

Use of the Web by Members of the U.S. House of Representatives

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As awareness and usage of the Internet spreads throughout the world, it should come as no surprise that elected officials are looking for ways to employ network technology. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Congress of the United States. By the end of October 1995, about fifty Members of the House of Representatives had established World Wide Web pages accessible to through the Internet. For those who want to have a look on their own, point your browser to <http://www.house.gov/MemberWWW.html> . This will bring up a list of House Members with home pages. The pages are changing rapidly so expect to find new pages and changed features on every visit.

Most congressional Web pages have standard offerings. The usual elements include a picture of the Congressman, a biography, basic Washington tourist information, and links to other congressional and federal WWW resources. Some Members offer links to resources in their home districts and to other Web sites that may be of interest to their constituents. For example, Rep. John Conyers, a senior Democrat from Michigan, provides a link to NewtWatch, a site that track the activities of House Speaker Newt Gingrich. House Majority Leader Dick Arme, a Republican from Texas, offers links to home pages for politically conservative groups.

Since political uses of the Web are relatively new, it may be unfair to be too critical of existing offerings. Nevertheless, few Members are making full or effective use of Internet capabilities. One who does is Rep. Rick Boucher, a Democrat from Virginia. In the past, Boucher chaired a subcommittee with jurisdiction over network issues, and he is one of a few network literate Members. His well-developed home page shows his constituents what he is doing on their behalf, highlighting the Congressman's activities to promote economic development in his congressional district. It also features Boucher's work on National Information Infrastructure issues, something likely to be of interest to anyone who accesses the Web site. Boucher makes full use of the capabilities of the WWW, offering a multimedia archive with film and sound clips of his speeches. He even offers a link that will help people learn how to use these advanced features.

Most Members of Congress are not as sophisticated. The pages are not as effective as they should be because of a lack of understanding of the medium. The biggest mistakes include:

1. Boring pages - Too many congressional Web pages are uninteresting. The problem is that most Members of Congress have never seen a Web site before, and they think that their own site is something wonderfully new. It isn't. Users will immediately get over the novelty of a congressional Internet connection, and they will look for something useful. Links to other federal sites are fine, but users can find these on their own and return to them directly. Members fail to provide sufficient current information about their own personal

activities, votes, legislative initiatives, and districts. Users rarely have a reason to pay a return visit to the Web site.

2. Old technology - Some Members make use of Gopher servers to provide access to press releases and other documents. No one who uses the World Wide Web wants to find last year's technology. Even worse, some Gopher servers identify documents by DOS file names (e.g., 015.PR), leaving browsers to guess at the contents. This is not helpful.

3. Too many graphics - No one is surprised that Members include their pictures on their home pages. Almost everyone with a home page does the same thing. But many congressional Web pages make intensive use of graphics. For users with slower modems, graphics can present a significant roadblock. It simply takes too long to receive several large photographs when connections are less than 28.8 baud. Even at that speed, graphics can be slow. One way to cater to all users, well-connected and otherwise, is to provide text-only switches so that those with slower modems can avoid the graphics.

4. Missing the point - The technology offers lots of new capabilities, but Members too often think in old ways. Thus, one provides a list of television appearances, but fails to offer audio or video clips or transcripts. The list itself is not especially useful and does nothing to get the congressman's substantive message across.

5. Failing to exploit the audience - The Internet is a wonderful way to find, develop, and lead a group of people with an interest in a specific issue. Members do not make effective political use of the Internet because they fail to aggressively promote their own legislation and projects. A Member who wants to find a constituency for a pet project should use the Internet to find supporters and to help those supporters find each other.

The biggest challenge in exploiting the capabilities of the Internet is electronic mail. Congressional offices use a large percentage of their resources answering constituent mail. It is a major activity for most offices. Congressional Web pages permit users to send electronic mail, but responses invariably are sent by snail mail. This is also true, by the way, for the White House Web page.

There are several reasons. First, Members don't want to waste their time responding to people who don't live in their congressional districts. If you write a snail mail letter to a Congressman who doesn't represent you, it will likely be ignored or transferred to the correct office. Since no one can't tell by e-mail address whether the author of a message is a constituent, the Web pages tell correspondents to include street addresses. Second, congressional offices have sophisticated correspondence control systems for snail mail. The technology to feed electronic mail into these systems has not yet been installed. The staffers who operate the Web sites are not likely to be the same people who answer the mail, and the intra-office connections are not established. This is likely to change as a new generation of computer technology is installed, but it may take some time. It will also take some rethinking. E-mail has to be viewed as a regular source of constituent contact and not just a passing fad.

Third, e-mail correspondents probably have different expectations than those who send snail mail. Both expect responses, but e-mail lends itself to immediate responses and to a continuing back-and-forth exchange. Congressional offices simply cannot meet expectations for rapid and regular exchanges. This is true in general for government. It remains to be seen what the impact of e-mail will be for the Congress or for the executive branch. If those who send e-mail to their Congressman expect to engage in continuing dialogue, they are likely to be disappointed.

Fourth, there is little evidence so far that e-mail is being used for organized, grassroots lobbying activities. There have been some electronic petitions that gathered large number of e-mail signatures, but these were compiled by private organizations and submitted in print. It is not clear that a congressional office can sort through a large volume of messages. At least with snail mail, incoming letters and postcards can be measured by volume. I doubt that any office can quickly assess the contents of 20,000 e-mail messages received in a day. There will eventually be expert systems to help, but these systems are not developed for congressional use today. For the moment, direct e-mail lobbying campaigns are likely to be ineffective.

As Members of Congress learn more about the Internet, expect them to make better use of its capabilities. I found no indication that Members are establishing list servers that permit wider, automatic sharing of messages and information on specific topics, but this is a natural. One basic idea is to offer to send press releases to those who ask for them. A more ambitious approach would use a moderated discussion group to develop a constituency for a bill or to raise the identification of a Member with a specific issue. An unmoderated group on a controversial issue may provoke too much interference from those who disagree. It might work well for a local issue that is not highly emotional.

Another easy way for Members of Congress to make effective use of the Internet is to use questionnaires. Visitors to a Web page can be asked for their opinions on specific issues, and the responses can be automatically tallied. Computer-generated, targeted responses can be sent based on the responses. If questionnaires are changed regularly, people may have a reason to revisit their Representative's Web page.

In 1992, candidates Clinton and Gore were the first presidential campaigners to use the Internet for overtly political purposes. For 1996, other presidential candidates are doing the same. Congressional use of the Internet will not follow the same path because of restrictions on the use of federal funds for any campaign related activities. Still, there are many legal and proper ways to use the Internet to further congressional operations and to increase the exchange of communications between Members of Congress and their constituents. With so many Members active on the Internet, we can expect new and interesting developments over the next few years. Your observation post is as close as your modem.

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