

Heading for the “X”-it?: How Congress is Navigating Changes in the Digital Communication Landscape

Benjamin R. Burnley - Georgetown University

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Introduction

The digital communication landscape in Congress is in a unique moment. In the last 18 months, Twitter, the platform favored by most of Congress, was purchased by Elon Musk, who rebranded the site as “X”. Musk’s changes to the platform led some to leave for alternatives like Mastodon, Threads, and BlueSky. Meanwhile, TikTok, the fastest growing platform and the one favored by young Americans is essentially untouched by Congress. How are digital communication professionals in Congress thinking about these changes?

This project was inspired by the period right after Elon Musk’s takeover of Twitter (now X) when a series of changes to the platform, its governance, and perhaps most importantly its workforce destabilized its functioning and posed serious questions about the site’s future—this period featured changes to the verification system (Clark and Peters 2022) on the site and the expansion of a subscription service model (Roth 2023) that allowed anyone to pay for a blue check that boosted the prominence of their account’s activity. Additionally, this period featured a stretch of outages (Hern and Milmo 2023) that raised questions about the health of the platform. Though the platform has stabilized now, there was serious discussion about the long-term prospects of a service that represents a key component of political communication online. The takeover also represented an important change in the platform’s political valence. Musk commonly posts conservative messages, shares conspiracy theories, and makes overtures to the online right, and he has been and remains a very active user of the platform. This alone marks one of the starkest differences between Musk and the platform’s former executive, Jack Dorsey, who was largely silent on the platform but was often perceived by the right as governing the platform in a way that stifled conservative speech and played into larger progressives societal and cultural trends. Though

It matters that the most common platform utilized by members of Congress was purchased by the world's richest man, whose other companies' activities often either work in conjunction with or under strict regulation by the U.S. government. Twitter is part of the modern Congress and it is woven into the way members of Congress represent themselves in the 21st century (Russell 2021). This implies that changes in platform functioning and governance inherently mean changes to representation. This paper seeks to understand how committed members of Congress are to Twitter and whether they are interested in taking this moment of change to innovate. Twitter has been a powerful means of accomplishing political goals over the last 15 years, is it now time for a new technology to take its place? Past cycles of technological innovation indicate that there are opportunities within the current equilibrium for members to take innovative approaches to new platforms and revolutionize the way politicians communicate (Epstein 2018). The question here is whether the change from Twitter to X and all the changes Musk has brought with him are enough for members to attempt this innovation.

This paper seeks to answer these questions and explain Twitter's staying power as a tool for Congressional communication. The levels of change in how the platform operates were sudden and extreme – no other information communication technology (ICT) has experienced a takeover with such implications – and yet it appears that X has stabilized for the most part. Utilizing one-on-one interviews with digital communicators, communication directors, and members of Congress, I show why Twitter is so ingrained into the routine of Congressional communication. I show that the affordances, the audience, the professionalized nature of digital content creation, and the lack of viability from alternatives make Twitter positioned to stay important to Congressional communication for the time being. The implications of these findings help us make sense of how Congress has structured itself to create digital content, how Congress is navigating this moment, and how resilient digital representation is to change.

Digital Communication and Change

Communication is at the core of democratic representation. Members of Congress (and any democratic legislature for that matter) must maintain transparency in their activities and need to demonstrate that their actions represent their constituent's best interests. They do this by taking credit for certain material benefits generated via legislation and actions to further issues important to voters at home (Mayhew 1974). Constituencies are variable and change depending on need, but every member communicates at a higher level to both raise their persona and expand their reach (Fenno 1978). While this has been a factor throughout Congress' history, the 20th and 21st centuries have brought about novel technologies that have been adapted to meet the communicative needs of legislators.

Each wave of change in information and communication technologies (ICT) has brought about new methods of reaching and communicating with constituents. These technologies are often pioneered at first by members who are outside of power and then, as the ICT becomes more entrenched, their methods are adopted by the mainstream (Epstein 2018). There is no better example of this in our current moment than Twitter¹, an ICT that started as a short message service (SMS) but has evolved into a social media platform with incredible importance to politics around the world (Jungherr 2016). The adoption of Twitter started in the late aughts by both campaigns and members of Congress alike (Chi and Yang 2011; Gulati and Williams 2012; Lassen and Brown 2011). By 2013, every sitting member of Congress had at least one account associated with either their office or campaign (Russell 2021).

In *Tweeting is Leading*, Russell (2021) demonstrates how Twitter became more professionalized over time, particularly in the Senate where members of Congress hired staff members to help shape an online persona that represented their work and priorities on Capitol Hill. This happens at a time when Congress is increasingly investing in communication due to increased competition for control over the institution. Lee (2016) notes that the number of communication staffers has increased at the expense of policy staff because the modern Congress is more concerned with electoral messaging than Congress in the past. The 2016 presidential election took communication on Twitter to a new level as Donald Trump made his tweets a key part of his strategy to dictate and control coverage. The key insight Trump discovered seems to be that there was seemingly no limit to the amount of coverage a tweet might get if it was sufficiently extreme enough to attract the attention of mainstream media outlets (Francia 2018). Members of Congress were engaging with and often asked what they thought of Trump's most recent tweets, giving Twitter a new importance to the institution.

This trajectory changed slightly with the end of Trump's presidency and his subsequent banning from the platform following the January 6th attack on the Capitol in an attempt to stop the certification of Joe Biden's electoral victory. The Biden presidency certainly changed the tenor of what was happening on the website, but it also brought about a lot of soul-searching for the platform itself as Jack Dorsey, Twitter's founder and CEO stepped down at the end of 2021 (Conger and Hirsch 2021). This period also marked the rise of TikTok as the fastest-growing social media platform, a trend largely spurred by the Covid-19 pandemic. Politicians have for the most part avoided TikTok for

¹ I will refer to the platform as Twitter throughout primarily because this is still common in academic literature and this was the name of the platform during the time period I am considering.

various reasons stemming from national security² to the different demands a short-form video platform places on staff that generally create text-based digital content. This hasn't stopped the platform from being a locus of political communication though, particularly around social movements (J. Lee and Abidin 2023), protests (Literat, Boxman-Shabtai, and Kligler-Vilenchik 2023), and issues tied to young voters (Zeng and Abidin 2021).

One unique aspect of Congress members' reliance on social media platforms is the control that individual CEOs have over how the platforms operate. Past ICT were subject to regulation by the government but made up of numerous companies providing a service. These companies have gatekeeping ability over who gets on the air – the actual medium itself (television for example) is made up of companies competing for viewership on the same technology. Social media platforms are a bit different in the sense that access is open to anyone, but within a given platform the company has much more control over how users communicate. This is true of the affordances the platform gives its users (Evans et al. 2017; Gibson 1977) but also in the decisions they make around content moderation and general usage guidelines (Gillespie 2018).

Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter marks an important change in the platform for several reasons. First, it marks an important change in the platform's governing structure for the first time in its history. Though Dorsey was briefly replaced by Parag Agarwal, his tenure as CEO did not mark the sea change that Musk's did. Second, Musk's takeover represents an exogenous change to the platform that ultimately ends in the changing of some of the basic functioning of the platform as well as some initial dips in its performance. Lastly, if Dorsey's reign as CEO was marked by his desire to stay out of the political limelight, Musk's takeover represented the opposite. For one, Musk is a well-documented user of the platform and over time his tweets have become increasingly conservative and conspiratorial. These are important implications to consider as the platform shifts to become what Musk wants it to be. Do members of Congress shift their behavior in response?

Unlike the cable news environment, social media is still marked by ideological diversity. Iyengar and Hahn (2009) demonstrate that viewers of television news typically skew toward networks that share their ideological preferences. This is much harder on social media because engaging in politics often means that users are inadvertently exposed to viewpoints from the other end of the political spectrum (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015; Barberá et al. 2015; Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016). Selective exposure often means individuals skipping out on news altogether rather than missing viewpoints from the other side (Bode, Vraga, and Troller-Renfree 2017).

² The Biden Administration ultimately banned TikTok from being on government phones due to concerns about the application's ability to track user data (Allyn 2022).

There is a trend in text-based social media platforms over the last several years has been toward decentralization. This has played out in two ways. First, with the movement toward federated platforms like Mastodon and Bluesky, the latter of which is a product of a number of ex-Twitter employees including Dorsey. The second way this has played out is with an increasing number of explicitly conservative platforms like Truth Social, Parler, Gab, and others, built around Twitter's affordances. These decentralization movements have not yielded much in terms of network shifts though.

Methods and Data

Existing research of congressional communication has largely relied on large-scale analysis of tweets, using the text of the tweet to illuminate patterns via human interpretation or methods such as natural language processing (Burnley forthcoming; Russell 2021). This certainly helps us get a sense of what is happening on the platform and can give insight into larger trends across time. The research questions at hand, however, are much more concerned with the inner workings of communication staff and the kinds of decisions they are making in response to changes in the social media landscape. To answer these research questions, I conducted interviews with individuals who worked in Congress or congressional communication and had experience with content creation for digital platforms.

To do this, I set out to conduct interviews with a variety of professionals ranging from Congress members, communication directors, digital directors, and anyone else with professional experience. The sample was collected in two ways. First, via email recruitment using publicly available contact information and second via connections made during the first stages of the interview process. All questions and procedures were reviewed by Georgetown University's Institutional Review Board and participants were not compensated for their time. Most interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately one hour in length. One of the interviews in the sample was done in person and was shorter due to time constraints. All participants consented to participate in this study and were notified they could remove themselves from the study at any time.

The content of the interviews focused on the process of digital content creation in Congress, the specific goals in posting, differences in platform, and uncertainties about the future of digital communication. The interviews were open-ended in nature and respondents were encouraged to discuss specific examples from their professional lives. The text of the interviews was then transcribed and reviewed for thematic similarities between respondents. The transcription process was done via

OpenAI's Whisper API using the audio files from the interviews themselves. These transcripts were then reviewed and any mistakes were fixed manually.

In total, I utilize the content of seven interviews as data for this paper. I interviewed a range of professionals – digital directors, communications directors, and Members of Congress from both parties. The balance of the panel was 3 Republicans and 4 Democrats. They varied in whether they still worked in Congress or had moved to other jobs. Six of the seven interviews were with former Congressional staff and one was still working in Congress at the time of the interview. The interviews were semi-structured and I encouraged interviewees to give examples for their professional work. I broadly pursued four research questions:

RQ1: Who is your ideal audience on Twitter? On other platforms?

RQ2: What makes Twitter valuable to your office and has it lost any of its value over time?

RQ3: How is digital content made in your offices?

RQ4: Do any of the new social media platforms seem viable to you?

Results

“Twitter was used for a lot of different reasons and for a lot of different circumstances. To monitor what members were saying, to diffuse any situations within the caucus, for message discipline, and to micro-target these markets, these seats, that we thought we could win. We used it for all of those things” - *House Democratic Leadership, Communications Director*

The quote above demonstrates just how central Twitter is to accomplishing the goals of Congressional leadership. The top-level takeaway from the interviews was clear: Twitter is deeply engrained in Congressional communication and would be very difficult to supplant. The interviews pointed to several key reasons that this is the case. First, the audience on Twitter, though not representative of the nation or the member's constituency more generally, is political elites who are valuable to Congress. Second, the platform's affordances make it useful for activities like engaging stakeholders, coordinating party message, and highlighting both interparty and intraparty conflict. Third, digital communication strategy is currently built heavily on Twitter's centrality and the fact that it serves members quickly and with essentially no cost. Fourth, video first platforms present a large technological lift in content creation that doesn't come with a corresponding return on investment. This means that the incentive to build out a digital video team is not a strong one. And lastly, despite transitions in Twitter over the last 18 months, newer platforms are not currently viable. Put together, these themes point to Twitter being stronger than it is given credit for, at least among political

communicators. Additionally, it places the onus on other platforms to demonstrate their viability or, in the case of TikTok, to present safe avenues for digital innovation. I will

Audience

The most salient topic when discussing Twitter activity with interviewees was their view of who their audience is. Past research has shown that Twitter is used by a minority of Americans and an even smaller proportion are active on the platform (Pew 2019). This fact has led to the phrase “Twitter is not real life” becoming a popular retort when the viral moment on the platform fails to make waves in the general public. One respondent said that President Biden was fond of this phrase and communicated it to Democrats often when they were too focused on the platform. Even so, it is clear that Twitter is real life to the digital communications apparatus in Congress because their audience was not the general public but the power users that make the platform valuable for Congressional communication. The audiences that are mentioned in the interviews are the elite media, other members of Congress, and potentially new donors.

Journalists and media outlets are the key constituency for tweets. This means respondents know their audience is not representative, but they are nonetheless important to the goals of Congressmembers. A Democratic communications director put it this way when thinking about how the goals for Twitter changed over their tenure:

[Twitter] wasn't democratizing the information. We thought it was. And maybe it was at one point. But it clearly became elites – elite media.” The audience is “elite media, members, your followers.

Twitter isn't seen as a means for getting the message to as many people as possible but rather getting it to the right people. One Democratic member of Congress relayed this fact with an air of defeat saying “I *wanted* my audience to be my constituents (emphasis mine).” A Republican staffer put it similarly:

“The audience is not the larger population of America. It is overwhelmingly east-coast, media members, influencers, and increasingly other members of Congress. It wasn't like “This is my constituents in Ohio or California.”

The development of this relationship between Congress and the media appears to have stemmed from the way that the media relied on Twitter as a distribution channel in the platform's earlier days. One Republican communications director described the development like this:

“First, it became a place that journalists were using to get their message and their work out. It became a place to get our message right into the media conversation. Second, you have the power of an echo chamber. We realized that we could create an echo chamber, this surround sound effect on this platform. Twitter gave us the ability to demonstrate our status and power to the media.”

This ability to shape and engage directly with the media and use party institutions to shape media narratives made the media the most important audience on the platform. This provides a key point in understanding the primacy of Twitter in Congressional communication – other platforms don’t offer this. Journalists are not using TikTok or other platforms in this way. Until they do, Congress’ most important audience will likely keep them utilizing Twitter.

The second key audience was a bit more surprising – other members of Congress. Though these members face no barrier to in-person or between-office communication, respondents often brought up how Twitter helped solve information problems between offices. For one, leadership could signal to the conference what the party line was. “Tweets from the Speaker are signal to the caucus on where they should be” said one staffer. Another, working for House leadership at the time, viewed the audience hierarchy as “other members of Congress, interest groups in DC, and then sometimes the general public.” Another staffer in House leadership discussed the ways that leaders find Twitter an incredibly easy way to monitor where their members are and that they use it to keep tabs on what their members are saying.

Lastly, it was clear that some portion of the messages were aimed at gaining new followers, particularly with an eye toward fundraising. Twitter’s targeting capabilities are not as built out as Facebook’s but the virality of certain tweets “allowed us to fundraise” said one Democratic staffer. This same staffer raised questions about whether TikTok could provide the same value. The short, text-based nature of content on Twitter allowed greater tailoring of messages:

“You could tailor your message to try to reach new audiences.” You could “alter your voice in a way to alter your audience. You can’t do that through a statement to the press. You couldn’t do that in an email. It served that purpose for us ... building out the audience and the people we were engaging with.”

Affordances

Though they did not use this language, it became clear in my conversations with communications staff in Congress that the affordances of Twitter are what makes the platform so valuable. Interviews discussed the immediacy the platform provides both in terms of getting your message out but also receiving engagement. Additionally, interviewees highlighted the public conflict that they can create via Twitter by engaging with other members of Congress or other politicians. Lastly, the specific social graph of Twitter powers the platform and makes it valuable to Congress. For all three of these affordances, it is unclear whether TikTok or other Twitter competitors can immediately provide alternatives.

The most common answer to what makes Twitter valuable is its immediacy and speed. Members feel they have the ability to respond and to make news quickly on Twitter. “I needed to interact with the stories of the day”, said a former member of Congress. The platform’s trademark “short, pithy, and impactful statements” make it ideal for communicating quick, politically potent messages. “Twitter is a news creator” explained a Republican staffer. The platform also provides course correction when a story does not necessarily provide the angle or the narrative an office prefers. “We would just go around the media... if we weren’t getting what we wanted out of stories. We’d just go straight to Twitter” described one Democratic staffer.

The reason this was possible is largely due to Twitter’s social graph. Twitter differentiated itself from Facebook early on by utilizing non-reciprocal following, meaning the platform incentivized connections based on interest in content and not replication of real work social networks. This creates a different kind of ecosystem, one that has different overlaps than alternatives. “You need a tool that can track the social ecosystem [in Congress]” explained one Republican staffer. They went on to complain that Instagram and TikTok, despite having similar following structures, don’t provide the same feel for the landscape – “Twitter has that arena-like feel”.

The social graph of Twitter is most helpful in getting messages to travel much further than they would on their own. As explored above, this is largely due to the media’s presence on the site. But it’s also due to the fact that stakeholders follow members who are working or advancing policy that interests them. Communications staff knows this and utilizes it to their advantage. When discussing a big hearing in a committee that was garnering a lot of attention, a staffer who worked communications for the committee noted that once they tweeted out their talking points “all the other interest groups picked up our message and ran with it.” They were not alone in highlighting this fact. A Democratic member of Congress highlighted how powerful Twitter’s retweets are for the reach of a message:

“The benefit of the tweets is that they can be retweeted. Remember the ultimate goal is to get this short and sweet message out in front of as many people as possible. You would post and then others would do the work for you.”

The mirror image of the mechanism described above, where similarly interested users amplify a message to boost its reach, is Twitter’s ability to bring conflict front and center. Because members often share overlapping social graphs and staffers make clear that they deeply value what other members are doing, accounts often engage in conflict and that conflict plays out quite publicly. The staffers I spoke to saw this as a positive feature of the site for their goals. No better example of this is the number of combative House Republicans for whom “Twitter is their lifeblood”. A Republican staffer told me they “couldn’t imagine the House Republicans without Twitter.”

This conflict plays out not just between members of Congress, but also between branches when members of Congress engage with the president. This has become a larger part of how Congress communicates in the last two presidencies. At one point, this strategy was still very new and a Republican staffer during the Obama administration mentioned that one of their main communication goals was to get one of their tweets read during the White House Press Briefing. “We wanted to go toe-to-toe with the president”, they said. Right now, it is unclear whether other platforms could replicate the same social graphs that provide Twitter its dynamism. TikTok is utilized almost exclusively by Democrats and ideologically filtered platforms such as Truth Social eliminate this feature.

Interestingly, this was not universally seen as a positive feature. Communications staff that worked with House leadership mentioned that public conflict between members presented difficulties for the party in Congress. “From leadership, the public airing of laundry and intra-party conflict is not conducive to moving policy forward. They would usually try to deal with these things behind the scenes” explained the staffer. In this way, what is potentially helpful for individual members may present a conflict for the party as a whole, a reality we see throughout studies of institutions in political science.

Strategy

Another reason that Twitter seems to have strong staying power is that digital content strategy in Congress is professionalized in a profound way. This is primarily driven by the fact that communications staff feel that the content on Twitter is serving their goals really well. This has led members and their staff to pursue greater levels of professionalization which has led to increased message control at the party level and greater autonomy at the staff level. Parties provide members with

the digital resources they need to communicate effectively and members delegate digital content responsibilities to their staffs. While success on the platform is usually necessary, it is usually a means to an end; what members really want is attention that can help them beyond Twitter.

The sense I got from talking with staff is that they've figured out how to use Twitter to serve their goals. Originally, it was a place to put links or stories members wanted to highlight, often intending to point followers back to sites they saw as more valuable:

“Twitter originally was just being used as an extension of member’s websites. It wasn’t a big communications tool as much as it was just something people were trying out. At some point, we realized we needed to customize the content.” - Republican House Staffer

The two prior sections explored some of the ways this customization occurred. Staff looks to play into the media environment and utilize the affordances of Twitter to maximize the impact of a tweet. This extends upward to the party level too. The main theme interviewees discussed was the degree to which parties provide their members with talking points. This sometimes came in the form of daily sample tweets to make communication streamlined and to keep the party on brand. A House Democratic leadership staffer noted that leaders “gave digital content directly to members.” Another House Republican staffer noted the same – “We would draft content from press releases specifically tailored for Twitter.” Individual members can either tweet these directly or make small edits to better reflect their personal style. “Democrats have the reputation of being verbose... of over-explaining things,” said a Democratic communications director. Message control helped reign this in.

At the individual office level, the professionalization of digital communication strategy meant that staff had autonomy over the content that was being created. Despite social media operating under the pretense that these are personal accounts, the reality is that staffers do almost all of the work. “Your worst nightmare was the principal asking to see the tweet.” said one Democratic staff member. The view from a former member of Congress I spoke with was that complicated approval and involvement in digital content creation takes lawmakers away from other activities that need their time and involvement. This has led communications staff to lean on one other. “We would ask other offices to retweet our messages behind the scenes. We’d even go around conference chairs to amplify the messages we wanted amplified” said one Republican communications director.

What makes this all work though was the agreement that success on the platform alone was not sufficient. A Republican digital communications director explained it this way: “The Hill still very much values traditional media over digital media. There is still a preference for being successful on TV

rather than social media.” Twitter proves very effective in getting messages beyond the platform, more so than other platforms. A Republican communications director highlighted Twitter’s ability to drive traffic elsewhere with this anecdote:

“I could post something newsworthy and use the same message on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and hold it for Twitter... And it wouldn’t make news until reporters saw it on Twitter.”

For Republicans, this relationship with traditional media seems more of a priority, as Democrats were less likely to talk about this link. Republicans view this social media to traditional media link as a key to their strategy.

“Members are much more conscious about using their brand to raise money... to get on TV. At some point, it became about, instead of “here is the agenda I am pushing”, getting the attention of certain people – Trump himself, Hannity. They care about getting on Fox prime time and gaining followers”.

Technological Lift

The final topic that came up in interviews, particularly around exploring short-form video platforms like TikTok, is the additional technological lift associated with filming and editing video. If Twitter is ideal because of its speed, the autonomy it affords staff, and the simplicity of text, then platforms like TikTok present a slower, more complicated process that would likely take members’ involvement to be successful. Videos take larger teams and more resources to complete. Additionally, video production is time-intensive. A Republican communications director mentioned that during their tenure “we would release a web video every six to eight weeks... and we were a content forward operation.” Another discussed at length the planning and work associated with taking policy complexity and making it work for video.

Despite this, multiple interviews discussed how successful videos are as pieces of digital content. A Republican Communications director recalled the conflict this way:

“The broad swath of our tweets were text only. Tweets sometimes had some image or graphic, but those generally underperformed. Videos often overperformed, but the biggest performer was text only. No question about it... There’s breaking news and you don’t have the capacity or

time to build a digital asset, some sort of visual asset around it. Speed is of the essence and you can make just as big of an impact with just text.”

This quote illustrates the trade-off communications staff are making when they utilize Twitter. They understand that videos overperform, but they feel that text can serve the goals of their member just fine. Given the additional resources associated with video production, it would likely need to reap many more rewards for a switch to occur.

Part of the challenge of video is associated with the way communications staff is currently built. “Most digital communications folks are politically minded first, not creative,” said one interviewee. One of the interviews was with a Republican digital director who explained how offices currently approach videos:

“Most people don’t have the capability to do that themselves. When most offices hire a digital staffer, that could mean anything. Right, that could mean you’re a 23-year-old who understands Twitter, but you’ve never taken a photo with a real camera and can’t use Photoshop. You may be a great photographer, but don’t do graphic design. Some offices have a videographer, but it’s rare.”

This is true even in the Senate where resources are less scarce. The picture this paints is a Congress that recognizes the power and impact of video but has not arranged their staff in a way to make video production easy. Paired with the professionalism devoted to creating digital content for Twitter, a video first digital approach seems a long way away.

Viability of Alternatives

A final theme that inevitably arose during our conversations was the viability of other platforms as alternatives to Twitter. It helps to separate this out into TikTok and platforms like it (Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts) and those that seek to replicate Twitter (Threads and Bluesky, primarily). There is a sense that TikTok is “transformative, like Twitter... in our ability to reach bigger, broader audiences.” but that there is long runway from adoption to it becoming a necessary tool.

All interviews, from all levels of staff, and both parties mentioned national security concerns when talking about Congress communicating on TikTok. One interviewee even questioned whether the metrics on the platform are believable. That said, the Democrats I spoke with are more interested in the platform. “I do think that this kind of content is the wave of the future. It is a big deal. When you think about over half of America being on TikTok, that’s unbelievable,” described a former member of Congress. There was a sense that speaking directly to constituents was potentially a better

and more healthy form of communication. Multiple interviews brought up the style of Representative Jeff Jackson (D-NC) who has had success on TikTok.

For Republicans, there is considerable skepticism about the platform beyond the immediate national security concern. Those that I interviewed acknowledged the social and societal impact the platform is having, but they questioned their ability to point views toward those more valuable sites discussed above. “Politicians are risk-averse,” said one communications director “They don’t want to end up like the ‘How do you do, fellow kids’ meme.” Multiple interviewees felt Democrats needed to show the platform was viable before they thought Republicans would take the platform seriously – “I think it would take this election being ‘the TikTok election’ for Republicans to be interested.” Another mentioned brought up the audience question explored above:

“My advice to all members is to not spread yourself too thin. Pick a few platforms where your greatest constituencies are and do them well. I would advise against TikTok for a variety of reasons. Are the people who vote, the people that care about your issues, the people that know about you on TikTok? Probably not. Is that a good investment of your time? Probably not.”

That said, another Republican mentioned an effort to explore short-form video on other platforms:

“The conference is trying to develop a strategy for short-form vertical videos. We encourage them to do it all the time. The tension is that TikTok is where the people are, but Shorts and Reels may be more sustainable over time. “Our YouTube Shorts are hit or miss, but in general they do not perform”.

As far as other platforms that mimic Twitter go, the themes explored above explain the lack of uptake for most members. Unless the media and political journalists shift together to a new platform, the shift for members of Congress doesn’t offer much. The specific platforms themselves also have challenges unique to themselves. Threads, for example, aims to minimize the spread of political content on the site, making it difficult for Congress to succeed there (Heath 2024). Similarly, the platforms that are ideologically geared, like Truth Social, Parler, or Gab, eliminate a lot of the conflict that members view as helpful to the spread of their content. One communications director said he encouraged members to “stick to fewer platforms and do them well.”

Conclusion

“As Twitter became more toxic through the Trump years, there were a lot of members who felt it was a space that they weren’t excited to be on it. But it’s become so integral to the strategy that you can’t not be on it. From a member’s perspective, you can’t go back. You can’t jump off it. You may not like it but you’ve got to have that tool in your toolkit.”

- *House Democratic Leadership, Communications Director*

Members of Congress face a unique moment in the digital communication ecosystem. Meta, the company that operates Facebook and Instagram, is moving away from political content. Twitter has rebranded as X after the takeover by Elon Musk. TikTok, the fastest growing social media platform and one now used by over half of Americans, is shifting how Americans engage with social media. This paper argues that Twitter’s mix of audience, affordances, and position make it resilient to these changes. Because newer platforms do not seem viable and because content creation comes with a high technological burden and uncertain benefits, we are not seeing an innovation at this time (Epstein 2018).

Twitter has been central to how members of Congress communicate for over a decade (Russell 2021). While it is not uncommon for ICT to be dominant for long stretches of time, the rise of TikTok is unprecedented even by social media’s standards. It is significant that there are real barriers to politicians effectively using the website. This paper has sought to expand out understanding to this phenomenon beyond just national security concerns. The rise of TikTok has presented a challenge for Congressional offices because it does not operate with the same audience and affordances that platforms of the past do. While this is not necessarily a barrier to success, digital communication offices have not made the shifts necessary to create content for the platform. The analysis of this paper exists within a certain temporal context, but it’s important to consider these barriers in the historical context. Politicians are rarely out of step with the largest ICT of the time. How members of Congress will deal with changes in social media consumption remains an open question.

This paper is not without limitations. For one, the sample is still very small and needs to be expanded to include more members with more diverse backgrounds. Additionally, while it offers helpful explanation for this specific moment, the long term implications are unclear. Around the time to of circulation, the House of Representatives passed a bill that would force the sale of TikTok or would implement a ban of the app in the United States. New ownership could change the calculations for members and shifts to digital communication strategy might follow. Additionally, banning TikTok completely could reshape the social media landscape again. A ban like this is unprecedented in the

social media era and would potentially push users to existing options. Future studies should continue to follow the development of short-form video content in Congress on competitors such as Reels and Shorts. Digital communication is key to Congressional representation in the twenty-first century. While this presents unparalleled ability for constituents and representatives alike to communicate freely, it happens within an ecosystem that is unstable and quick to change. The decisions of digital communication staff will continue to shape our politics for the foreseeable future.

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