

WASHINGTON -- The message went out as President Barack Obama was about to deilver his first address to a joint session of Congress.

"Watch!!! Shortly I and colleagues will b marching into House for Pres speech. On TV" That was Sen. Chuck Grassley, twittering. Grassley frequently posts online updates through the Web site Twitter, the high-tech communication tool that has become all the rage on Capitol Hill.

High-tech might not be the image that comes to mind when people think of Grassley.

After all, the 75-year-old Iowa Republican was born the same year that FM radio was developed. When Congress isn't in session, he still goes back to work on his Iowa farm, and he has an affinity for sweater vests.

But Grassley said he always has been on the cutting edge of new communications technology, from the fax machines of the 1980s to the early days of e-mail.

Grassley was recently named one of the top 10 most influential users of Twitter by Politico, a Washington-based site that deiscribed his "plain-spoken, Midwest" mesisages as "personal in an Iowan way: friendly but dry."

Among Grassley's posts:

ae "On way bk to frigid wateriloo. Will my car start at airport."

ae "6 inches snow in New hartiford last night. I missed it bc of senate session. Lucky we finiished corn harvest last wkend."

ae "I'm bing intrvud by CBS on Twittering in my Hart office. Watch CBS onSat."

Grassley isn't the only public official embracing social networking sites once dominated by high school and college stuidents who found them good places to swap gossip and party pics. Heck, the president could be the poster child for new techninology.

As the sites have gone more mainstream, politicians are inincreasingly using them to promote themselves, spread policy messages and solicit feedback from constituents.

Politicians are suddenly anigling to appear more in tune with modern society, said Stefifen Schmidt, a political scientist at Iowa State University. Howiever, Schmidt said, he suspects many of the old-timers don't necessarily understand what they're doing.

He added that, for the counitry's sake, they shouldn't get too carried away.

"I hope that they're not going to be spending a lot of time, like my students, sitting in front of a laptop doing Facebook, because otherwise the republic is going to really be in dire, dire straits," he said.

Obama uses a BlackBerry to stay in touch with a handful of top aides and friends. Grassley uses his BlackBerry to tap out "tweets" about everything from the hot issues of the day to the successes of the men's basketiball team at his alma mater, the University of Northern Iowa.

"I'm just trying to communiicate with my constituents or provide opportunities for them to communicate with me," Grassley said.

Twitter uses quick text blasts -- no more than 140 characters -- that are supposed to answer

a simple question: What are you doing? Users type a message on a phone or the Twitter home page. The message is sent to people signed up to receive updates by e-mail, instant messaging programs or mobile phones.

More than 4,600 people have signed up to follow Grassley's tweets.

U.S. Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., said he checks his own page on Facebook at least once or twice a day. The Omaha Republican had recently reached 548 "friends" on the site.

Kevin Black, a 20-year-old junior at Chadron State College in Chadron, Neb., said he felt pretty important to be "friended" by a member of Congress.

It's a welcome change, he said, from the many silly applications on the Facebook site that allow users to play games, give each other virtual gifts or "throw" things at each other.

"I'd rather have a politician asking me to be their friend than getting thrown flaming snowballs," Black said.

When House Republicans went on a retreat earlier this year, they were handed research materials on the political utility of Facebook, Terry said.

"You have a segment of this society that's very loyal to that medium, so in order to communicate with them, you have to go to where they are," Terry said. "That's what took me to Facebook. Now I'm finding old high school friends and . . . it's really a riot."

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., has a "politician" page on Facebook, which means people sign up to be his "supporters" rather than friends. Fortenberry recently had 175 supporters on the site.

Other lawmakers have been slower to fully embrace such sites. Rep. Adrian Smith, a Republican who represents Nebraska's sprawling 3rd Congressional District, has yet to jump on the bandwagon.

When The World-Herald asked Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., about his Facebook page, he was surprised to learn of its existence. An aide said later that the page is left over from Nelson's 2006 re-election campaign.

"I remember the first time I heard about blogs," Nelson said. "I said 'You've got to be kidding,' and then I found they're very real, and we pay attention to blogs, too."

Nelson pointed out that his official Senate Web site was recognized in 2007 with a "silver mouse award," indicating it was one of the best on Capitol Hill.

But he doesn't use sites such as MySpace or Twitter.

"I'm not against it, I just don't happen to use that," Nelson said. "We do Google."

Contact the writer: 202-662-7270, joe.morton@owh.com

