

## Is Government Transparency Headed for a Detour?

Posted By [Jim Harper](#) On January 15, 2010 @ 5:04 pm In [Government and Politics](#), [Telecom](#), [Internet & Information Policy](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

With a year in office, and perhaps under some pressure to deliver on promises of transparency and change, the White House went on a little PR offensive this week. It rolled out a [blog post](#) <sup>[1]</sup> and a video claiming the transparency successes of the administration's first year. A lot has gone on, and it's worth a review. It's also worth noting some signals that the government transparency project could be heading for a slight detour.

In [the video](#) <sup>[2]</sup> — a little infomercial-y, but tolerable and interesting — federal chief technology officer Aneesh Chopra cites several examples of government use of technology. A system called [ISDS Distribute](#) <sup>[3]</sup> helps the government monitor flu outbreaks, for example, akin to Google.org's [Flu Trends](#) <sup>[4]</sup>. Chopra touted the benefits of machine readability and the Agriculture Department's release of data about a thousand most commonly eaten foods. (I'm not sure if [this is it](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, but if not it's probably something similar. Someone like [Mike](#) <sup>[6]</sup> could use it to build a site that is further along than 1996's state-of-the-art.) And Chopra discussed the platforms they are building at [apps.gov](#) <sup>[7]</sup> to help agencies draw on the participation and engagement of the public. Putting aside how these illustrate the federal government's distended role, these are all fine things.

White House ethics counsel Norm Eisen cited the [release of visitor records](#) <sup>[8]</sup> as "one of the big innovations in the White House" over the past year. (Good, yes. But "big"?) Eisen [dodged](#) <sup>[9]</sup> the question about why health care negotiations are not on C-SPAN.

In response to a question about putting federal advisory committees online, Chopra told of a recent meeting of the President's Council of Advisers for Science and Technology, which was [telecast live on the web and archived](#) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Finally, Chopra touted the planned January 22nd roll-out of data feeds from every federal agency under a recent [open government memorandum](#) <sup>[11]</sup> — three "high-value data sets" per agency. In working toward this, Chopra said, "the conversation is all about what would help you do what you do better. How can we advance our shared goals of reducing disparities in health care, improving our commitment to renewable energies, advancing our collective educational results?"

This language and some of the examples cited in the video cause me to worry that the transparency effort may be heading for a detour. Rather than substantive insight into government management, deliberations, and results, we might get a lot of data-oriented play-toys.

According to the memorandum:

High-value information is information that can be used to increase agency accountability and responsiveness; improve public knowledge of the agency and its operations; further the core mission of the agency; create economic opportunity; or respond to need and demand as identified through public consultation.

That's a very broad definition. Without more restraint than that, public choice economics predicts that the agencies will choose the data feeds with the greatest likelihood of increasing their discretionary budgets or the least likelihood of shrinking them. That's data that "further[s] the core mission of the agency" and not data that "increase[s] agency accountability and responsiveness." It's the Ag Department's calorie counts, not the Ag Department's check register.

The kind of substance the transparency community expects is well represented in a report issued jointly by the Center for Democracy and Technology and [OpenTheGovernment.org](#) in March of last year. It's called "[Show Us the Data: Most Wanted Federal Documents](#)" <sup>[12]</sup>, and it asks for access to important research and governmental process information with the capacity to generate real insights into government and its operations.

Interesting data that the agency has collected or produced may be just that — interesting — but the

heart of the government transparency effort is getting information about the functioning of government. Once we have these core elements of transparency captured, other data are absolutely good to have. But let the starting point be the workings of agencies themselves.

To help focus agencies on releasing the data that is high-value for genuine government transparency, I plan to examine the three data-streams each agency releases and grade the agencies on whether their releases provide insight into agency **management**, **deliberations**, or **results**.

As I examine the agency's data feeds, I'll use their proximity to true government transparency to assign them a letter grade, awarding them three points for each feed that has to do with management, deliberation, or results. These numerical scores — 9, 6, 3, or 0 — I'll translate into grades: A, B, C, or D. (Nobody fails when the criteria only came out a week in advance.) F is reserved for agencies that don't produce feeds.

This rubric for rating the data that agencies release seems reasonably objective, and a decent measure of which agencies are really responding to the demand for transparency and change, and which are pushing interesting data out as a smokescreen against deeper insights and reform. Hopefully, this effort at focusing agencies on true high-value data will see some uptake among my colleagues in the transparency community (if I haven't alienated them with my endless harping on President Obama's [Sunlight Before Signing](#) <sup>[13]</sup> promise). Watch this space for agency grades shortly after the release of the feeds.

---

Article printed from Cato @ Liberty: <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org>

URL to article: <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/2010/01/15/is-government-transparency-headed-for-a-detour/>

URLs in this post:

[1] blog post: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/01/13/fighting-against-special-interests-and-public-interest-a-year-change>

[2] the video: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/open-questions-year-changing-washington>

[3] ISDS Distribute: <http://isdsdistribute.org/>

[4] Flu Trends: <http://www.google.org/flutrends/>

[5] this is it: <http://www.data.gov/details/1294>

[6] Mike: <http://www.caloriecountercharts.com/>

[7] apps.gov: [https://apps.gov/cloud/advantage/main/start\\_page.do](https://apps.gov/cloud/advantage/main/start_page.do)

[8] release of visitor records: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/disclosures/visitor-records>

[9] dodged: [http://www.politico.com/blogs/joshgerstein/0110/Eisen\\_dodges\\_on\\_CSPAN\\_health\\_lockout.html](http://www.politico.com/blogs/joshgerstein/0110/Eisen_dodges_on_CSPAN_health_lockout.html)

[10] telecast live on the web and archived: <http://www.tvworldwide.com/events/pcast/100107/>

[11] open government memorandum: [http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/assets/memoranda\\_2010/m10-06.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/assets/memoranda_2010/m10-06.pdf)

[12] Show Us the Data: Most Wanted Federal Documents: <http://www.openthegovernment.org/otg/TopTenReport.pdf>

[13] Sunlight Before Signing: <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/2010/01/06/sunlight-before-signing-obama-racks-up-the-wins/>

Copyright © 2009 Cato-at-liberty. All rights reserved.