

# Chapter 14

## Congress 2.0: Incumbent Messaging in Social Media

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### ABSTRACT

*With Congress approaching full adoption of the three major social media platforms – YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook – this study gauges the performance of members’ official channels in terms of building audiences. Despite the popularity of these platforms, a divide exists among a few high performing members and many low performers. Using an index to differentiate performance, the study finds social media success is driven by several factors, party affiliation and ideology being significant. Performance is also derivative of larger political and media forces, and the study shows that the issues confronting government can engage audiences that turn to social media for information, as demonstrated by the congressional debate over healthcare on YouTube. The chapter explores how the utilization of this technology could be an historical step as important as the advent of C-SPAN in connecting Congress to the American people.*

### INTRODUCTION

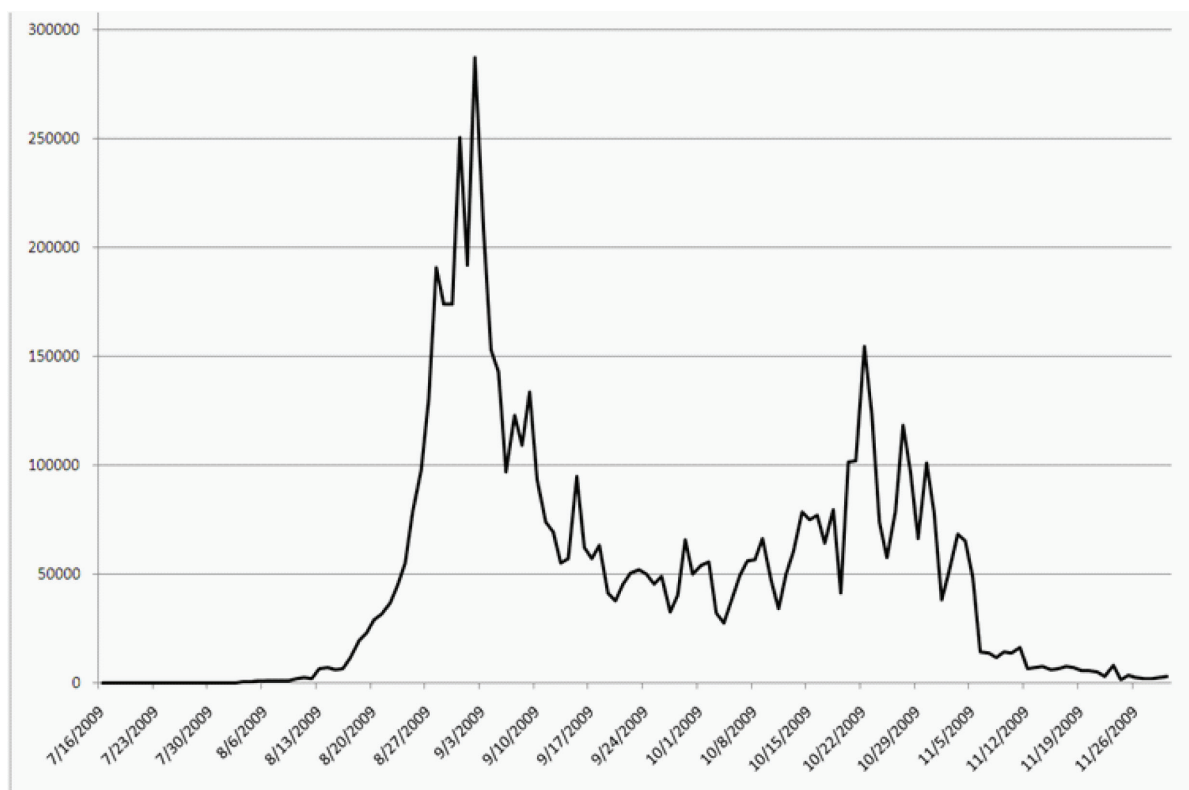
At the start of the House Energy and Commerce Committee’s consideration of the Democrats’ health care bill in July 2009, few would have expected the four-minute opening remarks of the tenth-ranking Republican to draw much attention.

Yet by late summer, as the historic health care debate began to unfold in Congress, Mike Rogers, a Republican representative from Michigan, became an improbable YouTube star.

Although neither flashy nor vitriolic, he delivered a succinct and a damning critique from the viewpoint of opponents of health care reform. Capturing the Republican theme, Rogers argued that the Democratic bill threatened to punish the

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Figure 1. Track of daily views of Rep. Mike Rogers' YouTube video on health care reform from when it was posted on July 16 through November 2009.



85% of Americans with health insurance to help the 15% of the uninsured. “Why would we punish the part that’s working to cover the part that’s not?” he asked. “It’s like taking a queen sized sheet and trying to put it over a king sized bed. I will guarantee you the corners are going to come up (Rogers, 2009).”

Rogers’ staff turned the comments into a video and posted it to his official House YouTube channel on July 16, 2009. Not much happened immediately; the video drew 1,200 views over the next two weeks. But in the August recess, as congressional town halls exploded in protest over health care reform and flooded YouTube and other Internet channels with the discourse, Rogers’ video went viral, collecting 1.4 million views that month. In September as the House took up the legislation, the views jumped to 2.6 million,

followed by 2.2 million in October. By the time the House sent the bill to the Senate in November, the video had drawn 7.4 million cumulative views, according to the tracking analytic of TubeMogul.com, a pioneering online video firm.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, the views faded into the “long tail” of the Internet (Bremmer & Keat, 2009) through the remainder of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress. (see Figure 1)

The popularity of Rogers’ video surprised even his own staff (Plautz, 2009), but the roiling national debate kept people tuned into YouTube, which has become a personal version of C-SPAN for members of Congress.<sup>2</sup> By YouTube standards, however, Rogers’ video would rank modestly in the largely entertainment medium. In comparison, the most-watched YouTube video of 2009 was Scottish singer Susan Boyle’s appearance on *Britain’s Got Talent*, which drew 120 million

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