Old Technology, Outdated Rules Stifle Congressional Outreach

By Lauren Hepler
Roll Call Staff
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In the age of YouTube attack ads and tweets taking aim at the political opposition, online activity among Members of Congress is often taken for granted.

But with dated technological infrastructure and inflexible rules governing Member websites and social media, some Congress-watchers argue that lawmakers use technology to fuel partisan controversy more than to put expertise to use with the ultimate goal of more informed policymaking.

Lorelei Kelly, a research fellow with the New America Foundation's Open Technology Institute, said a "noise problem" has resulted from a hesitancy to truly engage constituents and policy experts, making it difficult to go "deeper than predictions and post-mortems."

"If you look at Congress as your grandparent from another era, they can't hear what we want them to hear," Kelly said at a New America panel discussion today. "It's the first branch of government, and it must be the most technologically savvy. It's the closest to the people."

She emphasized the need for a more integrated approach to technology, using all available channels to capitalize on expert knowledge from outside the Beltway to educate policymakers often dealing with a mishmash of highly complex issues.

"A lot of the Members are very cautious and do things like post press releases," Kelly said in an interview. "We're moving away from the broadcast model of one person talking to many. We have to figure out many talking to many."

Instead of relying on carefully planned social media profiles monitored by staffers, she said, the focus should be on harnessing technology for endeavors like real-time fact-checking, comparative analysis and advanced software to sort incoming emails, resulting in "peer-reviewed, locally relevant knowledge."

Jessica Lee, a senior legislative assistant for Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.), said during the discussion that staffers are increasingly using online, localized data. She mentioned the website costofwar.com, which breaks down spending on the Iraq and Afghanistan war by Congressional district.

Citing SOPA

Other Hill staffers say social media in particular is far from focused on nuanced policy debates.

"The Congressman would love for Twitter to be a place where we are having a policy-oriented discussion," said Kinsey Kiriakos, communications director for McDermott. "It seems like it's more of a place where people are having a conversation — usually about breaking news — and the only way to get any traction is to say something a little bit edgy."

In fact, House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) on Monday announced his annual list of "online all-stars" recognizing social media-savvy House Democrats. This year's MVP, Rep. Jared Polis (D-Colo.) has amassed just shy of 40,000 Twitter followers with multiple posts per day commenting on issues ranging from Internet piracy to legalizing marijuana.

Kiriakos added that the gap between nuanced policy information and fodder about current events is enhanced by strict regulations in the Congressional handbook for websites and social media.

Under the rules, Members are barred from using private advertisements, and they also can't engage in campaigning, "grass-roots lobbying" or attempts to "solicit support" for a given policy position. This category also prohibits even a link to campaign or advocacy websites.

"That does significantly play into the content that is posted," Kiriakos said. "We're using official government resources to communicate with our constituents."

At its best, however, Kelly envisions technology informing policy debates the way it did during the heated debate over online piracy legislation.

Silicon Valley Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-Calif.) took directly to the user-generated social media site Reddit and posted on Facebook about the Stop Online Piracy Act, voicing support for a "blackout" organized across major websites such as Wikipedia, Google and Reddit.

Lofgren detailed the Congressional process necessary to defeat the bill and also reposted a document by a group of California lawyers that explained the bill's various components in plain English.

"It went viral," Kelly said. "This is the type of thing that Members can do via constituents to inform the substance of the debate."

Rep. Jared Polis was recognized recently for his social media savvy. He has just shy of 40,000 Twitter followers.

SOPA might have been a unique case because of how the issue resonated among the technologically literate. Kiriakos questioned the viability of more sustained involvement in niche technology like Reddit.

"It takes a lot of staff time, and I question the benefit at the end of the day," Kiriakos said. When Members try to promote policy positions across multiple media platforms, from YouTube to Tumblr to Reddit, "the message gets muddled," he said.

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