

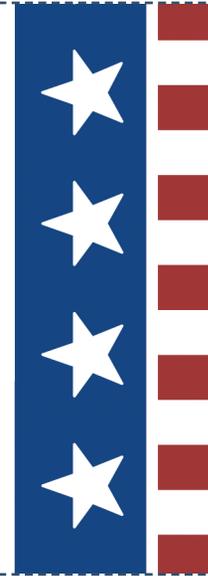
The **51st** *State*

The State of Online

Monitoring What They Say: Accountability and Tech Tools

Part I. Mainstream Press

In the articles written in this series, “The 51st State: the State of Online,” the central theme describes the growing importance technology is playing in our presidential and congressional campaigns and elections. We have seen tremendous creativity and passion in the 2008 presidential campaign, rising through an explosion of new technology tools, released almost on a daily basis, designed to help the voter and concerned citizen learn more about the candidates — biographical information; experience and expertise; legislative agendas; voting record; positions on issues; and the groups, individuals, and industries contributing to candidates’ campaigns.



These tech tools enable and facilitate the voting public to enter the voting booth well-equipped to cast an informed and thoughtful vote.

On the flip side, these same tools require more from today’s candidates. We expect, or even require, more direct communication with our candidates through email, blogs, social networking tools, etc. Candidates that fail to understand this will have an increasingly difficult time reaching out to those they need to succeed in this and upcoming elections. More importantly, the tools force our government leaders to become more open, more transparent, and more accountable about what they say and what they do. These tools serve a real need. The organizations, the groups, the bloggers, the individuals, the concerned citizens — all created these tools because they felt that something was missing from our elected officials, namely accountability, transparency, and openness in government. ➡➡

by **Laura Gordon-Murnane**, *Information Consultant*

NOT SURPRISING REALLY.

President Bush's job approval rating is at an all-time low of 28%, and 71% of the nation feels the country is going in the wrong direction (Pew Research Center via Yahoo! News [http://news.yahoo.com/s/pew/20080423/ts_pew/28presidentialapproval_1], April 23, 2008, and PollingReport.com [<http://www.pollingreport.com/right.htm>], accessed April 30, 2008). Congress's approval rating is even lower than the president's, hovering somewhere in the low 20s [<http://www.pollingreport.com/CongJob.htm>]. And daily headlines report on the failures of our government leaders to hold themselves to a higher standard. For example, read these:

- "Air Force Accountability: Senators Ask For Pentagon Explanation on Contract Abuse," *The Washington Post*, April 19, 2008 [<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/18/AR2008041801921.html>]
- "A Blight at the Museum: For the Smithsonian, another exit under an ethics cloud," *The Washington Post*, April 19, 2008 [<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/18/AR2008041802909.html>]
- "Congress May Seek Criminal Probe of Altered Earmark," *The Washington Post*, April 17, 2008 [<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/16/AR2008041603480.html>]
- "Jackson Resigns as HUD Secretary, Longtime Bush Friend Is Facing Cronyism Investigations," *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2008 [<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/31/AR2008033102672.html>]

The business pages offer no significant relief:

- "Pentagon, FBI Probing Air Force Contracts Questions Raised Over Noncompetitive Deal," *The Washington Post*, April 18, 2008 [<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/17/AR2008041703774.html>]
- "Groundings Prompt FAA Safety Overhaul Committee to Monitor Airlines' Maintenance," *The Washington Post*, April 19, 2008 [<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/18/AR2008041803196.html>]

You get the point. No branch of government is exempt when it comes to questionable actions, misdeeds, and corruption. Transparency, openness, and accountability are missing and sorely needed to restore public trust in our government leaders. In fact, the Association of Government Accountants (AGA)

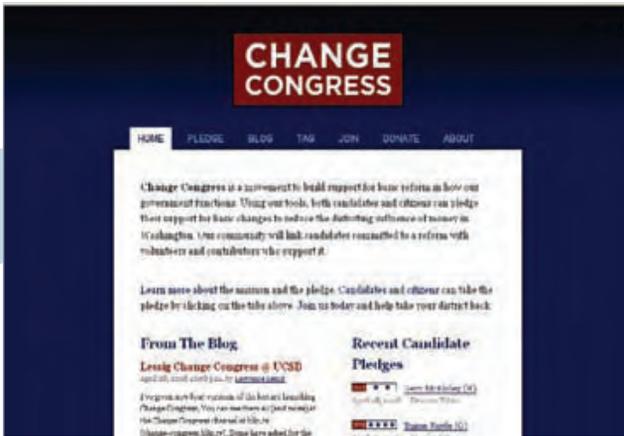
[<http://www.agacgfm.org>] commissioned a study of public attitudes toward government transparency and accountability and found a "deep dissatisfaction among the American public with both the availability of government financial information and the way it is delivered to the people" (Association of Government Accountants, "Public Attitudes Toward Government Accountability and Transparency 2008: A Survey Commissioned by the Association of Government Accountants," February 2008 [<http://www.agacgfm.org/downloads/pollreport2008.pdf>], page 2).

Reforming Online

Of course, we could just read these headlines, shake our heads, shrug our shoulders, and sigh — "Politics as usual inside the Beltway." But wait. Let's not give up just yet. Previous articles have shown us the work of media organizations, inspired groups and citizens, and bloggers who have used technology to "shine a light" on our government institutions and the people who run them.

We have seen the creative use of technology in examining the role money plays in our congressional and presidential elections with the fine work by the 2007 Webby Award-winning Center for Responsible Politics and its OpenSecrets.org website [<http://www.opensecrets.org>]. The Center makes it easy for all citizens to review how much money is spent by lobbyists, major donors, industries, interest groups, PACs, 527 groups, congressional committees, members of Congress, and political parties in both congressional and presidential campaigns. And the amount of money is absolutely mind-boggling.

The launch of Fedspending.org [<http://www.fedspending.org>] by OMBWatch, with support from the Sunlight Foundation, allows users to "search, aggregate, and analyze all federal spending" (OMBWatch and the Center for Responsive Politics Unveil Federal Spending Oversight Tools, Oct. 10, 2006 [<http://www.ombwatch.org/fedspending/presspacket/release.pdf>]). Why did OMBWatch create this tool? To enable the American public, as well as researchers, journalists, and even government officials and members of Congress, to find out how the federal government spends our tax dollars. Gary Bass, executive director of OMBWatch, compared FedSpending.org to going into a store, buying something, and getting a receipt for what you have purchased: He sees FedSpending.org as providing receipts for the federal government's spending activities. We can see where our tax dollars are being spent and which companies receive government contracts.



Change-Congress.org



The Sunlight Foundation

In March 2008, Lawrence Lessig, founder of Creative Commons, professor at Stanford Law School, and founder and co-director of the law school's Center for Internet and Society, launched Change-Congress.org [http://change-congress.org], a national reform movement “to end corruption in America’s Congress.” Lessig urges citizens to “push candidates to make four simple commitments: 1) No money from lobbyists or PACs; 2) Vote to end earmarks; 3) Support reform to increase Congressional transparency; 4) Support publicly-financed campaigns” [http://change-congress.org/about].

The reform movement has set three goals: to urge candidates and politicians to support reform, to build a wiki-based map of reform candidates, and to provide financial support for reformers. Here again we see the marriage of political advocacy and internet technology. The site includes a list of candidates who have pledged to support reform, a blog (RSS-enabled), and a wiki-based map of reform candidates. The wiki-map combines a GovTrack Maps and FEC data from OpenSecrets.org. Clearly, Lessig feels that something has to be done to clean up the corruption in Congress and has launched Change-Congress to draw attention to the problem and provide a technology tool to help solve it.

The Sunlight Foundation [http://www.sunlightfoundation.com] triumphs and showcases the accomplishments of technological innovation and creativity when applied to the dual goals of holding our government officials accountable and embracing transparent government. (Take a look at this brief video on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtiMa_xcPLY.) This foundation has supported numerous projects



Talking Points Memo

(blogs, widgets, mashups, databases, wikis, maps, etc.) designed to shine light on corruption in government — not only at the federal level, but at all levels.

Political blogs such as Josh Marshall’s Talking Points Memo [http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com] and Andrew Rasiej and Micah L. Sifry’s Personal Democracy Forum (PDF) [http://www.personaldemocracy.com] have combined investigative reporting and technology tools to question and challenge the behavior of our elected officials while embracing wholeheartedly openness, transparency, and accountable government.

All of these organizations, individuals, and concerned citizens have inspired many others to build their own tools, wid-

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Personal Democracy Forum

ets, websites, wikis, blogs, and databases to produce a better government. Why? They build these tools because they care — and care passionately — about the ideals, beliefs, and values championed in the Declaration of Independence [http://www.

archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration.html], the U.S. Constitution [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution.html], the Bill of Rights [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/bill_of_rights.html], and the Gettysburg Address [http://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/index.html?dod-date=1119].

To that end, the next two parts in this series will showcase accountability and transparency tools that you can use to track, monitor, and understand the statements of political candidates for the 2008 presidential and congressional campaigns. This article will showcase tools that have been developed by the mainstream press: the Annenberg Political FactCheck [http://www.factcheck.org], PolitiFact (a collaboration between the St. Petersburg Times of Florida and Congressional Quarterly) [http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter], and The Washington Post's Fact-Checker [http://blog.washingtonpost.com/fact-checker]. The second will highlight the many different widgets, databases, wikis, videos, and mashups created to spread awareness to the voting public and to challenge our political, military, judicial, and business leaders to embrace transparent and accountable government.

Annenberg Political FactCheck

A 2007 People's Voice Webby Award Winner [http://webbyawards.com/webbys/current.php?season=11#webby_entry_government], the Annenberg Political FactCheck [http://www.factcheck.org] site dates back to December 2003 [http://www.factcheck.org/archive/December_2003.html]. It is the oldest of the three mainstream press sites monitoring the statements of presidential and congressional candidates. The Holding Politicians Accountable page tells you exactly what you need to know about The Annenberg Political FactCheck site. The site bills itself as a “nonpartisan, nonprofit, ‘consumer advocate’ for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics.” It monitors “the factual accuracy of what is said by major U.S. political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews, and news releases” and sees as its goal “to apply the best practices of both journalism and scholarship,



and to increase public knowledge and understanding” [http://www.factcheck.org/about]. Brooks Jackson, executive director of FactCheck.org, pioneered the idea of monitoring the statements of candidates while at CNN, where he launched his “adwatch” and “factcheck” stories, reporting on deception and misleading statements beginning with the 1992 presidential election.

The Recent Posting section on the site features an in-depth analysis of statements by candidates, television and radio political advertisements (by candidates, advocates, and activists), debates, speeches, interviews, and press releases. The analysis pieces are great investigative stories. These include background information, links to the political ads and YouTube videos, statements of the candidates, interviews with legislators, listings of facts, judgments on the accuracy of statements, political ads or commentaries, and, finally, a listing of all the sources (with links) used to provide support for their conclusions.

Annenberg Political FactCheck *(continued)*

Other sections include Just the Facts — the weekly FactCheck Vid-Cast — a news clip report on statements candidates have made on the campaign trail [http://www.factcheck.org/just-the-facts/pennsylvania_leftovers.html]. The vid-cast is also available at blip.tv [<http://justthefacts.blip.tv>]. Ask FactCheck [<http://www.factcheck.org/askfactcheck>] encourages participation by allowing anyone to ask questions and FactCheck will research and post the answers. One recent question asked, “What happens if neither Clinton nor Obama wins enough delegates to secure the nomination?” See the answer here: http://www.factcheck.org/askfactcheck/what_happens_if_neither_clinton_nor_obama.html.

FactCheck editors will answer any questions that address political or policy issues. A useful key describes story types that appear frequently, including those on courts, presidential candidates, and congressional races. It's a quick and handy way to determine coverage. Sign up for RSS feeds, email alerts, or mobile alerts to keep informed.

Overall, the Annenberg Political Factcheck is a very useful, thoughtful, and necessary resource to monitor not only candidate statements, interviews, and claims made in political ads, but also the advocates, analysts, and talking heads surrounding the presidential and congressional campaigns.

PolitiFact

PolitiFact [<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter>] stems from a collaboration between the *St. Petersburg Times* of Florida [<http://tampabay.com>] and the Washington, D.C.-based *Congressional Quarterly* [<http://www.cqpolitics.com/wmepage>]. It proclaims itself as the source for “Sorting out the TRUTH in politics” by helping “voters separate fact from falsehood in the 2008 Presidential campaign.”

Reporters, journalists, and researchers from *CQ* and the *St. Petersburg Times* “fact-check the accuracy of speeches, TV ads, interviews and other campaign communications. We'll publish new findings every day on PolitiFact.com, and list our sources for all to see” [<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/about>].

PolitiFact offers a unique truth-rating system, The Truth-O-Meter, a six-category system designed to rate candidate claims and attacks.



The site is organized into new articles, the Truth-O-Meter, the Attack File, candidates, our rulings, and issues. The new articles section provides an in-depth analysis of current statements by candidates, their advocates, or their opponents. The analysis is backed up with links to key documents, legislation, government reports, transcripts, and voting records. The Truth-O-Meter lists recent statements reviewed by Politi-

Fact staff reporters [<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements>]. A quick glance at the Truth-O-Meter graphic tells you the accuracy of the statement, but the graphic is backed up with a detailed explanation of why they ruled the way they did. The Attack File is “a home for fact-checking the attacks candidates make against each other” [<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/attacks>]. However, the Attack File is not limited to candidates. It also covers the “claims that enter the public discourse via a talk show host, a blogger or even a fictional character in a YouTube video.” The site provides many different options to find information. One in particular, Browse the Truth-O-Meter, offers six different slices: browse the site by candidate or attacker, by our ruling, by subject, by political party, by where they said it, and “Pants on Fire” rulings. The site is also searchable, and you can have the information delivered via RSS, widget for your website, or in a Google gadget for your Google homepage.

Updated daily, PolitiFact can keep you informed on the latest statements, or misstatements, made by candidates, surrogates, advocates, and adversaries.

PolitiFact's Truth-O-Meter

TRUE – The statement is accurate and there's nothing significant missing.

MOSTLY TRUE – The statement is accurate but needs clarification or additional information.

HALF TRUE – The statement is accurate but leaves out important details or takes things out of context.

BARELY TRUE – The statement contains some element of truth but ignores critical facts that would give a different impression.

FALSE – The statement is not accurate.

PANTS ON FIRE – The statement is not accurate and makes a ridiculous claim.

The Fact Checker

The Fact Checker [<http://blog.washingtonpost.com/fact-checker>] from *The Washington Post* is a daily blog by WP reporter, Michael Dobbs. It is designed “to ‘truth squad’ the national political debate in the period leading up to the 2008 presidential election.” Dobbs’ goal is “to shed as much light as possible on controversial claims and counter-claims involving important national issues, such as the war in Iraq, immigration, health care, social issues, the economy, and the records of the various presidential candidates.” The difference between the Fact Checker, PolitiFact, and FactCheck.org lies in the Fact Checker’s reliance “on our readers to send suggestions on topics to fact check and tips on erroneous claims by political candidates, interest groups, and the media” [http://blog.washingtonpost.com/fact-checker/2007/09/about_the_fact_checker.html].



The site, like PolitiFact, has created its own four-part rating system — The Pinocchio Test. The posts analyze claims by listing “the Facts” coupled with links to important documents, reports, candidate websites, OpenSecrets.org data, videos, updated information, and 1 to 4 Pinocchio’s. If the statement is completely true, it wins the prized Geppetto Checkmark. Each post allows comments, and Share This with Technorati, del.icio.us, and Digg. The blog is RSS-enabled.

The Pinocchio Test

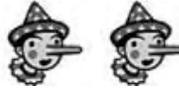
Where possible, we will adopt the following standard in fact-checking the claims of a political candidate or interest group.

One Pinocchio



Some shading of the facts. Selective telling of the truth. Some omissions and exaggerations, but no outright falsehoods.

Two Pinocchios



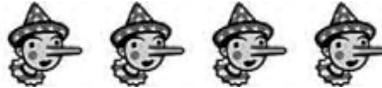
Significant omissions and/or exaggerations. Some factual error may be involved but not necessarily. A politician can create a false, misleading impression by playing with words and using legalistic language that means little to ordinary people.

Three Pinocchios



Significant factual error and/or obvious contradictions.

Four Pinocchios



Whoppers.

The Geppetto Checkmark



Statements and claims that contain “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” will be recognized with our prized Geppetto checkmark. Pinocchio Test – Washington Post’s The Fact-Checker (Accessed April 27, 2008)



A Darn Good Start

Together, the three sites described here provide a very useful and necessary set of tools to monitor, track, and challenge the accuracy and honesty of the candidates running for office. The sites, however, go beyond the candidates themselves and offer insights, evaluations, and analyses of the many different groups — commentators, bloggers, advocacy groups, and even spouses — actively engaged in the campaign. These tools enable citizens to get involved, to demand that candidates speak the truth, share their beliefs, and offer solutions to our nation’s problems. All out in the open. Plenty of sunshine. And that is as it should be. ■

NEXT UP: accountability websites, blogs, widgets, wikis, and mashups.