

Disinfecting the Sunlight Foundation

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For years, [Mike Klein](#) was a big-time D.C. corporate lawyer. He'd made millions starting a string of companies, including [an air cargo carrier](#), [a D.C. restaurant](#), [a D.C. art gallery](#), and [a real estate information database](#). But then Klein's son, aghast at the horrors of his government under Bush II, fled the country. Or, as Klein put it in [an interview with the Harvard Law School Alumni Bulletin](#), "My two sons led me to realize that a significant part of their generation thinks democracy isn't worth engagement or even respect. For an old 1960s activist like myself, that was the tipping point."

It's natural for a father to want to fix things for his sons (and perhaps for a wealthy D.C. lawyer to feel a bit guilty about it as well), so Klein, leaning a bit more on his corporate millions than his sixties activism, started a foundation. Taking its name from Justice Brandeis's famed comment that "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants", the [Sunlight Foundation](#) was formed to promote transparency and accountability in American government.

Most such organizations would do this by running investigations and publishing reports, but the Sunlight Foundation decided to take a different tack. Instead, [as Klein put it](#), Sunlight would "be utilizing 21st Century information technology, and Web 2.0 energy".

The Foundation was formed in January 2006 and, thanks to Klein, was quickly swimming in cash. Their first major project was [Congresspedia](#), a Wikipedia-like site to keep track of information on members of Congress. Unlike most Web 2.0 sites, they bought large ads on the major political weblogs to promote the new site. (Despite this blanket promotion — and the hiring of a full-time editor — the site seems to have about the same level of activity as the [They Might Be Giants wiki](#).)

Some of their other projects are about what you'd expect: [a federal funding-Google Maps mashup](#), [a Congressional tag cloud](#), [a video contest](#) mocking of members of Congress who don't release their schedules. (They've also donated money to already-existing related projects, many of which are doing valuable work.)

Their most recent project was an invite-only conference in San Francisco to bring together the leaders in this nascent field. (Disclosure: I attended and just about everyone there from the Sunlight Foundation invited me to take their money.) Funder Klein hailed the Foundation as the most important and fastest-growing project he'd ever started, while executive director Ellen Miller noted that this year they'd launched several projects, all of which had been successes.

(Afterwards I asked her what her metric for success was. “We’re throwing stuff up on the wall and seeing what sticks,” she explained. And success, I confirmed, means “it hasn’t completely fallen apart yet”.)

As a Web 2.0 developer, it’s hard for me to see how even the best Web 2.0 site can have much of a positive impact on government. Genuinely promoting transparency requires the hard work of doing investigative research, publishing reports, and promoting them to the media. Bubble 2.0 hype aside, the fanciest pop-up windows and and Google Maps mashups won’t change that.

The attendees seemed to begin to recognize this. In a breakout session on reaching users, a guru from Web 2.0 consultancy [Adaptive Path](#) tried to walk us through their user experience process. “Remember,” she told us, “these sites aren’t about what *you* want to do; they’re about improving the lives of your users by connecting with their *real needs*.” We gave our example user a name (Jane) and backstory (too busy driving her kids to care about politics, but upset at the high gas prices she has to pay). And that’s where we got stuck. Is Jane really going to muddle through graphs generated from FEC reporting data?

We decided our saviors would be the “Paul Reveres” — the people who care enough about politics to slog through the data and then mass email their friends when they find something good (we concluded that going after newspaper reporters was too Web 1.0). They would save us from having to write reports or take positions; all we had to do was make the data available and let them do the rest.

I’m sure there are a handful of people who actually do this, but it seems like we’re spending an awful lot to build a site just for them. And even then, what impact will they have? Even if our Paul Revere finds the smokingest of smoking guns and posts it on their extremely popular blog, without a larger political platform it will only fuel the cynicism that Klein claims he’s trying to combat. (“There they go again,” the reader thinks, and hits the back button.)

Even if Klein is for some reason averse to taking an actual political stand (maybe he doesn’t vote the same way as his sons?), there’s still much to be done. Several people in the session were from the group that runs [the opensecrets.org website](#), which details who contributes to which campaign. It’s useful stuff, but even a hundred of their reports can’t compare to their old-fashioned, dead-trees book [Speaking Freely](#), which brilliantly details the big picture of how money politics actually works. The author of the book, Larry Makinson, was in the room, but instead of figuring out how to tell more stories like that, he was busy worrying about how to make specific numbers come alive.

But what makes *Speaking Freely* so brilliant is that it shows specifics aren’t the problem. It’s not that donors bribe politicians into changing their vote — they rarely do — it’s that the entire campaign finance system forces all our

public officials to bend and scrape before big-money donors, instead of actually listening to the voters.

Such clear analysis makes the solution clear as well: we need to get rid of privately-financed elections altogether. And, in fact, there is an organization doing just that. It's called [Public Campaign](#) and, considering the enormous odds it's up against, it's having incredible success. (Arizona, Connecticut, and Maine have all adopted clean elections and smaller projects have been started in six more states.) But the Sunlight Foundation isn't giving money to Public Campaign. To the contrary, many of its top people used to work there.

Public Campaign is just one example; the larger point is that just as Web 2.0 pixie dust doesn't automatically make your web site into a success, just making important data available won't cause political change. Justice Brandeis's clever aphorism to the contrary, sunlight is not in fact the best disinfectant; actual disinfectant is. Sunlight just makes it easier for people to look at the pus.

The Sunlight Foundation responds: Many people from the Sunlight Foundation have thoughtfully written to me. Aside from our general disagreement about the value of the projects Sunlight engages in, they make several specific points. Since they haven't provided any letters for publication, I'll try to summarize them as fairly as I can:

- **It's not "a zero-sum game".** The open data work that Sunlight funds helps projects like Public Campaign by giving them ammunition. Center for Responsive Politics data makes it into corruption stories in newspapers which, in turn, has made the issue of clean elections a more serious part of the public debate.
- **Sunlight has many other projects.** They've provided serious grants to a number of organizations — including the [Center for Responsive Politics](#) — and have a number of projects, including [hiring some bloggers](#), doing distributed journalism on [Congress's Family Business](#), getting 90 candidates to sign [their Punch Clock Agreement](#), and even writing [an old-fashioned report](#).
- **Sunlight has a good relation with Public Campaign.** Mike Klein has made donations to Public Campaign on his own; Ellen Miller started Public Campaign but left long before she joined Sunlight; Micah Sifry was already lowering the amount of time he spent working for Public Campaign before he joined Sunlight.

I don't dispute any of these points, but I think the brunt of my critique still stands. Changes to the culture of Washington must be structural ones. These projects, while fun, fundamentally misunderstand how institutions operate.