

# GUEST OBSERVER

By Brian Frederick

## New Medium Yields Same Old Misinformation

In the past couple of weeks, the social-networking tool Twitter has been all the rage in the news. Everyone from MC Hammer to Karl Rove is now using Twitter.

Twitter allows its users to post messages of up to 140 characters and can be read by anyone. These messages are called Tweets — yes, the lingo can seem dumb at times — and users can reply to one another's messages publicly or privately.

Twitter took off as a news story after several lawmakers (rudely) Twittered their way through President Barack Obama's Feb. 24 address to Congress.

Suddenly, everyone in the mainstream media awoke to the potential that Twitter has to convey information back and forth with the most powerful members of our society.

Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.), for instance, has fully embraced Twitter after learning about it from her children. In a Feb. 25 post, she wrote: "The best part is being able to directly talk to Missourians about my day without reporters editing!"

McCaskill has relied on Twitter for alerting her constituents to stories the media aren't covering. In a March 1 post, she wrote: "Dirty little secret. 40% of all the earmarks in the omnibus budget bill belong to Republicans. The majority of the earmarks in Mo belong to Rs."

Speaking of earmarks, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) has taken up Twitter to post the "porkiest projects" in the omnibus budget bill. McCain's March 3 post naming the \$951,500 being sent to the "Oregon Solar Highway" as the No. 1 "porkiest project" drew a quick Twitter reply from Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.): "McCain wasn't familiar with a blackberry right? Hows he supposed to understand a solar highway utilizing right-of-way to generate solar power?"

The ancient art of politicking — now in 140 characters or less.

Still, as useful as Twitter can be for exchanging ideas, it can also be used to spread misinformation and

attacks.

During Obama's address to Congress, Rep. Joe Barton (R-Texas) took a cheap shot at Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.): "Aggie basketball game is about to start on espn2 for those of you that aren't going to bother watching pelosi smirk for the next hour."

That post was followed by another 15 minutes later: "Disregard that last Tweet from a staffer." (Both posts have since been deleted from Barton's account.)

In a March 2 Twitter post, Fox News contributor and former Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) wrote: "Callista pointed out flying into santa barbara you can see the oil rigs off shore Ironically they have had no spill since 1969."

In fact, there was a spill in the waters off the coast of Santa Barbara, Calif., in the past few months.

After Media Matters for America documented Gingrich's error, we posted the following Twitter message: "On Twitter, @newtingrich falsely claimed 'no [oil] spill since 1969' in waters off Santa Barbara: <http://tr.im/gYnS>." The "@newtingrich" alerted Gingrich that the message was directed at him (though others can also see it), and the "http" address linked to the item on our Web site.

A few hours later, Gingrich posted the following Twitter message: "@mmfa, check out @saeveryre: santa barbara oil spills. The whole truth matters <http://tinyurl.com/bh78cb>." The message was directed at Media Matters and linked to a blog post by a research assistant at the conservative American Enterprise Institute. The blog post, which was on the Web site of Gingrich's American Solutions, argued that the examples of oil spills Media Matters provided weren't significant.

However, more than 1,000 gallons of crude oil were released into the waters off Santa Barbara in one of the spills, resulting in a coordinated cleanup effort by the Coast Guard, the California Department of Fish and Game's Office of Spill Prevention and Response, and the company responsible for the spill.

Seems significant enough that one cannot truthfully say there has been "no spill since 1969."

(The blog post also falsely ac-



cused Media Matters of implying that a second spill consisted of crude oil, but, in fact, our item included an Associated Press report stating that it didn't.)

Media Matters responded in a blog post later that night and alerted Gingrich via Twitter again, and

the cycle continues ...

How far we've come from the days of the morning newspaper and the nightly news broadcast.

Twitter co-founder Evan Williams has said Twitter "really provides people with a new way to communicate that didn't exist."

Indeed, a new medium has been born.

And with it, a new fight against misinformation.

Tweet, Tweet.

**Brian Frederick is a deputy editorial director at Media Matters for America, which you can follow at [twitter.com/mmfa](http://twitter.com/mmfa).**

## LETTERS

### Wishful Thinking

Curiously, the Feb. 23 letter "GOP Nominees Need Full Support" from Judicial Confirmation Network counsel Wendy E. Long discusses a Guest Observer column that she wished I had written rather than the one I actually wrote (Feb. 9, "GOP Payback on Court Nominees Is Hard to Justify").

Long erroneously claims that I "misstated the record about why Democrats opposed the Bush nominees." She then includes her version of what I wrote in four numbered paragraphs, each of which is followed by a "Fact" paragraph, none of which claim that anything I wrote

was factually incorrect.

Long describes but does not dispute anything I wrote about failed 4th Circuit nominees William J. Haynes II and Claude Allen. Instead, she writes about nominees other than the 10 whom I had room to discuss in my column. Worse, Long mischaracterizes my statements about two other nominees.

First, Long claims that I discussed ethical problems "relying upon revisionist history that Judge [Charles] Pickering was 'racially insensitive.'" In fact, I wrote: "Pickering's lifetime 5th Circuit nomination was blocked in part because, as a district judge, he unethically solicited attorneys with cases pending

before him to send him letters supporting his appellate nomination."

Second, Long claims I wrote that "4th Circuit nominee Steve Matthews was blocked because he was active in a conservative group" and that his "membership was troubling." In fact, I wrote that "Matthews was an officer and director of the Landmark Legal Foundation when it tried to nominate the fiery Rush Limbaugh for a Nobel Peace Prize. Landmark is headed by Mark Levin," and in his book, "Levin thanked Matthews for having 'supported me in all I do.'"

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