

# Creating online, public accountability

GUEST COMMENTARY

*Editor's note: We publish this guest commentary today in celebration of Sunshine Week, held March 14-20. Sunshine Week is a national initiative to open a dialogue about the importance of open government and freedom of information. Participants include print, broadcast and online news media, civic groups, libraries, nonprofits, schools and others interested in the public's right to know.*

Every day, the federal government releases vast amounts of useful information about every aspect of our nation and how government works. This public information has a deep impact on almost every aspect of American life. Some of it can be used to hold our elected officials accountable for their actions, or have a profound effect on health, economic development and commerce. The problem is, much of this government information is too often hard to find, difficult to understand, expensive to obtain in useful formats, and available in only a few locations.

There is a solution to this problem: the Internet. Because of this revolutionary medium, we now have new expectations about our ability to access information, including information about the work of government. The Internet enables us to obtain a myriad of information 24 hours a day, seven days a week—from our latest credit card transactions to local traffic reports to the most recent baseball rankings. But if we want information about our federal government—information often required by law to be made available to the public—we often must resort to filing a formal request and waiting for weeks or even months for a response.

This is why the Sunlight Foundation is working to inform a new legislative initiative that will soon be introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives to require that all public government-held information be available online. This legislation follows Sunlight's ethos that "public equals online." That is, whatever information the government collects and discloses must be freely accessible online, in a format that can be downloaded and parsed by any citizen. In the 21st century, information is properly described as "public" only if it is available online, 24/7, for free, in a machine-readable format. Government information cannot be considered public if, to access it, one must travel to Washington and view it on paper or on the screen of a balky 1997-vintage computer in the basement office of a government building, open only on weekdays from 9 to 5.

Currently, there is a multitude of information that the government has determined is public, but has not made available on the Internet. This includes data pertaining to pension plans' solvency and investment practices, lobbying activities by federal grantees, the financial practices of the charitable sector, lawmakers' financial disclosures and reports on travel by executive branch officials paid for by corporations and other third parties. The failure to publicly disclose these data sets limits their usefulness, and deprives government and citizens alike of the value invested in collecting and maintaining this data.

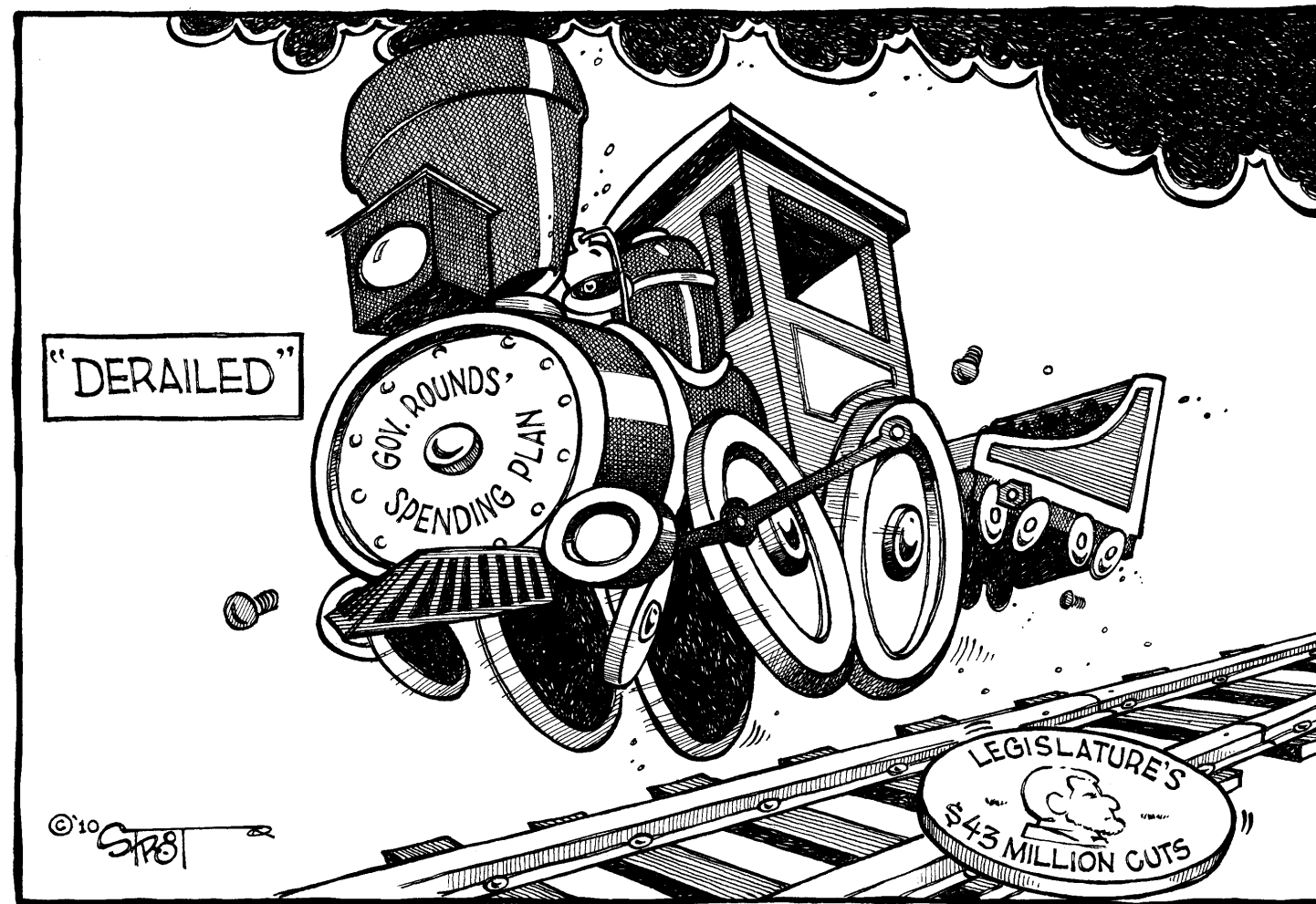
Fortunately, the Obama administration is leading a movement within the government to create the new kind of disclosure regime necessary for the Internet age. But it does not go far enough.

We believe there should be a requirement that all newly created executive branch information—with commonsense exceptions for privacy, trade secrets, and such—must be made available online to anybody who wants to see it, free of charge. Legislation to this end complements other developments we have witnessed during the Obama administration—including the online disclosure by the White House of its visitor logs; the launch of Data.gov, a central repository of government databases and data feeds; and last year's Open Government Directive, which gave federal agencies a number of milestones to make government more open and collaborative.

But much more needs to be done. The government should be encouraged to expand on its transparent agenda.

A new paradigm must emerge that shifts the burden from the public to request information from the government using the Freedom of Information Act to the government to disclose the information proactively. Providing online, real time, public access to government information will positively transform the relationship of citizens to government, rewiring our social contract.

For more information, contact:  
Gabriela Schneider, Communications Director  
The Sunlight Foundation  
202/742-1520, ext 236  
gschneider@sunlightfoundation.com



## Bailey seems to come to life around midnight

Bailey is a spooky cat. Each evening, with feline patience, she waits for us to go to bed.

Then she hops up on Phyllis's bed and stays a few minutes just to make sure that Phyllis is comfy. With a loud clump, she leaves that post and goes about her rounds—whatever those are. She first goes into the bathroom, opens up a linen closet door and after rummaging around, she pulls out all the sheets and towels stored there. Why she does that, no one knows!

Then she goes about her diabolical deeds which includes opening up another door in the office desk to take out stationery and envelopes as though she's going to write a letter. Whatever else she

does is lost in the darkness which only she knows about. Every now and then she let's out a yip to let us know where she is. We think she's looking for Baxter her buddy who has gone to the Great Cat House in the sky!

All of that activity makes her hungry so she goes to her cat dish in the kitchen. But she doesn't gobble up the food like an ordinary cat. Instead she takes her front paw and pulls out a single pellet one at

a time and eats them off the floor. She obviously is thirsty, too, because she dips one paw into her water dish and takes a drink from her foot.

A cat, like Bailey, must scratch something to remove the dead outer layer of their claws. Consequently, she has taken to the sofa for that reason so Phyllis went to K Mart and bought a scratching post for \$12.50 which saves having to get a more costly piece of furniture! The post is

treated with catnip which drives the cat nuts and causes her to use it.

She does more in her wanderings until she tires herself out and instead of going back to bed, she sleeps 'til dawn in my wheelchair. I've read that adult cats can sleep as much as 18 hours a day. Her daylight devilry can go on much of the day, however, when she isn't sleeping.

So there you have the story of Bailey's midnight marauding which Phyllis and I have to guess about since it's been done by a spooky cat. Because we don't understand cat conversation, what all she does is a mystery.

© 2010 Robert F. Karolevitz



**Bob Karolevitz**  
Writer At Large

## Striking gold where you least expect it

Is that a twinkle in his eyes? Is that my heart racing? Are we both giggling for the first time in a long while?

Recently, I have learned from an Indian Proverb that "To watch us dance is to hear our hearts speak." Since my husband and I started ballroom dancing lessons, our hearts have been a chattering.

In the few short weeks since our first lesson, we know one thing: ballroom dancing outwardly expresses the language that our hearts have spoken fluently all along. A metaphor for our marriage, through dancing our hearts are shouting, "I promise to be there!"

We are one of 12 couples in our class. Even though we appear to be very different, we all have two things in common: we step on our partner's toes and we trip over our own feet. In other words, we bring no natural talent to the dance floor. However, we are encouraged by our instructor, who believes that anyone can learn.

"Now remember, dancing is just like walking. And, be sure to practice when you go home," he reminds us.

MyStory YourStory



**Paula Damon**  
Columnist

When my husband and I do practice, we are like a new love, arm in arm, lightly stepping back and forth. We wrack our brains to recall the instructor's words, "Each slow step takes two beats of music and every quick step takes one..."

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four, we softly whisper.

With the furniture pushed back on the living room floor, we sweetly sway to the beat of Sugarland and Rascal Flatts. Twenty minutes go by in a flash as we move about with an innocent trust in one another's ability to remember.

The shades are not drawn. Our Dachshunds are looking on with amazement, possibly detecting a new spark, as we take slow, slow, quick, quick steps to the Foxtrot and rock forward, backward and then sideways while doing the

Swing. While ballroom dancing does expose our vulnerabilities, we are rediscovering our couple hood to the beat of 4-4 time.

After 38 years of relentlessly mining ways to be romantic, our hope of rekindling had withered; but now, we have struck gold on the dance floor.

The rhythmic heel, toe, heel toe reintroduced us to a finesse and tenderness that usually escapes our daily routine.

A new soft gift in our lives is transporting us back to an old familiar place where we first met, a time when we would gaze into each other's eyes, coordinating every move and holding hands until they were hot and sweaty.

The slow gentle leaning into one another and the sudden pulling away represents the best parts of our love.

As we dance, we are in a happy, silly place. We are romantically giddy when we get it right and lovingly chuckle if we get it wrong.

Ballroom dancing brightly teases us into believing that we are young again. It is a fountain quenching our thirst. I like it here. I don't only want to visit this place; I want to stay.

When our lessons are over, we are talking about signing up for some more of this tonic that summons our hearts. Heel, toe, heel toe...one, two, three, four...

A resident of Southeast South Dakota, Paula Damon is a national and state award-winning columnist. Her columns have won first-place in National Federation of Press Women, South Dakota Press Women and Iowa Press Women Communications Contests. In the 2009 South Dakota Press Women Communications Contest, Paula's columns took three first-place awards. To contact Paula, email pauladamon@iw.net, follow her blog at www.my-story-your-story.blogspot.com and find her on Facebook.

2010 © Paula Damon

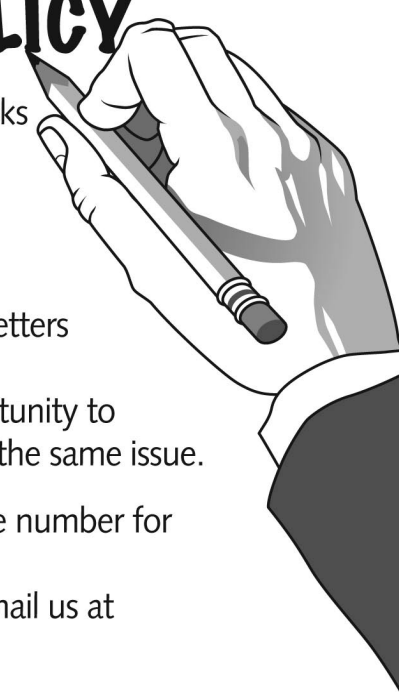
## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR POLICY

The Plain Talk encourages its readers to write letters to the editor, and it asks that a few simple guidelines be followed.

- Please limit letters to 350 words or less. Letters should deal with a single subject, be of general interest and state a specific point of view. Letters are edited with brevity and clarity.
- In the sense of fairness and professionalism, the Plain Talk will accept no letters attacking private individuals or businesses.
- Specific individuals or entities addressed in letters may be given the opportunity to read the letter prior to publication and be allowed to answer the letter in the same issue.

Only signed letters with writer's full name, address and daytime phone number for verification will be accepted.

Please mail to: Letters, P.O. Box 357, Vermillion, SD 57069, or e-mail us at david.lias@plaintalk.net.



**Vermillion PLAIN TALK**  
Since 1884  
Official County, City and School District Newspaper  
201 W. Cherry, Vermillion, SD 57069  
Publication No. USPS 657-720  
Editor: David Lias  
Published weekly by YANKTON MEDIA, Inc.  
Periodicals postage paid at Vermillion, SD 57069.

Subscription rates for the Plain Talk by mail are \$27.56 a year in the city of Vermillion. Subscriptions in Clay, Turner, Union and Yankton counties are \$41.34 per year. Elsewhere in South Dakota, subscriptions are \$44.52, and out-of-state subscriptions are \$42.  
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Plain Talk, 201 West Cherry Street, Vermillion, SD 57069.

Vermillion Plain Talk Staff  
Advertising Director: Michele Schievelbein. Advertising Sales Rep: Jennifer Newton. Composing Staff: Heidi Henson, Kathy Larson, Matt Richardson, and Tera Schmidt. Reception Office Manager: Penny Tucker. Distribution & Circulation Manager: David Jeffcoat.