EDITORIAL:

Enabling Open Government for All

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One of the refreshing promises that Barack Obama made to the nation during the recent campaign was to bring greater openness and transparency to the operation of government. What distinguished this pledge from those of his predecessors was his commitment to go beyond soft promises of greater candor in press conferences and fewer assertions of privilege. This administration, he pledged, would provide an unprecedented level of access to information and direct interaction with government, enabling a richly interactive, ongoing dialogue between citizens and their elected representatives.

The president reaffirmed that promise immediately upon his inauguration, in a directive he issued to the heads of all federal executive departments and agencies. In that memorandum, he committed his administration to, "work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration." The transparency would be achieved in

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part by harnessing, "new technologies to put information about their operations and decisions online and readily available to the public," and the promised participation and collaboration would be made possible by, "innovative tools, methods, and systems." He charged the nation's first Chief Technology Officer and other senior administration leaders with turning his instructions into an Open Government Directive within 120 days.

As with much of the new administration's lofty goals, reality and the press of the current economic crisis have made implementation significantly more challenging than conceptualization. Indeed, more than half of those 120 days have now gone by, and President Obama's CTO has not yet been appointed, while Vivek Kundra, the former CTO of the District of Columbia and Mr. Obama's pick to be Chief Information Officer, is on leave pending completion of an investigation into the acts of two of his former subordinates. Meanwhile, countless bloggers and journalists cast critical eyes over every move and statement the new administration makes, debating whether it lives up to the President's pledge. And Mr. Obama's staff are

struggling to adapt to a technical infrastructure that is far less nimble than the state of the art platform they created for the president-to-be's campaign.

Beneath the surface of these public and all-too typical events, however, a number of less visible challenges stand in the way of keeping the President's open government promises. They can be summed up with a simple question: "transparency, public participation and collaboration for *whom*?" The answer to that question is obvious, from an aspirational perspective, but not so simple to achieve technically.

The problem arises from the mixed blessings of technology. If the major benefits of the new policy are delivered via the Internet, then by definition these benefits will be available only to those that have the access and skills needed to locate, review, and interact with what has been made available on line. As a result, achieving true openness in government will rely as much on the manner in which openness is technically enabled as it will upon the commitment of the administration to be truly forthcoming.

Having said that, what should be done?

Providing a free computer to every American is clearly not in the economic cards. But ensuring that everything that the government provides on line rigorously supports all accessibility standards and can be accessed by the greatest range of devices (e.g., browser-equipped cell phones), running the most diverse range of operating systems and software applications, will make an enormous difference.

In the past, many government Web sites have served pages that often render poorly (or not at all) on some popular browsers, and have provided or accepted documents in only one or two proprietary document formats. The result has been to force citizens to download or purchase the specific software products that support this technology, or be denied access to the public information at all. Famously, Apple computer users running Safari, the Apple Web browser, found themselves unable to access urgently needed emergency information in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, because the government Web sites posting that information supported only Microsoft's Internet Explorer Web browser. Similarly, many government sites still do not support the accessibility standards that are essential to allow many citizens with visual and other physical handicaps to access and interact with these sites.

On the one hand, then, we have the past, where a fully equipped desktop or laptop computer, running proprietary software, was needed to exercise citizenship rights on line, assuming that the owner was fully sighted and able-bodied. If this is also the future, then the promise of transparent, participatory and collaborative government will be a democratic embarrassment, rather than an egalitarian promise fulfilled.

To ensure that better future, the government must set itself the task of provisioning Web sites that citizens can access using not only desktops and laptops, but also the types of devices that almost all citizens can afford and know how to use – increasingly powerful and inexpensive cell phones, smart phones and netbook

computers running open source as well as proprietary software – then the true promise of open government will be realized.

Though few will realize it, this goal can only be realized by committing – now – to the mandatory implementation of the full range of interoperability and accessibility standards needed to ensure that all Web pages will render properly and usefully on all devices running all operating systems and other appropriate software. The great majority of these standards already exist, and the remaining tools are currently under development in consortia such as the W3C and OASIS. All that is required is the decision to select and use them.

Too often in our history we have allowed our democratic reach to exceed the grasp of the less fortunate. It will be sad indeed if, through indifference, this most hopeful and progressive of recent administrations provides open government not for all, but only for the technically sophisticated, the able-bodied, and the well to do.

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