TECHNOLOGY LIBERATION FRONT

U.S. Open Government Action Plan Introduced

by Jim Harper on September 20, 2011

The White House's release of its "Open Government Action Plan" today is timely. I'll be rolling out the product of several months' work on government transparency Friday at a Cato Institute event called "Publication Practices for Transparent Government: Rating the Congress."

The paper we'll release commences as follows:

Government transparency is a widely agreed upon goal, but progress on achieving it has been very limited. Transparency promises from political leaders such as President Barack Obama and House Speaker John Boehner have not produced a burst of information that informs stronger public oversight of government.

The reason is not lack of planning documents, meetings, or websites, as reading the White House's announcement today might suggest, but lack of specifically prescribed data publication practices that foster transparency. The government should publish data about its deliberations, management, and results in ways that make it amenable to all the varied uses of websites, researchers, reporters, and the public at large.

We'll be grading the Congress on how well it's doing with publication of data about formal legislative process. Congress is first because it's low-hanging fruit. We'll soon be turning to information the executive branch can make more transparent: budgets, appropriations, and spending.

The programs featured by the White House today—a new "We the People" petition platform, whistleblower protection, and an "Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative"—are fairly tangential. Fuller government transparency will be a product of specific good publication practices applied to data about the government's deliberations, management, and results.