Use of Twitter by the US Congress

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Twitter is a microblogging and social networking service with millions of members and growing at a tremendous rate. With the buzz surrounding the service have come claims of its ability to transform the way people interact and share information, and calls for public figures to start using the service. In this study, we were interested in the type of content that legislators are posting to the service, particularly by members of the United States Congress. We read and analyzed the content of over 6,000 posts from all members of Congress using the site. Our analysis shows that Congresspeople are primarily using Twitter to disperse information, particularly links to news articles about themselves and to their blog posts, and to report on their daily activities. These tend not to provide new insights into government or the legislative process or to improve transparency; rather, they are vehicles for self-promotion. However, Twitter is also facilitating direct communication between Congresspeople and citizens, though this is a less popular activity.

Data was collected in two parts. First, we collected the 200 most recent posts (also called "tweets") for each Congressperson listed on Tweet Congress on February 6, 2009 (69 people total). Due to technical restrictions at the time of the initial data collection, 200 was the maximum number of retrievable tweets per user account. When users had fewer than 200 tweets, we collected all the tweets in their histories. It is important to note that the overwhelming majority of Congressional Twitter users did not have more than 200 tweets at this time. There were,

however, a few Congressional Twitter users that did have more than 200 tweets. These users were very early adopters and power users and often had thousands of tweets. We choose not to attempt to include these tweets as this we would have led to the overall data being skewed by a few users. The tweets were analyzed to provide insights into the content and types of posts. All together, we found 4,959 tweets from Congressional users as of that date. This cross-sectional, exhaustive sample of tweets was used for the bulk of our analysis. We also conducted a follow-up analysis, repeating the same procedure for all tweets posted in June 2009 and August 2009 (1,516 tweets) to see if the patterns of usage had changed or remained the same.
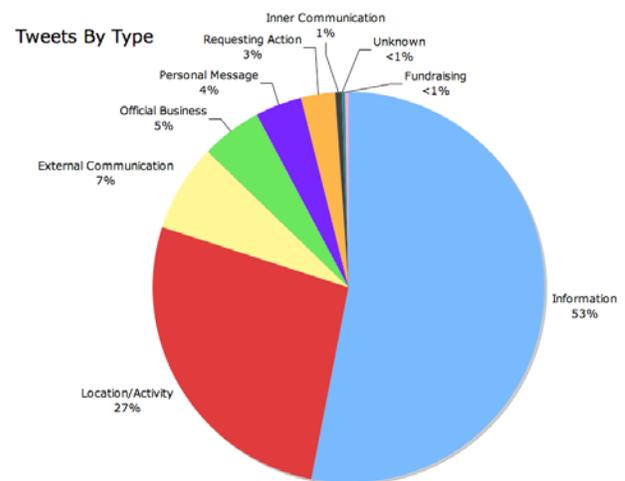

Figure 1: Types of Tweets by Congresspeople

Their tweets were coded into the following classes: Informational, Locations and Activities, Official Business (activities on the floor of Congres), Internal Communication (messages to staffers or others in Congress), External Communication (messages to people outside Congress), Personal Messages, Requests for Action, and Fundraising. Two researchers coded each tweet and we achieved an inter-rater reliability of 93.3%.

We found that informational posts are most common, accounting for just over half of all posts. The majority of these contained links that the Congressperson was sharing. Locations and Activities posts followed next, making up 27% of posts, and these detailed the daily activities of the Congressperson off the floor. While the other types of messages were less common, interesting Internal and External Communication debates and discussions can be seen across the data. A small secondary study of posts by members of Parliament in the U.K. match these results very closely, indicating both their accuracy and broader applicability.

Advocates of Congressional Twitter use argue that it can be used to increase transparency and improve communication. From this data, we draw several conclusions that directly address these points. Twitter does indeed provide a forum in which direct communication between Congresspeople and their constituents is supported. However, this is unlikely to scale, since there is a limit to how much meaningful personal communication one person can undertake. Until that threshold is crossed, Twitter is a venue that can facilitate this type of interaction.

On the other hand, Congresspeople are using Twitter primarily for outreach, not for improving transparency. While there are certainly limits to what can be communicated in 140 characters, we found the content of the tweets does little to improve insight into the activities of Congress, improve governmental transparency, or educate the readers about legislation or issues. From this perspective, the Twitter forum is not being used for new types of Congressional communication.

There is much future work to be done both on Twitter generally and in the context of government in particular. A similar analysis to what we presented here performed with a broader target group is important for establishing baselines of use habits. Within the government context, we see several spaces of future research. As mentioned above, metrics for evaluating impact will be necessary as research progresses. There are some existing services that measure how often posts are retweeted, which measures the reach of the posts. New metrics to measure impact will also be necessary. Finally, examining the connections and communication patterns between citizens and Congresspeople, particularly with respect to location may be useful. This can help Congresspeople focus their attention to their constituents as Twitter grows and to understand the perspectives being shared with them through the service.

PAPERS

1. Jennifer Golbeck, Justin Grimes, Anthony Rogers. 2010. Twitter Use by the US Congress, *to appear in JASIST.*