



How the Sunlight Foundation Promotes Transparency in Government

Concern about the influence of money and relationships, as well as a fear of corruption in Congress, reached crisis levels in 2005, with 75% of the voters in the last Congressional election saying it motivated their voting. But until Sunlight's founding, there was no organization to inform and thus enable people to become the change agents they want to be. Even investigative journalists had a hard time gaining access to the information necessary for public oversight.

To provide that access, the Sunlight Foundation is utilizing information technology and the revolutionary power of the Internet to facilitate the work of journalists and bloggers and empower interested citizens to be their own muckrakers. Founded in January 2006, the mission of the Sunlight Foundation is to strengthen the relationship between lawmakers and their constituents by maximizing transparency of the work of Congress, its members, staff and lobbyists. Sunlight believes transparency helps reduce corruption, ensures greater accountability, and fosters public trust in this vital institution of democracy.

Working through grants to other non-profit groups, and through its own activities and Web sites, the Sunlight Foundation's emphasis is the use of Internet technology to make millions of bits of information available online about the members of Congress their staff and lobbyists. This information includes political contributions and expenditures, lobbyists expenditures and activities, changes in the net worth, travel and entertainment and legislative activity of members of Congress. The Sunlight Foundation has also fostered such projects as Congresspedia, the Open House Project, OpenCongress.org and the "Is Congress a Family Business?" distributed investigation. Its Sunlight Labs is a leading innovative force on the cutting edge of the intersection of technology and politics.

Sunlight is unique in its commitment to total transparency and its broad and open use of information technology. This, combined with the spirit of Web 2.0, is at the core of all our efforts.

Our "transparency grants" go beyond the traditional, single subject public disclosure database, to the Web 2.0 ethos of inviting everyone—the media, bloggers, citizens and good government groups—to sift, share and combine this information in innovative ways that they find most are useful for them. Similarly, our Congresspedia project is based on "the wisdom of crowds" and the maxim that "many hands make light work." We believe traditional journalism performs a vital public function, but we also believe that the Internet age enables ordinary citizens to be their own watchdogs. Our goal, thus, is to engage as many as possible to pool their energy and talents to report and find out about the behavior of Congressmen, senators, their staffs and those who lobby them, and share that information online.

What kind of projects or tools has Sunlight created or funded thus far?

Citizen Journalism: In 2006, Sunlight launched a series of distributed reporting and research projects that looked initially at congressional financial disclosure forms, investigated earmarks in appropriations bills, and identified those members of the House of Representatives who have hired their spouses to work for their reelection campaign committees. Sunlight also made grants to two of the most prominent experiments in citizen journalism, Jay Rosen's "New Assignment.net," and Dan Gillmor's Center for Citizen Media.

Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW):

(<http://www.citizensforethics.org/>) Sunlight funded the launch of CREW's Open Community Open Document Review System—an online reviewing process that enables people across the Internet to review, tag and comment on any of the thousands of pages of documents they have in their possession. Sunlight's grant will enable CREW to build a massive publicly searchable database of every document they receive and will support growing a community of regular online contributors. This will be available in July 2007.

Congresspedia: (<http://www.sourcewatch.org/Congresspedia>) This Sunlight inspired and funded "wiki" hosted on the Center for Media & Democracy's SourceWatch utilizes "citizen reporting" to display information about every member of Congress and the issues that he or she is involved with. As a wiki, its content can be drafted and edited by anyone.

FedSpending.org: (<http://www.fedspending.org>) A Sunlight grant to OMB Watch created a database that tracks recipients of all federal grants and contracts, including where the money is being spent and whether it was competitively bid. This database has already been searched more than four million times. This database will form the basis of the government's newly mandated database under the Legislative Accountability and Transparency Act of 2007 (the Coburn-Obama legislation).

FollowTheMoney.org: (<http://www.followthemoney.org>) Grants by Sunlight to this premiere source of data on the role of money in state politics features searchable databases tracking the sources and uses of money to influence the executive officials and legislators in all 50 states. This grant helped to create the first APIs for any political money databases.

MAPLight.org: (<http://www.maplight.org>) Sunlight grants to MAPLight.org has created a tool that tracks the day by day, vote by vote, impact of political contributions at the federal level. This analysis is based on databases available at www.opensecrets.org and official records from the Library of Congress. The resulting database of bills, voting records, and campaign contributions powers the search engine at MAPLight.org and enables people to see the links between dollars spent and votes cast in Congress.

Metavid: (<http://metavid.ucsc.edu/>) Grants to this project will support an effort to capture, stream, archive and facilitate real-time collective remediation of federal legislative proceedings. Metavid opens up video source footage of House and Senate proceedings for permanent reusable online access, allowing citizens to remix, investigate, and track their representatives in a participant-driven open source archive.

OpenCongress.org: (<http://www.opencongress.org/>) OpenCongress.org is a joint project of the Sunlight Foundation and the Participatory Politics Foundation. It is a free, open-source non-partisan Web resource that makes the activities of Congress more transparent and encourages civic engagement. OpenCongress.org offers RSS feeds as an easy and convenient way to follow the latest developments relating to a bill, a vote or a Member of Congress. The site serves as a rich resource for political bloggers, issue-based membership groups, and individuals looking for a user-friendly way to track Congress and the issues they care about.

The Open House Project: (<http://theopenhouseproject.com>) This Sunlight sponsored project is collaborative, bi-partisan and officially endorsed effort by House leadership. It enlisted legislative information experts, non-profit organizers and bloggers to study how the House of Representatives currently integrates the Internet into its operations, and has identified attainable reforms to promote public access to its work and members. It is currently expanding its work to include the U.S. Senate.

OpenSecrets.org: (<http://www.opensecrets.org>) Sunlight grants and technical assistance provided to the Center for Responsive Politics, the premiere source of data on money in national politics, has enabled the Center vastly to expand the range and accessibility of its data from all federal campaign contributions, PACs, 527s, to lobbyists expenditures and activities, annual congressional financial disclosure, travel and entertainment, and the revolving door between government and industry, vastly increasing the visits and downloads of this information critical to an understanding of the power of the influencers of Congress. In April alone, OpenSecrets.org had 6.6 million page views.

Real Time Investigations: (<http://realtime.sunlightprojects.org/>) This unprecedented open source journalism effort by Sunlight instantaneously reveals the behind-the-scenes research involved in petitioning the federal government to make its information more accessible to citizens, constituents and journalists. Its first major project sheds light on the relationship between Congress and federal agencies by using Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to obtain monthly correspondence logs of letters sent by members of Congress to over 100 federal agencies. This information is posted online as soon as it is received, giving citizens and reporters an insider view of the extent to which members of Congress interact with executive branch agencies and what issues command their attention.

Under the Influence: (<http://www.sunlightfoundation.com/blog/13>) This Sunlight experiment in activist investigative journalism is led by veteran journalist Bill Allison. Allison's blog actively courts citizen journalists to partner with him as he tries to shed the light on congressional activity. One of its first citizen journalism ventures, the "Congressional Web site Investigation Project," asked citizen journalists to evaluate congressional Web sites to determine whether they provided three kinds of information:

- Access to basic information on what our elected officials do in Congress (the bills they sponsor, the committees they serve on)
- information from or access to any of the legally-required disclosures they have to file (on personal finances or junkets they take)
- Any additional information that furthers transparency (their daily schedule, lists of earmarks they've asked for or gotten).