

Transparency Group Taking Government Openness to the People

by **Michael Triplett** | 9:59 pm, March 18th, 2010



The kinds of people who get giddy about the **C-SPAN archives going online** came together in Washington to launch an effort to encourage the public to become more involved in advocating for greater transparency in government.

The **Sunlight Foundation**—which is **quickly becoming the dominant voice** in transparency and innovation in Washington—is launching **Public=Online** in cooperation with other transparency, technology, and media organizations to encourage the public to advocate for more transparency in government data and information.

“Transparency is a pan-ideological good,” said **Jim Harper** of the libertarian **CATO Institute** at the roll-out. “Libertarians and conservatives want more transparency to reduce demand for government. Liberals see opportunity to validate government and root-out corruption.”

The event, held at **Google’s** DC office, brought out new media and transparency advocates from DC’s geek and policy sector, as well as government officials working on increasing access to government data. Sunlight’s **Jake Brewer** said the event included Tea Party activists and Moveon.org types, as well as the usual coterie of ideological think-tanks including **CATO**, **Center for American Progress**, and the **Heritage Foundation**.

“We’ll ask candidates for office questions about their positions on transparency at town halls, we’ll scour earmark requests, write blog posts diving into campaign data or post video of important events,” Brewer said in describing the project.

One of the goals of the new campaign is to get the public to demand more access to data, Brewer said, which requires the media to do a better job of giving context to the data. That may mean working with transparency groups, like Sunlight, but also embedding data or visualizing the data in their reporting.

Quipping that “pot holes are the gateway drug to government engagement,” Brewer said the goal was to get the public to start pushing for more government openness and not just wait for the media or transparency advocates to find it for them.

Huffington Post’s **Jose Antonio Vargas**—**who was on a panel announcing the project**—said the mainstream media has a reluctant relationship with government transparency, in part because the media has often controlled access to public data and therefore worry about what happens when they no longer control public information.

“The mainstream media at large doesn’t grasp the idea of “me” in media,” suggested Vargas, who is the Technology and Innovations editor at HuffPost. He was formerly at the *Washington Post*. He said journalists tend to act as if they “owned the data” and that they should only release as much information as they consider important.

He noted that the media has traditionally not even been transparent about its own work—pointing to unsigned editorials and editorial committees working in secret—which is why it doesn’t always grasp the importance of getting information up front to the public so data can inform policy instead of explaining what has already happened.