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Micah L. Sifry

WikiLeaks and the Age of Transparency

Counterpoint, 2011

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Trust in the government has never been as low as it has today. With events like the Snowden leaks, the Benghazi outrage, closed door legislative hearings, crooked politics, and a massive misleading of the general public, many have become highly critical of proclaiming any kind of faith or support for their federal government. Although government corruption is nothing new, as the current plague of secrets shrouded behind red tape that inhibits our government can be drawn all the way back to the Watergate scandals in the 1970s. It is in the last few years, however, that we have seen this corruption become unprecedented, as it has begun to severely impede what we can and cannot believe coming from the mouths of our public officials, even though we have been promised nothing but transparency. Micah L. Sifry’s book, *WikiLeaks and the Age of Transparency*, presents to us a vivid account of everything important within the world of transparency, which has been one of the biggest political talking points in the United States for the last half decade. Sifry, who is one of the co-founders the *Personal Democracy Forum*, using his extensive experience in revealing the secrets sitting behind barred doors, also offers us an expert examination of the various groups within the transparency movement and how those entities are actively reforming the political system in this country as we know it.

In his book, Sifry presents his material in a rather dry and unexciting manner, although the formal approach that he takes and the grand historical scope of his material easily overcomes his rather ordinary presentation. In addition to the detail-oriented range of knowledge that he delivers, he also provides some critical insight into some of the larger events that he recounts throughout his book. This can be seen as Sifry examines various groups, organizations, and people that are making the push for transparency in all levels of government possible. Obviously, WikiLeaks and Julian Assange is one of the mainstays of his writings, but he also looks at other entities that have made waves in the transparency movement. One such person that he reviews and analyzes for us is Carl Malamud, who he goes on to state is the “modern father” of the “transparency movement in the United States.” (67) Through the account that is given in the book of Malamud, we as readers can not only begin to understand what Malamud did to open up a lot of the data begin created by the federal government (such as congressional bills, laws, court orders, etc.) we can also see just how much research Sifry has done in this field. He shows how expansive his knowledge and great his desire is to look into the history of the movement, which is underlined by the historical accounts of Malamud and others. Furthermore, he also has shown his passion for this topic as he has stayed up-to-date on many of the current groups. One such group is OpenLeaks, a spinoff of WikiLeaks, which he states has the “skills needed to succeed in a world filled with shady actors opposed to transparency. And unlike WikiLeaks, it is designed to be decentralized.” (176) Overall, as Sifry spans both the beginning of the movement all the way up to some of the most current trends in the sphere of transparency, Sifry presents himself and his material in a down-to-earth, professional manner, and offers for us a grand open door and a wealth of knowledge into what has happened and is happening within the movement for transparency today.

Over its lifetime, the transparency movement has taken the paramount responsibility to keep politicians accountable, and as Sifry points out through various examinations in the book, are actively reforming politics across the world as we know it. Sifry showcases his skills in research by presenting dozens of different organizations that have worked to make government more accountable. He looks at groups such as OpenCongress.org and GovTrack.us, which provide public archives of congressional actions (83), and other notables like “FaxMyMP,” which allows constituents to send a message as a fax to their representative, and gathers information on how fast they respond. All of these groups, as he conveys to us, are doing great work into holding out public officials accountable to their actions. Micah’s reviews show how much time and effort he has put into finding almost everything that is happening and affecting the political-transparency arena. (76) In the end, Sifry, through his research and exhibition of knowledge on the workings of the movement and what the entities within it are doing to reform politics, strengthens the material and overall worth of his book.

The main goal of this book was to present a historical perspective of the transparency movement, from the early 1900s to the time of the book’s publishing in 2011. The audience Sifry writes to is one that is obviously proponents of the movement for open government and open data, as he didn’t necessarily include a persuasive argument for those on the other side of the spectrum. More so than not, this book offers a historical background where Sifry offers some of his input on where the movement currently stands and is going. Although Sifry does engage in material that does at times enliven the proponents that he writes for, such as when he exclaims the importance of “whistleblowing,” and how it is a solution to “foster real accountability,” he does present the somber truth of where the movement currently is. (188) He states

But the unfortunate truth is that when it comes to core issues of transparency, participation, and collaboration, not that much has changed in how either the White House or Congress actually behaves. Some government agencies are genuinely innovating, and the same can be said for a handful of politicians and government bodies outside the Beltway. But so far, enacting real transparency for how Washington works remains an orphan issue – politicians coo at the baby but no one, other than a few outsiders, really wants to adopt it. (110)

This does proves that although Sifry does write to mainly a base of transparency supporters, he is open to the real state of affairs around the transparency movement. Overall, Sifry does offer some analysis and does excite his readers in some topics within the book, but the book does benefit from the fact that Sifry remains unbiased and doesn’t just use his writings as a call to action for an increase in transparency and openness.

*WikiLeaks and the Age of Transparency* holds a well-researched, formally presented historical lesson on the movement for increased transparency that has swept over the nation and become a new driving force in all levels of politics and government. Micah Sifry offers a thorough chronological review of the major entities within the movement that he himself has been a part and leader within, and gives us his own insight into the powers that are changing the world as we know it. Sifry remains open in his discourse, and although he doesn’t present a moving argument to persuade his opponents, he does present material that is worth reading, and provides an excellent basis for research in the effort that is pushing for open doors and revealing many of the government’s deep secrets. In the end, Sifry boldly ends his book by expressing the fundamental purpose of what those in the crusade for transparency are working for, that being that someday the “government and citizens” will be able to “gather and share more ideas about what problems need to be addressed and how to solve them,” and “instead of expecting government leaders or bureaucrats to solve our problems, we look forward to a day when government acts to enable large numbers of people to connect to each other to better our own lives.” (189)