

The Nevada Legislature in 140 words

Can a policy be debated on Twitter in 140 characters or less? Probably not, but that doesn't stop our legislators from utilizing social media to communicate with their constituents, the media, special interest groups and other legislators.

The use of social media by legislators typically begins with the campaign. Those running for public office are quick to ask constituents to "like" their campaign Facebook page, or sign up for their Twitter feed to get the latest updates on their campaign. The candidates can then communicate with supporters to organize campaign events, communicate positions and excite the electorate. If used correctly, social media can be an effective and low-cost method of amplifying a campaign.

The use of social media doesn't stop there. Once elected, and particularly during the legislative session, legislators utilize several types of social media to listen, learn and adapt to their constituents. Facebook and Twitter are the most used, but many legislators also use myriad social sites where they believe core followers are aggregated. In addition, they send e-blasts, post video blogs and send out electronic newsletters to maintain and build their base.

The real question is how is the use of social media is changing politics in the Nevada Legislative Building. To better understand this question, it helps to explore the scope of the current use of social media by some of those involved with the Legislature. The media, special interest groups, lobbyists and legislative staff all use social media in some fashion to communicate. A quick sampling of the numbers on Twitter can reveal some interesting information on how each of these groups utilizes social media.

For example, Assemblyman David Bobzien, known for his knowledge of



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technology, has 2,069 Twitter followers and has "tweeted" 2,269 times. Jon Ralston, a prominent legislative commentator, maintains almost 23,198 followers and has tweeted an astounding 37,870 tweets. Special interest groups on the opposite side of key issues are also leveraging social media. For example, the Nevada Mining Association has 2,572 Twitter followers and has tweeted 1,554 times, while the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN) has 1,941 Twitter followers and has tweeted 1,554 times.

Using these numbers, we can informally extrapolate how these different factions use social media. It appears that some legislators benefit from a large following, but their number of tweets is less than those in the media and more than the special interest groups or lobbyists. The numbers also indicate that lobbyists consume social media posts coming from the media and legislators, rather than broadcast their opinions. The most interesting use of social media is by special interest groups.

Gone are the days when the only way to reach a legislator was to travel to Carson City and wait for hours in their office to get a few minutes of their time. Not only can special interest groups communicate immediately with legislators; these groups can simultaneously speak to their supporters in an effort to engage them to join the conversation. On Twitter, these conversations are frequently posted using the hashtag #NVLeg. A hashtag is a number symbol used by Twitter to categorize topics that can be easily searched. The #NVLeg topic has become one of the best sources for anyone to get information on the Nevada Legislature, and is frequently used during the legislative session.

One interesting use of #NVLeg was during the debate on SJR 15, which was a resolution that would allow the Nevada Constitution to be amended to remove the authority of the legislature to tax mineral

property differently, currently used to assess the mining tax. Many commentators, including PLAN and the Nevada Mining Association, took to Twitter to provide additional commentary during the legislative hearing, each group sharing information in an effort to sway public opinion.

However, the aggrandizement of social media's use in politics also has its drawbacks. One significant drawback to the Twitter craze is how simple it is to spread incorrect or inaccurate information. It seems that every commentator, whether they're in the media or not, wants to be the first to scoop a story. The desire to be the first to tell a story increases the chance of inaccurate statements that can have significant negative impacts, especially when others rely on the veracity of the statements. A good word of advice to people following the legislature on social media is to verify information before you act.

The use of social media in the Nevada Legislature only seems to be increasing. Before social media, it was much easier for back-room deals to be discussed and negotiated. Legislators could lock themselves in a room for hours at a time to hammer out the big issues of the day. They wouldn't have an incentive to leak information because even if they did tell a reporter, it would be an entire news cycle before the information would be distributed to a large number of people. By that time, the legislature was on to the next issue.

Social media now makes these conversations more difficult to have because of the impulse of a legislator or lobbyist to share with their supporters. With the click of a button, Assemblyman Bobzien can take credit for important legislation to 2,069 of his supporters. A young reporter can scoop the wily veteran reporter. This could lead to legislators negotiating and debating important policies in a much more public forum. Would that be such a bad thing?

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QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“The idea of perfect closes your mind to new standards. When you drive hard toward one ideal, you miss opportunities and paths, not to mention hurting your confidence. Believe in your potential and then go out and explore it; don't limit it.”

— John Eliot

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