

A CONNECTED CONGRESS

Best Practices for Engaging Constituents on Social Media

A Report Prepared by Echelon Insights
on Behalf of the Congressional Institute

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About Congressional Institute

Founded in 1987, the Congressional Institute is a not-for-profit corporation dedicated to helping Members of Congress better serve their constituents and helping their constituents better understand the operations of the national legislature. The Institute sponsors major conferences for the benefit of Members of the U.S. Congress as well as a number of smaller gatherings, all devoted to an examination of important policy issues and strategic planning. The Institute also conducts important research projects consistent with its mission, develops resources such as a House Floor Procedures Manual, and sponsors Oxford-style bipartisan Congressional debates.

About Echelon Insights

Echelon Insights blends rigorous opinion research with digital insights and data analytics to create next-generation intelligence. From political campaigns to non-profits to corporations, Echelon works on projects and builds tools that shed new light on how audiences think, act, are persuaded, and are activated.

1. Executive Summary

In the past decade, there has been nearly a tenfold jump in the number of adults using social networking sites, with sixty-five percent of adults adopting at least one platform.[1] In 2012, the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project found that 66 percent of social media users (or 39 percent of all American adults) participated in some civic or political activity on social media.[2] It comes as little surprise that Members of Congress have increasingly adopted social media in recent years. Twitter, for instance, reported that while only 44 percent of Senators and 35 percent of House Members were on Twitter at the start of the 112th Congress, by the time the 113th was sworn in, 100 percent of Senators and 90 percent of House Members had joined. Our own review finds that 99 percent of Republican House members are using Twitter, and 98 percent are using Twitter in an official capacity at the start of 2016. Today, established networks like Facebook and Twitter are just the tip of the iceberg with newer social media platforms — Instagram, Snapchat, Vine, Meerkat, among others — accounting for an increasing share of social networking activity.

With social media carrying increasingly more weight as a way to reach constituents, Echelon Insights conducted this study on behalf of the Congressional Institute to provide a best practices guide for constituent communications on social media, focusing on Republican House Members in the 114th Congress. In developing this study, we had to consider the unique challenges Congressional offices face when using social media. Like all social media users, Congress must try to adapt to the constant and rapidly evolving social media landscape, but distinctively, these offices must do so with generally limited resources (i.e. time, staff, money) and government ethics limitations. Acknowledging these points, we set out to address specifically how to overcome or adapt to such challenges and generate specific outcomes that are directly tied to the audience and purpose for which Members and their staff intend.

To provide a holistic guide to social media best practices for Members and Committees, we took a multifaceted approach to researching "what works," which included establishing a baseline of suggested best practices, testing those baseline recommendations, and then (based on the results) discovering which practices generated the highest levels of engagement on social media.

How the Study Was Conducted

The first step in our research was to define a standard set of objectives that Members can achieve by leveraging social media, and then to understand which strategies Member offices and Committees are currently pursuing to achieve these objectives. To accomplish this, we first had to document current social media "best practices," as perceived by Capitol Hill staff managing Member and social media accounts, as well as those suggested by the social platforms themselves and by experts in the field.

First, we interviewed twenty House communications and digital staff to get their opinion on which "best practices" currently exist for Member social media use, which platforms they are active on, what they have found to be effective and ineffective, what their concerns and challenges are, and how they manage the

[1] Perrin, Andrew. "Social Media Usage: 2005-2015." Pew Research Center. October 8, 2015. Accessed December 10, 2015. http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/10/08/social-networking-usage-2005-2015/.
[2] Rainie, Lee, Aaron Smith, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady, and Sidney Verba. "Social Media and Political Engagement." Pew Research Center. October 18, 2012. Accessed December 10, 2015. http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/10/19/social-media-and-political-engagement/.

Member's social media presence. These interviews were ongoing throughout the study from August 1 to December 16, 2015.

We then compared the recommended best practices of House staff with those defined by white papers, research studies, and the social platform itself. We then synthesized the overlapping best practice principles, and used those as a baseline for what to analyze and test in the second phase of our study: a quantitative data analysis of all House Republican engagements on the major social platforms, Facebook and Twitter, from July 1 to October 31, 2015.

This second phase tested whether best practices as perceived by Capitol Hill staff and the outside community actually worked in terms of generating more engagement by the Member or Committee's social audience. In this study, we define engagement as the rate at which audience members interacted with and re-shared content, relative to the total size of the Member's social media audience.

Analyzing the content Members and Committees posted on their respective social media accounts, we examined whether different kinds of content corresponded with levels of audience engagement. In this evaluation we asked: What's working? What do we see Members actually doing? Which subjects do Congressional social audiences tend to respond to the most? Which formats (text, photos, or videos) tend to work better? When is the best time to post? Are there engagement techniques that will reliably lead more people to see, respond to, and engage with content?

From this analysis we determined what kinds of content are most successful in engaging audiences on both district work and national issues, and how this is aligned with staff expectations. This led to a set of recommendations on best practices for managing a social media presence specifically tailored to the needs of Congress.

Key Findings

- Authenticity is a key ingredient of success on social media, according to every communications and digital staff member we interviewed. For those who run Congressional social media accounts, this means showing the more personal side of the Member, with a strong emphasis on the Member's work back in the district.

- Facebook and Twitter are used by almost every House Republican office, with 98 percent and 99 percent adoption rates respectively. 74 percent of all offices are on Instagram. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are considered by staff to be the most important platforms, in that order. Adoption rates for other platforms were lower, and usage of these platforms is often considered experimental. Of these emerging platforms, Snapchat was the most widely cited.

- Congressional staff use each platform for different purposes and to reach different audiences. All of those interviewed pointed to Facebook as a good way of reaching constituents, or the conservative base nationally. Member offices overwhelmingly believed the primary Facebook audience to be constituents, while those in leadership offices targeted a more national audience. Twitter is seen as a platform for engaging the press, opinion leaders, and online activists (who are more politically engaged than the audience on Facebook). Instagram is used to show a more personal, "behind the scenes" side of the

Member. There is some uncertainty as to whom the Instagram audience really is, but many staff consider it a good way to reach women and young people.

- Discussion of national issues and national leaders (including the president and Congressional leaders) was found to generate the most reader engagement across platforms. Despite the belief among staff that social media is primarily used to highlight constituent engagement, we found that Member and Committee accounts were primarily used for discussion of national policy issues and voting records, and this is the content that readers seem to respond best to.

- Testing and analyzing the Facebook and Twitter data that we gathered from Member and Committee official pages, we examined to what degree the suggested best practices were used and how effective they were in generating engagement. In many cases, we found important differences in what offices perceived to be the most effective and what the data actually showed to generate the highest engagement. For example, staff tended to say that photos were the most effective content type on Facebook, but our data showed this was the least engaging content (in terms of likes and shares). Videos were the most effective Facebook content, but were amongst the least used, especially by Member offices.

- Changes in social media algorithms, especially the Facebook news feed algorithm, can dramatically affect how different types of content perform, and it is critical for social media managers to stay on top of these changes. Looking at historical Facebook data from 2012 forward, we found that photos used to be the most effective Facebook news content through 2014, a time which coincided with the expansion of Facebook's native video player. Though video was most effective overall, other content types were effective in specific circumstances (photos for highlighting a Member's district, or long-form status messages for policy and legislative updates). There is a widespread belief, validated in our study, that offices should use a mix of different content types, and not rely exclusively on one format.

- On Twitter, hashtags are found to be effective at increasing the level of engagement, as is visual content. Including a link in a tweet was not found to increase engagement on Twitter. Asking readers to retweet content, while cited by few offices as a best practice and not very widely adopted, was extremely effective at raising engagement levels.

- Unclear ethics rules as they relate to social media, and a traditional culture within some Member offices that staff described as slow to integrate digital into the larger strategy pose the greatest challenges to effective social media use. The ambiguity of ethics rules poses challenges to messaging, content, and strategy leaving staffers to grapple with questions of what kind of authentic and personable photos may or may not be used, how Facebook ads can be used, and which rules apply to differing platforms. A traditional culture hesitant to fully adopt and leverage digital limits what kind of content is used, if and which emerging platforms are piloted, and to what degree digital is able to respond rapidly and directly to online opportunities.

How Offices Can Apply These Findings to Their Work

Social media is the most measurable form of communication there is. In our interviews, offices stressed using digital analytics tools to measure how audiences were were responding to their messages. Our study aims to take this measurement to the next level, providing a broader perspective and a cross-sectional view of what works across Member offices and Committees, with a large sample size set comprising tens of thousands of social media posts sent by 269 Republican Member offices, leadership, and committees.

While certain techniques can be found to work better at increasing social media engagement, offices will only be successful to the degree that they are generating compelling content that is authentic and aligned with the strategic objectives of that member or committee. In our study, we encountered offices with a laser focus on local issues or answering constituent questions through social media. While the data might suggest that this focus might generate lower engagement levels, these offices created compelling content consistent with their priorities and were able to generate above-average engagement as a result. Other offices have stood out in their focus on engaging an audience on national issues, and used distinctive techniques in furthering these goals. Different priorities dictate different strategic approaches, and the purpose of this paper is to highlight ways all offices can do better regardless of whether their focus is local or national.

Finally, we close by considering how offices can continue to improve their social media strategy given the constraints of time, staffing, and budget. The number of new social platforms is growing everyday, and these platforms are only becoming more differentiated and specialized. This offers staff a range of new ways to communicate — at the risk of spreading themselves too thin. As the number of platforms grows, what works on established platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and increasingly Instagram, also continues to evolve. This report gives offices a glimpse of what works in this moment, but carries a message that extends into the future: always be testing what works, because change is the only constant in social media.

2. The View from the Staff Level

Social media best practices for any individual or organization are defined by two factors: the goal behind using the social platform(s); and how effectively the platform is used to achieve the goal. Our research indicates that the common goal of all Congressional offices in using social media is to effectively communicate with (1) constituents and (2) the media and to maximize a Member's or Committee's reach and engagement with these audiences online.

After conducting in-depth interviews with Republican Members' digital and communications staff, our findings revealed that the biggest factor determining which platforms offices adopt was dependent upon what audience they were trying to reach and where they perceived the audience to live online.

Broadly, the Representatives' communications staff defined their social media goals as generating engagement and having high reach; these were commonly accepted metrics for gauging effective social media use. Engagement is defined as the degree to which an online audience is interacting with the social profile and messages. Reach is defined as the number of impressions or the number of people who saw the content. Freshman offices were more concerned with social growth than more established offices or Committees due to their naturally smaller base.

Generating engagement on social platforms requires an approach that is simultaneously social, data-driven, and creative. When a social platform is being used effectively and generating engagement, the success factors behind it can be defined as follows:

1. **Social:** Adhering to the platforms' social conventions; respecting the conversational culture of social media; using the platforms for two-way communication

2. **Data-Driven:** Using online analytics tools to inform strategy for generating engagement; understanding the algorithms behind the platforms and acting accordingly

3. **Creative:** Creating, generating, or procuring content that resonates with the specific audience; posting a mixture of humanizing content and official talking points or policy-driven content

Which Social Platforms Do Congressional Offices Adopt and Why?

To establish the baseline practices, we defined each social media platform's audience, the goal and purpose for using the platforms, and then segmented the platforms to develop sets of best practices for each. The baseline best practices were determined by comparing the interview respondents' suggested best practices and social media strategy with those published by the social platforms or in white papers and reports.

Unanimously, all of the Hill communicators and digital staff Members interviewed for this study felt it was essential to be on multiple social platforms to extend and maximize the audiences reached. Our initial study also found that Congressional offices and Committees are universally on Facebook and Twitter. The third most popular social platform is Instagram. The consensus among Member offices is that Facebook is the most effective means to communicate with constituents, and Twitter is best for Beltway insiders, media, and activists. While many Congressional offices like and use Instagram, multiple respondents could not say what specific audience they were reaching with the same degree of confidence as when

discussing Facebook and Twitter. However, one commonly held belief was that Instagram heavily skews toward women and young people.

Table 1.1: Platform Adoption Rate of Republican Member Offices and Committees

Platforms	Total Number of Representatives & Committees Using Platform	Rate of Adoption Across Members, Committees & Conference
Facebook	263	98 percent
Twitter	265	99 percent
YouTube	212	79 percent
Instagram	188	70 percent
Medium	41	15 percent

If Facebook and Twitter are used universally in the House, how many people are offices actually reaching and how much engagement do these platforms generate? In Table 1.2, we compare the platforms head to head. While the average House Republican Twitter account has about 1,000 more followers than the average Facebook account, Facebook generated more than five times the content shares of House Republican content from July to October of 2015. Meanwhile, offices active on Instagram had an average of 672 followers on the platform. The combination of follower counts with engagement data (where available) seems to reinforce offices' beliefs that Facebook is the platform with the widest reach and most engagement, followed by Twitter, with Instagram at a distant third.

Table 1.2: Following and Engagement on Top 3 Social Platforms

Platforms	Average Numbers of Followers of Offices	Shares or Retweets of House Republican Content (July-October 2015)
Facebook	16,604	1,158,305
Twitter	17,772	216,512
Instagram	672	N/A

The emphasis on using these platforms and subsequent rank reflects the national social media adoption insights released in a recent Pew Research Center study, which revealed that of online adults using social media, 71 percent use Facebook, 23 percent use Twitter, and 26 percent use Instagram.[3]

Of the offices we interviewed, all 20 reported using Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in an official capacity. The next most used platform was YouTube. Of newer platforms, eight reported being active on

[3]Duggan, Maeve, Nicole Ellison, Cliff Lampe, Amanda Lenhart, and Mary Madden. "Social Networking Fact Sheet." Pew Research Center. January 9, 2015. Accessed December 10, 2015. http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/

Snapchat (a video messaging platform), four on Periscope (live video), two on Vine (short, repeating videos), and one on Meerkat (live video). According to staff we interviewed, which platforms the individual Congressional offices use hinge on three factors:

1. What was a natural fit for the individual Member
2. Which audience they wanted to reach and;
3. Their purpose for using the platform

These considerations underscore what respondents universally perceived as a paramount social media strategy -- being authentic. Across the board, Communications Directors found stronger audience engagement when the post was true to the Member's personality and told a story about who they are and their work in Congress.

Relating the goals to the platforms and their use, one staff Member from a Congressional office distilled this point saying, "Depending upon the message and the audience, different platforms have different audiences and utility." Considering the utility of these platforms, another respondent outlined the widely shared belief of how the platforms can be used for the differing messages and audiences. "For Facebook," he said, the goal is to raise awareness for issues and policy that we think will positively affect folks who are Facebook fans *and* to show the more personal side of the Congressman." This is in contrast to Twitter, which the respondent said, "Twitter is mostly just raising awareness, generally. Instagram is showing the real human side of the boss."

There was one respondent who highlighted a social media use case not mentioned by other offices: using social media like Facebook and Twitter for constituent case work. Congressional offices answer vast numbers of constituent phone calls, letters, and emails every year. This respondent suggested that not integrating social media with the kinds of two-way constituent interaction that offices are already accustomed to was a missed opportunity. Such a function might be compared to how many companies have taken to directly responding to customer comments and complaints through social media. For example, AT&T responds to more than 100,000 social media messages monthly, with an average response time of 87 minutes.[4]

In the vast majority of cases outside of Leadership, social media in Congressional offices is handled by the communications director or press secretary. Given both limited resources and the day-to-day focus of those tasked with responsibility for social media, it is not surprising that the current focus is on communications, rather than on other functions. Putting it into the context of day-to-day operations, the individual explained, "If someone walked into your office, you would not leave them just standing there. Yet online, we do that all the time. We are not following the standards of conduct when it comes to digital activity, and that's not sustainable for politicians in the future."

Operational Challenges

Being authentic, using personable content, and leveraging platforms for different purposes, however, also presents the unique challenges of navigating house ethics rules and overcoming the traditional culture of offices not integrating digital with the overall strategy. Navigating house ethics rules was the most common challenge cited among the 20 Member and Committee professionals interviewed. Surprisingly,

[4] Pathak, Shareen. "AT&T responds to 100k social media mentions a month." Digiday. December 15, 2015. Accessed January 7, 2015. http://digiday.com/brands/inside-atts-social-media-customer-care-team/

the challenge posed by ethics rules wasn't that staffers could not post good social media content because of the limitations. The challenge was there was a lack of clarity on what the exact rules are and when they applied. The degree to which these rules applied was one issue in dispute - while some respondents explained they had to be incredibly cautious in making sure they didn't accidently post a photo that could be construed as campaign related or promotional of a brand or industry, others said they opted not to post certain content at all.

Beyond the degree of application, there was an inconsistency in how different platforms are governed. While some respondents said Instagram was great for posting personable, authentic content with the Member's family, another respondent said photos of family or grandchildren on Facebook violate the ethics rules. Two interviewees said that the problem with the House guidelines is that they don't keep up with the latest trends on social media, so what might not be addressed in the rules today, might be an ethics violation tomorrow. An additional illustration of this issue was also highlighted in respondents' discussing Facebook ads. While one interviewee said that Facebook ads violated ethics rules (and that was why the office did not use ads) another office simply said the ads could not contain a photo of the Member.

Outside of ethics issues, culture was considered the second biggest hurdle digital and communications professionals faced when using social media. Unlike ethics issues, there was a common consensus for this issue. The problems were that the legitimacy of digital is often in question and there is a lack of understanding of digital by senior staff. To quote one interviewee, "I think a lot of digital-centric staffers in the House are considered junior staffers, it's almost an entry level job to be digital in the House unless you're in Leadership roles (such as for the Speaker). You're typically considered low on the totem pole so it helps to educate chiefs and comms directors that someone good at digital shouldn't be a glorified press assistant, but should have a seat at the table."

The question of legitimacy of digital was described by five Congressional communications and digital staffers who said that social media is generally an afterthought rather than a priority and that they struggled to get a seat at the table and to get other staffers to consider social media as integral. This sentiment was suggested by other respondents who explained they had trouble adopting new platforms or getting approval to directly engage online, because they needed to get buy-in from someone else within the office. Generally speaking, multiple respondents said they still felt social media was generally not understood by decision-makers or among many other staffers.

Best Practices Across Platforms

Table 1.3: Top Best Practices Overall From Respondents

Best Practice	Number of Respondent Mentions
Be authentic	18
Post photos & graphics to drive engagement	18
Post a variety of content to engage different audiences	16
Use analytics tools to inform what kinds of content are most engaging, when to post, and what audience is engaged	16

Facebook

Establishing baseline best practices for Member offices on Facebook, we examined what the offices defined as the audience, purpose and goal for the platform. Within the context of those definitions, we then looked at the platform-specific social, creative and data driven best practices for reaching these objectives. From the in-depth interviews with Member offices the general consensus established that:

1. Facebook is the most used platform with the largest audience reach
2. The primary audience is constituents and the conservative base
3. Facebook is the best platform to use to communicate with constituents, especially among offices representing districts with older demographics.

We defined the standard best practices on Facebook based on what the majority of respondents considered most effective for reaching and engaging audiences. These strategies were:

1. Communicating in authentic, personable tone
2. Leveraging the algorithm and Facebook page-level analytics to target specific audiences; and
3. Posting relevant content that is diverse, unique, and timely.

Table 1.4: Top Best Practices on Facebook From Respondents

Best Practice	Respondent Mentions
Be authentic	18
Post a variety of content to engage different audiences	18
Post photos & graphics to drive engagement	18
Consider their Facebook audience to be constituents	17
Use analytics tools to inform what kinds of content are most engaging, when to post, and what audience is engaged	16

Posting about both local and national issues is important to take advantage of trending topics.	16
Specifically comment on local and constituent issues	16
Specifically comment on national issues	14
Post videos	12
Consider their Facebook audience to be the conservative base	4
Engage Facebook audience in the comments section	4
Upload videos directly to Facebook instead of linking to YouTube	3
Ask for followers on Facebook	2

Social Best Practices on Facebook

Posting personable or humanizing content is often cited as a key best practice of Members on social media. While there are many differing philosophies on what the best social practices are on Facebook, white papers from various academic studies, reports, and online communities share the common belief that authenticity is paramount in using Facebook. As a Facebook Government and Politics post put it: "Facebook users have come to expect a genuine experience when engaging with the friends and causes they value the most. Sharing photos from 'behind the scenes' and highlighting the human aspect [...] is the best way to let supporters see a candidate as a real person."[5]

Reflecting on how to be authentic and relatable on Facebook, one digital manager explained, "when you're talking about policy or press about something like the Iran deal, you're not going to get as much positive engagement as something like a wedding anniversary picture. It's going to perform better than a press release about the EPA. I like trying to tell a story about my boss and Republicans in general, caring about people, showing he's down to earth and friendly. Getting people in our district to see that side of him, it's good."

Among the 20 communications professionals interviewed, four suggested engaging with the Facebook audience directly in the comment section. When speaking with one respondent, the individual expressed that in an effort to come off as personable and positive, it was important to interact with people even if it was as simple as liking a comment or saying "thank you" to someone who comments on a post. This respondent's sentiment reflected that of several others in saying that it is difficult to engage audiences in the comments on Facebook for a myriad of reasons. Some offices have authority problems, raising questions such as, who signs off on responses? And is it worth the effort? Others suggested they might not have the bandwidth to continue engaging Facebook audiences in the comments.

[5] Facebook Government and Politics Team. "Less Than 100 Days Until Election, Facebook Offers Tips for Campaigns." Facebook. August 1, 2012. Accessed December 10, 2015. https://www.facebook.com/notes/government-and-politics-on-facebook/less-than-100-days-until-election-facebook-offers-tips-for-campaigns/10150937198965882.

Echoing this, another interviewee explained that while engaging audiences on Facebook in the comment section was looked upon unfavorably by their peers, from that specific Congressional office's experience, the Facebook audience loved it and it had even led to positive earned media for the Member. Another interviewee took engaging on Facebook one step further, addressing the problem of not having bandwidth, saying that to actually respond to people online in a substantive way means offices should not silo "digital" to just one person. "It's like saying just one person can use the telephone; every person in the office should leverage these platforms in some way — policy staff, communications directors, district staff — they should all be thinking about how they can integrate with these platforms and use the platforms to achieve their goals."

Data-Driven & Creative Best Practices on Facebook

Leveraging the Facebook algorithm is the key to generating engagement and expanding reach, and is the best data-driven Facebook practice. While the algorithm is subject to change, in early 2015 Facebook representatives explained that currently Facebook prioritizes "the importance of posts in news feeds based on five-levels of judging criteria. From the most important to the least, are:[6]

1. **User Interest:** The first and most dominant factor is a user's — or in the case of government, a citizen's — interest in a page or profile. This is determined by how recently they interacted with the page.
2. **Post Performance:** The second attribute is the performance of a post with other users — Likes, Shares and comments.
3. **Creator History:** Third is a page's overall track record as far as engaging its audience and drawing interest from followers.
4. **Post Type:** Fourth are the types of posts that are published — is it an image, video, text, link, etc. — and how often a user interacts with that kind of content.
5. **Timelines:** The last category is a basic measure of how recent the latest post is.

In light of this favored content, to generate wider reach and leverage the algorithm, Facebook representatives recommend:[7]

1. Varying the types of post to engage multiple kinds of users,
2. Uploading videos directly to Facebook instead of linking to YouTube
3. Posting both local and national content to take advantage of trending topics, and;
4. Finding opportunities to ask for followers.

Leveraging the Algorithm Using Analytics

Offices use Facebook's built-in analytics to both track and build strategies for increasing engagement and reach. Specifically, these offices stressed using analytics tools online to determine how much they were able to engage online audiences with varying content and messaging, track growth, and tailor their ongoing social presence to what performed well with audiences in the past. Strategically, many offices

[6] Shueh, Jason. "Facebook Unveils Verified Government Pages, Offers Best Practices in Social Sharing." GovTech. April 30, 2015. Accessed December 10, 2015. http://www.govtech.com/social/Facebook-Unveils-Verified-Government-Pages-Offers-Best-Practices-in-Social-Sharing.html.
[7] Ibid.

found Facebook's analytics helpful for determining what time of day to post to maximize impressions and to confirm that posts with pictures and videos were most effective at stoking engagement and reach.

One key to maximizing the effectiveness of Facebook posts was explained by a Hill communications staffer, saying that it was important to leverage the algorithm and use a combination of content, messaging, and posting frequently. To gauge how effectively they were leveraging the algorithm, multiple individuals who managed Member or Committee social media stressed that using Facebook analytics was essential in figuring out the right mix of content and frequency of posts to maximize engagement. In particular, some Member staff use the analytics to see when certain demographics and locations are active and post at times that constituents were most likely to see it.

Time of Day and Frequency of Posts

Many of those who manage Member or Committee social media also note that they use Facebook analytics to determine the best time of day to post. When asked what the best time of day is to post, respondents' answers varied widely suggesting that there was no consensus on this question. While posting frequently was considered essential as a basic element of social media best practices, the exact number of regular posts varied without consensus. What Member digital and communications staff did emphasize was that they posted less on Facebook (as much as 2-3 times a day) than on Twitter, and that many offices were keen on focusing on quality of content over quantity.

Leveraging the Algorithm by Posting Varying Types of Content to Engage Multiple Kinds of Users

Facebook's suggested best practice of posting various kinds of content such as videos, links, photos, graphics, or status updates is a widely agreed upon standard method of generating engagement and reach. All of the Member staff interviewed for this study indicated that this approach was paramount to engagement, however, their approaches and focus varied. While some Congressional staff Members said pictures were the single best way to drive engagement; other respondents were insistent upon an equal ratio of all content saying that the key to generating engagement and increasing visibility on Facebook was diversifying content and posting equal amounts of varied content using using links, pictures, and long-form text-only posts.

The Importance of Photos and Graphics

Eighteen Hill communications and digital staff who were interviewed about social media best practices specified that photos and graphics were key to posting engaging content on Facebook with some going as far as saying that posting on Facebook without a picture was actually pointless. Another respondent explained that while graphics are absolutely key to driving engagement, photos should be posted with links, because post with a photo or link will extend the reach at least a few more people.

Using Videos to Drive Engagement

In comparison to photos, only 12 of the 20 Congressional staff named videos as an essential key to stoking engagement from their online audiences. While almost all Congressional communications and digital managers acknowledged the importance of video, these staff Members were split with how much they felt videos actually engaged audiences. Videos were more favored by offices with larger staffs and of more senior Members. Facebook's new feature of natively embedding the video (rather than uploading a YouTube link) was named an ideal feature by two staff Members who were interviewed, who liked that the

video automatically played. Integrating videos, however, is still considered difficult both because creating videos requires more time and resources to create than a graphic, and as one interviewee explained, audiences didn't want to watch content past 60-seconds, saying: "Videos are really tough. Recently our Member went into the district and met with people and we made a video mini-series off of it. It was really moving content, but people wouldn't watch the video past 1 minute. Anything longer than 40 seconds people don't watch and won't get involved."

Posting About Breaking News and Trending Topics

All of the Congressional staff Members interviewed consider their Facebook audience to be largely two groups: constituents and a national conservative base (to whom they have won support through their reputation). More than half of the respondents said that capitalizing and posting content about breaking news or current issues was important to generating engagement. Respondents generally defined nationally trending topics as those listed on the side of Facebook and Twitter users' newsfeeds in addition to any widely discussed breaking news story (like the Pope's visit to the U.S. or the Paris terror attacks). The degree to which these individuals emphasized local versus national content was generally dependent upon the seniority of the Member and/or the focus of the specific office.

Posting About Local Issues

Sixteen of twenty of Member staff respondents said that discussing local issues on Facebook is an important strategy both for engaging constituents and for growing followers and support. One respondent explained this in the context of saying that he posts content on platforms, like Facebook, based on the role that platform should play. For example, this individual (like the majority of others interviewed) considered Facebook to be a primary platform to reach and engage constituents. Because of this, he said he used Facebook posts as a means for the Member to discuss policy decisions and why the Member voted how they did on legislation. Stressing the importance of making posts relevant and tailoring the message to resonate with constituents, this staffer harkened back to legislation funding the Department of Homeland Security. While this staff member suggested that most constituents might not take an interest in the issue of Homeland Security funding, the key to getting engagement on the issue was using social media to "make them understand how it relates to the local fire station."

Posting About National Issues

Fourteen of the twenty Member staff respondents felt national issues were essential topics to post about to drive engagement. The overarching principle of commenting on national topics was posting about content that was relevant to the news cycle and discussing the "hot topic" of the day. Like the local content, the use of national content and focus varied. Some popular national topics named by respondents included issues that took a traditional conservative stance on issues like emphasizing family, patriotism, the military and veterans, for example.

While some offices viewed national issues as a broad topic to generate engagement among constituents, others viewed discussing national issues in a more nuanced way that considered the audience. This distinction appeared when comparing the responses of Leadership offices with other offices. Using national issues to engage a national conservative base, one office explained is essential because "successful social media use equals building a follower base and generating interactions" and national content is a good way to get these results. This distinction underscores the audience the Member's office believes they

are reaching on Facebook — both constituents *and* a national base. National issues, he said, are geared towards activists "who are talking a lot online."

Facebook Advertising

Most offices interviewed did not use Facebook ads as part of their social media strategy. One reason digital managers gave for not using ads was that they did not feel ads were necessary, explaining that though the Member's campaign used advertising, "We don't do any ads on the official side. Haven't seen any real needs." This was significantly contrasted by one of the only offices that did use Facebook ads and said not to underestimate the power of advertising. This office used Facebook ads to gain followers and engagement, but did not use promoted posts to boost content often.

The challenge of understanding the limitations of ethics rules resurfaced in discussing Facebook ads with respondents. While one interviewee said that Facebook ads violated ethics rules (and that was why the office did not use ads) another office simply said the ads could not contain a photo of the Member. (While not prohibited by House ethics rules, ads do need to be approved by the Franking Commission and there are significant limitations on content.) Other popular reasons for not using Facebook ads also included that the ads weren't easy to launch without training, and that other decision-makers in the office refused to buy into the idea of spending money on Facebook. While getting decision-makers to "buy in" to ads was a challenge, this issue of buy-in was a larger issue extending beyond ads and considered a general hurdle for social media managers trying to generate engagement. As one individual put it, "The only way you are going to get increased engagement is to experiment and see what works, take some risk [and] it's tough to get the buy in."

Twitter

In contrast to Facebook, where Congressional communications and digital staffers believed the audience to be largely representative of constituents, and sometimes, the conservative base nationally, Twitter is considered the best platform to primarily reach and engage highly-active and influential individuals like the press and online activists. From the in-depth interviews with Member offices 16 of the 20 of respondents agreed that Twitter's primary utility for Member offices is reaching and engaging with press, opinion leaders and online activists. Comparatively, 7 of the 20 respondents specified that they used Twitter to try to reach and engage with constituents. As one respondent explained: "Twitter is good for getting reporters' attention" and "Twitter is more for opinion leaders, news media, and thought circles around specific topics."

Through the interviews from research reports and whitepapers, it was also established that standard best practices for effectively reaching and engaging with audiences on Twitter are:

1. Communicating in an authentic, personable tone
2. Tweeting content that contains a photo (or some other piece of media: a link or video)
3. Providing content that has a newsworthy quality — i.e. a Member's announcement or commentary on breaking news, a video or photo that has not been shared elsewhere or engaging in a popular conversation, like the Super Bowl.

Like on Facebook, respondents favored photos saying that using photos on Twitter increase engagement and help tweets stand out. However, they also cautioned against posting a press release or the same

content from Facebook without taking the platform into account. Twitter's own best practices suggest using hashtags and links to boost engagement.

Table 1.5: Top Best Practices on Twitter From Respondents

Best Practice	Respondent Mentions
Be authentic	18
Post photos & graphics to drive engagement	16
Engage press, opinion leaders, and influencers	16
Include links in tweets	12
Comment on breaking news	11
Use analytics tools to inform what kinds of content are most engaging, when to post, and what audience is engaged	9
Post or tweet videos	6
Engage in popular conversations (non-political)	5
Directly and authentically engage with Twitter users (retweeting or @mentioning)	2
Ask Twitter audience to retweet	1
Post unique content that audience cannot find elsewhere (newsworthy content)	1

Social Best Practices on Twitter

Authenticity

Twitter's best practice documents stress the value of sharing authentic content that will give audiences inside access to information that they might find elsewhere. The focus on authenticity spans the gamut from suggesting authentic tone to recommending unique photos and video to tell a story. For example, Twitter explains the popularity of using photos and videos suggest that authenticity and access to unique information are the most important principles for Twitter followers who engage with content.

Engagement

While authenticity is directly tied to engagement, Twitter also argues that it's important to use Twitter to define an individual's personality (in this case the Member of Congress) and suggests making tweets more personal by sharing "behind-the-scenes moments" to "keep [followers] coming back for more," and that "ultimately, personality wins on Twitter, and being as personal as you feel comfortable being is a great way to develop and build a loyal following."

To generate engagement, Twitter suggests a combination of four popular methods:

1. Directly and organically engaging users by: retweeting, mentioning or replying to others to build conversation around topics for which individuals want to generate awareness.
2. Asking Twitter users to retweet: "you can increase engagement on a Tweet just by asking for it. Government officials and leaders will often encourage their followers to retweet a post to show support or spread awareness for someone or something." [8]
3. Commenting on breaking news and relevant events to drive the narrative: "commenting on breaking news can have an impact on important political issues as they develop. [...] Twitter enables politicians to put out an immediate response on breaking news or ongoing debates, and allows leaders to engage directly about crucial policy discussions.[9]
4. Engaging in popular culture conversations: "Politics isn't the only thing politicians talk about. Twitter gives politicians a platform to connect with the public, whether it be over sports or the latest buzzworthy news item. It is an opportunity for politicians to show they are more than just a suit — or pantsuit — and to talk about something other than policy and votes and such. In doing so, they broaden their follower base and show off a little personality to humanize themselves."[10]

Direct and Organic Engagement

Directly and organically engaging Twitter users through replies and retweets of Twitter followers, and asking Twitter users to retweet were the two best practices least mentioned by Congressional digital and communications managers. Two respondents specifically suggested that directly and organically engaging users was a best practice on Twitter for Members of Congress, and only one respondent cited asking Twitter users to retweet as a best practice.

Commenting on Breaking News

Commenting on breaking news and relevant events to drive the narrative is a key Twitter best practice when the goal is to engage the press according to half of the Member staff who were interviewed. The common sentiment was stated well by one office: "Twitter is where to push what's happening, what's breaking, this is what needs to be stopped. It's more urgent. [In terms of the focus, there is some] balancing [of content] between district/local news journalists and national journalists. It just depends on what content is available and what it's about."

Some offices use Twitter for real time reporting as much as for pushing statements on top relevant news stories of the day. Discussing the day-to-day approach, one office explained that they use Twitter "for reporters. We use it to report in real time where the Member will be, what he is doing, the way he is voting, highlight his schedule and the also to push press releases. The focus is rapid reporting, frequently." Another office sharing this approach also used it to "show the Congresswoman in action — in a hearing, voting — anything that is showing her doing something for the people is worth showing. Twitter is great for real-time, but has a little less interaction."

[8] "Tweeting a Call to Action in Government." Weblog post. Media.Twitter.com. Twitter, 2014. Web. 21 Aug. 2015. <https://media.twitter.com/best-practice/tweeting-a-call-to-action-in-government>.
[9] "Using Twitter to Facilitate Policy Change." Web log post. Media.Twitter.com. Twitter, 2014. Web. 21 Aug. 2015. <https://media.twitter.com/best-practice/using-twitter-to-facilitate-policy-change>.
[10] "Politicians Talking about Sports, News, TV and More." Web log post. Media.Twitter.com. Twitter, 2014. Web. 21 Aug. 2015. <media.twitter.com/best-practice/politicians-talking-about-sports-news-tv-and-more>.

Other offices also use Twitter to influence the media narrative. As one respondent explained: "We use [Twitter] for rapid response, and to reach media, reporters, political activists/strategists. [We want to make] sure perspective is known." A slightly more robust approach was described by a different interviewee who said her key Twitter approach was trafficking referral to the website on Twitter, converting Twitter supporters to rapid response activists online, and using that base a means to drive the conversation online. While Member offices often commented that Twitter was essential to rapid response to media stories, there was only one office that mentioned an ongoing effort and goal of activating Twitter supporters to steer online conversations in favor of the Member and office's position.

Data-Driven Best Practices on Twitter

Posting Rich Media

According to Twitter, photos are the most effective means to augment engagement, boosting retweets by 62 percent; this means photos are twice as effective as hashtags (when used individually, not combined). Using statistics, quotes, and video URLs are all equally as helpful in spurring engagement, boosting retweets by 16 percent, 14 percent, and 14 percent respectively.

Using Photos on Twitter

Posting photos is the most effective means of enhancing engagement on Twitter.[11] Tweets with photos get 1.5 times the number of Retweets compared to the average Tweet, and 2.3 times the number of favorites.[12] Verified Twitter users in government and politics receive 62 percent more retweets than they would expect normally. Sixteen of the 20 Member of staff respondents largely agreed that pairing photos with tweets was an excellent means to garner engagement with one respondent explaining, "pictures are the best at driving engagement on any platform. I hardly ever put out a text-only tweet or a tweet with just a link — if it doesn't have a picture, people don't care about it." Another respondent specifically said "more than half the time" she tries to include a graphic.

Earned Media with Photos

With Congressional communications and digital managers largely defining reporters as their primary target audience on Twitter, Member staff explained photos are a helpful means to make tweets stand out and get the media's attention. "Twitter is a main news source. You need to keep content fresh. I think press releases still get [reporters'] attention. Twitter has lots of press. Press people are always looking at phones. I don't know specific ways to call them out, but personally, I know reporters and I can give them a heads-up and call them and say 'did you see this?' Graphics with tweets help things stand out."

Tweeting Fresh & Original Content

When asked what common mistakes people make in using Twitter, Member staff largely agreed that the content needed to be fresh, clear and grab people's attention, which is why using photos or graphics is important. As one respondent put it, Twitter content needs to be, "short and catchy. Graphics catch attention." Expanding on the importance of unique content to get media attention, another interviewee pointed out that, "people tend to make the mistake of posting the same content over and over, and not

[11] Ibid.
[12] "Using Photos in Government Tweets." Web log post. Media.Twitter.com. Twitter, 2014. Web. 21 Aug. 2015. <https://media.twitter.com/best-practice/use-photos-share-media-to-stimulate-activity>.

getting candid shots or pictures from different angles. People shouldn't be using Twitter to tweet out the subject line of a press release."

Noting that both on Facebook and Twitter photos are considered important means of engaging users, respondents were asked if popular Facebook content translated into popular Twitter content. If you post something that generates high levels of engagement on Facebook will that same content generate high levels of engagement on Twitter? "Typically a popular post on one platform doesn't cross over, but any time you are able to use multimedia on Twitter, it's usually a good change instead of a re-tread of a press release. What is important, is to take lessons from one social platform and see if it applies to others [in terms of what makes people engage]. One type of post may do well on Facebook, but not as well on Twitter, but it's still a good post."

Making a distinction about this point, the same respondent further explained that while a Member or Committee can discuss the same topic or focus on the same topic across multiple platforms and see how much engagement it generates, he considered posting the exact same content across all platforms to be a bad practice. "Carbon copying a post from Twitter to Facebook is a rookie mistake. You can't just put a graphic made for Facebook on Instagram. You have to be protective of the platforms and sometimes comms directors or digital folks don't have the seniority, wherewithal, or knowledge to treat the mediums differently."

Using Hashtags, Videos, Links & Statistics

According to Twitter's best practices white papers, hashtags generate 30 percent more retweets, [13] videos generate 14 percent more retweets, and [14] links generate 14 percent more retweets.[15] Additionally, Twitter's white papers say that tweets containing a number data and statistics "can drive political discussion on Twitter and the fact that Tweets with digits or numbers in them also get 16 percent more Retweets shows how the raw facts can be very powerful when presented on Twitter. The data can provide the substance behind the argument, showing that your opinions are informed and based in facts. And as this Vine from the @USCensusBureau shows, those numbers can be combined with video — which gets 14 percent more Retweets than the average (that includes all types of video)."[16]

Links were popularly suggested by Congressional communications and digital managers to spur engagement, and was suggested by 12 of 20 respondents. When asked if calls to action were necessary to induce Twitter engagement, one respondent shared: "Twitter is more link driven. It's better to put a commentary with a link that to copy and paste text from op-eds and press releases if you're trying to drive a story." In contrast to the 16 respondents who suggested using photos and links in tweets, only 6 of respondents said using videos in tweets as another kind of essential content.

In the context of Twitter being a rapid and constantly updating stream of news, one digital staffer for Congress said he supported using all the content available including videos and links, and not shying away from text-only tweets. He explained that he shared anything: "news articles that paint Committee or chair in good light, anything chairman puts out (op-eds), press releases, real-time updates, good quotes, videos

[13] "Government & Politics: The Impact of Tweeting with Photos, Videos, Hashtags and Links." Government & Politics: The Impact of Tweeting with Photos, Videos, Hashtags and Links. Twitter, 2014. Web. 26 Oct. 2015. <https://media.twitter.com/best-practice/government-politics-what-works-best>.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

(if there's a really good interview) — Twitter is the main way to engage with people on broad level. [On] Twitter you can post more content without worrying about filling [up people's] news feeds."

Other Social Platforms

Looking at platforms that might be less frequently adopted by Member offices, we asked respondents on which mediums they were present. Instagram is the third-most used platform. All 20 of the offices interviewed confirmed that they were on Instagram and considered it a primary platform.

In contrast, newer platforms and video platforms were less cited. The fourth most mentioned platform was YouTube, but generally respondents had to be asked if they had an account as YouTube and other video platforms were seen as a means to share video, but not a social platform used directly to reach constituents. Ten offices indicated that they had YouTube accounts, eight indicated that they were on Snapchat, four mentioned Periscope, two mentioned Vine, and one mentioned Meerkat.

With authenticity considered principal to Members' social strategy in generating engagement and appealing to audiences, it was important to respondents that whatever platform the Member was on was a "natural fit" for their personalities. Because of this need for a natural fit, there was a higher adoption rate of newer platforms by younger Freshman Members, and reservation over these among some senior Members. This may be one reason that only half of the Member offices interviewed used Snapchat, and even fewer Periscope or Meerkat.

Older platforms like Flickr, Google+, and YouTube are in use by offices, but these are not a primary means of outreach, instead generally serving as repositories for content. The interviews with Congressional staff indicated that there has been some adoption of newer platforms into their social presence (like Snapchat, Vine, and Periscope); however, these platforms are regarded to be more experimental than essential to the overall strategy. The value and purpose for using some of the newer platforms is commonly questioned, because as many respondents explained, they were not entirely sure if and if so, how much of their audience on these platforms was comprised of constituents. Emphasizing the value of knowing who a Member or Committee's audience is, one staffer said "it wasn't important which platform you are using, those are going to change as [online] habits change. The question is where are the constituents? The goal is to reach them. That's what's important."

Related to this question of value and purpose are the second and third most recommended best practices: use photos and videos to generate engagement and increase reach, and track which posts work to inform future content. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, where there are both built-in and third-party analytical tools that tell Congressional communications and digital staffers who their audiences are, what issues those audiences engage with, and how engagement varies based on content and messaging, platforms like Instagram and Periscope don't provide this same degree of feedback. When we spoke to Congressional communications and digital managers, a common question about the audience on these platforms were: are the audiences voters in Member's state? Are they Members of the media? Are they younger or older? Men or women?

Table 1.6: Number of Respondents Using Newer Platforms

Newer Platforms	Respondent Offices Using this Platform
Instagram	20
YouTube	14
Snapchat	8
Periscope	4
Vine	2
Meerkat	1

Best Practices on Instagram

Of the social platforms beyond Facebook and Twitter, Instagram is widely adopted and was considered by many respondents to be a primary social platform, albeit it has not been adopted universally among Republican Members of Congress like Facebook and Twitter. In describing why they liked Instagram, respondents explained that they liked to use it to show an authentic, personable side of a Member or Committee, and also said they largely shy away from policy discussion on the picture-based network.

While Instagram has been widely adopted by Congressional offices, there is some hesitation on the part of communications and digital staffers because it is difficult to tell exactly who comprises an Instagram following. Despite this, multiple respondents indicated Instagram appealed to them because they believed that they could reach a younger audience. This assertion is corroborated by a 2014 Pew research study, which reported: "Roughly half of internet-using young adults ages 18-29 (53 percent) use Instagram. And half of all Instagram users (49 percent) use the site daily."[17]

Table 1.7: Top Best Practices on Instagram From Respondents

Instagram Best Practice	Respondent Mentions
Good for showing personality, behind-the-scenes	13
Use as much or more than Facebook & Twitter	8
Good for reaching a younger audience	5
Not sure who the audience is	4
Can be used for messaging including some policy discussion	3

[17] Duggan, Maeve, Nicole Ellison, Cliff Lampe, Amanda Lenhart, and Mary Madden. "Social Media Update 2014." Pew Research Center. January 9, 2015. Accessed December 10, 2015. http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/01/09/social-media-update-2014/.

Should not be used for policy discussion	2
Not effective at generating earned media	2
Post videos on Instagram	1

Using Instagram to Convey Personality & Authenticity

All of the respondents interviewed confirmed that their Member or Committee had Instagram and considered it a primary platform. Of those twenty respondents, eight indicated that they used Instagram as much as Facebook or Twitter, and the remaining five said they used it less. Interviewees largely agreed that using Instagram was excellent for showing Members as people. The most shared opinion among the interviewees was that Instagram's best feature was its ability to share a personable, authentic version of the Member or office they represented online, and that it was a good means for storytelling.

One of the respondents who indicated that he used Instagram as much as Facebook and Twitter, said while he liked Instagram for making his Member appear more personable, he was "not 100 percent sold on it" explaining that, "It's fun, but not the best for getting messages across. It's a mental thing on Facebook, people don't want to read and Instagram [people want to read even less]. People on there not in tune with politics, and don't want to be overly political. Instagram is mostly good for behind-the-scenes stuff." The staffer added, "It's good to show Members as people and Instagram can show their personality, but it doesn't seem that useful on the Committee level though."

Using Instagram for Policy Discussion

Like the interviewee quoted above, other respondents indicated they generally agree: Instagram is not a good platform for policy or Congressional messaging. Thirteen respondents indicated the platform was used for to channel authentic, personal content. In contrast, only five respondents discussed using the platform for messaging with two respondents adamantly saying that Instagram was not for policy discussions, and three saying there was potential for messaging using the platform.

Knowing the Audience on Instagram

Knowing specifically what audience an Instagram post reaches and engages (demographically) is a common concern shared by respondents. Five of the respondents indicated that Instagram was ideal for generally reaching younger audiences, though there wasn't a shared assurance of whether or not this was true. One respondent confidently suggested that Instagram is for women and millennials, while different interviewee said he was not at all sure, saying, "Instagram is a weird bag of people. It's hard to figure out who is who. It's become sort of a catch-all for whatever we're doing."

Nonetheless, respondents seemed open to trying to reach these groups using Instagram without knowing who their audience is. Reflecting this view, those who said Instagram was good to use for younger audiences expressed similar views to this: "I think a younger crowd might be accessed through Instagram and Snapchat. It's narrowing the focus based on audience, but I'm not [against] the idea of expanding to mediums that might help me reach these people."

Establishing a Baseline for Best Practices: Key Takeaways

1. Authenticity is considered the #1 most important best practice in Facebook use.
2. Of the Hill communicators & digital strategists interviewed, all agreed that constituents and the conservative base are the primary audience and the purpose of Facebook is to communicate with those groups.
3. Twitter's primary utility for Member offices is reaching and engaging with press, opinion leaders and online activists, according to 16 of 20 respondents.
4. Both on Facebook and Twitter respondents considered using photos & graphics to be the second-most important best practice (after authenticity).
5. Multiple respondents said leveraging the Facebook algorithm was important and that to do so it was important to diversify content and messaging and post frequently.
6. Almost all respondents said that they used different messaging on Twitter than that which they posted on Facebook.
7. Directly engaging with Facebook comments was one of the least-adopted best practices for multiple reasons including not having enough bandwidth and difficulties in getting approval.

3. Putting Best Practices to the Test

The second phase of the study was to gather data from social media platforms and conduct an analysis that would allow us to test many of the best practices shared by Congressional staff. This would allow us to answer questions such as: Do visuals really work best, as many interviewees suggested? Do constituents respond most to posts about local constituent engagement or national issues? What is the best time of day to post?

This portion of our study primarily focuses on Facebook and Twitter due to their near-universal adoption amongst Members of Congress, as well as the ability to access data from these platforms through APIs or third-party analytics tools. Instagram is addressed in this section as well, but our review of the platform was largely manual and more limited in scope. In total, we collected 148,488 Facebook posts and 251,620 Twitter engagements from Republican Member offices, Committees, and Leadership. The primary study period for both platforms was July 1 to October 31, 2015, though, in some cases, the Facebook data collected reached back to 2009, allowing for further study of how Facebook engagement has changed over time. We then analyzed the data on both platforms across a variety of different dimensions, including subject matter, posting formats (such as photos, links, or text-only status updates), and engagement techniques (such as asking people to share or retweet, or replying to followers).

Engagement on Facebook and Twitter: A Comparative Overview

Facebook and Twitter are the only social networks with near universal adoption by Republican Members of Congress. In total, we identified 263 distinct House Republican Facebook accounts and 265 Twitter accounts. Only one Member with a Facebook page did not have a Twitter account. The next most popular social network was Instagram, where 74 percent of House Republican Members or Committees were active.

From July through October 2015, House Republicans generated 25,477 unique Facebook posts and 27,679 tweets. While both platforms were on roughly equal footing in the number of posts, Facebook generated higher levels of engagement. House Republican Facebook posts were shared a total of 1,158,305 times during the study period, compared to 216,512 retweets of House Republican content on Twitter. On average, a post was re-shared five times as often on Facebook as on Twitter.

Raw engagement totals only tell part of the story. We also aim to understand *how* Congressional offices are using these platforms to accomplish their objectives, evaluating both what offices *do* and whether it *works*. To do so, we needed to develop a common currency for measuring social media engagement that applied equally well across platforms to social followings of different sizes.

How Engagement is Measured

First, we ask how social media managers on Capitol Hill currently measure success in the social media realm. In doing so, staff cited both reach (the number of people reached through social channels) and engagement (the rate at which people interacted with content) as metrics of success. Certain metrics, such as follower or “Like” counts are publicly available. Others are made available only to those running social media accounts, including total views on social media content or clicks back to a website. Measurement tools may differ from office to office, and all relevant metrics are not publicly available. In light of this, how could we establish a common currency to evaluate the effectiveness of social media across offices?

Primarily, we do so through an engagement score. The engagement score is a function of the success of an individual post as judged through shares, likes, or retweets, divided by the total size of the audiences in likes or follows. We make a final adjustment to account for a tendency for an engagement score to decline as audience size grows; for example, an audience that is 100 times the size may only be 40 times as powerful at spreading content, as more casual, less engaged followers are added beyond the initial "early adopter" core. These adjustments are specific to each platform, and the full methodology is documented in the Appendix.

We also needed to account for the fact that data from social media can also be highly variable, with a single "viral" post receiving tens of thousands of likes or shares, to a degree that it throws off findings for any post in that group. We needed to account for the fact that certain types of content sometimes appear wildly more successful on average, when in fact the effect is caused by a tiny number of outliers. As such, when analyzing posts, we opt to report on median engagement scores, which aim to measure how a typical piece of content — one where half of content performs better, and the other half worse — might perform.[18]

What Do Members Communicate Through Social Media?

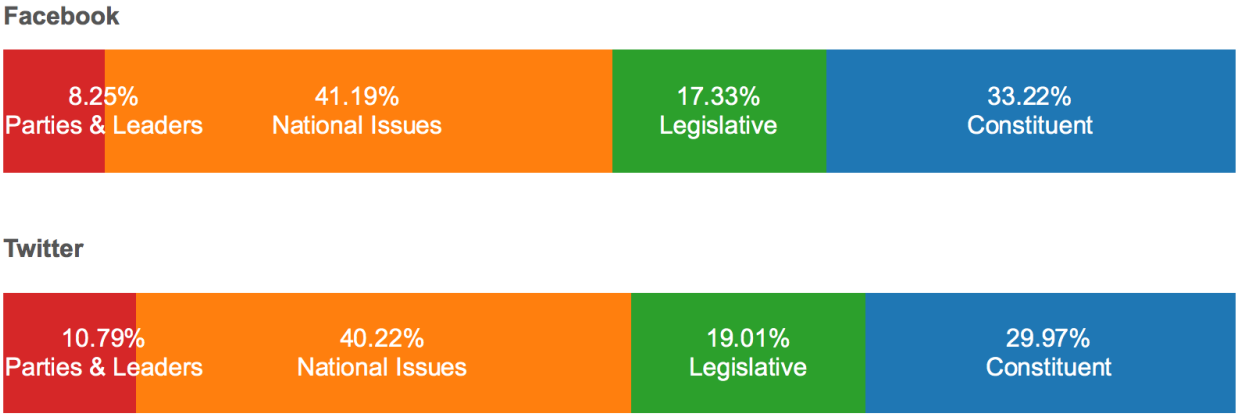
Social media activity by Members of Congress reflects the broad range of responsibilities inherent in their roles. This includes advancing legislation on national issues and solving problems for their constituents.

This dual role is reflected in what Congressional offices choose to communicate through social media. Throughout this study, we group social media posts into four broad categories: 1) Constituent-focused and district-related postings, 2) Legislation (which include references to specific legislation and votes), 3) National issues, and 4) Political parties and leaders (which include references to President Obama, the political parties, and Congressional Leadership). We delve further into this grouping methodology in the Appendix.

Across both Facebook and Twitter, discussions of national issues are most common, representing more than 40 percent of the mentions indexed to a topic across all categories. This is followed by Constituent/District issues at 33 percent on Facebook and 30 percent on Twitter, and legislative conversation at 17 percent on Facebook and 19 percent on Twitter. Discussion of national parties and leaders came in last, at 8 percent on Facebook and 11 percent on Twitter.

[18] Most charts in this report are box-and-whisker plots of Facebook and Twitter engagement scores. These charts show a line for the median engagement score and shaded regions ranging from the 25th to the 75th percentile of performance. These visualizations are helpful in understanding not only how a typical piece of content performs, but also how the distribution of the data over various levels of performance.

Figure 2.1: Share of Total Posts in Each Content Group for Facebook and Twitter



Across both main social platforms, the focus is national more than local. 70 percent of total mentions on Twitter and 68 percent on Facebook focused on issues, Leadership, or legislation (though of course, there may certainly be overlap between between these groups).

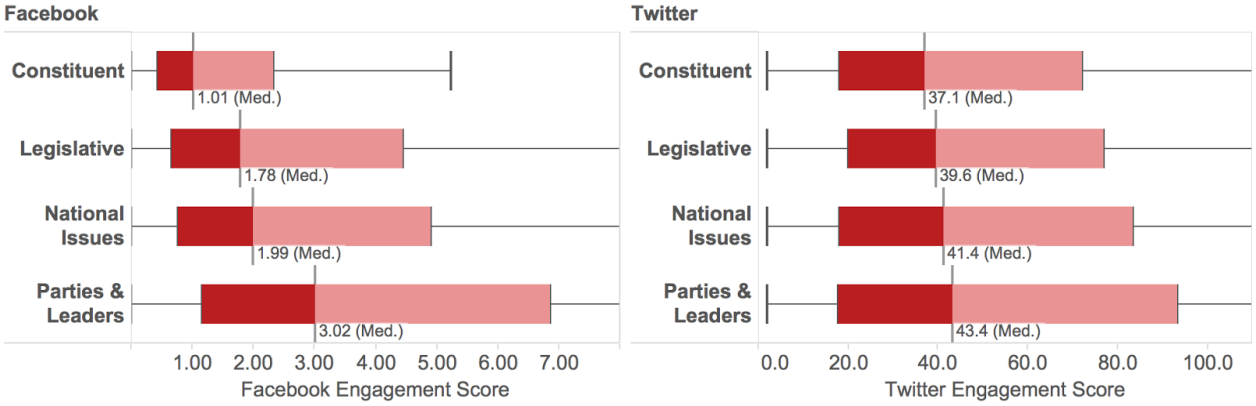
This finding also highlights a potential contrast between best practices as outlined by practitioners on Capitol Hill, and actual usage. In our interviews, staff stressed the importance of having a unique strategy for each medium, with Facebook being used to reach constituents and Twitter as a channel to reach the media and influencers. At least when it comes to the subject matter being addressed, the differences are smaller. Facebook is somewhat more likely to be used to discuss constituent matters, and Twitter is somewhat more likely to be used for political and legislative discussion, but the differences are not great. The pattern we observed was largely one of messaging consistency across platforms.

Finding the Content That Works

While much discussion of social media effectiveness is focused on format (whether a post includes video, photos, or just text), the one common denominator of success across channels is content: What is it that an office is trying to communicate, and how does the audience generally respond to this message or subject matter? Can we find meaningful differences in the types of content that people will respond to across social channels?

In analyzing both Twitter and Facebook data, the answer when it comes to our broad content groupings is yes. A focus on national policy and issues is generally rewarded with higher performance across Twitter and Facebook.

Figure 2.2: Engagement Score Across Content Groups



On both Facebook and Twitter, posts about parties and leaders performed best, followed by posts about national issues. District level posts performed less well across both channels. In one sense, this is not surprising: national issues are relevant to all Americans and elicit strong reactions across social audiences in a way district-specific posts, which are relevant mostly to people in a local area, may not. Yet there appears to be a major difference in how this reaction plays out across channels. While national topics performed *much* better on Facebook, they only performed slightly better on Twitter.

One possible explanation for this trend lies in the distinctly different ways that Facebook and Twitter display content to their users. Facebook employs an algorithmic timeline, where better-performing content is more likely to be shown to more users, whereas Twitter uses an unfiltered timeline, where one is more or less equally likely to be exposed to all forms of content regardless of how well it initially performs. The minor differences in engagement we see on Twitter are what we might see on Facebook if it too did not optimize posts with higher early engagement.

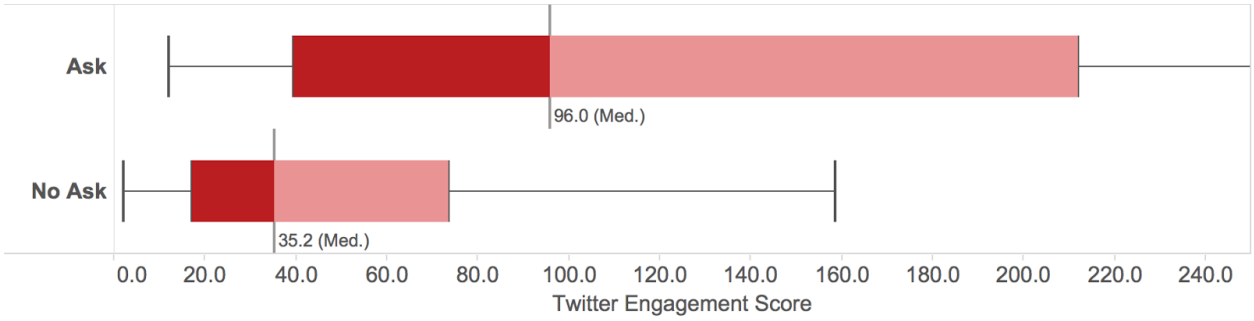
One consequence of this is that Twitter provides more of a level playing field for content or engagement techniques. Despite the perception that Twitter is seen as a hyper-charged environment for the media and political influencers, and Facebook is seen as a home to constituents, local content performs better compared to national content on Twitter than Facebook.

Spurring Engagement by Making the Ask

On both Facebook and Twitter, Members have experimented with the strategy of asking for likes, shares, or retweets within the content itself. This appears to work across platforms. Explicitly asking for users to retweet or share content significantly increases engagement on both Twitter and Facebook.

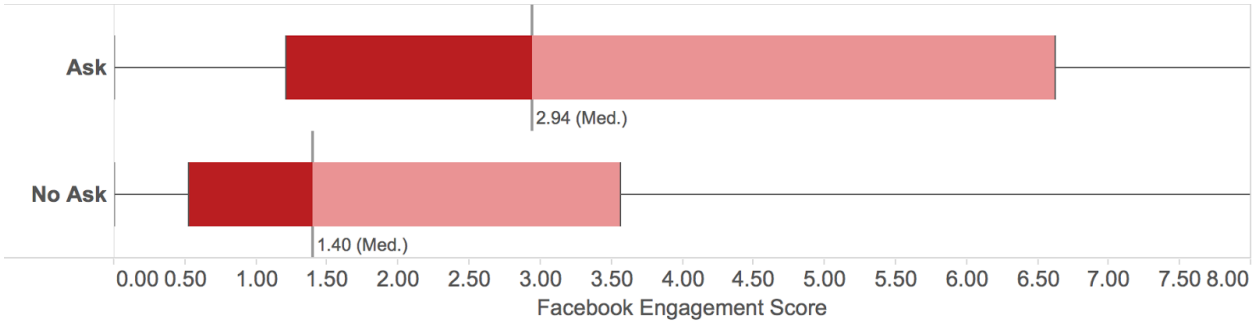
On Twitter, tweets that included a retweet request had an average engagement score ten points higher than tweets that did not. The effect is robust for all office types, whether Leadership, rank-and-file Members, or Committees. Tweets were classified as "asking for a retweet" if they contained phrases such as "RT if you agree," "Please RT," or "Share if you agree."

Figure 2.3: Engagement Score of Tweets with Calls to Action Compared to Those Without



On Facebook, posts that ask for shares or likes stand out even further, seeing almost twice as much median engagement than other kinds of posts.

Figure 2.4: Engagement Score of Facebook Posts with Calls to Action Compared to Those Without



While some metrics and techniques are directly comparable across platforms, some are specific to individual platforms, and we delve into these next.

Measuring Engagement on Facebook

To determine and potentially confirm the accuracy of the suggested baseline Facebook best practices, we analyzed Facebook data collected from all current Republican Member offices and Committees for which data was publicly accessible via the Facebook API.[19] In this analysis we examined the significance and efficacy of using social and data-driven best practices to generate engagement. Our Facebook analysis looks at types of content (photo, video, status, or link), how different content types perform according to subject matter, and the best time to post. We then conduct case studies of two Members who have each seen success with distinctive approaches to constituent and national outreach on Facebook.

Types of Content

There are four major types of posts used on Facebook: links, photos, videos, and statuses. Most Members use different combinations of these types of posts based on different beliefs about what works and what doesn't. At the staff level, there is a belief that photos and videos are effective, statuses — posts with text

[19] In total, data for 250 out of 263 Members and committees on Facebook was accessible via the Facebook API.

alone — have little value, and that a mix of different post types should be used to diversify content and maximize engagement.

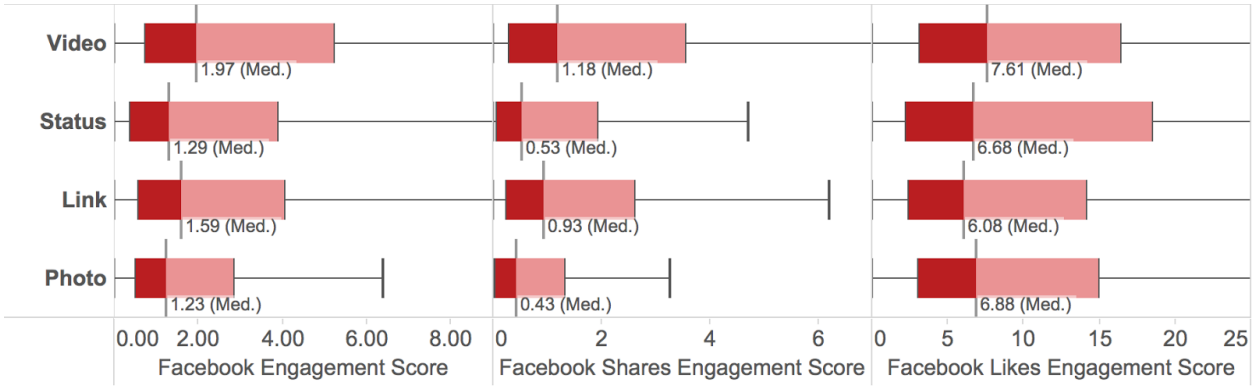
The most used type of post on Facebook are photos, representing 42 percent of total posts, followed by links at 39 percent. Less commonly used were videos (11 percent of posts) and statuses (8 percent of posts).

Figure 2.5: Share of Post Types on Facebook



While photos were the most commonly used posting format, we find that they are the least effective at generating engagement. The chart depicts median engagement scores across all Members for each type of post, as well as separate median engagement scores for shares and likes broken out separately.

Figure 2.6: Median Engagement Scores by Type of Content



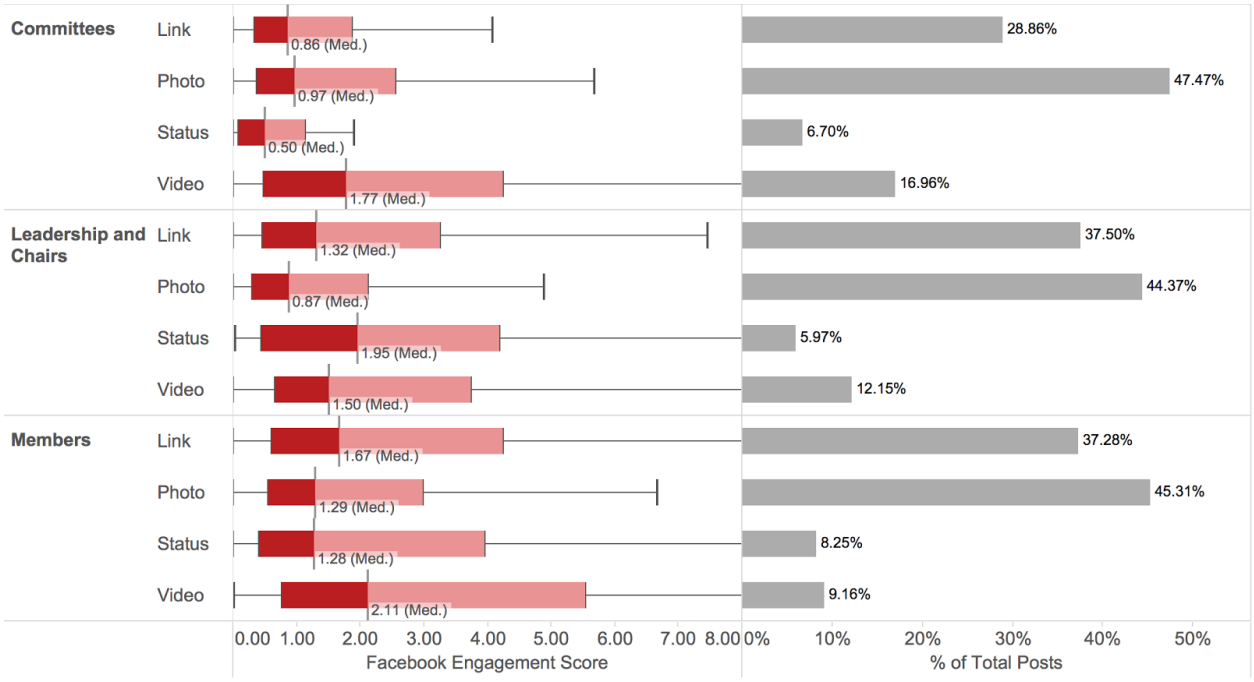
The relatively poor performance of photos runs counter to conventional wisdom. In our interviews, 18 of 20 interviewees, or 90 percent, suggested using photos to drive engagement, while 12 (or 60 percent) suggested using video. Consistent with the views of a majority of staff, videos are highly effective in terms of engagement, driven by success in garnering shares—the metric that offices value the most. On the other hand, videos were the less effective at garnering likes. Statuses are the best type of posts in generating likes, even if likes are considered less important by offices. Link posts also seem to do better than photos. These observations strongly contradict conventional wisdom that photos perform well and statuses do not, since statuses received the second highest median scores overall.

Of course, no post's value can be fully captured by this engagement score. For example, statuses may be engaged with equally or more, but typically don't link back to Member websites (neither do photos or videos, unless a link is copied and pasted into the post). While these types of posts may generate engagement on Facebook, they are less likely to drive traffic to websites that may serve other objective, such as maximizing signups to email newsletters, thus altering the perceived value of the post in ways not necessarily visible through widely available Facebook data alone. Indeed, the internal engagement metrics that offices may be looking at via Facebook Page Insights) may differ in that they report clicks (either back

to a website or to enlarge a photo). Ours focus primarily on how often the post was shared with others, expanding its reach to more people.

In order to see what kinds of offices are driving higher engagement in different post types, we can look at individual users and segment them in different ways. The following chart breaks out the data by three groups: Committee accounts, Leadership and Committee chairs, and rank-and-file Members.

Figure 2.7: Median Engagement and Share of Total Post Volume by Post Type and Member Group



When it comes to which formats are most used by each of these groups, the results differ in at least one important respect. While photos edge out links as the most common post format overall, videos are more used by Committees (18 percent of all posts) and Leadership and Committee chairs (14 percent), than they are by rank-and-file Members (10 percent of all posts). This confirms what we heard in our interviews with staff: shooting video can be time and resource intensive, and as such, it's a format most likely to be embraced by offices with additional staff.

While rank-and-file Member offices have been slower to embrace video than their Leadership counterparts, the format generates the most engagement, with a 2.75 median engagement score compared to 2.11 for statuses, 2.03 for links, and 1.43 for photos. This strong lead for video is also seen amongst Committees, while it is the second most effective format for Leadership and chairs, trailing statuses. These findings suggest both that video is underutilized, and when it is used, the benefits are greatest for rank-and-file Member offices. This suggests a potential opportunity for offices that can generate video quickly and cost-effectively, for example, by repurposing a floor speech or using a smartphone to shoot the Member giving a quick update to their constituents.

What about the notion that diverse content is needed to spur engagement? Data alone can't answer this question, but as we shall see in the historic view of Facebook that follows, the Facebook algorithm no

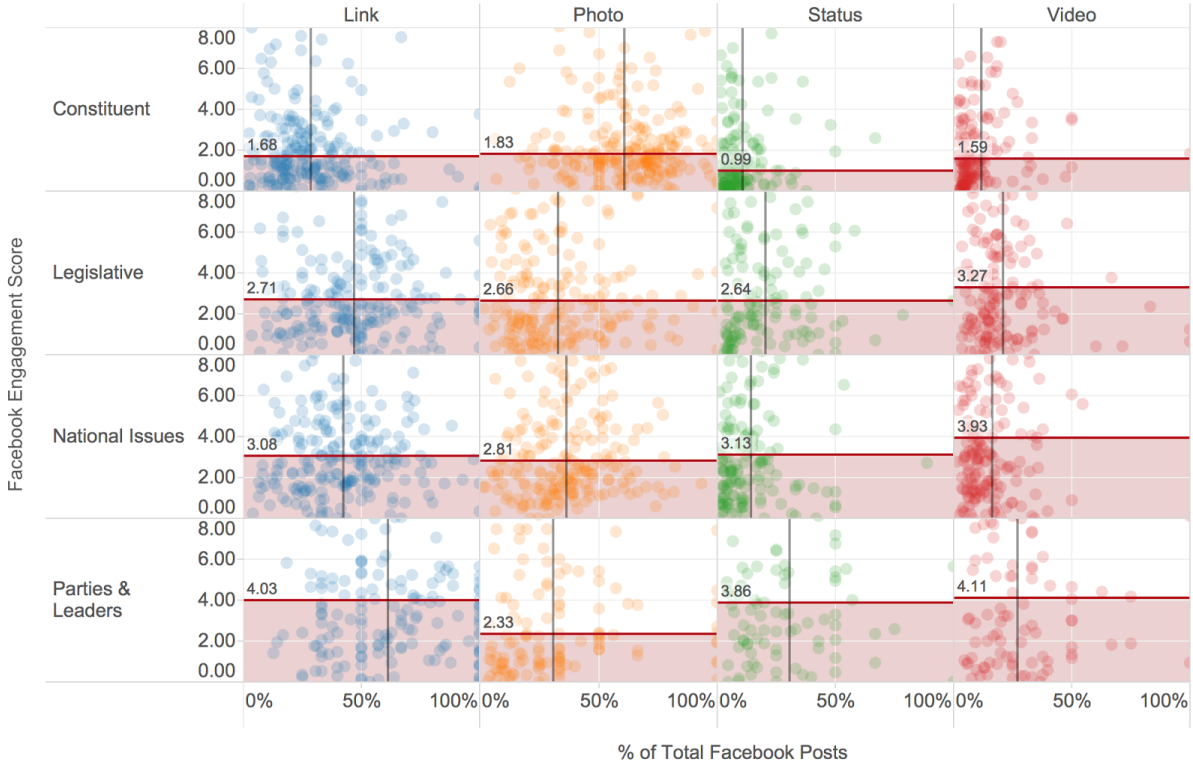
longer systematically skews in favor of one post type, as it did when publishers promoted websites through photos rather than links because that is what was most effective. Facebook has addressed these imbalances, meaning that offices should feel comfortable with using the post type that makes the most sense for the content being presented.

The Interaction of Content and Format

We've seen how audiences can react strongly when national debates and policy issues are discussed on Facebook, but is there a certain kind of post that enhances this effect — or runs counter to it? After all, a national focus will not make sense for every Member. Does the data suggest a set of best practices specific to Members who are very focused on using social media primarily as a vehicle to interact with constituents? And conversely, is there a playbook for Members who do want to use social media to advance a policy agenda?

To begin to answer this question, we compared how different post types performed with posts that fell into each of the four content groupings we laid out earlier: constituents and districts, national issues, legislation, and parties and leaders.

Figure 2.9: Post Type (Link, Photo, Video, Status) Across Content Group (Constituent, Legislative, National Issues, Parties & Leaders) and Corresponding Engagement Score



The above chart visualizes the interaction between the use of a particular post type when discussing a particular issue, and the engagement score. Each dot represents a single Member office, and their use of that post type & issue group. Each dot's horizontal position shows the frequency (on a 0 to 100 percent scale) with which an office uses a post type when discussing an issue, while the vertical position represents the office's average engagement score for this specific combination of posts. The vertical (gray) line represents the average frequency with which all offices

use a given post type to discuss a certain kind of issue, while the horizontal (red) line represents the median engagement score across all offices.

Clear differences become apparent when crossing format and content. Photos are most commonly used to highlight constituent outreach, and in that category, they actually overperform better than any other post type. Statuses were by far the worst type of post to use to highlight constituent outreach, with an engagement score just over half that of photos. Therefore, the conventional wisdom about higher success of Facebook photos over text-only statuses does seem to bear out in one area: when Congressional offices are talking about their districts.

When national issues are discussed, offices see the most success with video, with a median engagement score of 3.93, followed by statuses. (Photos place fourth.) The different post types are more evenly matched when discussing legislative priorities, but video again runs first. The trend when discussing national parties and leaders is less clear, but in that category, photos are the clear loser, with an engagement score that is barely half of the other status types.

There is no monolithic best way to post across issue types. While video generally performs stronger overall, this effect is mostly limited to national issues and legislation, and photos are a strong way to showcase constituent outreach, along with videos and links.

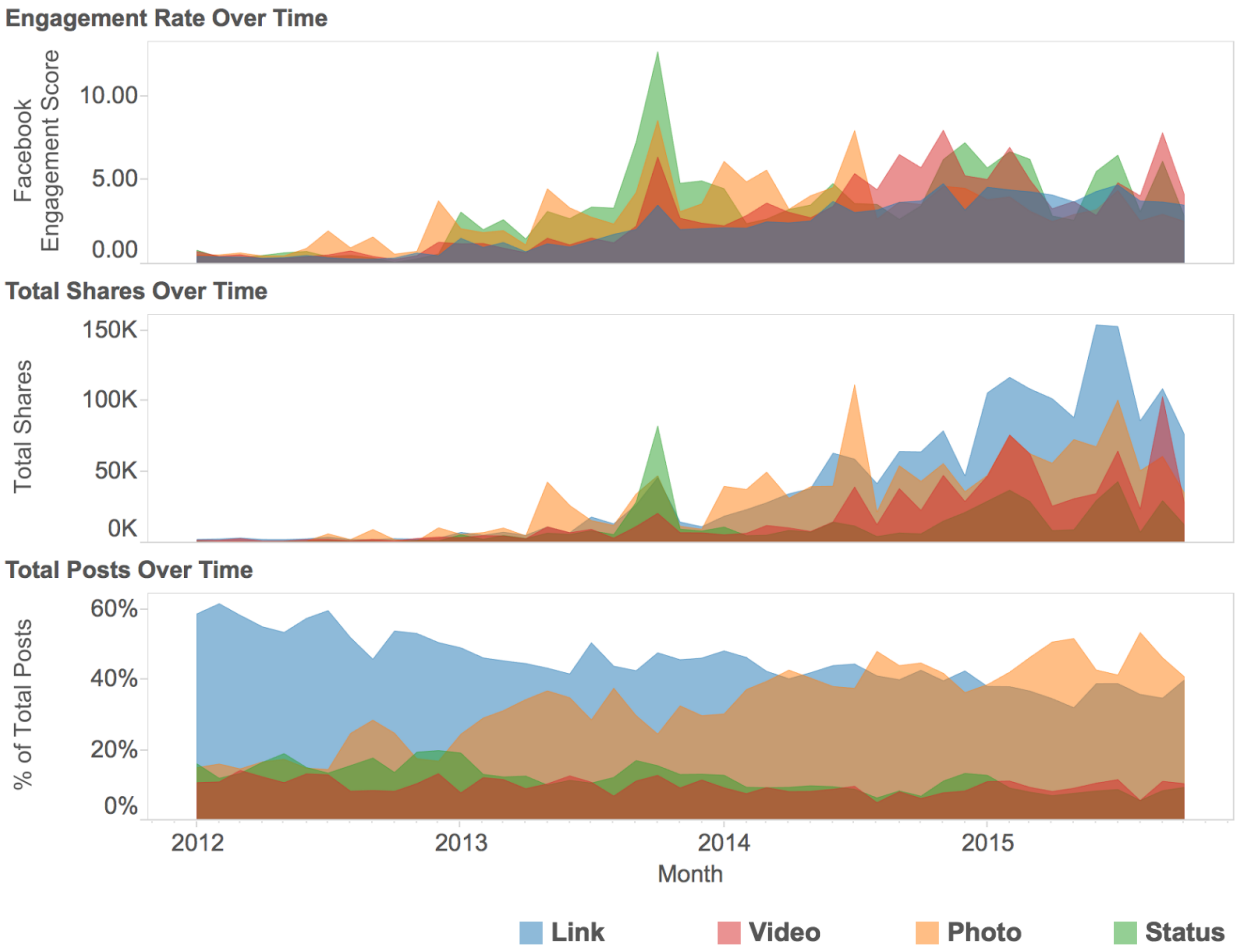
How the Facebook News Feed Algorithm Has Changed Over Time

The relatively poor performance of photos overall did surprise us, given the strong sentiment voiced in favor of photos by Congressional staff. So, we decided to explore engagement with Facebook photos over time to understand how the belief that photos perform best got started. Since 2012, the use of photos in House Republican Facebook posts has been seeing heavy increases relative to other types of posts, while the level of video use has changed much less. Photos were utilized effectively between 2013 and 2014, seeing higher engagement rates than other post types, but starting in late 2014, offices began to gain more engagement on average from other post types, while engagement rate for photos stayed about the same. The chart below shows the monthly share of total posts, total shares, and engagement score by post type over time.[20]

[20] Three accounts, for Reps. Jim Bridenstine, Justin Amash, and Mia Love, that make heavy enough use of a particular type of post are excluded from this historical analysis. Since page like statistics were only available at the time data was collected, historical engagement scores are calculated based off that figure, rather than the number of Likes a page had at the time of posting. This accounts for the upward trend in average engagement scores for all post types depicted in the chart.

Figure 2.10: Monthly Share of Total Posts Over Time by Engagement

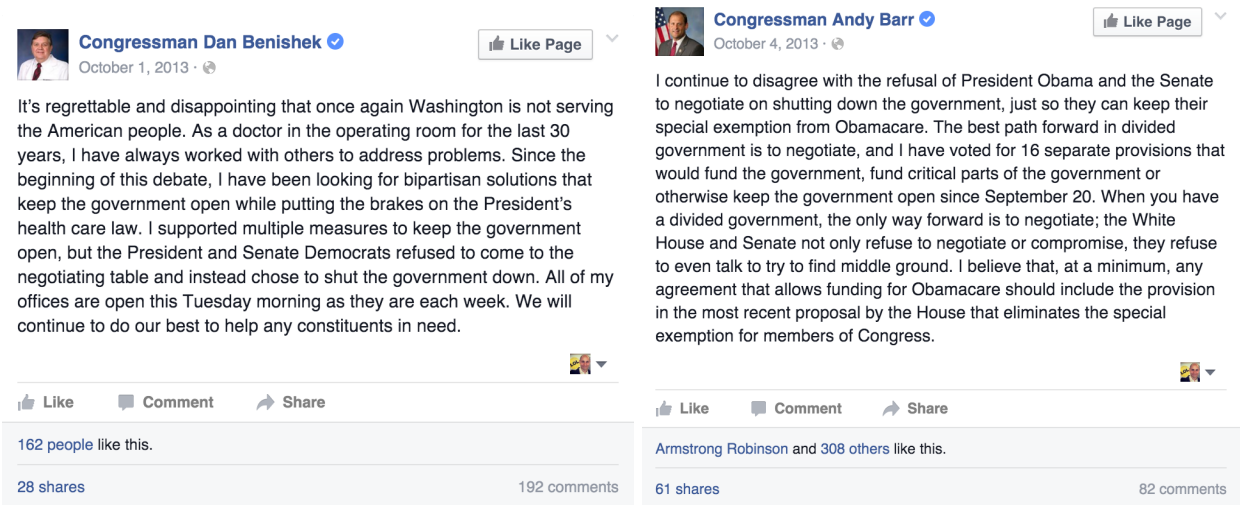
A view of how much photos, links, videos and status updates were used as content over time and the relative engagement score, Likes and Shares



Since 2012, Congressional offices have progressively used photos more and links less, even as links became the most shared post type in 2014. This is in contrast to the situation that existed prior to mid-2014, when photos were used less than links, but photos were commonly the most shared post type. Perhaps in response to this, offices began using photos more and more, even as their effectiveness declined. The conventional wisdom in favor of photos reflects the reality in 2014 and before, but not of today.

Changes in the Facebook news feed algorithm offer a likely explanation for this change. In September 2014, Facebook introduced its native video format, which may have led to more favorable treatment for videos in the news feed. For nearly every month leading up to September 2014, either photos or statuses generated the highest engagement score in our dataset. Since September 2014, photos have not generated the highest engagement in any month, with an equal mix of statuses, videos, and links performing strongest. When it comes to raw number of shares, links have consistently held the crown of most shared content since September 2014, with the exception of one month, where videos were most shared. Notably, Facebook also changed links to be more photo-like, with larger preview images, which likely increased engagement on links.

In the above charts, we also see the powerful impact of events. The government shutdown and the Affordable Care Act rollout of October 2013 saw a spike in engagement rates across all types of posts unmatched since. Statuses, which were used by Members to communicate longer-form thoughts on the evolving situation, saw the highest number of shares and highest engagement rate during that month. In fact, engagement on these types of posts doubled in October 2013 from September levels, and quadrupled from August. This underscores that in no way should text-only statuses be overlooked, as engagement on these types of posts can spike on high-stakes issues the public is following closely.



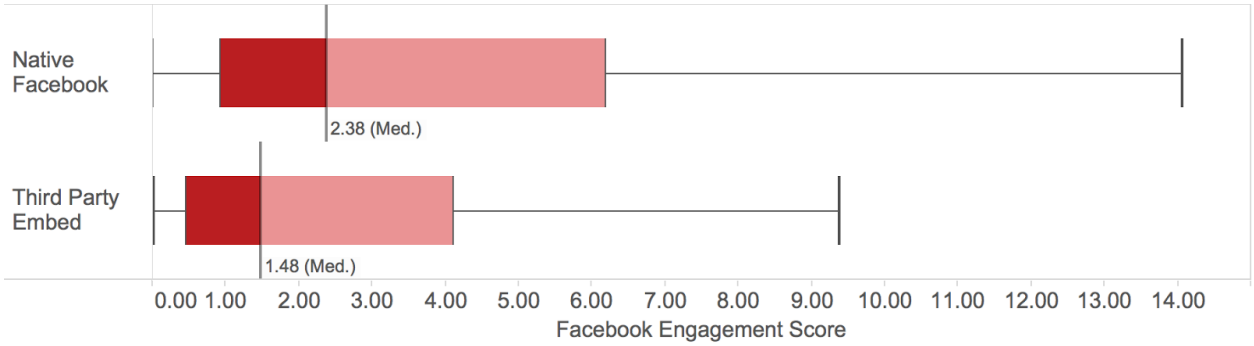
Facebook statuses posted by Reps. Dan Benishek and Andy Barr during the October 2013 government shutdown. These posts saw engagement levels ten times what is normally seen for Facebook statuses.

The Advantage of Facebook's Native Video Over YouTube and Other Platforms

Uploading videos directly to Facebook rather than linking to YouTube was a best practice suggested by Facebook itself and by three of our interviewees. Our data confirms this. Video uploaded to Facebook performs substantially than embedding players from outside platforms like YouTube.

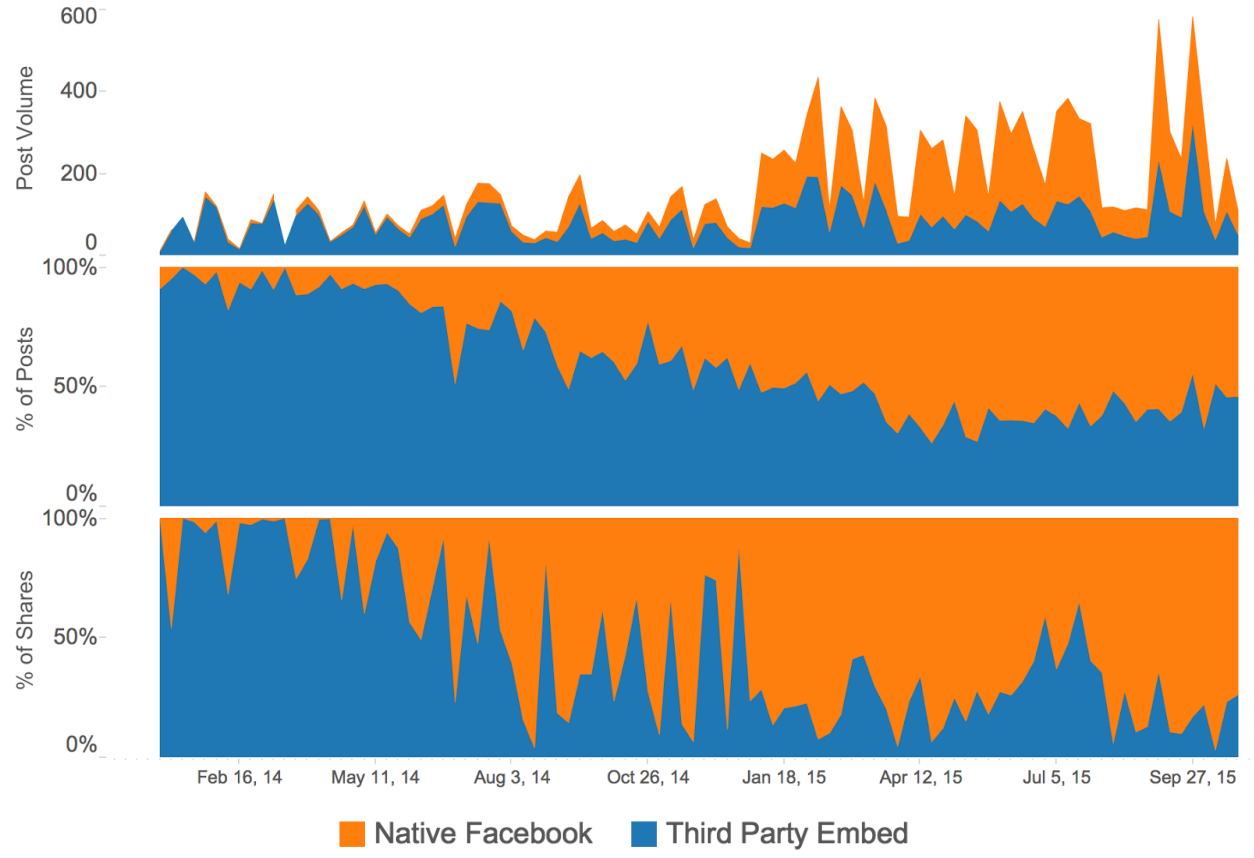
Data returned from the Facebook API allows us to distinguish between videos uploaded natively (which are flagged as an "added video") versus embeds of third-party video players like YouTube (a "shared story"). Median engagement was nearly double on natively uploaded videos (2.38) than it was on third-party embedded videos (1.48) during our study period.

Figure 2.11: Types of Video Content Shared on Facebook and Relative Engagement Score



Republican offices have largely adopted to this shift in video on Facebook. Native Facebook video has been steadily rising as a share of Facebook video posts since 2014, and made up more than 50 percent of posts throughout 2015.

Figure 2.12: Video on Facebook: Weekly Volume, Share of Posts, and Number of Shares by Native vs. Third Party Embedded Video



What is even more striking in this chart is just how much more natively uploaded videos are shared on Facebook. Natively uploaded videos were 60 percent of videos on Facebook shared by House Republicans — but garnered 75 percent of total shares. Video made up 19 percent of all posts from current Members in

2015 compared to 12 percent in 2014. We've seen how video as a format tend to perform better than all other formats on Facebook. And within the video format, Facebook's native video option performs best.



Video of floor speeches before important votes proved to be some of the most engaged-with content.

When To Post

There was no clear consensus among communicators or digital managers on the best times of day or week to post on Facebook. This was despite the fact that many offices reported using analytics tools to find the answer to this question.

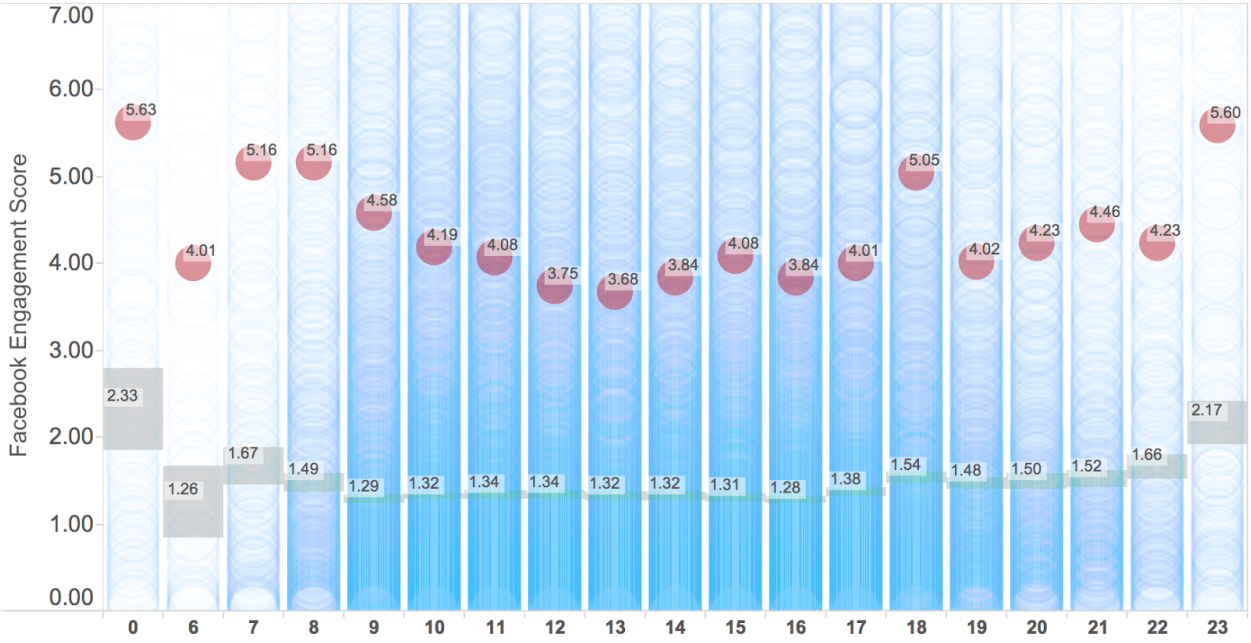
We find that there are time-of-day effects, specifically around increased engagement in the late evening or early morning. However, we aren't surprised by the lack of consensus. Because offices rarely post during off-peak hours, the low sample size of posts from any one office at this makes it difficult for any one office to confirm these findings on their own. Even when we aggregated more than 250 House Republican accounts across the four months of our study, we had difficulty collecting enough posts during certain off-peak hours to confirm this finding.

To reduce uncertainty, we expanded our sample to instead look at engagement on all posts from January 2014 forward, and to rule out the possibility that that this trend had changed substantially, we looked at blocs of time within that time period, including the July-October 2015 study period. As we do elsewhere in this study, we primarily focus on median post performance to give offices a better sense of how a typical post will do at different times, and to remove distortions caused by a very low number of highly engaged-with posts.

What Are the Best Times of Day to Post?

Depicted below are median and average Facebook engagement on posts by hour of day. The average is listed in the red dot, and the median is listed below, in a 95 percent confidence interval. Posts from 1 a.m. to 5 a.m. are removed because of the very low volume of posts.

Figure 2.13: Median and Average Facebook Post Engagement by Hour of the Day: January 1, 2014 - October 31, 2015



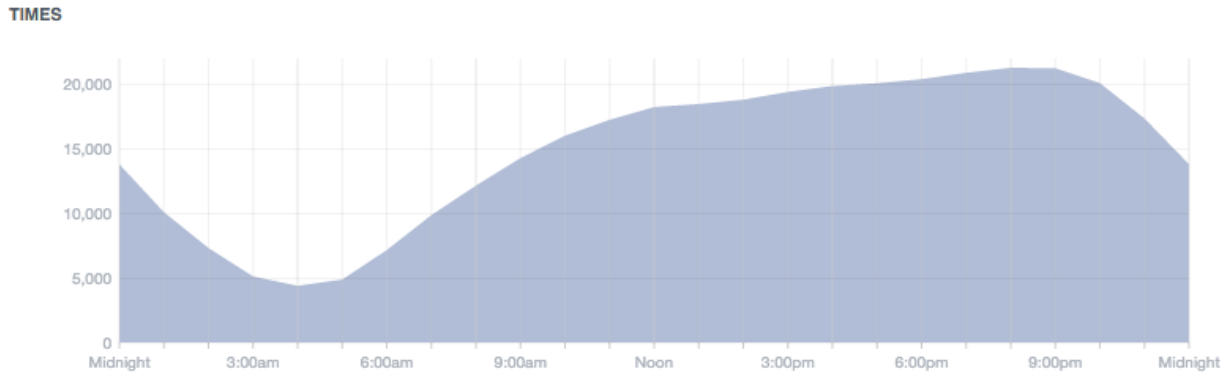
Median engagement score is shown within a 95 percent confidence band, while average post performance is shown by the red circle. Blue circles represent individual Facebook posts.

Post engagement stays remarkably consistent during the day, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., with median scores ranging from 1.32 to 1.49. But performance begins to rise at 5 p.m. and peaks late, at 11 p.m. and 12 a.m. Average performance is largely consistent with median performance, with the exception of 5 p.m., which demonstrates the effect of a very highly performing outlier. Narrowing the timeframe to just the four months in our study yields similar results.

From this chart, we can conclude that the typical post is likely to perform best in the evening or early morning. Why is this? Is Facebook traffic really higher during off-peak hours than during the day, when we might assume people are most active?

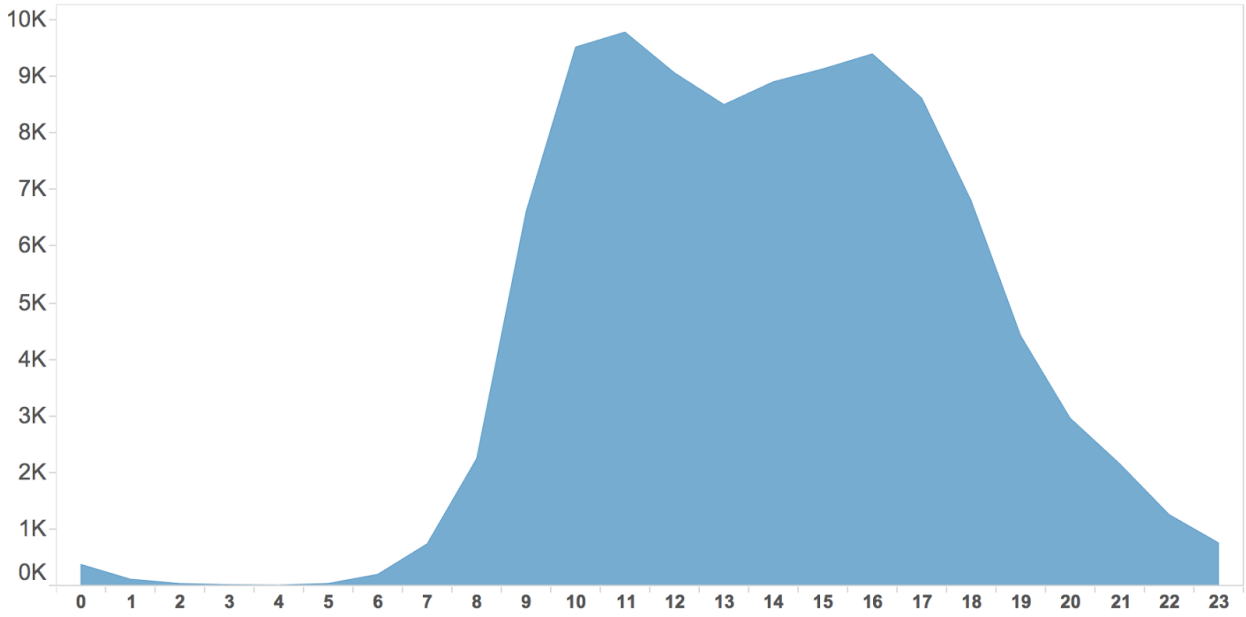
A likely explanation is simply that Congressional offices aren't posting when many Facebook users are online. Looking at Facebook Page Insights from a sample Facebook page -- that we were able to replicate across Facebook pages we had access to -- and we see that the heaviest usage of Facebook amongst the audience for that page is actually in the evening hours. This data is available for any Facebook page administrator, including for Congressional offices.

Figure 2.14: Median and Average Facebook Post Engagement by Hour of the Day: January 1, 2014 - October 31, 2015



Yet, as we see in Figure 2.15, Congressional offices overwhelmingly choose to publish during the business day, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. It stands to reason that there will be more competition for limited news feed real estate if other Facebook pages follow the same patterns. Congressional offices compete not just with each other, but brands, public figures, news organizations, small businesses, and the multitude of other pages people follow on Facebook. Increased engagement can generally be found for the hours where there are more Facebook users online than a supply of content from Congressional offices and other pages.

Figure 2.15: House Republican Facebook Posts by Hour, January 1, 2014 - October 31, 2015



Does this mean that Congressional offices should shift all Facebook publishing to late night hours? While we certainly believe there could be benefit to a posting strategy that mirrors when the audience is more likely to be online and engaging with content, this has to be weighed alongside timeline considerations.

There is good reason to post when offices do: this is typically when the work of Congress is done. Shifting all posts to the late evening in the name of optimization may mean waiting hours to report on a key vote or

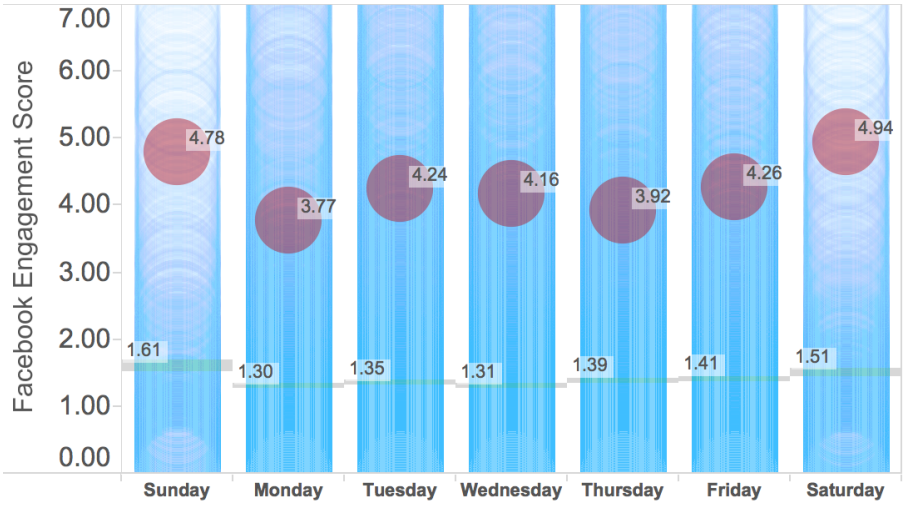
floor speech, and deprive constituents of timely information. On social media, speed is king. Posts that are artificially delayed might see lower engagement because constituents perceive these posts to be less timely, cancelling out any benefit from posting at the "best" time.

What offices can do to take advantage of higher engagement during off-hours is to intentionally schedule posts that are not time-sensitive for these times. The best strategy is one that doesn't overcrowd posts during one time of day, spreading them throughout the day, and reserving business hours for posts about breaking news where timeliness is key. For instance, posts about constituent service or district issues, which currently don't perform as well as posts about national issues but are an essential part of a Member's work, could see engagement lifts of 15 percent if posted in the early evening (6 to 8 p.m.) or nearly double if posted late at night (11 p.m. or 12 a.m.).

Is There a Best Day to Post?

If posts perform better during the evening when there is less competition from other publishers, does the same hold for weekends (or any other day during the week)? Here, we see less evidence that there is a clear benefit towards timing posts based on day of the week. Looking again at January 2014 to October 2015, we do see higher median performance on weekends (with an engagement score of 1.51 on Saturday and 1.52 on Sunday) but this nearly ties Tuesday and Friday (1.48 and 1.49 respectively) and is only 10 percent better than the lowest-performing day.

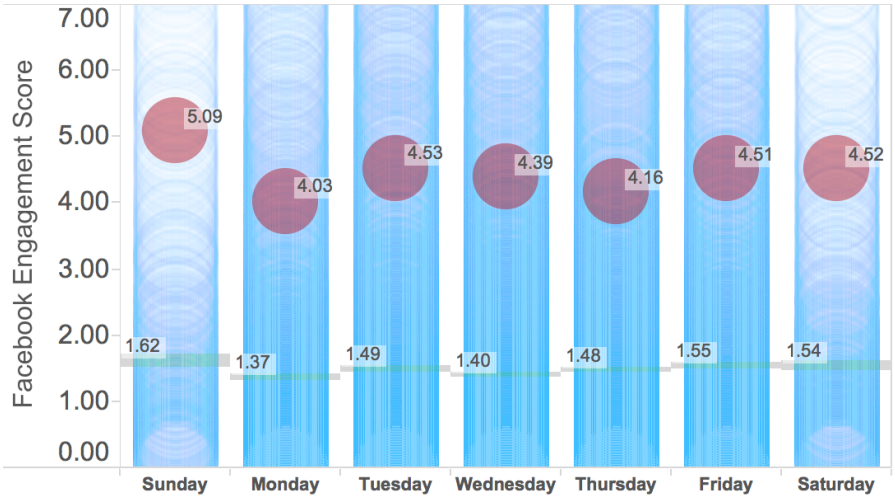
Figure 2.16: Median and Average Facebook Post Engagement by Day of Week: January 1, 2014 - October 31, 2015



Median engagement score is shown within a 95 percent confidence band, while average post performance is shown by the red circle. Blue circles represent individual Facebook posts.

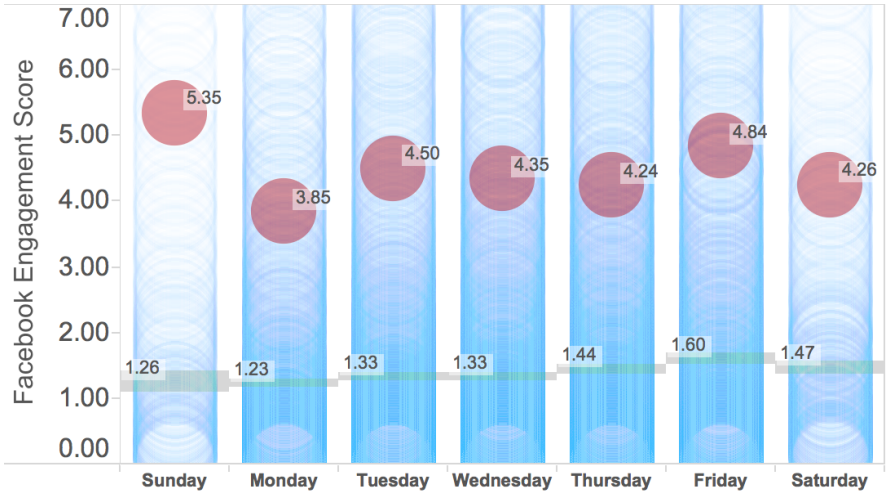
Do these patterns change over time? Looking only at posts from 2015, we see that Tuesday and Friday have the highest median engagement scores, but the weekends no longer perform best in absolute terms:

Figure 2.17: Median and Average Facebook Post Engagement by Day of Week: January 1, 2015 - October 31, 2015



Limiting our analysis only to the main study period, shows engagement scores growing progressively during the week, peaking on Friday, and performance on the weekend that is statistically indistinguishable from the rest of the week (especially given the low number of posts on Sunday).

Figure 2.18: Median and Average Facebook Post Engagement by Day of Week: July 1, 2015 - October 31, 2015



While the evidence might suggest there is a marginal benefit to posting more on Friday, the effect is not as strong as that identified around time of day, and a strategy of timing posts by day of the week is not recommended. If an office's goal is to consistently stay in front of constituents, concentrating a large majority of posts during specific days or hours runs counter to that strategy. In all likelihood, offices crowding posts on a single "best" day would start competing with their own posts, reducing the reach of each post. At best, timing data offer guidance as to when to schedule posts when the office would otherwise have been dark — such as scheduling posts during the weekend — but the more important factor in successful social content remains the underlying message and timeliness of what an office is communicating.

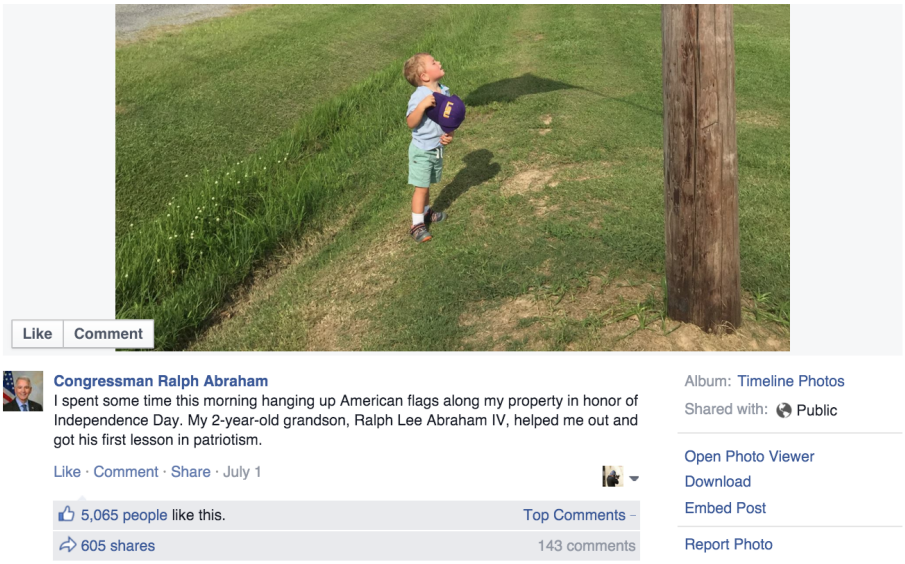
Facebook Case Studies: Different Engagement Strategies in Practice

While certain best practices yield demonstrably higher rates of engagement, what this looks like in practice is different from office to office. Communications staff have stressed authenticity as a paramount consideration in crafting their own office's social media strategy. While authenticity is hard to measure quantitatively, we do see offices being successful adopting a range of social media strategies. Many Members use social media to highlight their personal side or their work for the district, while others use it to generate engagement on national issues. The strategies used to achieve each of these objectives will vary considerably. In this section, we will look at the example of three Members, Ralph Abraham, Jim Bridenstine, and Diane Black, who have each been successful in their own right with different social media strategies.

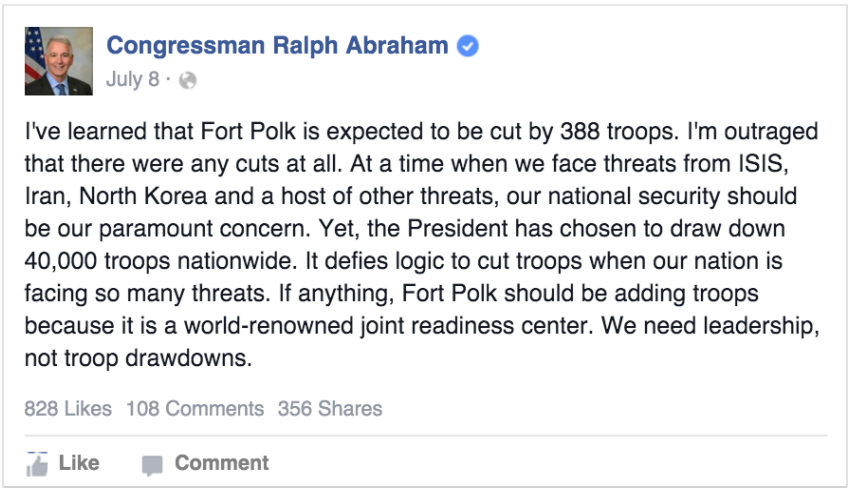
Ralph Abraham: Using Facebook to Drive Constituent Engagement

Rep. Ralph Abraham (LA-5) falls somewhere in the middle when it comes to page likes and volume of posts, but he received by far the highest engagement on both constituent outreach and legislative discussion during our study period. Not only that, but he scores consistently high across all types of posts and is among the very highest in overall engagement.

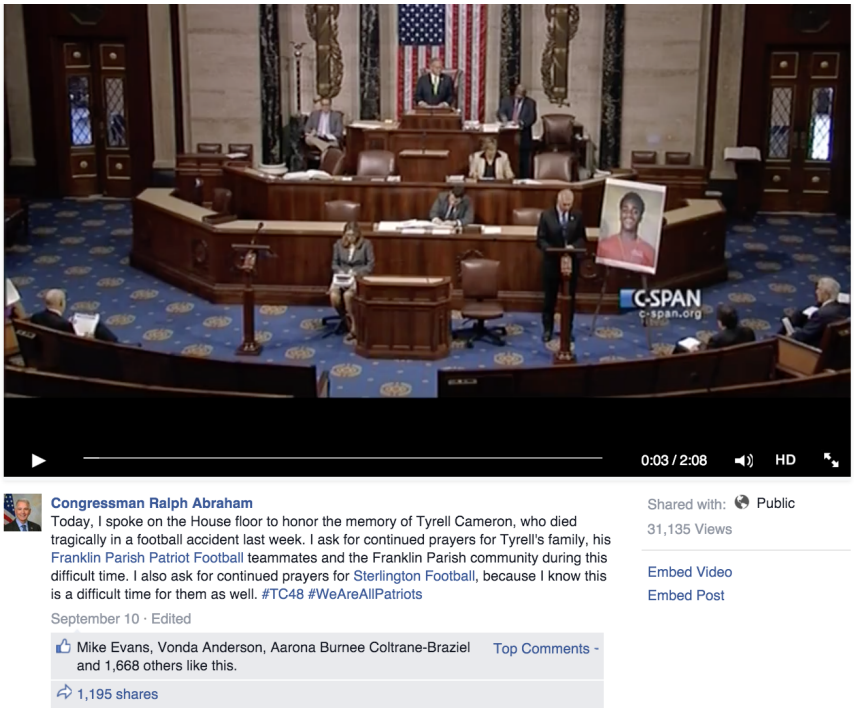
Rep. Abraham's team uses a mixture of different types of posts aimed at delivering a personalized message to constituents and followers. For instance, Members will often use graphics to highlight major holidays. For the Fourth of July, Rep. Abraham took a slightly different approach, posting a photo of his grandson paying respect to the American flag that received 5,065 likes and 605 shares.



As we saw when we discussed the importance of status messages during the October 2013 government shutdown, text-only statuses can still be an important way to communicate with constituents on important issues. When a military base in Rep. Abraham's district faced potential cutbacks, he took to Facebook to post a message that received 828 likes and 356 shares.



Rep. Abraham has also used videos effectively on issues that touch constituents. A floor speech offering prayers for a high school football player tragically killed in his district was seen more than 31,000 times.



Jim Bridenstine: Using Facebook to Drive Engagement on Issues

Rep. Jim Bridenstine (OK-1) carved a niche for himself as a prolific user of issue-centric Facebook graphics that ask users to engage. His account received higher engagement from photos overall than any other Member account, with a focus on national issues and legislation. His office had the second highest level of engagement in the Conference in 2015, on top of 72,000 Facebook likes, one of the highest totals for any rank-and-file Member.

Many of Rep. Bridenstine's posts focus on upcoming legislation, with lists of reasons to support or oppose laid out in the graphic, as well as clearly-stated policy positions. Nearly all posts ask readers to "like" if they agree.





Many posts are not tied to a pending legislative issue, and instead share a quote or express support for the troops. Rep. Bridenstine's team also makes ample use of social media conventions like Throwback Thursdays (#TBT) that likely reflect a well-planned and deliberate approach to scheduling social media activity so that his audience remains engaged even during lulls in the Congressional calendar.

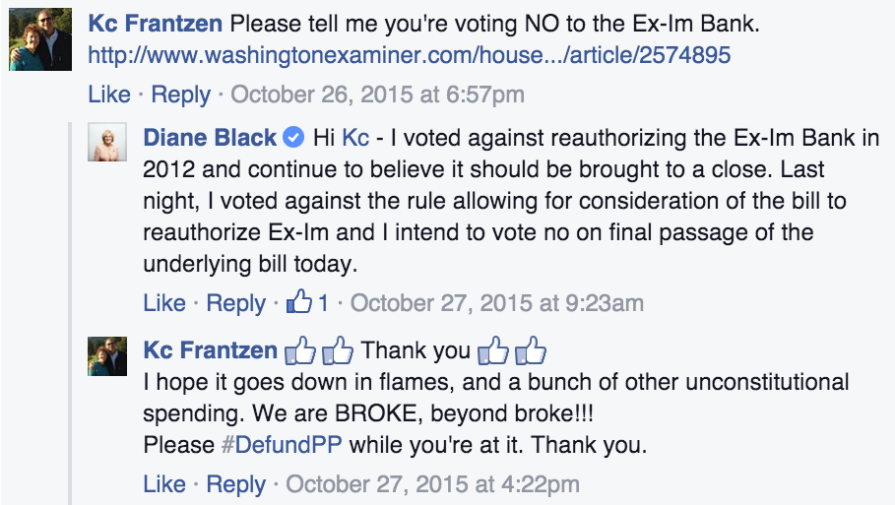




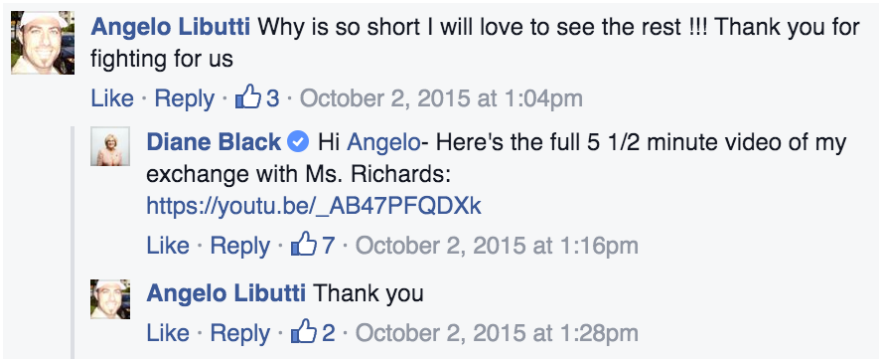
Rep. Diane Black: Engaging Through Comments

One way for Congressional offices to stand out in their use of social media is to be diligent about engaging in comments sections on their Facebook pages. Many offices spend time responding to comments, but

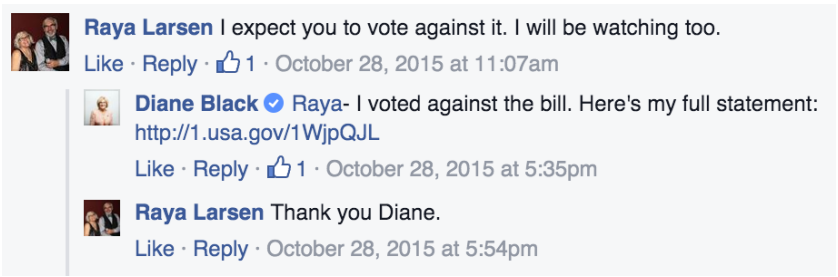
Rep. Diane Black (TN-6) in particular and her team have shown how to do this while using these opportunities to engage on a personal level.



Below, a commenter requested the full version of a video regarding the Planned Parenthood debate. The Congresswoman's reply generated further interaction around an expanded version of the video:



Facebook brings existing constituent service interactions into a public sphere, and in Rep. Black's example, constituent questions can be answered in minutes on social media, rather than days or weeks through the mail. In these examples, constituents are always appreciative of Rep. Black's prompt replies, which have the added benefit of showing others on Facebook (and critical audiences like the media) that the Member is truly listening to their constituents.



Twitter

Congressional staff see Twitter as the best way to reach the media and political influencers. While its reach is not as large as Facebook in absolute terms, staff value it for the direct access it provides to local and national reporters as a way to shape mainstream media coverage. As a result, it sees broad adoption amongst House Republicans, with 274 total active accounts, as compared to 275 active Facebook pages. During the four months of our study, House Republicans tweeted 27,679 times, generating 216,512 retweets from 66,132 unique accounts.

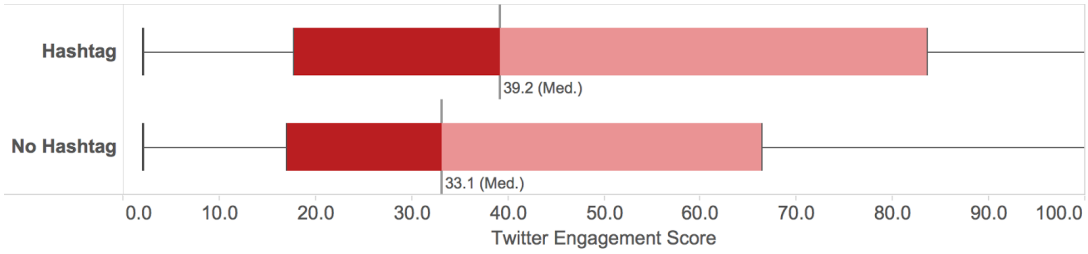
Twitter and Facebook differ not only in their audiences, but in how content is presented to users. Twitter currently relies on an unfiltered timeline, while Facebook filters their timeline to primarily show content that has been highly engaged-with already. This has the potential to alter the perception and reality of "what works" for each platform. As we've seen, posts focused on the district tend to do better in relative terms on Twitter than they do on Facebook, possibly because of this filtering effect.

In the following section, we put a series of perceived Twitter best practices to the test, using an analysis of all tweets posted by House Republican accounts from July to October 2015.

Using Hashtags to Drive Engagement

Twitter's best practices suggest that hashtag use increases retweets by 30 percent. While we were not able to confirm that exact figure, we found that hashtag use does increase engagement, measured in our median Twitter engagement score — which factors in total retweets and the office's follower count.[21] The median engagement score tweets with hashtags was 39.2, while it was 33.1 for tweets without hashtags, meaning that we expect the typical tweet to perform 18 percent better with a hashtag.

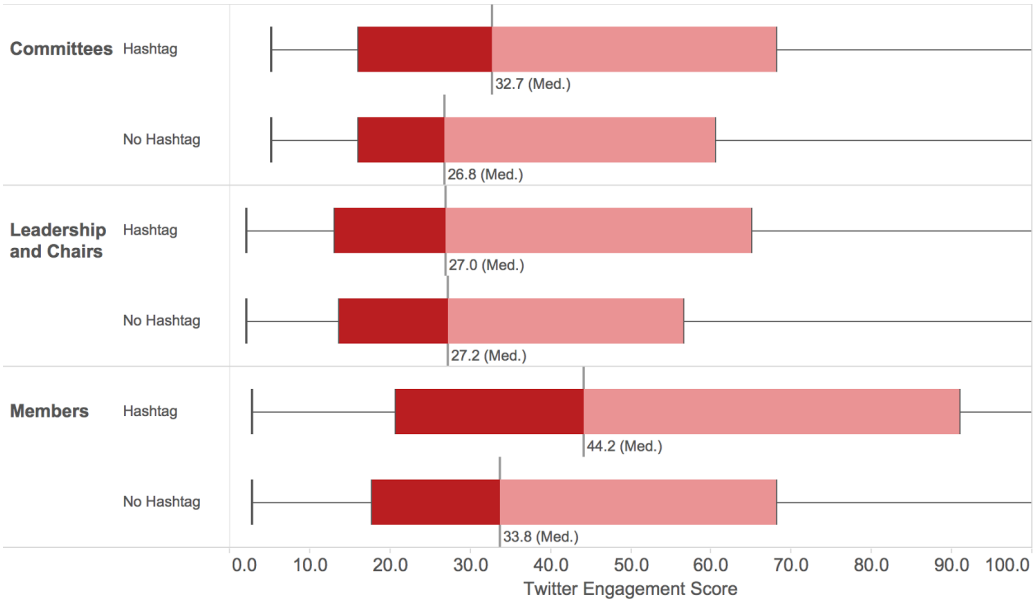
Figure 2.19: Effectiveness of Tweets Including vs. Excluding Hashtags



The good news is that a majority of tweets from House Republicans already contain hashtags — 56.7 percent. This breaks out to 59.1 percent of total tweet volume for Committees, 56.4 percent for Leadership and Committee chairs, and 56.5 percent for rank-and-file Members. Hashtags are often used to In the chart below, rank-and-file Members are shown to be the group that can benefit the most from the use of hashtags, with essentially no effect observed for Leadership & Committee Chairs.

[21] The methodology for creating the Twitter Engagement Score is outlined in the Appendix.

Figure 2.20: Hashtag Effectiveness (Across Committees, Leadership, and Members)



Tweets & Replies to Twitter Users

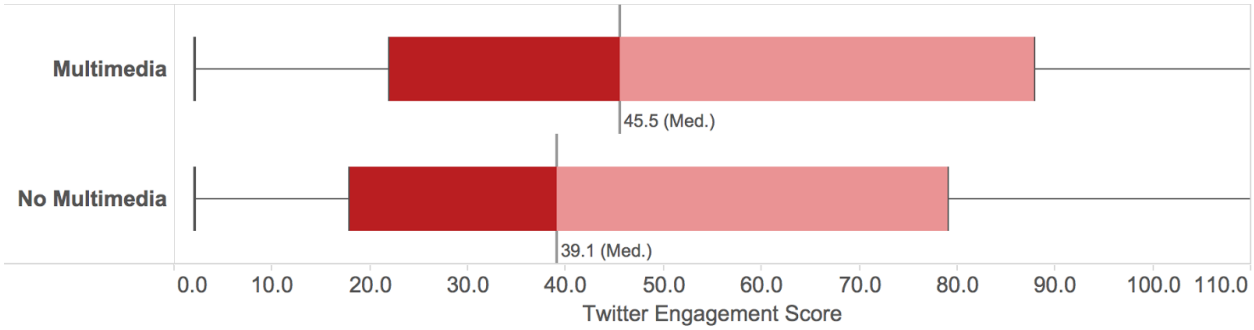
Twitter's official best practices suggest generating engagement by tweeting "@" users directly or replying to their tweets. How frequently do offices follow this advice? Are some office types more likely to reply than others? To answer these questions we analyzed our data set and found that 15 percent of Committee accounts, 50 percent of Leadership accounts, and 42 percent of individual Member accounts had tweeted at a user or directly replied at least once during the study period.

While a sizable percentage of offices have tweeted at a user or replied at least once, replying to users is infrequent. The overall incidence remains low — only 5.4 percent of tweets we analyzed were replies. Breaking this down into user types, the incidence was 3.6 percent for Committees, 4.2 percent for Leadership, and 5.6 percent for individual Members. "Standout" offices - those who frequently and consistently use Twitter replies - include the Financial Services Committee (18 tweets were replies out of 219), the House Republican Conference (18 tweets out of 152), Rep. Jeff Duncan (34 percent of all tweets), Rep. Kevin Cramer (17 percent of all tweets), Rep. Frank LoBiondo (15 percent of all tweets), and Rep. Bob Dold (13 percent of all tweets).

Photos & Videos

A number of staff members (and Twitter itself) suggest that adding photos or videos to posts can drive higher engagement. We found evidence in favor of this finding, though we were not able to validate it across the full set of photos or videos posted. The format in which Twitter data was collected did not distinguish between videos and photos or text-only posts. We instead grouped content by whether it included two or more links — a common pattern seen when a Twitter user links to a page and also attaches an image or video to a post. For this group of posts, we saw a statistically significant increase in engagement. While this is broadly suggestive of the effectiveness of photos and videos, it also suggests that multimedia content works in conjunction with links.

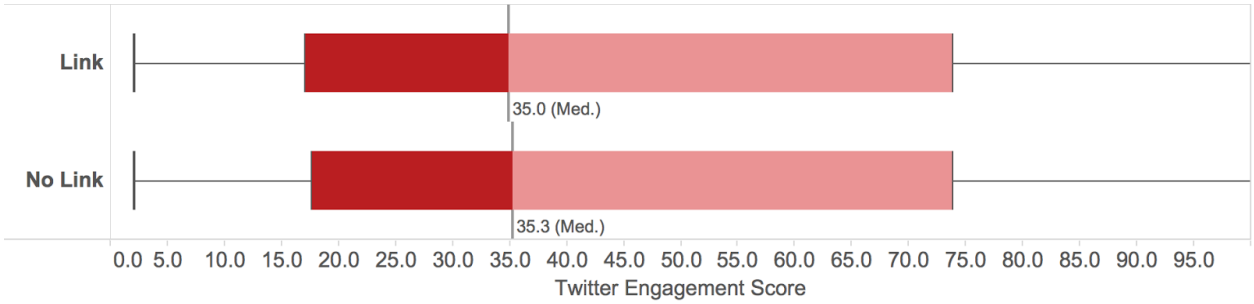
Figure 2.21: Effectiveness of Multimedia Tweets vs. Other Tweets



Links on Twitter

Links are widely used — 52.5 percent of tweets analyzed in our data set included one. Leadership used them the most, with 67.1 percent of tweets containing a link. Committees were next, with 55.5 percent, followed by rank-and-file Members with 50.4 percent.

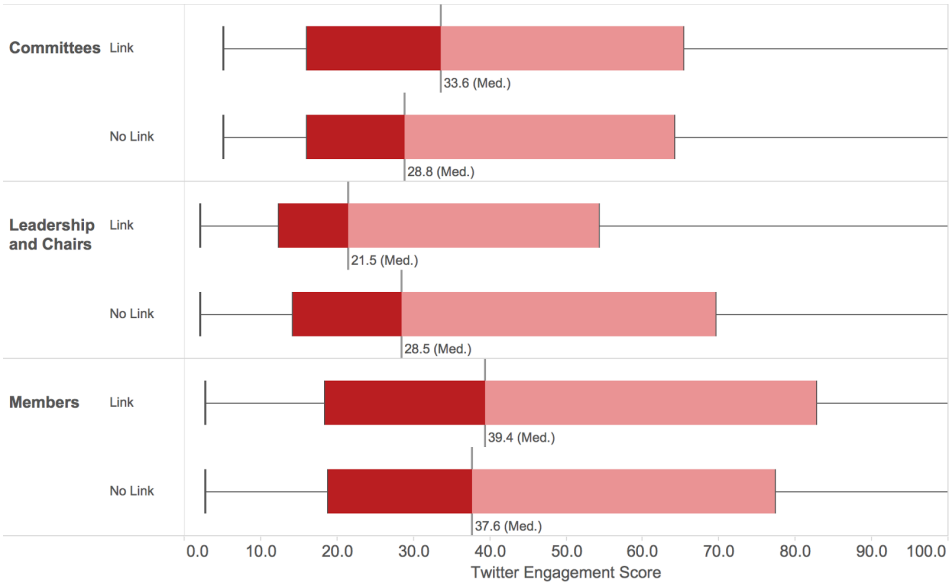
Figure 2.22: Effectiveness of Tweets With Links vs. Others



We observed a small positive relationship between link usage and increased audience engagement for Committees and Members. However, we observed a moderate-to-large negative effect for Leadership accounts. We would hesitate to draw any conclusions from this. The Leadership cohort is smaller, and this finding may simply reflect differences in the types of content posted as links, compared to what content Member offices would post as links.

Taken together, our findings suggest mixed evidence for the efficacy of including links to drive audience engagement.

Figure 2.23: Link Effectiveness (Across Committees, Leadership, and Members)



What Members Talk About on Twitter

While the kinds of content Members post (links, hashtags, text, media) are important in driving engagement, the topics of posts are as well. After matching the text of individual tweets to a list of common political and national policy topics by keyword, we grouped topics into four broad categories: Constituent (Local/District Issues), National Policy Issues, Legislation Discussion, and discussion of Political Parties & Leaders.

Local Topics

Consistent with the best practices suggested by interviewees, district topics were less popular on Twitter. An average of 34 percent of Members' tweets fell into this category, which consists of discussion of district related topics and activities as well as constituent service. However, 85 Members focused on local or district related topics more than other categories. When tweeting about district topics, Members often posted about community events they participated in or school groups visiting Washington DC. Tweeting about internship opportunities in Member offices is a common constituent service topic. When discussing district and constituent service topics, offices adhered to the platform conventions of keeping language informal and relaxed, writing in first person, and often including a link or a hashtag.

Members with a particularly strong focus on local matters include Rep. David Young (72 percent of all tweets), Rep. Chris Gibson (71 percent), Rep. Barbara Comstock (68 percent), Rep. Mike Rogers (67 percent), and Rep. Tom Emmer (67 percent)

National Topics

The largest single category in our data set, National Issues, consists of a broad range of issues relating to national policy.[22] 40 percent of tweets from Members, 44 percent of tweets from Leadership, and 49 percent of tweets from Committees fell into this category. Within National Issues, the most discussed subtopic across Committees, Leadership, and individual Member accounts was Foreign Policy, which accounted for 26 percent of Member's national topic discussion, 29 percent of Leadership discussion, and 32 percent for Committees. This was largely a reflection of the national agenda at the time of the study, with legislative debate over Iran and the situation in Iraq and Syria.

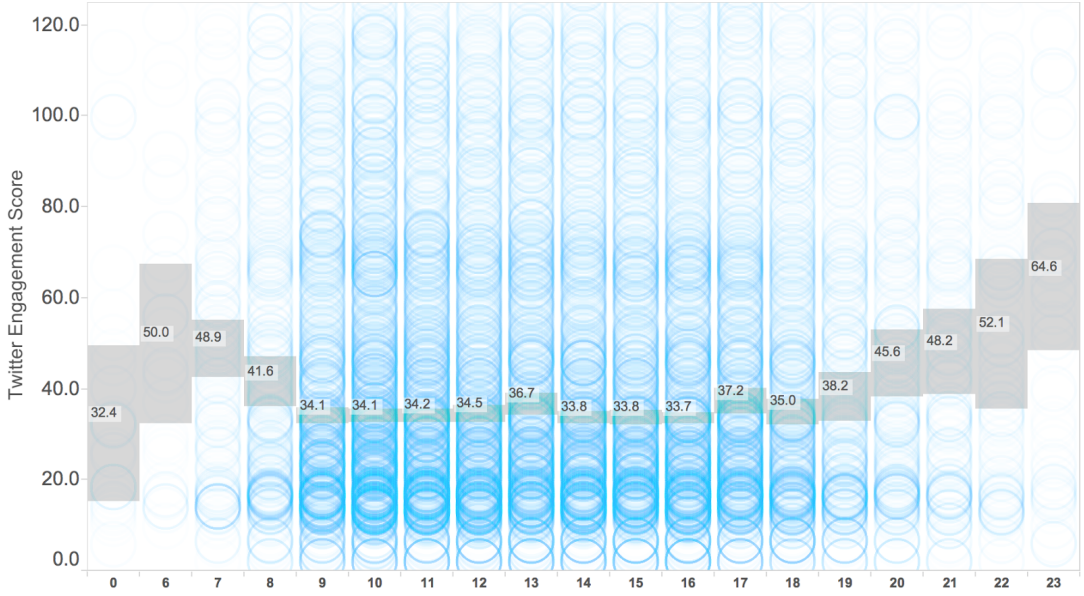
Overall, 102 Members focused their attention on Twitter primarily on National Topics. Members with a particularly strong focus on national policy included Rep. Richard Hanna (74 percent), Rep. Ted Poe (70 percent), Rep. Charles Boustany (68 percent), Rep. Ken Buck (67 percent), and Rep. Ryan Zinke (63 percent).

When to Post on Twitter

What Are the Best Times of Day to Post?

The chart below depicts median Twitter engagement scores by hour of day listed within a 95 percent confidence interval. Posts from 1AM to 5AM were removed because of very low volume. Unlike with the Facebook data, average Twitter engagement scores were very similar to median scores; they were excluded because of potential clutter.

Figure 2.24: Median Twitter Post Engagement by Hour of the Day: July 7, 2015 - October 31, 2015

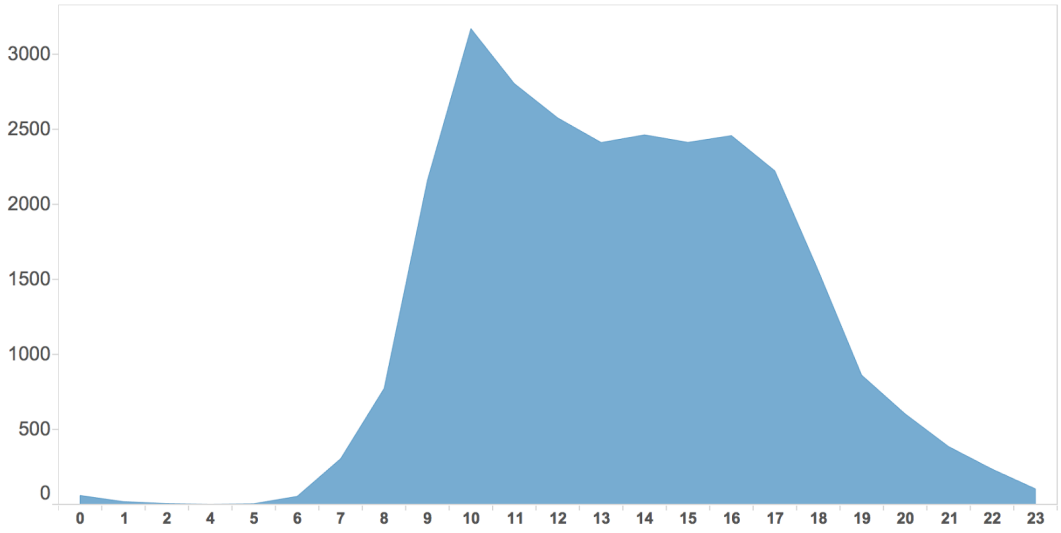


Median engagement score is shown within a 95 percent confidence band. Blue circles represent individual Tweets.

[22] Topics grouped under national issues include foreign policy topics (such as Iran, ISIS, or Russia), abortion/Planned Parenthood, military and veterans, health care, the economy, education, the budget and deficit, the environment, gun rights, immigration, and technology policy.

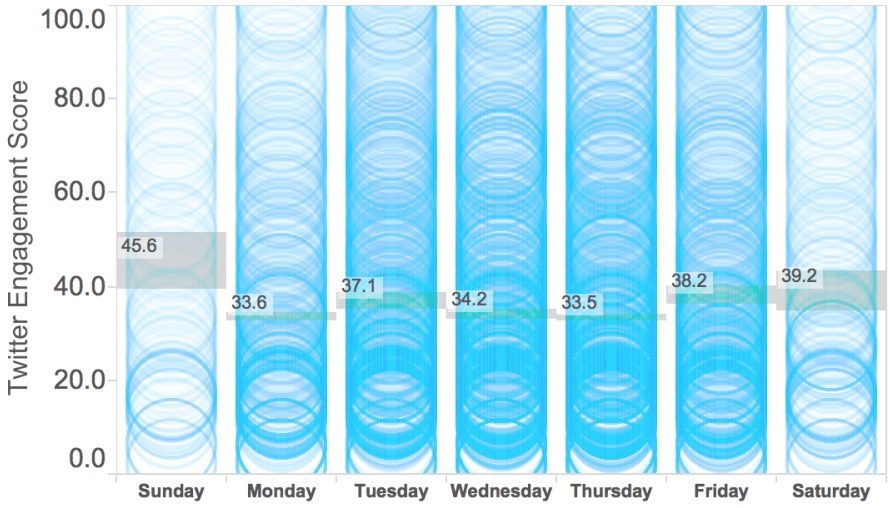
When breaking out median engagement score for each tweet by hour of day, there are similarities with the Facebook data. Median scores over the course of the day change very little, while scores increase at nighttime. The likely explanation for this is also the same: there is more competition for engagement during the day, which may result in a lower likelihood of high engagement.

Figure 2.25: House Republican Twitter Posts by Hour: July 1, 2015 - October 31, 2015



When looking at engagement scores of posts in terms of days of the week, there are few strong differences between different days to post. Weekends seem to show higher engagement scores, with Sunday standing out with the highest median score, but there are also larger margins of error on these days. As with Facebook, Fridays seem to be slightly better for posting than most other weekdays.

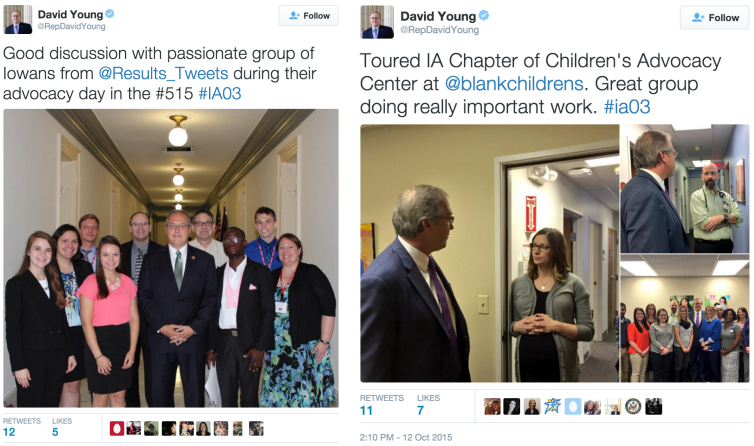
Figure 2.26: Median Twitter Post Engagement by Day of Week: July 7, 2015 - October 31, 2015



Twitter Case Studies

David Young: Engaging Constituents On Twitter

Congressional staff rarely see Twitter as a primary tool to engage with constituents, but this is not always the case. Some offices like that of David Young's (IA-3) do tend to utilize Twitter as a means to target and engage those in their districts. This includes posting pictures of Rep. Young on a regular basis meeting with various groups of Iowans, often including the handle of the particular group and "#IA03." This strategy is not far off from what one might see on Facebook in terms of using photos to personalize the Congressman.

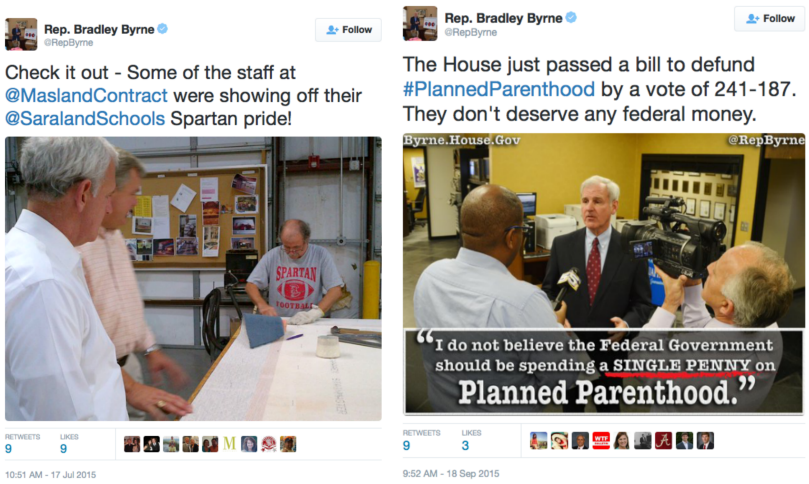


Young's communications staff receives one of the highest overall levels of retweet engagement, but it is also important to observe that they post at a very high volume to a small following. While they appear to be sacrificing quality for quantity, there isn't a huge downside to posting a lot of tweets. It is true that the overall reach and absolute number of constituent users engaging per-post is bound to be much smaller on Twitter than on Facebook for Congressional offices. However, if the cost is low, then then the strategy used by Young's team does appear to be viable if the goal of the office is to use Twitter as a supplement to Facebook for constituent outreach.

Bradley Byrne: Building a New Following with an Active Twitter Presence

Newer Members in the House have to find a way to build their online reputation in social media. On Twitter they have an opportunity with their voice to reach a national audience, political insiders, and constituents back home. Rep. Bradley Byrne (AL-1) provides an example of a recently elected member who is using an aggressive strategy with a mixture of targets on Twitter to build a following.

In some cases Rep. Byrne's team engages constituents with a good mix of content. In some tweets, he highlights his district, while in others he speaks to broader national issues and legislation:



Not only does Rep. Byrne's team target a mixture of different audiences, they also try different kinds of posts. Sometimes posts may feature unfiltered photos of the Congressman meeting with constituents. Other times, they might try shareable creatives based on a relevant national issue. Some Tweets include tweeting at relevant groups, and some include hashtags of related to the issues.

Rep. Byrne also posts at one of the highest frequencies among similar Members on Twitter. On Facebook, some Members focus on turning out an optimal, limited quantity of posts. However, this is less of an issue on Twitter. Tweets are automatically seen by all followers, with less of a downside for tweeting often. While generating tweets with a high frequency may result in lower engagement on average, it will likely increase the overall number of retweets, which means greater exposure overall for a Member working to grow his or her footprint.

The most pertinent point in this case is that Byrne's office finds ways to experiment using different post types and styles with high frequency in order to see what works. While it is important to experiment at any level, it is especially key to try a wide variety of different strategies at the early stages in order to see what sticks. More posts means also means a higher sample size in order to determine what works and what doesn't.

Instagram

All of the communications and digital staff Members interviewed indicated that their offices use Instagram, suggesting that the platform has become a relatively popular tool for Members. Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of Congressional Republicans have accounts on Instagram. While the average number of followers is 673, the median falls to 345 due to outliers such as Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (15,000 followers), Speaker Paul Ryan (6,000 followers), and Reps. Trey Gowdy and Jason Smith (5,000 followers each). Generally, Members post far less to Instagram than they do to Facebook or Twitter, with the average number of posts being 137 and a median post number of 78. Some offices, however, post more frequently on Instagram than the typical Member. Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, Rep. Elise Stefanik, Rep. Sean Duffy, and Majority Whip Steve Scalise are particular standouts when it comes to post frequency.

With regards to content, Instagram posts are diverse. Pictures taken in Washington DC are typically of the Member with constituent groups or preparing for a Committee meeting or hearing. "Behind the scenes" shots of Members doing press interviews in the Capitol rotunda or elsewhere are also popular and serve as an easy way to promote press hits. District pictures are often of local businesses that the Member toured, local landmarks, or the Member speaking at a community event. Occasionally Members post graphics for holidays such as Veteran's Day, or they choose to post a personal picture related to the holiday. Conventional wisdom that Instagram is meant to show off the more personable side of the Member certainly bears out when looking across posts, as photos of family Members, children, and old pictures of Members from their childhoods are common. Hashtag use is fairly frequent, often using established ones such as #TBT or district-identifying information.



An Instagram post of Rep. Sean Duffy with a group of constituents in Washington, DC that uses identifying district and topic hashtags



A "behind the scenes" Instagram post of Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers promoting an upcoming Fox News segment

4. Conclusion: Building a More Connected Congress

The 112th and 113rd Congresses were times of tremendous growth in the adoption of social media by Congressional offices. In 2016, nearly all Members of Congress and committees have some official presence on social media.

Where it was once a struggle to get offices to see the value of social media, they are now an integral part of official communications strategies. Collectively, content from House Republican social media accounts has reached tens of millions of Americans on Facebook and Twitter, and their content is shared millions of times annually. The vast majority of these impressions occur as a result of social media users who re-share content from a Congressional office to their friends. A Member will never reach a majority of his or her constituents simply by posting to a social media account; he or she must rely on social media followers who will share content to their friends. To increase the likelihood that their content will be shared, Members can try a variety of engagement techniques. We have outlined many of these in this report, including asking followers to share content, posting at times outside of normal business hours when other publishers are not, and making use of a formats that are proven to perform well, especially videos.

The challenge moving forward is no longer to broaden adoption of social platforms themselves, or even simply to grow the number of followers or likes. Members that focus almost exclusively on "likes" at the expense of quality content or genuine interaction will soon find themselves speaking to a very large -- and very empty -- room online. The challenge is also one of adaptation. Social media by nature is constantly evolving, which means audiences may shift, algorithms may change, and what was proven to work today might not be true tomorrow.

The reality is that outside of using specific tactics to increase engagement, overcoming larger day-to-day organizational challenges play just as large a role in dictating whether the Member is successful online. To have a social media strategy that is adaptable demands the flexibility afforded through access to resources like time, money, and staff. While such resources may be possible for large brands or celebrities, Congress does not always have the luxury of these resources. Other challenges are institutional in nature. Congressional staff must also determine how to navigate ethics rules as they relate to social media, and a traditional culture within offices that staff cited as slow to adapt to change and hesitant to give digital staff a "seat at the table."

With all of this in mind, we offer the following recommendations, drawing on what we learned in months of qualitative and quantitative study of social media use in Congress. Our recommendations relate less to the nuts-and-bolts of effective social engagement, and more to the process of creating an open and collaborative culture within Congress that will allow social media and digital engagement to flourish in the years to come.

Training and Collaboration

Interviews with numerous staff members and an analysis of tens of thousands of social media posts by Republican offices made possible the social media best practices outlined in this study. Although

comprehensive, these findings reflect what works across all Republican offices at a given moment in time. Even using these findings as a baseline, the definition of "what works" will quickly evolve in the coming years and months.

Just as our study drew upon data from all Republican offices, it is incumbent on those managing social media on Capitol Hill to draw upon the experiences of their peers across Congress on an ongoing basis. Many respondents said social media trainings offered by the House Republican Conference had been valuable, and would like to see them expanded. Fourteen of the twenty staff interviewed said that a place to exchange ideas and tips in addition to learning best practices would be valuable to them. A few of the individuals interviewed also said more opportunities to meet with representatives from the major social platforms would help them fine-tune and understand how to better use the platforms.

This exchange, which could exist both online and in regularly scheduled biweekly or monthly gatherings, also serve as a collection point for data (which could include sharing Facebook Page insights or Twitter analytics from Member offices) and case studies. With the frequency of staff turnover on Capitol Hill, this information exchange could serve as an invaluable resource for onboarding and training new staff, so that on day one, they are well versed in social media best practices as they apply to Congress.

Embracing Social Media as a "Customer Service" Platform

In recent years, many of America's most successful businesses have dramatically changed how they interact and operate online. Building on this business metaphor, this has meant a shift from treating digital media as an extension of traditional one-way broadcast communications, to a two-way platform to engage with customers, earning their loyalty and trust. In the mid-2000s, companies began setting up blogs and answering comments made about them online. Today, this had evolved to major brands like Southwest Airlines or Domino's Pizza answering thousands of comments on social media every month, creating a friendlier customer service experience.

From our interviews with staff, it's clear that Congress has an opportunity to embrace a more holistic view of social media as a platform for constituent service. The good news is that offices already know how to do this, generating countless pieces of constituent correspondence annually. Yet, extending this to social media was not always mentioned as a top priority by the staffers we spoke with. When the topic was raised, it was often in the context of the additional time demands it would create for communications staff running a Member's social media account, or in the context of doubts that junior staff would be empowered to speak directly to constituents online on behalf of the Member. That said, those Member offices that did employ this strategy reported that it was successful, and were surprised at the appreciation and thanks they earned from those whose comments were initially hostile.

Given the very real time constraints of Congressional offices, how can they implement such a strategy more broadly? More widespread adoption of social media as a platform for constituent engagement will involve participation from more staff members, including legislative correspondents and policy staff, beyond just the communications staff currently responsible for social media in most Member offices. This is an approach that treats social media as an integrated piece of everything a Congressional office does to represent its constituents, which requires input and involvement from all staff members.

Clarifying House Ethics Rules

House Ethics rules were raised again and again as a constraint on Congressional use of social media. The rules under which Congressional offices operate exist to ensure taxpayer funds are not used for political activity. Yet, there was a widespread belief that rules initially developed to deal with traditional and costlier franking activity, like direct mail, had not caught up to the social media age. Rules were also cited as a significant hindrance to conducting any form of social media advertising, even though it was technically allowed by the Franking Commission.

Many of the best practices highlighted in this report run up against ethics regulations. These include limitations on how many times Members can mention national leaders (like the President or the Speaker) in official communications or personal references to the Member and their families. Staff routinely cited a desire to show authenticity and a personal side of their bosses, yet there is considerable uncertainty right now as to what the rules do and do not allow in this regard.

Indeed, the Member's Congressional Handbook[23] for the 114th Congress hardly references social media, and when it does, it does so mainly to state that rules applicable to Member websites also apply to social media accounts. With social media becoming the primary way that Members communicate online, House rules governing social media should take into account the unique ways that Members interact on these platforms, and not be derivative of any other medium. Given a highly general set of rules that are not uniquely tailored to the medium, House staff currently operate with a great deal of uncertainty on social media that they feel hinders effective two-way interaction through these platforms. The Committee on House Administration should convene practitioners, representatives of the social platforms, and other interested parties to make formal recommendations on reforming House ethics rules specifically as they relate to social media, and have these rules in place for the start of the 115th Congress.

* * *

All those elected to Congress come into office with a distinct set of goals. The practices outlined in this report should only be considered "best practices" insofar as they are effective in helping a Member achieve his or her own goals. Higher engagement for its own sake is not a strategy. Congressional communications staff should start with "why" and fashion a distinctive social media strategy that is true to the Member's personality and objectives. In this sense, it is no different than any other strategic communications medium a Member might employ.

At the same time, the possibilities offered by social media go well beyond communications. Social media provides a platform to authentically engage and connect with citizens, creating a two-way dialogue. This is a power Congress is just beginning to tap into.

[23] U.S. House of Representatives Committee on House of Administration, "Members Congressional Handbook," http://cha.house.gov/handbooks/members-congressional-handbook

Appendix

Facebook Methodology

Data was gathered on 269 House Republican accounts, covering individual Members of Congress (segmented into Leadership and rank and file) and Committees. In some cases, the data goes back to 2009, providing historic context, but the primary window for our analysis is July 1 to October 31, 2015. The data we gathered included Facebook handles, post Share counts, post Like counts, page Like counts, and Share text. Because a number of viral outlier posts with extremely high engagement in the set skewed our ability to acquire an understanding of behavior on a regular basis, the scope was also limited to looking at posts with under 10,000 shares.

Facebook Engagement Score

Throughout our report, the success of any given post is measured on the basis of the following engagement score:

$$\frac{(\textbf{\textit{Shares}} + (\textbf{\textit{Likes}} \times .1)) \times 1{,}000}{\textbf{\textit{Page Likes}}\ \hat{}\ .96}$$

Numerous ways have been developed to more reliably measure engagement on social media, in response to an initial reliance on "vanity metrics" like overall page Likes, or simply counting the numbers of Likes on a post. An engagement score allows to directly compare a social media account with 100,000 followers to one with 1,000 followers. At a basic level, engagement scores measure the level of activity on a post or set of posts divided by the total audience for that account.

Within the engagement score itself, different types of Facebook interactions are valuated differently. During our interviews, Shares were commonly seen as much more important than Likes on Facebook, as the former typically posts the story in friends' news feeds, exposing a story to dozens if not hundreds of additional viewers, whereas Likes typically do not have this viral effect. In our score, one Share is treated as equivalent to ten Likes.

Shares and Likes were then multiplied by 1,000 to keep the score within a reasonable frame of reference and granularity. The combined Shares and Likes calculation was divided by the total number of Page Likes in order to normalize across accounts with different-sized followings.

A further adjustment to the formula is necessary to account for the decline in engagement rates as Facebook audiences grow. To account for this, one social media measurement company, Unmetric[24], has developed what it calls an "Audience Reception Rate," which estimates the number of people likely to be exposed to a post based on the size of the page, and defines it as audience size calculated a power of 0.8. Under this formula, a page with 1,000,000 Likes will only will receive 40 times more Likes and Shares than a page with 10,000 followers despite being 100 times the size.

Our own testing found that the decline in engagement due to audience size on Facebook was not quite this dramatic, and as a result, we've calculated the Facebook Audience Reception Rate for this study as Page

[24] "Engagement Score Revised." Unmetric. Accessed December 10, 2015. https://unmetric.com/engagement/.

Likes to a power of 0.96. At this power, it was found that the average engagement rate does not decline as a social following grows larger.

Twitter Methodology

To determine the most effective means of driving Twitter engagement from target audiences, we gathered Twitter data from July 1, 2015 until October 31, 2015. The data set is composed of two pieces: first, we collected all tweets from House Republican official Twitter accounts over the time period; second, we collected all tweets (from any Twitter user) which contained a retweet of a tweet originating from a House Republican's official Twitter account.

Twitter Engagement Score

Success on Twitter is also defined in terms of an engagement score, with some slight differences from the Facebook engagement score. First, the engagement score only measures retweets, as Favorites (now dubbed "Likes") play an even less prominent role in assuring distribution for content on Twitter than on Facebook.

The Twitter engagement score also features a modified audience retention metric for Twitter. On Twitter, we found severe declines in engagement rates as accounts grow their followings. Raising the audience size (Twitter following) to the power of 0.45 eliminates any differences in engagement rates due to the underlying size of an audience.

Repeating our previous test, we found that on average, a Twitter account in our dataset with 100 times the followers could be expected to generate 7.9 times as many retweets, whereas a Facebook page with 100 times the Likes would generate 83.2 times as much engagement.

Content Grouping Methodology

After gathering the data, we proceeded to analyze the tweets and posts, generating counts of mentions of general political and news-related topics. We then examined the data and determined that it exhibited a natural typology — the vast majority of Members' tweets or posts fall into at least one of four categories of discussion: 1) Constituent, 2) Legislative, 3) National Issues, and 4) Political Parties & Leaders. Each broad category is made up of various topics. For example, the "national issues" includes broad national topics such as Immigration, Healthcare, and Foreign Policy. Each post may belong to multiple categories (for example, a post about a pending piece of healthcare legislation could be categorized both as "Legislative" and "Policy"). Boolean search queries were used to index the entire data set and categorize conversations by topic.

This typology allowed us to analyze differences in performance by subject matter, as well as identify patterns in what a given office was likely to use social media to talk about, for example to classify offices who were much more likely to post about constituent service than national issues.

While we did find that different topics generated higher natural levels of engagement (for example, posts about national issues and political leaders generated higher engagement scores than posts about constituent service), it would be wrong to alter social media strategy on this basis alone. National issues are naturally more relevant to a broader audience, many of whom may not reside within the district. Each

office will have different priorities in what it wishes to communicate, and our report aims to offer a blueprint for success whether their objective is to stand out on a policy issue, engage directly with constituents, or both.

Listing of Search Terms by Category

***Constituent**:* district, tour, open house, interview, op-ed, event, talk, newsletter, honor, meeting, discuss, visit, school, schools, students, stopped by, tickets, internship, fair, internships, art competition, academy nominations, federal agency, constituents

***Legislative**:* bill, #hr, committee, legislation, debate, resolution, caucus, colleagues, colleague, amendment, vote, votes, voting

***Political Parties and Leaders**:* President Barack Obama, Speaker Paul Ryan, former Speaker John Boehner, Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi

Policy comprises various sub-topics, including

Health Care: healthcare, Obamacare, Medicare, Medicaid, health insurance

Foreign Policy: Iraq, ISIS, Iran, Syria, Russia, Turkey, Greece, Yemen, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Paris, extremism, terrorism

Education: education, Common Core

Energy: energy, gas, oil, solar, wind, renewables, Keystone XL pipeline

Budget/Fiscal Issues: budget, deficit, debt, fiscal

Military/Veterans: military, POWs, veterans, the VA, army, navy, air force, marines

Technology: tech, technology, internet, high tech