

White House tweeting spreads president's message

March 8 2010, By PHILIP ELLIOTT , Associated Press Writer



In this July 7, 2008, file photo then-Democratic presidential candidate, Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., checks his BlackBerry in St. Louis, Mo. Blending behind-the-scenes nuggets with a defense of Obama's record, White House and administration officials are increasingly communicating through Twitter, the popular social network that operates as a Web-based clearing house for public statements on subjects as broad as the federal budget and as narrow as personal grocery lists. It's similar to a bulletin board where anyone can post short notes and users cull the pieces they see by choosing to "follow" individuals' account. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

(AP) -- #wanttospinWHreporters?

If you're PressSec - [White House](#) press secretary Robert Gibbs' username on Twitter - you join the powerful social media platform and push your message across the Internet, 140 characters at a time.

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The popular social network is operating as a Web-based clearinghouse for public statements on weighty subjects (the federal budget) and the mundane (personal grocery lists). It's similar to a bulletin board where anyone can post short notes and users cull the pieces they see by choosing to "follow" individuals' account.

Forget press releases. Gibbs and his deputy, Bill Burton, are now sharing news in Twitter messages. So far 35,000 people have signed up to follow Gibbs and more than 6,000 are tracking Burton. Those two officials have a ways to go to catch actor Ashton Kutcher and his 4.6 million followers.

"Wow unreal game... POTUS watched OT in his office right off the Oval Office - all of us are so proud of our great team," Gibbs tweeted during the men's Olympic hockey finals last Sunday, when the Americans lost the gold medal game to Canada in overtime. POTUS, of course, is the acronym for president of the United States.

Burton offered a midgame, inside-the-Beltway joke: "Tied! White House response, on bgnd, from a low- to midlevel administration official: USA! USA! USA!" (He was referring to a favorite administration request when talking to the press "on background" means the official won't be identified publicly.) After the U.S. loss, Burton noted that America still led the overall medal race.

These are hardly the pronouncements one expects from the president's top spokesmen. But as Obama's team continues an online strategy set in place during the campaign and imported to Pennsylvania Avenue, it seems only natural that they would make it a piece of a broader communications plan that extends across the government.

U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice tweets about diplomacy, Assistant Secretary of State Arturo Valenzuela tweets about the Western Hemisphere and Commerce Secretary Gary Locke tweets about trade.

"Welcome back, furloughed DOTers!" Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood tweeted recently to his employees.

With a news cycle now measured in seconds rather than days, administration officials recognize they must embrace this rapid pace and use the same tactics as the critics who assail them and the reporters who cover them. Gibbs, who is Obama's chief defender, has signaled that the White House won't cede any ground online.

Twitter began four years ago as a microblogging site to follow the activities of celebrities such as Lance Armstrong, the bicycling champion whose account was the first one Gibbs followed.

Since then, it has proved to be a powerful tool for mobilizing causes and protest movements by allowing people to use common phrases to link subjects by theme. In Washington, that translates into hashtags - key words preceded by the symbol for a pound sign - such as (pound sign)whitehouse or (pound sign)gop that users key in to find connected nuggets.

"There's a whole language, obviously, and typing with numbers and symbols that has evaded me," Gibbs said. "I'm sure my son could teach me that far better than I could pick it up."

Twitter also lets users communicate directly with each other, either through public messages using (at) symbols or through private messages. In many ways, it can be used as an e-mail system in which messages are completely public but limited to just 140 letters, numbers or symbols.

Obama's aides are fast students of Twitter's etiquette and uses. The White House announced Obama's first news conference on Twitter last year. Burton has been known to clarify Gibbs' comments while Gibbs is still speaking from the White House podium. Officials share with their followers news reports the White House views as positive.

Burton explained - in a tweet, no less - the approach.

"(At)PressSec is using this new medium in a way that gets information out quickly and effectively tracks what is on the minds of our press corps," he responded to a tweet from this reporter, PelliottAP.

Obama's campaign team built an Internet-based direct engagement model to win the White House and adapted the plan once in Washington. At the Democratic National Committee, aides continue to update the political BarackObama account, which operates separately from the White House tweets. Those are treated as formal communications and will be filed away as part of the presidential archive along with legal memos and policy documents.

In tandem with their quick bursts of information on [Twitter](#), the online White House routinely turns to its blog, Facebook page or YouTube channel where Obama now posts his weekly address.

"All of these things are basically entirely new to government, but have become a standard part of White House operations, with top White House officials recognizing their value and placing them as top priorities, giving the public equal footing in a world where, for most of history, government has had to engage and communicate with them through the press or interest groups," White House spokesman Nick Shapiro said.

For instance, 60,000 people went to the White House Web site last fall

to watch Obama speak to a joint session of Congress on health care, and one-third of them stayed on the site after it was over to talk with administration officials about the speech.

Macon Phillips, the White House new media director who tweets as macon44, said the online chat allowed officials to get "a taste of what questions the actual public had in raw form - rather than simply the questions cable news and Beltway pundits have."

More information:

White House Twitter: <http://twitter.com/whitehouse>

White House Facebook: <http://apps.facebook.com/whitehouselive/>

White House YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/user/whitehouse>

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