

Twitter brings new language to old institution, the Senate

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Sen. Charles Grassley was darned annoyed when he saw that President Barack Obama was having a good time in Paris. So Grassley tweeted in protest: "Pres Obama while u sightseeing in Paris u said 'time to delivr on healthcare' When you are a "hammer" u think evrything is NAIL I'm no NAIL."

Translation: "We were working when he was playing. I kind of resented that," Grassley said in an interview.

Something else was also going on here: The 75-year-old, 28-year Senate veteran _ one of the most powerful Republicans in Congress _ was making himself heard through Twitter, the quick-message system that limits senders to 140 characters and is most often favored by folks half a century younger than Grassley.

Grassley is one of an estimated 30 senators and more than 100 members of the House of Representatives who use Twitter _ quite a development in an institution where messengers still bow when they enter the Senate chamber and votes are taken by members often putting their thumbs up or down.

The irony, said Senate associate historian Don Ritchie, is that "members still use 19th-century language in the chamber," referring to one another in floor debate as the "distinguished gentelady from Missouri" and so forth.

But there's another tradition tugging at members: the need to keep the folks back home informed _ and get re-elected _ that's long meant keeping up with the latest in communication trends. After all, the first message sent by telegraph ("What Hath God Wrought!") was sent from the Capitol to Baltimore by Samuel F.B. Morse on May 24, 1844.

House proceedings have been televised live on C-SPAN for 30 years (the Senate followed in 1986). Now comes [Twitter](#), which members usually use for just-folks self-promotion, as Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev., did on a recent trip to Iowa _ "It was great to get back to some of my roots as a veterinarian _ even had a calf suck on my finger," he wrote. Or Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., relating how he had lunch with his interns ("Urged them to make the most of the opportunity.")

Sometimes the tweets have spice.

Grassley has long been known as a plain-spoken prairie populist. First elected in 1980, he's now the top Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, a powerful panel that expects to write major health care legislation this year.

His tweeting, which began on Dec. 8, usually gets personal. In April, he wrote, "Work on farm Fri. Burning piles of brush WindyFire got out of control. Thank God for good naber He help get undr control PantsBurnLegWound." He was referring to a small fire that grazed his pants; he was fine.

Other tweets involved his staff beating Montana Democratic Sen. Max Baucus' softball team and the birth of a great-grandchild.

Grassley got miffed at Obama because the president said he wanted hard work on health care legislation, and Grassley's staff was working while the president was relaxing in Paris.

Obama had gone to France to speak at Normandy for the 65th anniversary of D-Day on June 6. He also took his family sightseeing and in the evening had dinner with his wife at a Paris bistro where they dined on roast lamb and filet of beef with bearnaise sauce.

"I suppose I was being unfair," Grassley said later in an interview, "but he was being unfair to me."

He tweets, Grassley said, because he's always tried to use the latest communication methods to reach his constituents. He's got a cable TV show, recently did a constituent "telephone town meeting" that attracted an estimated 3,000 people, and has a blog, Facebook and MySpace profiles, and a Web page.

"Town meetings are old fashioned. I still do them, but I can reach a lot more people in different ways," he explained.

Sometimes, critics said, he tries too hard.

The Obama tweet "looked like the Valley Girl/awkward ravings of a 12 year old," said Dennis Goldford, a politics professor at Drake University in Des Moines. "He's a solid, substantive guy, but he showed why tweeting is bad for the human race."

Grassley is characteristically defiant about his tweets.

"I've got 3 million constituents," he said. "And this is a case of me trying to show as many of them as I can that I've a human being."

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