

CHECKS AND BALANCES REINVIGORATED

Craig Newmark

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A democratic system incorporates a system of checks and balances to facilitate constant vigilance and scrutiny by the citizenry. Otherwise, people in power will inevitably abuse their power.

That's the story of the decline and fall of the Roman Republic. Its informal constitution and checks and balances were quite advanced for its time. However, abuse of power led to an increasingly corrupt and ineffective government. For example, powerful politicians and lobbyists started wars for purposes of vanity, and to enrich themselves and their allies, including defense contractors.

The American Founders created a similar governmental structure including a formal constitution with many checks and balances between the branches of government and the government and its citizenry. They knew this was necessary because corrupt politicians would find ways to

abuse power, say via a compromised Department of Justice or judicial branch, in the manner of the Roman Republic.

The Founders also realized that a free press with journalists asking tough questions was the only way to preserve checks and balances. Good reporting with mass communications would provide the scrutiny required for good government.

The Internet provides tools and information for journalists to aid them in their effective scrutiny of governmental accountability. To this end, the Sunlight Foundation funds the development of tools via “transparency grants.” Two great examples of these grants are Congresspedia, an open, collaborative wiki about congressional representatives, created in conjunction with the Center for Media and Democracy, and Open Secrets, a database that tracks lobbyist payments to Congress that is run by the Center for Responsive Politics.

The Internet provides tools and information for journalists to aid them in their effective scrutiny of governmental accountability. These tools enable journalists, and citizen journalists like me, to help preserve American values in Congress. For instance, I was able to verify media reports that a presidential candidate was dominated by special-interest lobbyists.

Sometimes, we need to uncover governmental corruption after the fact, in order to understand where we’re going. The investigative reporting done by the Center for Public Integrity, specifically their database on Defense Department contracts let in conjunction with the Iraq war, conclusively proves deliberate deception in the run up to the Iraq war.

In ancient Rome, with no mass media, political gangs spread disinformation via “whispering campaigns.” The same occurs now via loosely organized groups, such as the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth in the 2004 election. Investigative reporters now work together to expose such gangs, known often as swiftboaters (in the generic sense), front groups, or astroturf groups. To this end, Common Cause exposed “Hands Off the Internet,” a front group for big telecommunications

firms masquerading as a grassroots organization. The Center for Media and Democracy runs SourceWatch, which exposes front groups in the political space, such as “Freedom’s Watch.”

Finally, even the work of good investigative reporters and honest politicians need fact checking. The most notable group doing so is FactCheck.org, which according to its website, “analyzes what is said by major U.S. political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews, and news releases.”

The Founders recognized the role in our democracy of the press bringing government problems and issues to light. The press is aided in doing so with the Net and tools like those described above. Working together with the public, they provide checks and balances of unprecedented effectiveness. This requires that almost all governmental records be made available online. Although certain documents, particularly those regarding (honest) matters of national security, will always be too sensitive for publication.

We would all like to avoid the fate of the Roman Republic. To that end, we need reporters asking tough questions. We also need help exposing those who would deceive us for short-term profit and power. Fortunate for us, this help is being delivered by people of goodwill working together via the Net.

Disclaimers: Because of their good work, I’ve joined boards of The Sunlight Foundation, the Center for Public Integrity, FactCheck.org’s educational arm, and work with the Center for Media and Democracy via Sunlight and also via Consumers Union.

About the Author

Craig Newmark is the founder and customer service representative of craigslist, a non-commercial community bulletin board with classifieds and discussion forums.