year.

Sen. Claire McCaskill, a Missouri Democrat, drew the wrath of her mother for tweeting during President Barack Obama's speech to a joint session of Congress Feb. 24.

"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," McCaskill later told her followers.

Tweeting during Obama's speech was a source of laughs for comedian Stephen Colbert, who joked that even the president was doing it: "OMG, totally addressing Congress. LOL Mitch McConnell looks like a turtle."

All comedy aside, lawmakers who embrace new technology understand that the Internet already has drastically changed the political landscape, said Rep. John Culberson, a Republican from Texas who claims to have been the first U.S. politician to chat with constituents through a computer back in 1987. "Whether we like it or not, the electronic information superhighway will force us all to change. It's not survival, it's evolution."

As members of Congress embrace social networking, Twitter could possibly shape the language of politics in unexpected ways. Richard

Hanley, who teaches new media at Quinnipiac University, said he can envision a day when a senator at a congressional hearing poses the following question: "What did you tweet, and when did you tweet it?"

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