

L. Elliott Hibbler. Congressional Communications with Constituents through the use of Web 2.0 Technologies. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in I.S. degree. April, 2009. 32 pages. Advisor: Michael Van Fossen.

This paper examines the myriad ways members of Congress are already using Web 2.0 to both inform and be informed by their constituents. First, it presents a history of other communications media Congress has used since its inception. Next, the paper tries to define the nebulous concept of Web 2.0, taking a holistic view of the technical aspects and the ethos behind it. Finally it looks at the web sites of individual members of Congress to analyze different implementations of Web 2.0 features. Technologies examined include video publishing, blogging, micro-blogging, content syndication, social networking software, social news sharing, polls, podcasting, and widgets. Overall, while some Congresspersons have fully embraced Web 2.0, others are still just scratching the surface of this new technology.

#### Headings:

Web 2.0

Weblogs

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Really Simple Syndication (Internet)

CONGRESSIONAL COMMUNICATION WITH CONSTITUENTS THROUGH THE  
USE OF WEB 2.0 TECHNOLOGIES

by  
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## **Introduction**

Members of the United States Congress have been concerned with communicating with the people they represent since the founding of the United States (Glassman, 2007). Today, the Internet offers more ways for people to communicate than ever before. This paper will examine some of the different Web 2.0 technologies Congressmen are using to communicate with constituents. First, it will present a brief history of Congressional communication methods before the rise of the Internet. In the next section, the actual term Web 2.0 will be explored. Finally, the paper will examine specific examples of how some Congressmen are reaching out to the public by employing online applications, such as Really Simple Syndication and Facebook.

### *About Congress*

The United States Congress is the legislative body of the federal government. It is a bicameral legislature, composed of a 100 member Senate, whose members are elected every six years, and a 435 member House of Representatives, who are elected every two years. There are no term limits restricting how long someone can serve, nor how many times a person can run for office.

## **Congressional Communication Methods through Time**

### ***Mail***

Before electronic communications, Congressmen could communicate with their constituents by mail. The franking privilege allows them to send mail for free (or at least at no personal cost) (Glassman, 2007). The frank had been a privilege granted in the British House of Commons in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the American Congress established it along with legislation creating post offices in its very first session (Glassman, 2007). Congressmen were allowed to send copies of official documents, like Acts or government reports, as well as letters they generated personally. This privilege also extended to receiving mail. Constituents were able to send mail to their representatives in Congress for free, through the late 1800's.

The frank was abolished in 1873, but reinstated in 1895, with changes. It was no longer free for constituents to mail their Congressmen. Also, mail from Congress had to be for official business only. It was not until 1961 that it was made clear that newsletters and questionnaires fell under the category of official (Glassman, 2007). The franking privilege still exists today. In the House of Representatives, it is regulated by the Franking Commission, under the auspices of Committee on House Administration. The Commission must approve any mass mailing by a Representative (Committee on House Administration, 2009). In 2007, its workload was estimated to be 6,000 to 8,000 messages yearly (Glassman, 2007).

### ***Radio***

Congress has never used radio to broadcast its day-to-day floor activity. In the 1920's, when radio was establishing itself in the United States, the Senate did commission a report from the War and Navy Departments about the feasibility of a Congressional radio station, but after three years of study, it was deemed impractical. The issue was not seriously revisited until the mid-1940's, but once again radio broadcasts of the House or Senate floors did not come to pass. However, individual Congresspeople did have access to the airwaves. The National Broadcasting Company gave free airtime to any Congressperson who desired it. The Columbia Broadcasting System also gave access to members of Congress, broadcasting more than one thousand individual speeches from 1928 to 1940 (Garay, 1984).

### ***Broadcast Television***

With the advent of television, Congress gained new avenues into people's homes (Garay, 1984). It was not a wide avenue, however. During the 1960s and 1970s, there were only three broadcast networks. Throughout that time period, they only had nightly newscasts of fifteen or thirty minutes, and individual stories were not often longer than two minutes (Frantzich and Sullivan, 1996). Some Congressional actions, namely investigative hearings, did make it onto broadcast television. The most famous may be the Army-McCarthy Senate hearings investigating Communism in the federal government and in the military. ABC televised the hearings in their entirety, approximately 187 hours in total. Meanwhile, cameras were banned from hearings in the House of Representatives entirely (Garay, 1984). In 1970, House and Senate committees

were allowed to invite television cameras into hearings under the Legislative Reorganization Act (Garay, 1984). This permitted the hearings involving the Watergate scandal to be broadcast on television. It is important to remember that these examples of televised Congressional coverage were for matters related to Congress' investigative power, having nothing to do with any legislative process.

### ***Cable Television***

Cable television began not as a service to compete with or expand the offerings of broadcast television, but just to deliver broadcast television stations to locations without a good broadcast signal. During the 1970's cable operators' attention turned more toward expanding programming as a way to sell their service. This expansion included an increase in public affairs programming (Frantzich and Sullivan, 1996). At the same time, there were Congressmen, including Tip O'Neill, who supported the idea of the House of Representatives' sessions being broadcast, as long as the chamber had control of the cameras. PBS did not want to broadcast on those terms, and neither did the major networks (Frantzich and Sullivan, 1996).

### ***Computers – Electronic Mail***

While television increased Congress' ability to inform the public, it was essentially a one-way medium. People's ability to communicate with their Congressperson was still limited to writing a letter, making a phone call, or meeting with the Congressperson in person. Computers offered new ways to exchange information with the public. They enabled Congress to distribute more of the materials they generated

out electronically. Electronic mail for Congress was used originally solely as an internal communication system (Frantzich, 1982).

### ***Computers - The World Wide Web***

In 2003, before the term Web 2.0 came into parlance, the Congressional Management Foundation released a study about how well Congress was using the Internet. Along with this research, it listed several benefits of having a “good website.” These benefits included enhanced constituent service, unfiltered communications, greater public feedback, and greater citizen engagement. At the time, many offices were not reaping these benefits, as more than one quarter of the Congressional sites the report examined were given a grade of “D” or “F” (Folk and Goldschmidt, 2003).

## Web 2.0 Defined

Web 2.0 is a difficult term to define. The term itself was coined by Dale Dougherty, of O'Reilly media, in 2004 (O'Reilly, September 2005). In 2005, Tim O'Reilly (the "O'Reilly" of O'Reilly media) acknowledged that the concept of Web 2.0 was vague, and tried to clarify it. He laid out a set of these seven Web 2.0 principles:

- The Web as Platform
- Harnessing Collective Intelligence
- Data is the Next Intel Inside
- End of the Software Release Cycle
- Lightweight Programming Models
- Software above the Level of a Single Device
- Rich User Experiences

From: <http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2005/08/not-20.html>

O'Reilly was addressing Web 2.0 from the point of view of a business consultant, with that audience in mind. However, it has been suggested that "congressional offices resemble business enterprises in that both organizations are concerned with a product" (Loomis, 53). It is certainly not part of a Congressional office's mission to actually

develop Web 2.0 features for its website itself, although some websites do show a high degree of technical knowledge, which will be explored below.

Others have said that Web 2.0 should be thought of as a “technology concept” (Deans, 2009). There are several technologies underlying Web 2.0. The first is extensible markup language, or XML. Using XML, a programmer can create tags around their content, which others can use to find and manipulate that content. XML is often used with the scripting language Javascript in Web 2.0 applications using a method called AJAX, or Asynchronous Javascript with XML (Deans, 2009).

In a less technical way, Web 2.0 is closely associated with social networking. Several of the above principles go into creating a better social networking experience (Deans, 2009). Amy Shuen identifies the takeaway of Web 2.0 as “enabl[ing] large numbers of people to come together to work, share, and build” (2008).

So what, exactly, is a Web 2.0 technology? Coming up with a precise definition that will be universally adopted is beyond the scope of this paper. However, there are several functions that fit into all of these conceptions of Web 2.0, and the paper will look at applications that support these functions. These functions are video publishing, blogging, micro-blogging, content syndication, social networking software, social news sharing, polls, podcasting, and widgets.

*A Note on Congressional Limits to Web 2.0*

Similar to Congress' slow acceptance of television cameras into the Capitol, their own rules have slowed the adoption of Web 2.0 applications on Congressmen's web pages. As late as the middle of 2008, members of the House of Representatives were not supposed to post, in their capacity as Representatives, on any web site that had commercial advertisement or material that could be thought of as campaign-related. This would leave a site like facebook.com off limits (Beizer, 2008). The rule was finally changed in October 2008 to allow Congressmen to post on websites outside of the house.gov domain, with the stipulation that the communication is for official purposes, and not campaigning (Beizer, 2008).

### **Methodology**

Congressional servers host many web pages – one for every Representative, one for every Senator, and then one or two for every House and Senate Committee.

Unfortunately, a full survey of every web site hosted on Congressional web servers was beyond the scope of this researcher's resources. Aside from sheer number of web pages within each site, these web pages can also change over time, rendering a snapshot of what one looked like one day potentially inaccurate a week later. Instead, it is useful to look at examples of what some web sites are doing, both with Web 2.0 technologies and without, to examine the effects Web 2.0 can have on constituent communication.

## **Web 2.0 Technologies**

### ***Web 2.0 Technology – Online Video***

#### *Description*

YouTube is one of the quintessential Web 2.0 web sites. It is a web service that allows people to upload and share videos. These videos can be viewed online, and even on some handheld devices. This sharing can happen in many ways. All of the video descriptions are searchable. There are also YouTube RSS feeds, taking advantage of another Web 2.0 technology. Most importantly for members of Congress, there are also specific “channels” that are a grouping of videos from one source. These channels also provide information from the source’s account profile and can include greetings and other supplementary items like comments and a list of channel subscribers (YouTube, 2009).

#### *Congressional Examples*

Congressman Jason Chaffetz<sup>1</sup> (UT-3) has taken the use of YouTube video farther than any other Congressperson. Many Congressmen who post videos of themselves only include clips from work, either giving a speech on the House floor, or during a hearing. These videos are generally shot by C-SPAN as part of their larger coverage of a hearing or the floor. Chaffetz has posted videos that are clearly shot by his staff, on their own camera. This in-office production also allows him to speak directly to the viewer.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://chaffetz.house.gov/>

Chaffetz's page also has a link to his entire YouTube channel<sup>2</sup>. Here, there is a mix of his self-made videos, clips from C-SPAN, and clips from appearances on television news. He also does something few other Congressmen do on their channels and links to other videos on YouTube in the 'favorites' section. This is exactly the kind of sharing that social networks thrive upon. Granted, two of the four favorites were videos featuring himself, just from other sources. But it is a start. Compare this to the YouTube channel from Representative Michael C. Burgess<sup>3</sup> (TX-26). First, it has not been updated for seven months. He too is talking to the camera, but his setting is not clear, aside from the fact it is in a studio.

Chaffetz and Burgess both have a section in their channel for registered users of YouTube to leave comments, but none have chosen to do so. Individual videos also have a place for comments, which other users have used sparingly. Comments left on YouTube are not automatically emailed to the account holder, so video viewers may have chosen to send a direct message, as the interface allows one to do.

### ***Web 2.0 Technology – Blogging***

#### *Description*

A blog is a "online diary or a journal that a person is keeping and updating on an ad hoc or regular basis" (Vossen and Hagemann, 2007). In theory, there is no requirement to use anything that would be considered Web 2.0 technology to create or maintain a blog – a web site could be updated by changing the HTML directly. The term

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/JasonChaffetz>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/drmichaelburgess>

itself was first used in 1995 (Vossen and Hagemann, 2007). However, blogging is associated with Web 2.0 because new technologies make it easier to update entries.

### *Congressional Examples*

Some members of Congress have a section on their websites called a “blog” that does not really deliver any Web 2.0 functionality. One example of this is Representative Lois Capps’ (CA-23) blog.<sup>4</sup> As of March 31, 2009, it had been updated just seven times in the last year, with three of those being in a five-day period. Secondly, there is no interaction with the blog reader available – there is no section for comments and no syndication option. Overall, it is hard to tell the difference in her blog and the press release page on the website<sup>5</sup>, as both are just a list of links.

Congressman Mike Honda (CA-15) links to his blog that is hosted on the web site Blogger.com<sup>6</sup>. He integrates this into his page hosted on house.gov by linking back to the house.gov site for things like constituent services. By using Blogger.com, Honda relieves his staff of some of the work it would take to maintain a blog.

Rep. Honda also allows comments on his blog. This is a typical blog function that not all Representatives are actually doing on their own blogs. It is not clear if not having a comments section is an attempt by Representatives to control their message, or if they are having difficulties in finding and utilizing, or in some cases creating, the software

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.house.gov/capps/media/blog.shtml>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.house.gov/capps/media/pressreleases.shtml>

<sup>6</sup> <http://mikehonda.blogspot.com/>

necessary to support this feature. Representative J. Gresham Barrett (SC-3) does combine a blog hosted on the house.gov domain with a comments section that only requires a valid email address<sup>7</sup>, showing it is possible.

### ***Web 2.0 Technology – Micro-blogging***

#### *Description*

While there are several micro-blogging sites, like Plurk and Jaiku, the current dominant company in providing micro-blogging is Twitter (McGiboney, 2009). Micro-blogging is unsurprisingly similar to blogging, but with a few limiting factors. The most important limit is that the length of any post generally must be shorter than 200 characters, with Twitter having a limit of 140 characters. This brevity also encourages more posts in a day. The length limit on updates makes it much more feasible to post via a handheld device than being tied to a computer (Java, Song, Finin & Tseng, 2007). Posting a new entry is sometimes referred to as “tweeting.”

Journalists are also taking advantage of elected officials’ availability on Twitter to communicate. George Stephanopoulos, a journalist with ABC News, has asked questions of several Senators with Twitter, with the Senators replying via Twitter (Thrush, 2009). Anyone following one of those Senators is able to see their responses.

#### *Congressional Examples*

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.barrett.house.gov/?sectionid=19&sectiontree=16,19&showallitems=true>

Currently, at least fifty members of the House of Representatives, as well as several Senators, have Twitter feeds (“Members of Congress who Twitter,” 2009). Zach Wamp’s (TN-3) twittering is a good example of how Congress’ rules are hampering members of Congress in fully using Web 2.0 to communicate with constituents. Aside from his duties in Congress, Representative Wamp is running for governor of Tennessee. He is maintaining a Twitter feed, <http://twitter.com/zachwamp>, where he mentions topics of general political interest. However, since this site links to his gubernatorial campaign website, he cannot post a link to it from his House website<sup>8</sup>. There is no indication on his House site at all that he has a Twitter feed that constituents can send him messages on. So while the Representative is taking advantage of Web 2.0, Congress is not.

Another Congressperson using Twitter is Representative Robb Wittman (VA - 1). Unlike Wamp, he is able to link to his Twitter page<sup>9</sup> from his House page<sup>10</sup>, although he does not do so prominently. His tweets, however, provide a lot of information. He sometimes updates his feed when he is attending a House Committee meeting. On March 18, 2009, he not only said what hearing he was attending, but who he intended to question, and even what he intended to ask. It would be quite easy to take it another step and use Twitter to get ideas for questions that his constituents may also want posed.

Wittman also uses his feed to post links to other forms of online media. He has links to video of himself on YouTube and links to the web site of a House Committee

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.house.gov/wamp/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://twitter.com/RobWittman>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.wittman.house.gov/>

that he sits on that has online video. He also links to updates on his own website. Overall, he is integrating Twitter into his total communications effort.

Representative George Miller (CA -7) does invite people to communicate directly with him on his Twitter feed<sup>11</sup>. He goes so far as to call his account “Ask George.” The reply speed is not always fast – it took him ten days to respond to a request for a copy of the Constitution sent on March 12, 2009 from “Mikey85875” on Twitter<sup>12</sup>. It is also interesting to note the time gap between some of his updates. There are no updates listed from July 29<sup>th</sup> to February 6<sup>th</sup>. Part of that could be explained by not wanting to use his Twitter account too close to his election – franking rules do prohibit using the frank ninety days before an election (Glassman 2007), and he may have been concerned with that. On the other hand, there were no updates for three months after the election either.

### ***Web 2.0 Technology – Really Simple Syndication***

#### *Description*

Really Simple Syndication (RSS) is a method for distributing content over the Internet. Typically, a person has to navigate to a particular website to see the content, and see if it were updated. This increases the effort it takes to keep up to date with web sites that were updated frequently, which is one of the main selling points of blogs. RSS provides a solution to the problem.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://twitter.com/askgeorge>

<sup>12</sup> <http://twitter.com/Mikey85875>

RSS is based on XML, extensible markup language. A website can put tags around its content and publish it as something called a 'feed'. People can use a feed aggregator, or reader, like Google Reader or Bloglines.com, to subscribe to these feeds. It is up to the aggregator to pull any new content in, leaving the user just one web site to visit to see the new content from any number of sites. Web sites that offer RSS feeds usually have a button or link right next to the content that can be subscribed to with an aggregator. There is another XML-based syndication format called Atom that some websites use in lieu of RSS.

### *Congressional Examples*

As a mark-up language, RSS can be used in conjunction with many other Web 2.0 technologies. Any type of content can be marked up in the RSS format and it is the particular reader program that handles fetching the data and displaying it for the reader. It does not appear that any Congressperson has yet released their own internally developed RSS reader, which is not surprising, given the resources required to develop such an application.

Using RSS is an easy way for members of Congress to move into a Web 2.0 direction. Even if they do not blog, many Congressmen put out press releases with some degree of regularity. If their press releases are put online, they can be made available in an RSS format. One example of this is Congressman Tim Bishop (NY-1). On his web site, the "Latest News" page<sup>13</sup> has a link to the page in RSS format at the top. Clicking it

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<sup>13</sup> <http://timbishop.house.gov/?sextionid=79&sectiontree=3,79>

takes you to the page with the RSS feeds. In the Mozilla Firefox and Internet Explorer web browsers, this page also displays links for easily adding the page into an RSS reader of the user's choice.

Some members of Congress try to simulate this functionality a different way. Instead of offering an RSS feed, they give readers an option to sign up to receive press releases via email. This way, the updates go to the subscriber's email box, instead of their RSS reader. While this may or may not be more convenient to the subscriber, the member gains an email address for all future communications. Signing up for an RSS feed, on the other hand, usually does not require any kind of personal information to be provided. Representative Allen Boyd's (FL-2) "Recent News" web page<sup>14</sup> is an example of this. The news stories are all laid out in chronological order, similar to the look of Rep. Bishop's page. Here, instead of a link to any type of RSS feed, there is a form where a user can sign up for updates on the left.

### ***Web 2.0 Technology – Social Networking Software***

#### *Description*

Social networking is itself not a technology. It is a concept that has been recognized by the field of sociology for more than a hundred years. At its most basic, it is a "grouping of personal relationships that each of us establishes" (Deans, 2009). Web 2.0 websites, like Facebook.com, MySpace.com, and LinkedIn.com, let users create individual profiles, and then allow users to link to the profiles of others. People can share

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<sup>14</sup> [http://www.house.gov/boyd/recent\\_news.shtml](http://www.house.gov/boyd/recent_news.shtml)

news, pictures, and other personal information with people in their network, or in some cases with anyone on the website. This facilitated sharing can increase the reach of information provided to any one person, as it spreads throughout their network (Vossen and Hangeman, 2007).

In addition to distributing information via passing it to an interested party on a social network, members of Congress have the option of joining a social network as themselves. This has two significant effects. First, it lets them establish a type of brand identity on a social network. Secondly, online social networks have been referred to as “the new public square,” a place where many Congressmen would like to be (Funk, 2009).

### *Congressional Examples*

Representative John Shimkus (IL-19) links to his Facebook page from his House web page,<sup>15</sup> although he does not highlight it or display it prominently – it is just a button on the bottom right. The link takes the user to a Facebook page with a picture of the Congressman, and pictures of several of his friends, but no information. A user cannot even verify it is John Shimkus, or see any contact information, until the user creates a Facebook account, and signs in. After signing in, all someone can do is see his friends, or add him as a friend.

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<sup>15</sup> <http://shimkus.house.gov/>

Contrast this to how Jo Bonner (AL-1) has his Facebook page set up. Like Rep. Shimkus, all he has is an indelible link from his official web page<sup>16</sup>. However, following that link takes the user to Bonner's complete Facebook page. There is his complete contact information – phone, email, and office address. There is the same weekly column that he has on his official site. There are also links to the pages of people who have signed up as his supporters (although the ability for someone to see their pages depend on their own privacy settings). Someone can see all of this without signing into or even being a member of Facebook.

Rep. Michelle Bachman (MN-6), in addition to a Facebook page<sup>17</sup>, has a link to a page on the social networking site Myspace.com<sup>18</sup>. Her page has more personal information than a typical Facebook page, which has sections for the Representative's favorite music, movies and books. It is possible to contact her through the MySpace service, but she does not list an alternate email address. There is also an area where other MySpace members can, and have, written messages to the Representative ranging from urging her to vote a particular way on a bill all the way to a friendly Thanksgiving greeting. Her Facebook page has more than twenty times the number of "friends" as her MySpace page, but that is most likely do to the current popularity of the two services.

### ***Web 2.0 Technology – Social News***

#### *Description*

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<sup>16</sup> <http://bonner.house.gov/HoR/AL01/Home>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Michele-Bachmann/7658849357>

<sup>18</sup> <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=384742300>

Websites can put links on content that allows users to recommend that content to others. One such service is Digg.com. Users submit content to Digg, and then other users can see and vote on the content. The more ‘diggs’ it gets, the higher it is ranked on the front page of digg.com, and in the appropriate subject list. Digg also allows a user to easily share content with others at the click of a link. Other similar sites include Reddit, Del.icio.us, and stumbleupon.com.

### *Congressional Examples*

A typical press release on the web page<sup>19</sup> of Representative Dave Reichert (WA-8) shows a common way to make it easy for a user to mark content to share via a social bookmarking site. There is a box next to the content of the press release, which has links for social news sharing on the web sites Slashdot, Del.icio.us, Google, Digg, Reddit, Newsvine, Furl, Yahoo, and Facebook. There is no indication of how those services were selected, but it is an impressive number. To share, a user must have an account with one of those services, but this does not require any identifying information to be sent to Congressman Reichert’s office. Unfortunately, there is no link from his website to see what people have chosen to share. The large number of services which provide social content sharing that he links to indicates that it could be too time-consuming to do much more in terms of integrating them into his site.

### ***Web 2.0 Technology – Online Polls***

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<sup>19</sup> <http://reichert.house.gov/News/DocumentSingle.aspx?DocumentID=115303>

Surveying public opinion is one activity that franking privileges explicitly covered (Glassman, 2007). What Web 2.0 does is it makes that a much easier proposition. Someone who takes a very technology-focused view of Web 2.0 may not consider the online poll a part of the movement; after all, polls are based on HTML forms that have been producible for years before the term “Web 2.0” was even coined (Aronson and Lowery, 1997). However, when considered along with the functions that Web 2.0 is supposed to support, like providing ways to generate feedback, polls certainly belong in the conversation (Murugesan, 2007).

### *Congressional Examples*

Congressman Sam Johnson (TX-3) does a good job of integrating a poll into the design of his website<sup>20</sup>. It is in an easy to spot location on the left side of the page, and highlighted with a star. The one problem with the poll is that the Representative may not actually be seeking much feedback on the issue presented. On March 30, he asks about people’s opinion on paying out bonuses to executives of American Insurance General (AIG). He frames the question as a yes/no question on if you are “outraged”, and uses the word “lavish” to describe the bonuses. Its placement is right next to a story that the Congressman is “livid” about the bonuses.

Much as others in Congress are doing with other Web 2.0 technologies already discussed, Rep. Johnson is not making it easy for people to share information. The results of his poll are not available, even after submitting an answer. Furthermore, he requires an

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.samjohnson.house.gov/>

email address to be submitted along with an answer, which may be the real goal of the survey.

Representative Tom Latham (IA-4) goes much farther in trying to pick the mind of his constituents with his online poll.<sup>21</sup> He only asks three questions, but they all have multiple possible responses. Additionally, the user can check more than one issue that is important to her, allowing for much more nuance than a simple yes/no poll provides. On the other hand, he requires even more personal information when submitting to this poll. He also does not make the results available.

Rep. Mike Honda, whose blog was discussed above, outsources an online poll as well as his blog. He uses a service called SurveyMonkey.com to host his question<sup>22</sup>. As far as a “survey”, it is just one question. However, it is an open-ended question, and it is clear the Congressman is looking for suggestions. Another difference in this survey and those mentioned above is that participation is not contingent upon giving the Congressman an email address or other personal information. The final difference is that there is also a link<sup>23</sup> to see other people’s submissions.

## ***Web 2.0 Technology – Podcasting***

### *Description*

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<sup>21</sup> <http://latham.house.gov/Forms/Form/?ID=173>

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=FkCiIgFwtJ8dD\\_2f8PoC73Og\\_3d\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=FkCiIgFwtJ8dD_2f8PoC73Og_3d_3d)

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.surveymonkey.com/sr.aspx?sm=rWFtGcW6neEg74NWUzDMt\\_2b8THT5qyahpFiMIj62NhO0\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/sr.aspx?sm=rWFtGcW6neEg74NWUzDMt_2b8THT5qyahpFiMIj62NhO0_3d)

The term “podcasting” is the amalgamation of the words broadcasting and iPod, a handheld digital music player made by Apple. A podcast is a digital file that can be shared and played on any number of digital music players (Jones & Stephens, 2007). A podcast is downloaded as a single file. The other major way of distributing audio online is to “stream” it. Streaming requires the listener to be connected to the Internet to listen, and broadcasts in that format are not designed to be saved.

### *Congressional Examples*

Representative Xavier Becerra (CA-31) is one of the Congressmen using podcasting on his House web site. For users of the media management program iTunes, from Apple, they can do even more. They can subscribe to the podcast, much like they would subscribe to a blog using RSS, and iTunes will automatically download new podcasts from the Representative as they become available. Every podcast is also archived, so they can all be obtained for free. One can also see what other podcasts people who subscribe to this one subscribe to. Finally, there is a section for ‘customers’ (the iTunes store primarily sells digital media) to rate and review this podcast, but as of March 27, 2009, none have chosen to do so.

Representative John Dingell has a podcast, “Dingellcast.” Installments can be accessed through iTunes, like Rep. Becerra’s, or downloaded and played directly from Dingell’s website<sup>24</sup> in an .mp3 format. His page also gives the option of getting the transcript of the podcast. Unlike with the iTunes interface, there is no place for user

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.house.gov/dingell/Dingellcast.shtml>

feedback directly on the page. He also provides a way to subscribe to the podcasts from the web application feedburner.com. One other problem with this is that there is no clear date of first broadcast on the messages.

Representative Mike Conway does not bother with the naming conventions of Web 2.0 – he has a section on his House web site<sup>25</sup> called “Congressman Conway’s Blog” which actually goes to a feed of audio files. Like Representative Dingell, he also has his podcasts available directly from iTunes.

### ***Web 2.0 Technology - Widgets***

#### *Description*

A “widget” is a small application, that can run on the desktop of a computer, or that can be embedded onto a web page. The widget is able to get data from another source, like another web page, and display it seamlessly, without the user having to take any action to see the result. Imagine it as a small RSS feed that can be placed anywhere (Gordon-Murnane, 2008).

#### *Congressional Example*

The Office of the Minority Whip (currently Rep. Eric Cantor) has put out a widget that some Republicans, like Sue Myrick (NC-9), have put on their house.gov web sites. Doing so gives the Office a small piece of real estate on their home page. The Office of the Minority Whip can put a link to other web pages, or news events in that

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.conwayblog.com/?feed=podcast>

box. The widget also has a link to a page<sup>26</sup> that describes how to install the widget on a person's own web page. This allows the Whip to distribute his message through social networks, bypassing the traditional media

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<sup>26</sup> <http://republicanwhip.house.gov/Widget/>

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined how Members of Congress can use technology to communicate with their constituents. While communication has been part of being a Congressperson since Congress was established, today's Web 2.0 technologies allow Congress to do more to share information. As Members of Congress are elected to represent specific geographic communities, they can now operate in the realm of online communities. Currently, the majority of members are using Web 2.0 technologies to supplement their older modes of communication, like mail and the telephone, which is like a line with a point on each end. We are beginning to see some in Congress expand that model into a networked model, where people can communicate with the Member, and also with each other, regarding what their representative is doing. This could be posting a comment on a blog, or sharing a video on Facebook. The people who make up a Congressperson's constituents are going to be using Web 2.0 regardless of what their Congressperson does; ideas are going to be shared throughout social networks, and they will be able to influence things like voting and contributing to campaigns. It is up to individual members of Congress to participate.

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