

Disclosure and Transparency Key to Democracy
By Deanna R. Gelak
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The May 9 *Roll Call* editorial, "Open Congress," was excellent. With all the excitement over the "culture of corruption" and Lobbying Disclosure Act reforms, the implementation of purpose-driven transparency at a practical level seems to have gotten lost in the shuffle.

Because of electronics, we are now capable of accomplishing the goal of making the entire legislative process available to ordinary citizens for viewing in their home offices or dens. How can we not do it now that it's available? Since, as is often said, "an informed citizenry is the bulwark of democracy," how can we not do everything we can to get citizens as involved and aware as possible? This is especially true for our young citizens who live much of their lives via the Web.

This is a timeless principle. In 1796, George Washington explained how the strength of our system is directly connected to an informed and involved citizenry:

"Promote, then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion be enlightened."

Had the Internet been widely used when political disclosure requirements were originally enacted, timely home page availability for the public undoubtedly would have been incorporated. But as technology has advanced, we have inadvertently slouched toward "selective transparency" since disclosure reports originally intended for public consumption are becoming available on a patchwork basis to those with inside-the-Beltway connections and professional subscription resources.

We should not underestimate the ability of ordinary citizens and, indeed, their lobbyists to regularly use a transparent process to expose illegal and unethical behavior and proactively create an environment that encourages more accountability.

All public Congressional legislative meetings should be available via the Web live and on an archived basis in time for citizens to weigh in and make a difference. "Glacial time" availability of hearing transcripts also disadvantages experts who are attempting to scrutinize the substantive details and long-term ramifications of proposals. Sure, citizens can eventually find out how their Members of Congress voted via THOMAS, but a more "real time" system allows them to weigh in more effectively on the front end of the process, when it really counts, e.g., when bills are prioritized and before changes are considered in committee.

The recommendations addressed in your editorial make a lot of sense. Here are a few more:

1. The Department of Justice needs to post Foreign Agents Registration Act information more quickly and the process should be more meaningful. The last report to Congress posted on www.usdoj.gov is dated 2005. And these are lobbyists who are trying to influence the U.S. government on behalf of foreign governments.

DOJ should make the information readily available via the Web and should launch a campaign to increase the public's understanding of the FARA disclosure process, with public utilization of their database as one measure of success.

2. Submission and public disclosure of lobbying reports under the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 should be effectively coordinated and harmonized between the House and Senate, promptly posted and fully searchable.

3. The excellent Congressional Research Service Issue Briefs that are now made available for purchase through private service providers should either be available to the taxpaying public via the Web or they should not be available to the subscription services that turn around and sell them at a profit. The current selective and quasi-public availability of these taxpayer-funded documents doesn't make sense. (Full disclosure: A Roll Call subsidiary, GalleryWatch, provides CRS reports to its subscribers.)

4. Senate electronic filing is essential for the Senate campaign finance system to get into the 21st century, and it's also essential if citizens are going to have access in real time to Senate campaign finance information. The wasteful and ineffective Senate campaign disclosure situation was effectively detailed in Roll Call's Feb. 20 editorial. Reforms such as those embodied in Sen. Dianne Feinstein's (D-Calif.) S. 223, and long supported by former Federal Election Commission Chairman Michael Toner, should be implemented immediately.

5. Congress should establish a one-stop electronic disclosure Citizen Resource Center that simply provides links to all of the publicly available disclosure forms in one place along with a public awareness campaign to truly make it known and utilized by the public at large. For example, the Government Printing Office could simply establish a Web site, with clear links to each of the publicly available political involvement disclosure information currently scattered around. (Borrowing from the British, I nominate www.TheyWorkforUs.gov as a title.)

These practical changes should not be a threat to conscientious public servants, lobbyists or governmental service providers because:

1. A transparent process rewards conscientious lawmaking. The hard work of many legislators frequently goes unnoticed by constituents unable to physically attend meetings. Conscientious Members of Congress are not threatened by common-sense input on the practical ramifications of proposals in "real time;" they rely on it and realize that it prevents legislative mistakes.

2. Good lobbyists understand that their expertise, experience, contacts and diligence are strengthened when the "special interests" that they represent are more informed and engaged.

3. The ever-increasing complexity of legislation provides an infinite number of opportunities for service providers to adapt with advances and value-added services for eager consumers once the government effectively covers the basics.

Citizens have proved that they value unfiltered access to the legislative process. That is why C-SPAN's "gavel-to-gavel" coverage is not only popular, but highly edifying to the public policy process.

Everyone wants credit for lobbying and ethics legislation, but it is important that it does not eclipse some of the less sexy but perhaps more practical and lasting transparency actions. The strength of our system is directly connected to an informed and involved citizenry. There is great power in effective transparency empowered by "real time" democracy.

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