

Social Networking and Committee Communications: Use of Twitter and Facebook in the 113th Congress

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Summary

Communications between congressional committees and constituents and stakeholder groups have changed with the development of social networking services. Many committees now use email, official websites, blogs, YouTube channels, Twitter, Facebook, and other services—technologies that were either nonexistent or not widely available until recently—to communicate with Members of Congress, constituents, and stakeholder groups.

Social networking services have arguably served to enhance the ability of congressional committees to reach Members of Congress, constituents, and stakeholder groups and to widely disseminate committee actions and announcements. In addition, electronic communication technology has reduced the marginal cost of communication; unlike postal letters, social media can reach a large audience for a fixed cost.

These advances are altering how Members organize and manage their personal and committee offices and impacting the ability of Members to gather support for political and policy goals. Perhaps most importantly, they may transform the very nature of representation in the United States.

This report examines committee adoption and use of two social networking services: Twitter and Facebook. The report analyzes data on committee use of Twitter and Facebook collected by an academic institution in collaboration with the Congressional Research Service during a 4½-month period between June and October 2013. This report analyzes the following questions related to committee use of Twitter and Facebook:

- How many committees have adopted Twitter and Facebook?
- How widely are committee social media accounts followed?
- How much are committees using Twitter and Facebook?
- What are committees tweeting and posting about?
- Are committees interacting with other users on Twitter and Facebook?

This report provides a snapshot of a dynamic process. As with any new technology, the number of committees using Twitter and Facebook, and the patterns of use, may change rapidly in short periods of time. As a result, the conclusions drawn from these data cannot be easily generalized or used to predict future behavior.

Finally, the report examines the possible implications of committees using Twitter and Facebook. The analysis focuses on interaction between committees and the public, real-time communications and changes in constituent feedback, and outreach to the public through social media.

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Introduction

Committees have existed within the House and Senate since the first Congress. Initially, committees were ad-hoc—temporarily convened to address specific pieces of legislation and disbanded after reporting to the House or Senate.[1] By the early 1800s, both the House and Senate "developed a system of permanent, or standing, committees" that were organized around topics instead of an individual piece of legislation.[2] The system of permanent, standing committees was reinforced through changes made in the 1946 and 1970 legislative reorganization acts that further defined and refined committee jurisdiction.[3]

Communications to and within Congress have evolved over the years. Technology available today was unheard of 20 years ago. The idea that Representatives, Senators, and committees could communicate in real time with constituents was unfathomable. Political scientist Stephen Frantzich once described Congress as "the vortex of three discrete communications flows: it is the target, sender, and subject matter of communication."[4] Further, when Representatives and Senators wanted to solicit constituent opinions, those opinions "arrived only sporadically, and members had to augment fragmented information with creative intuition to assess constituent desires and possible reactions."[5] Many committees now use email, official websites, blogs, YouTube channels, Twitter, and Facebook pages to communicate—technologies that were either nonexistent or not widely available until recently.

The communication strategies of congressional committees have changed with the development of these online social networking services. These technologies have arguably served to enhance the ability of committees to share information directly with stakeholder groups, including other Members, federal agencies, and individual private citizens. Despite the advantage of having a direct avenue of communication open between the committee and these groups, electronic communications have raised some concerns. For example, existing law and chamber regulations on the use of communication media such as the franking privilege have proven difficult to adapt to the new electronic technologies.

This report examines how congressional committees are using social media. This includes how social media is altering how Members organize and manage their personal and committee offices and impacting the ability of Members to gather support for political and policy goals. Perhaps most importantly, social media may transform the very nature of representation in the United States. After providing an overview and background of social media platforms, the report analyzes patterns of committee use of Twitter and Facebook during a 4½-month period in 2013 and discusses three potential implications of social media for committees in Congress: increased direct interaction with the public, real-time interaction with advocacy groups, and outreach of public constituencies.

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[1] Roger H. Davidson, Walter J. Oleszek, Frances E. Lee, and Eric Schickler, *Congress and Its Members*, 14th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2014), p. 165.

[2] Ibid.

[3] P.L. 79-601, chap. 753, 60 Stat. 812, August 2, 1946; and P.L. 91-510, 84 Stat. 1140, October 26, 1970.

[4] Stephen Frantzich, "Communications and Congress," *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, vol. 34, no. 4 (1982), p. 88.

[5] Ibid., p. 89.

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Social Media Platforms

Twitter

Created in 2006 by developer Jack Dorsey as a tool to keep in touch with friends, Twitter is a web-based social networking service that allows users to send and read short messages.[6] Also considered a micro-blogging site, Twitter users send "tweets" of up to 140 characters. These tweets are displayed on an author's Twitter home page and on the pages of people subscribed to his or her RSS feed.[7]

Twitter enables individual users to post thoughts and comments on any number of topics or activities. While Twitter use varies, it has been used by individuals and organizations to state opinions, promote events, and announce the release of products and services. Several legislative branch entities actively use Twitter to communicate with interested parties. These include the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO),[8] the Library of Congress (LOC),[9] and the Government Publishing Office (GPO).[10] In addition, Restaurant Associates, the House's food service vendor, uses Twitter to announce daily specials and events. Posting under the user name "@ushrcafes," a typical tweet might look like this:

> Come to Longworth Cafe and get that Chesapeake Gold!! Our chef is chucking them right now. http://fb.me/1J18PGecc![11]

Because of the 140 character limit on tweets, Twitter messages are necessarily short. The brevity of the messages highlights the ease with which tweets can be quickly sent from mobile devices to followers around the world. The rapid transmission of information allows individuals and groups to communicate instantly regardless of physical distance.

Twitter allows individual users to "follow" other Twitter subscribers and read their tweets from the Twitter homepage. Individuals may choose to follow another Twitter account if they are interested in the information provided, are friends with the Twitter account holder, or if they are a "fan" of an activity or place. Following another user's Twitter account allows for almost instant access to his or her tweets, through a computer or a mobile device. This can be useful if a

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[6] Twitter, "Where did Twitter Come From?," *About Twitter*, at http://twitter.com/about. For more information about social networking, see Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, "Social Networking Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 13, no. 1 (October 2007), pp. 210-230; and Lee Humphreys, "Mobile Social Networks and Social Practice: A Case Study of Dodgeball," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 13, no. 1 (October 2007), pp. 341-360.

[7] An RSS feed, which stands for Really Simple Syndication, is an opt-in service that allows users to receive targeted content from webpages, blogs, and online news sources. For more information see Tom Barnes, "RSS: Marketing's Newest Communication Channel," *Journal of Website Promotion*, vol. 1, no. 4 (2005), pp. 15-30.

[8] U.S. Government Accountability Office, at http://twitter.com/usgao.

[9] Library of Congress, at http://twitter.com/librarycongress. Additionally, some divisions of the Library of Congress maintain Twitter accounts. These include the Maps Division (@LOCMaps); the National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program (@ndiipp); the U.S. Copyright Office (@CopyrightOffice); THOMAS, the legislative information system (@THOMASdotgov); and the Law Library of Congress (@LawLibCongress).

[10] U.S. Government Publishing Office, at http://twitter.com/USGPO.

[11] House Dining Services, tweet, December 3, 2014, at https://twitter.com/ushrcafes/status/540190936207491072.

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follower is looking for a featured item or to better understand the activities of the person or group he or she is following.

Facebook

Launched in February 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg and several of his classmates at Harvard College, Facebook is the world's largest social networking service and website.[12] Facebook provides "profiles"[13] and "pages"[14] for users, both of which are personalized websites within Facebook on which users can post pictures, videos, messages, and comments. Users can limit the visibility of their profile posts to other users who they have personally approved ("friends"). A Facebook user can become a fan of a page, however, simply by clicking "like" on the Facebook page of interest; owner approval is not required.

Once a Facebook user becomes a fan of a page, the activity of the "liked" page appears on the user's "newsfeed."[15] A newsfeed contains activities by a user's friends, along with content generated by the pages of which the user is a fan. Thus, each Facebook user's newsfeed is personalized.[16] Newsfeed content can include links to news stories, personal updates, videos, comments, and photographs.

The profiles of individual Facebook users also contain a "timeline," which chronologically captures all of the user's posts. Other users may also post to someone's timeline, if the two users are "friends," and if the user permits such a post.

Research Design

Questions

This report analyzes the following questions related to committee use of Twitter and Facebook:

- What proportion of committees has adopted and used Twitter and Facebook?
- How widely are committee social media accounts followed?
- How often do committees use Twitter and Facebook?

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[12] Melony Roy, "Year in Review: Facebook Remains World's Largest Social Network," *CBS Radio (KYW) Philadelphia*, December 28, 2014, at http://philadelphia.cbslocal.com/2014/12/28/year-in-review-facebook-remains-worlds-largest-social-network/; and Marcelo Ballve, "Our List of the World's Largest Social Networks Shows How Video, Messages, and China are Taking Over the Social Web," *Business Insider*, December 17, 2013, at http://www.businessinsider.com/the-worlds-largest-social-networks-2013-12.

[13] A profile or timeline is each user's "collection of the photos, stories, and experiences that tell [their] story." For more information, see "profile" on Facebook, "Facebook Glossary," at http://www.facebook.com/help/glossary; and Facebook, "Timeline," at http://www.facebook.com/help/timeline.

[14] A Facebook page "allow[s] businesses, brands, and celebrities to connect with people on Facebook. Admins can post information and News Feed updates to people who like their pages." For more information, see "Page," on Facebook, "Facebook Glossary," at http://www.facebook.com/help/glossary.

[15] "Facebook Glossary."

[16] Ibid.

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- What are committees tweeting and posting about?
- Are committees interacting with other users on social media?

Methodology

Between June 21 and October 31, 2013, the tweets and Facebook posts of House and Senate committees which were registered to use Twitter and Facebook were collected. To collect these data, CRS partnered with graduate students at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas. Custom programming scripts were developed that queried both Facebook and Twitter's application program interfaces (APIs) and pulled account-specific information from committees' official public accounts. Prior to the collection of the data on committee tweets and Facebook posts, a dataset capturing committee adoption of Twitter and Facebook was collected in September 2013. These adoption data were then used to retroactively collect tweets and Facebook posts from June 21 to October 31, 2013, and then used to analyze committee use of Twitter and Facebook.

Data

The unit of analysis is the individual tweet or Facebook post. A total of 15,524 cases are included in the dataset—12,946 tweets and 2,308 Facebook posts—across 54 Twitter and 28 Facebook accounts. Data collection was automated and characteristics including date, time, and content were captured. After an initial examination of the content and a review of the established coding schemes used to catalog similar data, researchers devised a comprehensive set of coding categories.[17] The research team then examined each tweet or post and recorded the appropriate coding results. Coding was subjected to an internal reliability test to validate inter-coder reliability. Tweets or Facebook posts could be coded into more than one category.

Several caveats accompany the results presented. First, the analysis treats all committee tweets and Facebook posts as structurally identical, because even if the account has an indicator that a Member wrote the message, the overall account reflects the committee majority or minority. In some cases, committee Members might personally tweet or post, whereas other committees may delegate these responsibilities to staff. CRS draws no distinction between the two. Second, the analysis covers only 4½ months of committee activity. Therefore, it is inherently a snapshot in time of a dynamic process. As with any new technology, the number of committees using Twitter and Facebook and the patterns of use may change rapidly in short periods of time. Thus, the conclusions drawn from these data cannot be easily generalized. Finally, these results cannot be used to predict future behavior.

[17] See CRS Report R43018, *Social Networking and Constituent Communications: Members' Use of Twitter and Facebook During a Two-Month Period in the 112th Congress*, by Matthew E. Glassman, Jacob R. Straus, and Colleen J. Shogan, and CRS Report R43691, *Social Networking and Constituent Communications: Members' Use of Vine in Congress*, by Jacob R. Straus, Matthew E. Glassman, and Raymond T. Williams.

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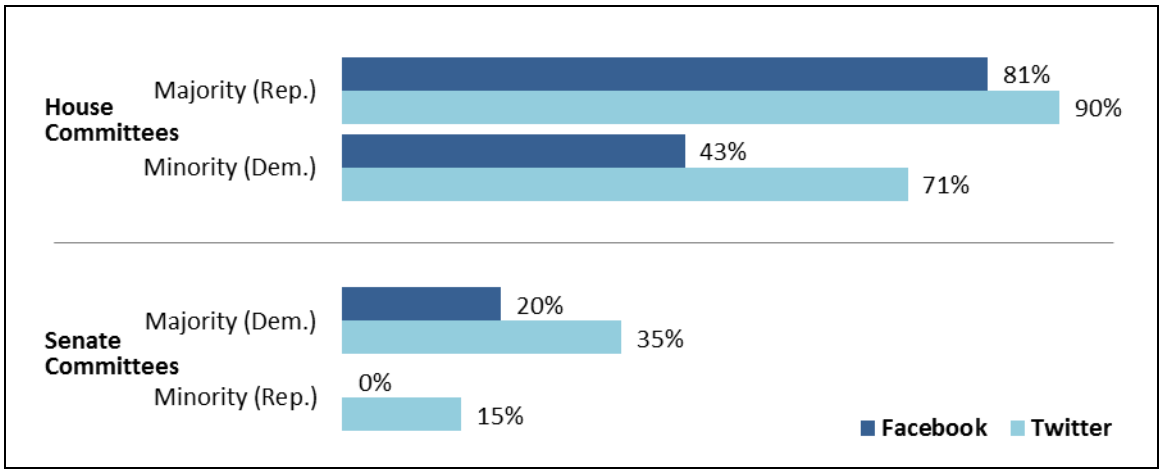
Results

How Many Committees Have Adopted Twitter and Facebook?

As of October 21, 2013, a total of 54 Twitter accounts and 28 Facebook accounts were identified for 21 House committees and 20 Senate committees. In the House, 90% of the committee majorities had either Twitter or Facebook accounts, while 76% of the committee minorities had adopted the platforms. In the Senate, 45% of the committee majorities had adopted Twitter or Facebook and 15% of the minorities had. **Figure 1** shows the proportion of committees in the House and Senate which had an official account with Twitter and Facebook as of October 31, 2013, respectively.

Figure 1. Platform Adoption by Chamber and Party Status

As of October 31, 2013



Source: LBJ School of Public Affairs and CRS data analysis.

Data on social media adoption by committees parallel early adoption patterns by Members of Congress in the House.[18] In this House, committee majorities (Republicans) had the highest adoption rates for both Twitter and Facebook. This parallels trends found for individual Member adoption in the 112th Congress, when House Republicans (the majority party) had the highest adoption rate for both Twitter and Facebook—87% for Twitter and 95% for Facebook. For the Senate, a pattern opposite of past studies is revealed—Senate committee majorities (Democrats) have adopted Twitter and Facebook in greater proportions than Senate committee minorities (Republicans). This stands in contrast to earlier studies of individual Senators, where Republicans

[18] CRS Report R41066, *Social Networking and Constituent Communications: Member Use of Twitter During a Two-Month Period in the 111th Congress*, by Matthew E. Glassman, Jacob R. Straus, and Colleen J. Shogan; CRS Report R43691, *Social Networking and Constituent Communications: Members' Use of Vine in Congress*, by Jacob R. Straus, Matthew E. Glassman, and Raymond T. Williams; and Jacob R. Straus, Matthew Eric Glassman, Colleen J. Shogan, and Susan Navarro Smelcer, "Communicating in 140 Characters or Less: Congressional Adoption of Twitter in the 111th Congress," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 46, no. 1 (January 2013), pp. 60-66.

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(then in the minority) had adopted Twitter and Facebook at higher rates than Democrats (then in the majority).[19]

How Widely Are Committee Social Media Accounts Followed?

For all Twitter accounts included in the dataset, a total of 184,612 unique accounts were following at least one committee. The sum of all committee Twitter followers (including those who follow multiple committees, who are counted more than once) was 322,479.

The number of followers can provide insight into the potential reach of a Twitter account. Using a social media tracking website called Followerwork.com, a "Social Authority" metric of an account's influence, ranging from 1 to 100, can be generated. For example, across all committee followers, the highest "Social Authority" scores were for President Obama (91.7) and the *Huffington Post* (92.5). Conversely, 53% of accounts that follow a congressional committee have a "Social Authority" score of 1, indicating that they are either infrequent users or might be computer-generated accounts. **Table 1** shows the average and median number of followers and the "Social Authority" scores for the average and median congressional committee's Twitter accounts.

Table 1. Twitter Followers and Social Authority Scores for Congressional Committees, 113th Congress

	Followers	Following	Tweets	Created	Social Authority
			All Committees		
Average	3,785	1,915	4,148	1/30/2011	13
Median	190	706	431	2/26/2011	2
			Republican Committees[a]		
Average	3,929	1,917	4,336	1/18/2011	13
Median	188	715	467	2/10/2011	3
			Democratic Committees[b]		
Average	3,729	1,950	4,049	2/8/2011	13
Median	197	706	417	3/14/2011	2

Source: LBJ School of Public Affairs and CRS data analysis.

Notes: Number of followers, Tweets, and "Social Authority" scores are inherently a snapshot of congressional committee accounts. These numbers were collected between June 21 and October 31, 2013.

a. In the House for the 113th Congress, Republican committees are the committee majority and in the Senate, Republican committees are the committee minority.

b. In the House for the 113th Congress, Democratic committees are the committee minority and in the Senate, Democratic committees are the committee majority.

[19] Straus, Glassman, Shogan, and Smelcer 2013, p. 62.

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Overall, the average and median number of followers for any particular committee, regardless of party, is relatively low. The limited number of followers and the potential for the committees' tweets to reach a wide audience is supported by their "Social Authority" scores. The average score for committees regardless of party is 13, and the median score is 2 for Democrats and 3 for Republicans.

How Much Are Committees Using Twitter and Facebook?

During the 4½ months of data included in this study, the observed committees sent a total of 12,946 tweets and posted 2,308 times on Facebook, for an average of 97.3 tweets and 17.4 Facebook posts per day. The data collection period—June 21 to October 31, 2013—captured time when Congress was in session and out of session (in recess) for the August district and state work period. Additionally, the dataset includes the government shutdown that took place between October 1 and October 16, 2013. **Table 2** shows the number of tweets and Facebook posts, including the average per day, for when Congress was in session, out of session, and during the government shutdown.

Table 2. Twitter and Facebook Activity by all House and Senate Committees Through Selected Periods, 113th Congress

Period	No. of Days	Tweets	Tweets per day	Facebook Posts	Facebooks Posts per day
Out of Session	37	1,580	42.7	350	9.5
In Session	80	9,972	124.7	1,798	22.5
Government Shutdown (in session)	16	1,394	87.1	160	10.0
Total	133	12,946	97.3	2,308	17.4

Source: LBJ School of Public Affairs and CRS data analysis.

The data showed that committees tweet and post to Facebook more when Congress is in session than when it is in recess. When Congress was in session, an average of 124.7 tweets and 22.5 Facebook posts were made per day. During recess, an average of 42.7 tweets and 9.5 Facebook posts were made per day. During the government shutdown, the number of tweets and Facebook posts was greater than when Congress was out of session, but not at the same level as *regular* session days. During the shutdown, an average of 87.1 tweets and 10 Facebook posts were sent per day.

What Are Committees Tweeting and Posting About?

Analysis by Core Function

Within Congress, committees play many roles. They "conduct investigations, make studies, issue reports and recommendations, and ... prepare measures on their assigned subjects for action by their respective houses."[20] For all tweets and Facebook posts collected in the dataset, each was

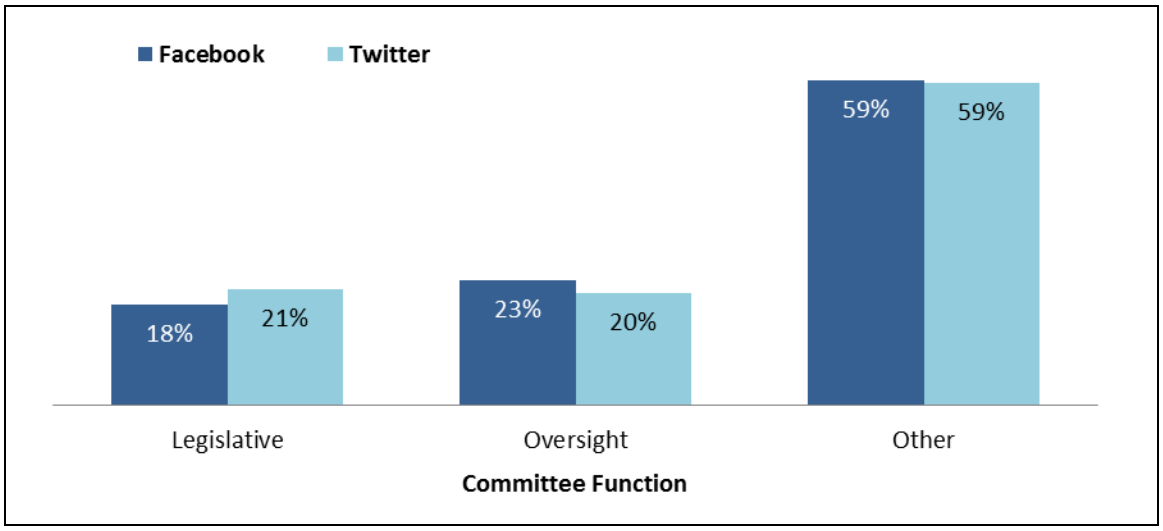
[20] Walter Kravitz, *Congressional Quarterly's American Congressional Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, (continued...)

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coded for whether it related to the committee's legislative function, its oversight functions, or was related to other committee activities. Tweets and posts were coded as legislative if they referred to the current legislative process. This included any reference to active pieces of legislation by bill number, committee and subcommittee actions, and House or Senate floor actions. Tweets and posts were coded as oversight if they referred to committee operations relevant to oversight responsibilities. These included review, monitoring, or supervision of federal agencies, programs, activities, and policy implementation. If a tweet or post contained both legislative and oversight information, it was coded as legislative.

Overall, fewer than half of all tweets and Facebook posts related to legislative or oversight responsibilities. **Figure 2** shows the percentage of total tweets and Facebook posts that dealt with legislation or oversight and the number of tweets and posts that did not mention either function.

Figure 2. Committee Function on Social Media



Source: LBJ School of Public Affairs and CRS data analysis.

While approximately 59% of tweets and Facebook posts did not address either legislation or oversight, approximately 41% did. Overall, committees utilized Facebook slightly more for oversight than for legislation and used Twitter slightly more for legislation than for oversight. The difference in use between the platforms is small, but may reflect that promoting a legislative activity (i.e., a hearing, markup, or report) can be done using Twitter's shorter platform, whereas providing content on oversight responsibilities is better suited for the longer format of Facebook posts.

Analysis by Message Category

Aside from the broad categorization of tweets and Facebook posts by general committee function, what are committees tweeting and posting about? To assess the content of committee tweets and Facebook posts, 12 major message categories were created following an examination of tweets

(...continued)

2001), p. 46.

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and Facebook posts sent by committees during the study. These were committee announcement, committee action, committee promotion, policy information, Member information, political stance, media, outreach, response, personal, campaign, and other.

The categories were defined as follows:

Committee Announcement

Tweets and posts that referenced committee proceedings, such as a general hearing announcement.

> POSTED-Background memo & witness list for 6/27 #SubCommTech hearing on commercial & federal #spectrum http://t.co/wbEYvxnA9Y.[21]

Committee Action

Tweets and posts that referenced specific actions or decisions related to the committee's functions, such as an official report or decision.

> The Committee is adjourned. H.R. 2612, H.R. 1848, H.R. 2576 and H.R. 2611 all reported successfully. http://t.co/Q6RuOt8NmO.[22]

Committee Outreach

Tweets and posts that promoted a positive image of the committee.

> Panoramic view of our main committee hearing room, 2123 Rayburn HOB. Stop by sometime and watch us work.[23]

Policy Information

Tweets and posts that relayed general policy information or general governmental affairs. Policy information tweets and posts may or may not have been related to specific committee business and included tweets and posts regarding the progression of specific bills.

> "Small business owners had been told they would not be able to enroll in new health care plans online when the federal government's new insurance exchange opened on Tuesday, but that they would be able to at least view plans and compare prices. It turns out, for the time being, they cannot do that either."[24]

Member Outreach

Tweets and posts that mentioned a committee member by name in a positive manner.

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[21] http://twitter.com, June 25, 2013.

[22] http://twitter.com, July 10, 2013.

[23] http://facebook.com, June 24, 2013.

[24] http://facebook.com, October 1, 2013.

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> ICYMI: Chairman Smith's Oped in The Hill: #Asteroid Retrieval is Costly and Uninspiring http://t.co/op9sfqh4TD #NASA.[25]

Political Stance

Tweets and posts that advocated for or against a policy position. These tweets and posts included bill advocacy, bill or politician criticisms, and value statements and may or may not have been related to specific committee business. Also included were tweets and posts that included perceived and unsubstantiated consequences or implications of legislation.

> #Teamsters: President's health care law will destroy foundation of 40 hr work wk ... backbone of #American #MiddleClass http://t.co/gpFB9StiJd.[26]

Media

Tweets and posts that referenced or directly linked to any nongovernmental media-related content, such as media appearances, news articles, blogs, and photos. If a media source was not cited, it was not coded as media.

> Via @NOLAnews: Hurricane Katrina anniversary prompts call to action on climate change: http://t.co/WJjHfM3cYE.[27]

General Outreach

Tweets and posts that called for constituent interaction. Outreach tweets and posts may or may not have been related to specific committee business.

> SHARE if you don't want Congress to repeal @Obamacare![28]

Response

Tweets and posts that directly responded to or engaged in a conversation with followers.

Personal

Tweets or posts that included personal comments unrelated to committee business and not germane to policy. These tweets and posts included thanks, congratulations, birthday wishes, and condolences.

> @CongressDIGITAL Thanks for the praise.[29]

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[25] http://twitter.com, July 10, 2013.

[26] http://twitter.com, July 16, 2013.

[27] http://twitter.com, August 26, 2013.

[28] http://facebook.com, July 23, 2013.

[29] http://twitter.com, August 14, 2013.

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Other

Tweets or posts that could not be classified as one of the other categories.

> RT @thepanamacanal: A current #PanamaCanal lock gate is approximately 700 tons, which can be compared to the weight of 300 elephants. http:.... "[30]

Each observed tweet and Facebook post was coded into as many categories as was appropriate. For example, a post could be categorized as "policy information," "political stance," and Member promotion, if the tweet or post mentioned policy information, a political position, and a Member by name.

"Personal" and "Policy Information":

> Tomorrow at 1:30pm we'll have an official from the U.S. Treasury Department testifying. We want #ObamacareAnswers.[31]

"Response" and "Policy Information":

> RT @EPAgov: Don't miss President Obama's remarks on climate change today at 1:55pm EDT - watch live here: http://t.co/qd6TCGgo7U.[32]

Figure 3 reports the number of tweets and Facebook posts by category:

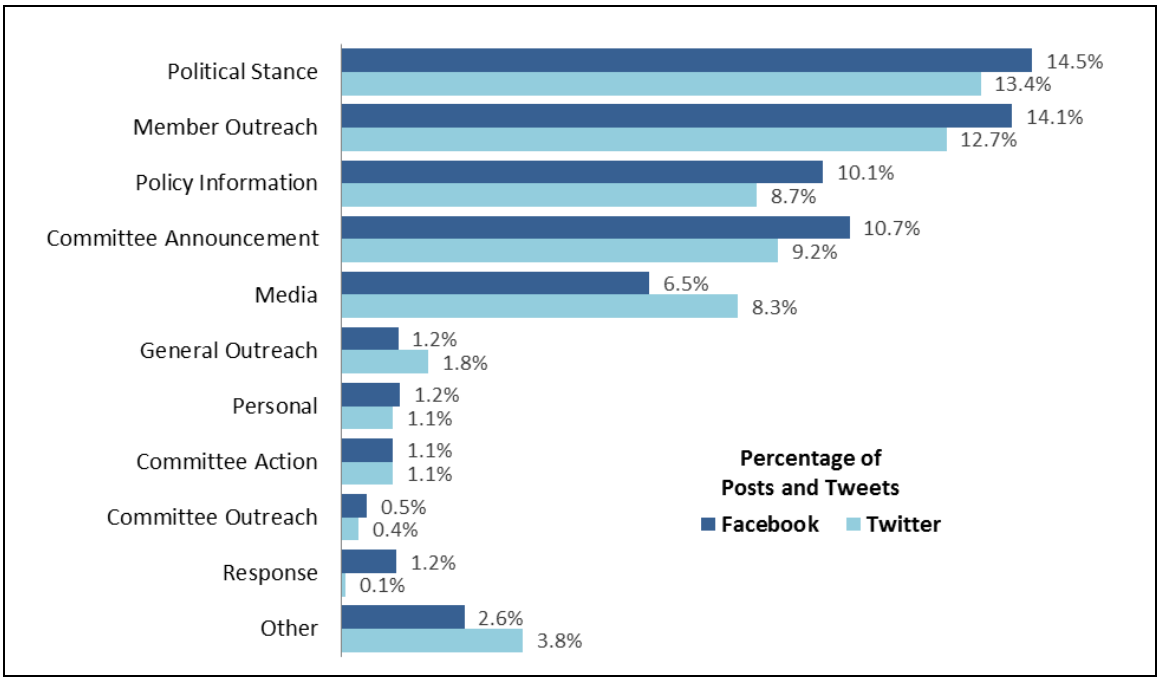
[30] http://twitter.com, September 6, 2013.

[31] http://facebook.com, July 9, 2013.

[32] http://twitter.com, June 25, 2013.

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Figure 3. Tweets and Facebook Posts by House and Senate Committees by Category, 113th Congress



Source: LBJ School of Public Affairs and CRS data analysis.

Notes: A tweet or post can be categorized in more than one category.

As shown in **Figure 3**, the most common committee tweets and Facebook posts were "political stance" and "Member promotion." These comprise 29% of tweets and 26% of Facebook posts. The next most common categories were "policy information" (10% of tweets and 9% of Facebook posts), "committee announcement" (11% of tweets and 9% of Facebook posts), and "media" (6% of tweets and 8% of Facebook posts).

Are Committees Interacting with Other Users on Twitter and Facebook?

Social media is, by nature, designed to be interactive. Committees have traditionally interacted with Members of Congress, executive branch agencies, and stakeholder groups, while not emphasizing direct contact with individual constituents.[33] Because Twitter and Facebook are interactive, a measure of interactivity was developed to observe how often tweets or Facebook posts directed comments at another user. Overall, only 5.52% of all tweets contained two-way communication language.

Interactivity can be measured in several ways. The data collected on committee usage of Twitter and Facebook examined retweets, hashtags, and followers of committee accounts.

[33] Gary Lee Malecha and Daniel J. Reagan, *The Public Congress* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 47.

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Retweets

Congressional committees can engage in two-way communication through the use of retweets. By retweeting constituents or other stakeholders, congressional committees could begin a dialogue, or display a point of view other than those directly drafted by the committee. Overall, 27% of outreach tweets involved committees retweeting another user's tweet. For example,

> RT @SenJohnThune: Check out my guest blog on #cybersecurity legislation for @USChamber's @FreeEnterprise: http://t.co/TVFdPrUoat.[34]

To determine the types of content that congressional committees retweet, all tweets containing an "RT" were identified. In total, 30% of tweets contained retweets. Each retweet was coded into one of the following categories:

- *Nongovernmental*: A constituent, business, media, or other nongovernmental source
- *Committee Member*: A member of the retweeting committee, but not chairman/ranking Member
- *Governmental*: A source within the government not captured in the other categories, such as agencies, Secretaries, or other branches
- *Other Member of Congress*: Retweet of a Member who is not a member of the retweeting committee
- *Chair or Ranking Member*: The chairman/ranking Member of the retweeting committee

Table 3 shows the percentage of retweets in each category across all committees in the House and Senate.

Table 3. Sources of Retweets Across House and Senate Committees, 113th Congress

Retweet Source	Percentage
Nongovernmental	31%
Committee Member (non-Chair or Ranking Member)	28%
Governmental	16%
Other Member of Congress	14%
Chair or Ranking Member	12%

Source: LBJ School of Public Affairs and CRS data analysis.

As **Table 3** shows, approximately 70% of all retweets were of tweets originally posted by governmental officials both inside and outside of Congress, with 40% of retweets being made from committee member tweets (including the chair or ranking member), 16% from governmental sources outside of Representatives or Senators, and 14% coming from other Member of Congress who were not members of the committee. Approximately one-third of all retweets originated outside of the federal government.

[34] http://twitter.com, September 13, 2013.

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The source of retweets presents an interesting observation. While committees certainly interact with nongovernmental entities on Twitter, a majority of their retweets are from other federal sources, with a total of 40% from other committee members and a majority (54%) from Members of Congress. This suggests that committees are primarily using Twitter as an internal communications tool, albeit a public one as compared to "Dear Colleague" letters, which are only circulated within the House or Senate.[35]

Table 4 shows the breakdown of retweets by chamber and majority or minority party status.

Table 4. Retweet Sources by Chamber and Majority/Minority Party Status, 113th Congress

Retweet (RT) Sources	Total House Majority (Rep.) RT (% of RT)	Total House Minority (Dem.) RT (% of RT)	Total Senate Majority (Dem.) RT (% of RT)	Total Senate Minority (Rep.) RT (% of RT)	Grand Total (% of RT)
Committee Member	722 (38)	327 (20)	26 (9)	14 (12)	1,089 (32)
Nongovernmental	518 (27)	529 (33)	107 (38)	36 (31)	730 (21)
Congress Member	309 (16)	233 (15)	19 (7)	1 (1)	562 (16)
Government Source	181 (10)	369 (23)	46 (16)	9 (8)	605 (18)
Chairman/Ranking Member	168 (9)	146 (9)	82 (29)	58 (49)	454 (13)
Total (% of all RT total)	**1898 (49)**	**1604 (41)**	**280 (7)**	**118 (3)**	**3,440 (100)**

Source: LBJ School of Public Affairs and CRS data analysis.

Notes: The total of all RTs does not include seven retweets from joint committees. Percentages have been rounded and may not sum to 100%.

As **Table 4** shows, Democrats were more likely to retweet a message from both "Nongovernmental" and "Governmental" sources, whereas Republicans more frequently retweeted "Committee Member" and "Congress Member" sources. Overall, it was very rare to find majority or minority committee members retweeting tweets from the opposing party within their committee.

Overall, the majority party in both the House and Senate retweeted more often than the minority. This may reflect the majority's control of the committee agendas and that the majority party generally adopts Twitter at a higher rate than the minority party on each committee. Further, the

[35] For more information and analysis of "Dear Colleague" letters, see CRS Report RL34636, *"Dear Colleague" Letters: Current Practices*, by Jacob R. Straus; CRS Report R42026, *"Dear Colleague" Letters in the House of Representatives: An Analysis of Volume, Use, Characteristics, and Purpose*, by Jacob R. Straus, and Jacob R. Straus; and "Use of 'Dear Colleague' Letters in the US House of Representatives: A Study of Internal Communications," *Journal of Legislative Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1 (January 2013), pp. 60-75.

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majority party might be using retweets as a way to extend the message reach of committee members, including the committee chair.

That the minority does not retweet as often as the majority, however, is a bit surprising based on past research that found minority party members tend to adopt and use Twitter more than majority party members.[36]

Hashtags

A hashtag is "a word or phrase proceeded by a hash mark (#), used within a message to identify a keyword or topic of interest and facilitate a search for it."[37] Including a hashtag categorizes a tweet or Facebook post and makes it searchable. Using a hashtag increases the opportunity for a message to be shared with others and to reach individuals who may not directly follow an account. Congressional committees use hashtags to self-categorize the general topic of messages. Hashtags offer an opportunity to observe how committees might coordinate messages across accounts, or with the majority or minority leadership.

An analysis of hashtags was conducted across all tweets in the dataset. **Table 5** lists the 20 most frequently used hashtags between June 21 and October 31, 2013.

Table 5. Most Frequently Used Hashtags by Party, 113th Congress

Hashtag	Democratic	Republican	Total Tweets with Hashtags	Number of Committee Accounts
#Obamacare	27.0%	73.0%	641	22
#smallbiz	0.31%	99.69%	326	5
#WRRDA	1.0%	99.0%	296	3
#GOPshutdown	100.0%	0.0%	277	13
#ACA	97.0%	3.0%	233	11
#IRS	38.0%	62.0%	221	12
#Syria	43.0%	57.0%	210	10
#PATHAct	4.0%	96.0%	159	2
#4jobs	0.66%	99.34%	151	8
#GOP	82.0%	18.0%	147	15
#KeystoneXL	0.00%	100.0%	141	5
#jobs	5.0%	95.0%	130	13

Source: LBJ School of Public Affairs and CRS data analysis.

[36] Jacob R. Straus, Matthew Eric Glassman, and Colleen J. Shogan, and Susan Navarro Smelcer, "Communicating in 140 Characters or Less: Congressional Adoption of Twitter in the 111th Congress," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 46, no. 1 (January 2013), pp. 60-66.

[37] "Hashtag," *Dictionary.com*, at http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/hashtag?s=t.

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The purpose of using hashtags can vary from one account to another. In some cases, hashtags are used to generate additional followers or traditional media attention. For example, several tweets within the dataset used the hashtag "#pjnet" (Patriot Journalist Network)—an organized social media political action group—likely in an effort to attract the attention of the group's members.[38] Some tweets that used this hashtag were retweeted more than 12,000 times, even though committees used it less than 100 times during the sample period. Such a strategy could lead to additional retweets, which would increase the reach of a tweet or post. Once a tweet is widely shared, however, the original poster loses control over the message and the opportunity for it to be taken out of context becomes greater.

Hashtags can also be used to differentiate messages within a committee (between the majority and the minority) or between the political parties. As shown in **Table 5**, the most popular hashtags reflect the majority and minority parties' agendas. For example, 73% of all instances of "#Obamacare" appeared in Republican-controlled accounts, while 97% of all tweets with the hashtag "#ACA" are from Democrats. While Republicans and Democrats were both discussing the Affordable Care Act,[39] using the hashtags #Obamacare or #ACA potentially changes the tone of the conversation. Using #Obamacare, for example, directly connects the health care law with the President, whereas #ACA is more formal and does not clearly link the President with the law.

Concluding Observations

The rise of social media, and electronic communications more generally, has potentially wide-ranging implications for the practice of legislative politics. Unlike postal letters, technology has reduced the marginal cost of communications. Members can now reach large numbers of citizens for a fixed cost, and individuals and groups can reach Congress at virtually zero cost.[40] Likewise, the speed of information exchange between Capitol Hill and the rest of the country has decreased and has become almost instantaneous. As soon as something happens in Congress, it is known everywhere in real time.

These advances are altering how Members organize and manage their personal and committee offices and impacting the ability of Members to gather support for political and policy goals. Perhaps most importantly, they may transform the very nature of representation in the United States. What follows is a brief discussion of three potential implications of social media for committees in Congress: increased direct interaction with the public, real-time interaction with advocacy groups, and outreach of public constituencies. As with any new technology, the number of committees using Twitter and Facebook and the patterns of use may change rapidly. Thus, the conclusions drawn from these data cannot be easily generalized nor can these results be used to predict future committee behavior.

[38] Patriot Journalist Network, at http://www.patriotjournalist.com/.

[39] P.L. 111-148, 124 Stat. 119, March 23, 2010; and P.L. 111-152, 124 Stat. 1029, March 30, 2010.

[40] This substantially differentiates electronic mail from franked mail, which does incur a marginal cost. See CRS Report RL34188, *Congressional Official Mail Costs*, by Matthew E. Glassman.

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Increased Public Interaction

Social media has the potential to change the nature of how committees receive and process information from the public. For the first time, a committee's public environment, which includes "the general public and representatives of organized interests,"[41] has tools available to directly contact the committee, tasks left to lobbyists, professional association managers, and individual Members of Congress in the past. Processing this stream of information is increasingly difficult, especially in light of the expectation for interactivity that comes from social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook.

Historically, for policy matters under their jurisdictions, most congressional committees have primarily interacted with Members of Congress,[42] the executive branch,[43] and stakeholder groups. Lacking a direct electoral constituency, the committee system has not generally sought to engage directly with the public.[44] Consequently, committee communications often took place through press releases and committee websites. The recent adoption of social media has the potential to change how committees communicate, providing public access to the committee for the first time.

The historic position of committee communication with individual constituents stands in contrast with the communications strategies for Representatives and Senators, who regularly want to hear from and speak directly to their constituents.[45] For individual Members, Twitter and Facebook are unique tools that can allow them to hear from and speak directly to constituents (and non-constituents) in real time.[46] Using social media to interact with constituents could provide Representatives and Senators with information that was previously unavailable. Instead of relying on phone, mail, and email tallies on an issue, constituents can be engaged in real time through Twitter and Facebook.

Whereas the interactivity of Twitter and Facebook might be beneficial to Member offices, its benefit is less obvious to a committee. As the data herein show, committees do not generally utilize the interactive features available through social media, with only 5.5% of all tweets responding to other users. Instead, committees use the system to supplement more traditional communication and outreach strategies by announcing hearings, meetings, the passage of legislation, and the position of the committee vis-a-vis a particular policy area. When interactivity does occur, it tends to be retweets of journalists and individual Members of Congress, especially those who serve on the committee.

It is not clear from this research whether committees seek to engage directly with individual constituents and if they do, what they would do with the information they receive. Since

[41] Ibid., p. 88.

[42] Richard L. Hall, "Participation and Purpose in Committee Decision Making," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 81, no. 1 (March 1987), pp. 105-128.

[43] Joseph N. Tonon, "The Costs of Speaking the Truth to Power: How Professionalism Facilitates Credible Communication," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory: J-PART*, vol. 18, no. 2 (April 2008), pp. 275-295.

[44] Gary Lee Malecha and Daniel J. Reagan, *The Public Congress* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 13.

[45] Richard F. Fenno, *Home Style: House Members in their Districts* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1978); and Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, "Are Legislators Ideologues or the Agents of Constituents?," *Papers and Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Congress of the European Economic Association*, vol. 40, no. 3-5 (April 1996), pp. 707-717.

[46] Libby Hemphill and Andrew J. Roback, "Tweet Acts: How Constituents Lobby Congress via Twitter," *Proceedings of the 17th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*, 2014, pp. 1200-1210.

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committees are set up to evaluate policy options within a specified jurisdiction, receiving and processing public opinion could change the focus of a committee's work and draw it away from the oversight of the executive branch, the needs of individual Members of Congress, and the regulation of stakeholder groups and industries.

Committees could utilize the interactivity of social media to further engage the public in the committee's activities, including oversight and legislative hearings. Twitter and Facebook have the potential to allow the committee to field ideas or hearing questions in real time from interested parties. Engaging the public in this manner would be outside of past committee practices. Such interaction could allow Members to see public reaction in real time, and adjust their questions as they see fit. Using real-time feedback during a hearing or meeting, however, could influence the committee's activity in unpredictable ways and introduce uncertainty in the legislative and oversight process.

Whether desired or not, communication between committees and individual citizens may simply become reality. The representational communication activities of both Members and citizens are constrained by cost. Prior to the rise of electronic communications, these costs were a significant impediment; postal mail and long-distance phone calls have a stable marginal cost. Likewise, citizens were constrained by their own personal financial budget; the marginal value of a phone call or letter to Congress had to be weighed against the marginal value of any other use of the same money. In effect, both Members and citizens were constrained to communicate with each other only when the cost of communication was outweighed by the importance of the communication.

Electronic communications have virtually no direct marginal cost. Once a Member or a citizen pays the startup and recurring costs of owning a computer, and paying for Internet access, there is no further financial cost for each individual communication between them. Almost all electronic communication media (e.g., email, social media, tele-townhalls, or web advertisements) tend to have fixed capital or startup costs, but are then largely free on the margin. The result is that, for both Member and citizen, the only marginal cost to sending an additional communication is time.

The result has been an explosion of citizen communications with Congress. The amount of constituent mail (postal and email) reaching Members has increased almost tenfold in the past 20 years, to almost half a billion messages per year.[47] Social media contacts by citizens to Members are not aggregated, but presumably now comprise a non-trivial number of communications. With the marginal cost reduced to near zero, citizens have little incentive *not* to contact committees, even if previously such contact was unwelcomed or ignored. In effect, technological change may be opening the committee system up to greater public interaction.

Real-Time Communication

Electronic communications are faster than traditional forms of Member-citizen communications. This is obvious, but it has several important implications for how committees choose to use new platforms, including social media, and how those choices might shape their communications strategy. In the past, if committees wanted to send out time-sensitive communications on congressional action, the best outlet was probably a faxed press release to the media, perhaps to

[47] For more information on constituent mail, see CRS Report RL34458, *Franking Privilege: Mass Mailings and Mass Communications in the House, 1997-2014*, by Matthew E. Glassman.

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the local newspapers serving a committee member's district or state. There was no point in trying to send postal mail directly to citizens at that speed. Now, however, Members can update constituents on floor activity or other business instantly, using subscribed email lists or social media. Likewise, constituents can use email and social media to contact Members in real time.

This advantage changes not only how quickly information can be shared but also the types of information Members and citizens might provide each other. In the past, real-time information about an upcoming amendment in a committee markup might not have been possible to communicate; the vote might have taken place before the Member could alert the constituents about it, or before constituents could communicate preferences to the Member. With the rise of electronic communications, constituents and Members can easily share information about such an amendment in real time.

Some Members have used social media to conduct "virtual town halls." These forums, similar to a regular town hall meeting or a tele-town hall, where constituents could call in to ask questions, allow participants to ask questions through a designated social media platform (e.g., Twitter or Facebook). Virtual town halls leverage the interactivity of social media platforms and allow for instantaneous questions and answers on Twitter, and longer conversations on Facebook. While there was no evidence in the data set that committees are engaging in virtual town halls, it is possible that future field hearings could utilize a social media platform to allow for public comment or testimony.

Virtual town halls could also pose unique challenges for committees. Unlike Members who could utilize real-time constituent communication in their decision making, committees generally observe policy and executive branch operations over a longer time horizon. As political scientist Douglas Arnold described,

> the committee system is the principle vehicle for gathering and analyzing information. Committees specialize not only in policies but in the politics of those policies. ... Committees encourage interest groups and other interested parties to testify and submit statements, and they commission bureaucrats and congressional staff agencies to produce even more studies.[48]

If a committee were to hold a virtual town hall meeting and it received more questions or feedback than it could answer, a risk exists that participants could perceive that the committee was purposefully avoiding their questions. Additionally, answering questions in a virtual environment ensures that answers are preserved in perpetuity. To interact in a real-time environment, committee Members or staff would likely need to coordinate responses to ensure that the committee's message is consistent.

Public Outreach

Advocacy groups have long used all available methods to promote grassroots support for their positions. For example, the public health community has long used the media to promote issues like "alcohol and tobacco control, lead poisoning, nutrition, and the prevention and treatment of HIV, and violence prevention."[49] Social media expands the potential reach for advocacy efforts.

[48] Douglas Arnold, *The Logic of Collective Action* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 85.

[49] David H. Jernigan and Patricia A. Wright, "Media Advocacy: Lessons from Community Experiences," *Journal of* (continued...)

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Groups use social media, especially Twitter, to engage followers and encourage them to use the advocacy message in their social media posts and to contact governmental decision-makers.[50]

Spurring followers to contact the government to advocate for a policy change is an effective strategy for advocacy groups and can be enhanced through the use of social media.[51] House and Senate rules, however, require that official resources be used only for the purpose for which they were appropriated.[52] Further, the House social media policy prohibits the inclusion of "grassroots lobbying or solicit[ation] support for a Member's position" from being placed on the committee website,[53] and the Senate Internet policy prohibits the use of the official webpages for promotional matter.[54] Additionally, for governmental entities, including congressional committees, federal law prohibits the use of appropriated money to directly or indirectly encourage the public to contact the government in an effort to influence public policy.[55]

There is the possibility that committee engagement in social media to encourage others to contact the government could violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the Anti-Lobbying Law and House and Senate social media and Internet policies. Research on the content of tweets and Facebook posts, however, suggests that less than 2% of all tweets and Facebook posts contain outreach messages. Further, those that do fit into this category generally encourage retweets or the sharing of posts, not the contact of other governmental officials. The use of social media—a strong advocacy tool—is not without potential peril. Committees that use Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms will likely need to be cognizant of the types of messages shared and what, if anything, those messages might be asking of the follower.

(...continued)

Public Health Policy, vol. 17, no. 3 (1996), p. 306.

[50] Chao Guo and Gregory D. Saxton, "Tweeting Social Change: How Social Media Are Changing Nonprofit Advocacy," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 1 (February 2014), pp. 57-79.

[51] For example, see Anthony J. Nownes, *Total Lobbying: What Lobbyists Want (and How They Try to Get It)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 74-80.

[52] 2 U.S.C. §57b.

[53] U.S. Congress, Committee on House Administration, *Committee Handbook*, 114th Cong., 1st sess., "Website Regulations," at http://cha.house.gov/handbooks/committee-handbook#comm%20ad%20internet.

[54] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Rules and Administration, "U.S. Senate Internet Services Usage Rules and Policies," adopted September 19, 2008, at https://www.senate.gov/usage/internetpolicy.htm.

[55] 18 U.S.C. §1913. The 1948 "Anti-Lobbying Law" states that: "No part of the money appropriated by any enactment of Congress shall, in the absence of express authorization by Congress, be used directly or indirectly to pay for any personal service, advertisement, telegram, telephone, letter, printed or written matter, or other device, intended or designed to influence in any manner a Member of Congress, a jurisdiction, or an official of any government, to favor, adopt, or oppose, by vote or otherwise, any legislation, law, ratification, policy, or appropriation, whether before or after the introduction of any bill, measure, or resolution proposing such legislation, law, ratification, policy, or appropriation."

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