Governors send unfiltered message to public with YouTube videos

By Ben Jones • Post-Crescent Madison bureau chief • October 22, 2010

A growing number of the nation's governors are joining the laughing babies and dancing cats on YouTube with videos aimed at getting their unfiltered message to constituents.

At least 38 governors have videos on the online site, including nine who have started this year, a Gannett Wisconsin Media review shows. At least nine other governors have posted videos using other services and state websites.

“It’s helpful in getting the message out directly to the public,” says Rachel Reeves, a spokeswoman for Kansas Democratic Gov. Mark Parkinson. “Social media, in general, really helps in getting your message out directly to constituents, unfiltered, without any sort of press sort of narrowing it down to a couple of quotes he may have used.”

YouTube use by governors is a bipartisan activity. Seventeen Republicans, 20 Democrats and one independent — Florida Gov. Charlie Crist — currently have videos posted there, the review shows.

Some, like Democrat Jim Doyle here in Wisconsin, are using YouTube to broadcast official speeches and events. Others, like Minnesota Republican Gov. Tim Pawlenty, are using online videos for their campaign ads. Two governors, Crist and Democratic West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin, are using YouTube videos in their U.S. Senate campaigns.

In Maryland, Democratic Gov. Martin O’Malley posts videos on YouTube channels that also include other state agency information, such as, in the case of Maryland, tips on how to track black bears.

Republican Gov. Rick Perry in Texas has posted videos of speeches, statements and interviews and recently has posted videos that use the work of Texas animators.

Arnold Shober, an assistant professor of government at Lawrence University in Appleton, said online videos allow candidates or sitting governors to control the content.

“They don’t have to worry that the newsroom is going to slice up their video package with only the juiciest quote,” Shober said. “This gives candidates a lot more control over their message.”

That control, however, doesn’t guarantee an audience.

The most popular video uploaded by a governor so far was on an issue that captured big attention nationwide — an ad came from the campaign of Republican Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer in which she attacked President Obama on immigration. It has garnered more than 1 million views over the past five months.

Most of the governors’ videos aren’t getting anywhere near that many views. In fact, online views counters indicate some of the governors’ videos
only have captured single-digit page views, even after being online for weeks or months.

- Republican Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour's remembrances of Hurricane Katrina survivor stories captured eight page views the first six weeks it was online.

- Republican Nebraska Gov. Dave Heineman's speech about a new health science center received just eight views in the year it spent online.

- A video uploaded by Parkinson, the Kansas governor, about flu prevention gathered 17 views in the year it was online. Reeves, Parkinson's spokesman, said some videos get few clicks but they are still worth posting because they provide another connection to constituents, so they can feel that they are part of the governing process. "And they certainly are," Reeves said. "Maybe we don't get as many hits, but it's important to reach out to them." Ines Mergel, an assistant professor of public administration at Maxwell School of Syracuse University, said politicians like the ability to provide quick feedback and responses on issues without waiting for a TV crew. And, Mergel, who has studied the use of YouTube in Congress, said it also gives politicians a chance to show another, behind the scenes, side of themselves. But Mergel said online video hasn't replaced the need for politicians to work with traditional media. "For them, it's adding additional channels and populating everything that they can," she said. "It's just an additional channel on top of everything else." In North Carolina, Democratic Gov. Bev Perdue recently hired a director of new media who will oversee YouTube videos. "We're all beginning to have a new realization of how connected people are," said Chrissy Pearson, Perdue's communications director. In Indiana, a staffer with a $200 flip camera broadcasted video last year from a trade trip Republican Gov. Mitch Daniels made to China. His spokeswoman, Jane Jankowski, said her office uses YouTube to broadcast events the press isn't interested in covering and it is able to show different sides of the governor. Not every governor is posting videos. Democratic Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski posted videos on YouTube in his last re-election campaign in 2006. But his spokeswoman, Anna Richter, said his official office doesn't have the resources to post videos online. "There's a very limited communications budget," she said. "It does take time and resources and staff to do that, and that's not in our budget, unfortunately."