

# THE ETHICS OF OPENNESS

Jeff Jarvis

“ Today the default in our discussion of government is negative: they are doing bad things badly, and we are the watchdog who’ll catch the bastards in the act. ”

Now that we have the technological means to open up government and make every action transparent, we must insist on a new ethic of openness. The Internet Age gives us not only new tools to change how our government operates and relates to its citizens, but also new ethics. Now that we have the technological means to open up government and make every action transparent, we must insist on a new ethic of openness. We have the tools of conversation that can involve citizens in decisions as they are made, so we should expect our politicians and bureaucrats to hear our ideas. If society is becoming connected and more (not less) social online, then so will politics as we use new tools to organize around our issues, rather than just gathering beneath party banners. If we’re lucky, technology may give us a more human government. Here are my dreams.

## Abolish the Freedom of Information Act.

Turn it inside out. Why should we have to ask for information from our government? The government should need permission to keep things from us. Every act of government on our behalf should be free by default, with rare exceptions: the personal business of citizens, national security, ongoing criminal investigations. See Ellen Miller's call for transparent and open government on page 59 in this anthology. See also Barack Obama's technology policy, calling for standardization and openness of government data, citizen involvement in decisions, and a chief technology office to implement this.

## Government officials and agencies should blog.

Openness should mean more than releasing official documents. It should mean engaging in conversations with citizens about the work of government. A blog is a convenient tool to do that—and a more efficient means of interaction than individual letters and phone calls. Hillary Clinton has said she wants agencies to blog: “We should even have a government blogging team where people in the agencies are constantly telling all of you, the taxpayers, the citizens of America, everything that's going on so that you have up-to-the-minute information about what your government is doing, so that you too can be informed, and hold the government accountable.”

## Webcast government.

The government should put C-SPAN out of business by broadcasting itself. Obama has said he wants to webcast agency meetings. We should do the same with congressional meetings and, yes, court sessions, including Supreme Court hearings. I also believe that radio stations

and newspapers should get citizens to record and podcast local government meetings. All of government's deliberations should be public. That doesn't mean they'll be watched, of course; these are sure to be the lowest rated broadcasts since the invention of the cathode ray tube. But that doesn't matter. All it takes is for one reader of the blog Talking Points Memo to watch one hearing and catch a newsworthy moment. It would be good for government officials on the other side of the camera to know that they are being watched. The camera becomes the eye of the people, always on: Big Brother, reversed.

### Start a government IdeaStorm.

To get itself out of Dell hell (a reference to when the computer company ignored a blogstorm which I started around its bad service), Dell started blogging and also created IdeaStorm, a platform that enables customers to submit, vote on, and discuss suggestions. Now Starbucks has used the same tool, from Salesforce.com, to solicit ideas from customers at MyStarbucksIdea.com. One sees trends emerge in the discussion: Starbucks could see that its greatest problem with customers was not the smell of its sandwiches but the length of its lines. One also sees an incredible generosity from customers; they offer thoughtful advice about how companies can improve. Citizens would surely do the same for government; after all, it is ours. So why not create IdeaStorms for our government just as Downing Street in the UK has opened up an ePetitions program?

There is another important aspect to this idea: turning the conversation about government to the positive. Today, the default in our discussion of government is negative: they are doing bad things badly, and we are the watchdogs who'll catch the bastards in the act. Too often, this is true. But it is destructive to concentrate only on the negative; we must also shift to the constructive: positive conversations

about positive action. This, one wishes, is what Obama's theme of hope is really about.

I am not in favor of turning to government-by-poll. Though the Internet has made me a populist, I do believe in the representative, republican (small 'r') structure of our government with its filters, balances, and deliberative process. But I do think that given a chance to participate in the process, citizens will. I hope technology helps us move past the gift economy to a gift society.

### Personal political pages.

I believe the Internet's ethic of openness will spread across society. If the press demands that government be transparent, then the press—including individual journalists—must also be transparent. Likewise, as citizens demand transparency, so will they become more transparent. Ethics are synchronous.

We are already seeing more personal transparency in society. In Facebook, blogs and other social media, participants realize that they need to reveal things about themselves to find others who share their interests. One's online identity is increasingly made up of the parts of ourselves that we choose to create or make public, and other parts we choose to keep hidden.

I envision citizens' personal political pages where each of us may, if we choose, reveal our stands, opinions, alliances, and allegiances, and where we would manage our relationship with government, campaigns, and movements. Paraphrasing Harvard blogger Doc Searls' movement for VRM, vendor relationship management, call it PRM, political relationship management. Here's how I see it working. I post my personal statement online: I am a centrist Democrat; I voted for Hillary Clinton; I want to actively support such movements as protecting the First Amendment against FCC censorship and insuring a

national open broadband policy. On my page, I can explain and discuss any issues I choose. I already disclose many of those views on my blog's disclosures page. But on my personal political page, I also get to manage my relationship with politicians: I say which candidates and organizations and movements may approach me to ask for donations or to volunteer. I can also invite opponents of my views to try to convince me: send me a link to your best shot. I can change my views and votes on the page. The page could become a standard for disclosure of conflicts and biases for politicians and journalists as well.

Let's imagine that millions of these pages can be searched and analyzed to get a constant snapshot of people's views: Google as the polling place that never closes. This puts us in control of public opinion and takes it out of the hands of pollsters. It makes politics a constant process, not an annual event.

So this becomes a platform for organizing citizens around shared needs and beliefs. Reacting to this idea on my blog, TV industry analyst Andrew Tyndall said in a comment that the left/right political pigeonhole "makes it so much more difficult to form coalitions with those at radically different parts of the ideological spectrum...with born-again Christians who are leading activists on HIV/AIDS or Darfur genocide...with Wall Street free traders who want to liberalize immigration with Mexico.... Personal Political Pages allow each of us to escape from the conventional left-right authoritarian-libertarian divisions of the political parties and the opinion pollsters. They allow us to align ourselves on each issue discretely, forming ad hoc, opportunistic coalitions, not binding ones."

That is what the Internet is really all about—not content, not media, but connections among people. Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, said at the South by Southwest conference that as soon as Facebook was translated into Spanish, it was being used to organize against the guerilla movement, Revolutionary Armed Forces of

Colombia or FARC. Facebook has been used to organize the Obama movement. It could be used to organize any cause.

People replace television.

The political strategist Joe Trippi believes that the power of the Internet to help campaigns raise money from citizens—and to organize those citizens into movements—is what will free our political system from large donations and corporate contributions. That's not happening yet, witness record campaign spending this year and John McCain's efforts to run away from the campaign reform act that bears his name. Television still matters, so big money that pays for television ads still matters.

But let's imagine that we're in the future, when television's reach has shrunken to the point that is no longer an efficient means of getting out a message. If you want to win an election, you will have to inspire people to tell their friends, who will tell their friends. The future of campaigning—like the future of marketing—is not media but people serving as advocates for candidates, campaigns and causes.

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### *About the Author*

Jeff Jarvis, who blogs at Buzzmachine.com, teaches at the City University of New York Graduate School of Journalism. He is writing a book, *WWGD? (What Would Google Do?)*, and is a columnist for the Guardian.