**With Social Media’s Rise, the Pulpit Isn’t Just the President’s Anymore**

By ASHLEY PARKERJAN. 28, 2014

WASHINGTON — Twitter has fast become the conventional-wisdom clearinghouse and real-time echo chamber for major political events, so it was not surprising Tuesday evening when Twitter also became the forum where opinion on President Obama’s State of the Union address seemed to crystallize before he had even finished speaking.

“The media party line where everyone can listen in,” said Mike Murphy, a Republican strategist.

“The town hall for the media and political elite,” said Erik Smith, a Democratic strategist and founder of Blue Engine Message and Media.

The power of Twitter to shape the debate (for better or worse) was on display shortly before Mr. Obama began, when Representative Randy Weber, Republican of Texas, posted an error-riddled message that called the president a “Socialistic dictator,” and quickly went viral.

President Obama, in the Oval Office, might take credit for economic growth in his State of the Union, but polls show Americans are in no mood to give him any.

Indeed, Twitter’s ability to focus the pundit class helps explain why, in the fierce competition to control the political narrative, lawmakers, candidates, operatives and even the president are increasingly turning to it and other social media. The battle is the same as before, but they are now hoping to prevail 140 characters at a time.

“Conventional wisdom is like fast-drying concrete in the Twitter age — it doesn’t take long to harden,” said Senator Charles E. Schumer, Democrat of New York. “Twitter is one of the fastest ways to shape opinion.”

The State of the Union address spawned a bipartisan embrace of new photo- and video-sharing platforms, and a rush to create tweetable graphics and synchronized hashtags to amplify messages. Democrats and Republicans competed to make their views the majority, often with little regard to what the president actually said. Members of Congress sent out 750 tweets over the course of Mr. Obama’s speech, according to data provided by Twitter.

Congressional Republicans rallied around hashtags like #CloseTheGap, to push their message of reducing income inequality, and #YearOfAction, to call on Mr. Obama to act on some of their major proposals in the coming year. (Of course, especially after the president called for a “year of action” in his address, #YearofAction took off among Republicans and Democrats alike.)

And, perhaps more notably, Republicans set up “recording stations” on Vine, the Twitter-owned platform for sharing six-second videos, and Instagram to allow caucus members to record short responses that they could share before, during and after the speech.

When Mr. Obama got to the part of his address where he said he was willing to go around Congress through executive orders, Representative Paul Gosar, Republican of Arizona, was ready. As if on cue, he tweeted out a prerecorded Vine video featuring him sitting him behind his desk and stating, “If the president has a pen and a telephone, we have the Constitution.”

Last week, Republicans brought in Sean Evins, Twitter’s partnerships manager, to give a tutorial on the best ways to use Vine. (Democrats did the same in November.) Mr. Evins’s message was simple: Use Vine and other social media platforms to bring constituents closer.

“You can report a Vine or send a tweet from your pocket from a different perspective than your constituents would ever get from just looking at TV,” Mr. Evins said.

One perspective that Republicans in particular offered was up-close glimpses of the “Duck Dynasty” star Willie Robertson, who wore a bandanna, with several Republican lawmakers posting photographs of themselves mugging with him.

 “I stand with ‘Duck Dynasty,’ wrote Representative Steve Stockman of Texas.Congressional Democrats were also encouraged to record short videos that echoed the administration’s themes and were shared on social media. Lawmakers were coordinating hashtags to underscore core Democratic goals for 2014, including, in the Senate, #MinimumWage (to raise the hourly minimum wage to $10.10) and #RenewUI (to renew the emergency unemployment insurance benefits that expired in December).

Not to be outdone, the White House posted graphics and charts during Mr. Obama’s speech that echoed its themes and that were shared on Facebook or Twitter with one click.

Proponents argue that when social media functions properly, it can also have a democratizing effect.

“It just has to be a citizen who says something interesting that catches the eye of a reporter or an office holder or a blogger,” said Joe Trippi, a Democratic consultant who was an early adopter of social media. “All of a sudden it gets picked up by Twitter, and it may be one of the tweets that defines people’s view of what happens in the speech.”

One hashtag that seemed to catch on organically was #SOTUinThreeWords.

“Frowny face Boehner #SOTUinThreeWords,” one Twitter user wrote. The message did not go viral, but it did have the ring of truth: throughout much of the address, Speaker John A. Boehner sat stone-faced behind the president’s left shoulder and did look a bit frowny.

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1. What social media website has become a forum to discuss political events like the President’s State of the Union Address?

2. *Critical Thinking*: Why do you think Twitter has become so popular among politicians? Explain.

3. *Critical Thinking*: Do you agree with Sen. Schumer’s statement that “Twitter is one of the fastest ways to shape opinion?” Explain why or why not.

4. How many tweets did members of Congress send out over the course of Obama’s State of the Union speech?

5. What hashtag did Republican use? What hashtag did Democrats use?

6. What other social media outlets did Republicans use?

7. *Critical Thinking*: Do you think members of Congress should be sending things out on social media during the President’s speech? Explain.

8. What reality TV star appeared in photos with many Congressional Republicans?

9. *Critical Thinking*: Do you believe the increase use of social media will be good for connecting voters to elected leaders? Explain your view.

10. What hashtag seemed to catch on organically?