

FINDING YOUR OBVIOUSMETER

Matt Stoller

“ Did you know that members of Congress cannot post YouTube videos on their official member websites without breaking House and Senate rules? ”

I have an “Obviousmeter.” The Obviousmeter compares cultural trends and existing power centers and asks, “Can a sixteen year old do something our government can’t?” If the answer in any particular area is yes, then that’s a place to find out where the future is going to smack us in the ass.

I can’t predict the future of democracy in the digital age—no one really can—but certain characteristics of what the future will look like can be identified right now. And one of them is that obvious and stupid contradictions are ripe for attack.

For example: Did you know that members of Congress cannot post YouTube videos on their official member websites without breaking House and Senate rules? Yup. I am friendly with a tech-savvy member of Congress, or Congresscritter, as well as a whole bunch of staffers, and it is simply infuriating to them that they can’t put up a YouTube

clip on their website to communicate with constituents. They can call them. They can mail out tens of thousands of glossy and expensive brochures discussing their recent legislative activities. They can even run expensive TV ads through their political action committees. But they cannot post a YouTube video on a web address that has .gov at the end.

The reasons are manifold. If you talk to the Franking Commission, the body in Congress that governs member communication to the outside world, they will give you a list of different reasons. It's a SECURITY risk! It's a CORPORATE ENDORSEMENT of YouTube! It's an ethics VIOLATION! Or even the wonderful, "Just run it by us, we'll let you know if it's a violation of the rules." This bureaucracy-loving attitude is bipartisan, as is the contempt of their intransigence from tech-savvy insiders.

Sixteen-year-olds can put up YouTube clips, as the whole world knows. So the Obviousmeter is buzzing in the red. And while it seems as though the problem here is the inflexibility of a single bureaucratic committee, when you pick at the onion of the problem a bit, flakes of skin keep coming off. This problem, at its core, represents the complete breakdown of the line between politics and government, between charity and politics, and between democracy and a hundred-year tradition of Walter Lippman-esque disinterested expertise.

The Franking Commission exists because the Founders of the country knew that communication was key to democracy. They codified the ability to 'frank,' or mail for free, communications from a member of Congress to their constituency so that the citizenry would remain educated and vigilant. As communications systems became more powerful, centralized, and expensive during the 20th century, breaking down local community bonds and helping to eliminate public spaces in the process, franking created an asymmetry of power that favored elected officials over voters who were passive receivers of an

incumbent's information. If you could frank for free, and your opponent couldn't, you could raise money and your name recognition, and essentially run an election with taxpayer resources using sophisticated direct mail techniques.

In the 1970s, the Congressional Franking Commission began remedying this asymmetry of power by imposing speech restrictions on members. No fundraising. No electioneering. Let us see the mail you send out. Nothing political. This made sense as a sort of stopgap measure, since the citizenry could not talk back en masse and had limited public spaces in which to engage in conversation with the powerful forces of televised mass communications. Mail cost money, and citizens couldn't just bill taxpayers; they were the taxpayers! So when the Internet emerged in full force, the Franking Commission handled e-mail like snail mail. That makes perfect sense; they both have 'mail' in the name, right?

E-mail and the Web function both as information transmission vehicles and as public spaces. Restricting e-mail or web communication crippled the ability of Members of Congress to convene people on the Web the way they do at town hall discussions, roundtables, district meetings, offices, etc. It stopped the political body designed to collaborate from using the greatest set of collaborative tools ever devised. And it also stopped a medium whose cost structure takes care of power imbalances by making communicating with large groups of people essentially free. While the Internet doesn't guarantee a large audience, it is amazingly inexpensive to communicate with any size group. (For example, there is no cost associated with those annoying joke e-mail forwards.)

The asymmetry of power has been flipped in the Internet Age. Citizens can communicate online to potentially millions of people at no cost, but Members of Congress can't. But this is real life, and regardless of the rules, members and staffers post videos on their sites, go offsite to join the conversation on blogs, do events in Second Life using

congressional resources, etc. But the fact that the rules are in place tells us something very important about Congress, which is its antipathy to public spaces. Rather than delve into the difficult questions of whether an embedded YouTube clip of a government resource can be used on a political website, the Franking Commission just says “No” to YouTube. And the Obviousmeter goes off, and Members break the rules, and Congress appears to be clueless.

But it's not clueless; it is protecting a lie. This lie is the supposed line between politics and government, a line that was always fiction but whose illusion could be maintained in a non-digital world. And there are similar fake lines between charities and political advocacy groups, government agencies and political parties, blogs and political action committees, citizens with websites and journalists, and foundations and corporations and governments. In David Weinberger's book, *Everything is Miscellaneous*, he points out that there are no clear dividing lines between objects and institutions, and that this is particularly true in regards to information.

As the George W. Bush administration dissolves into a puddle of embarrassment, and the public begins to believe that change in governance and politics is possible, expect a massive increase of public spaces connected to political power, and a lot more confusion around bright border lines that, when put online, no longer seem particularly bright or even line-like. And listen to your own Obviousmeter, because the world is full of archaic Franking Commissions.

About the Author

Matt Stoller writes at the progressive strategy site OpenLeft.com and is the President of the political action committee BlogPAC. He consults for the Sunlight Foundation on open government, for Actblue, and for Working Assets, a progressive phone company.