

# Does Increasing Government Transparency Help or Hurt Professional and Trade Associations?

By  
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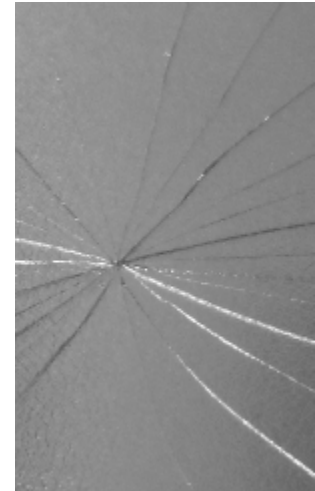
Does increasing government transparency help or hurt professional and trade associations? Here are two answers:

1. Government Transparency Helps Associations.

By making government actions more visible to the public, the need for specialized associations of individuals and organizations is *increased* because:

- Groups with specialized knowledge are more able than members of the general public to understand the meaning and significance of information about Government programs that relate to their areas of expertise.
- This understanding can lead to action sooner than would be the case if society had to wait for members of the general public to voluntarily or spontaneously organize around specialized topics that impact them.
- By generating faster action than would be possible through sole reliance on the general public the role and importance of associations are thereby strengthened.

2. Government Transparency Hurts Associations. By making government actions more visible to the public, the need for specialized associations of individuals and organizations is *lessened* because:



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- Those members of the public most impacted by government programs learn about Government program impacts faster than if they had to wait for specialized associations to communicate these impacts to them.
- There is no guarantee that specialized associations have the interest of the general public at heart.
- By cutting out the “middleman” the public is better able to organize and feed back responses to the government programs that most impact them

Actually, I don't really believe this question has a distinct “either/or” type of answer. A lot will depend on the program being publicized, the existing state of structure and communication within affected communities, and the nature of the dollars and public welfare that's at stake.

There's much more to government transparency than just dumping data “out the window” and hoping someone is there to catch it and make it usable and understandable. Responding to questions about [Recovery.gov in February 2009 I wrote](#):

*Whatever methods are developed to represent and report on the various processes that are involved in implementing the stimulus, they need to be understandable to professionals and to the public.*

*There needs to be developed a way to render the same data set in terms that are meaningful both to policy makers and to the public.*

*And, we need to makes sure that purely quantitative measures can be supplemented by the actual commentary provided by those affected.*

*The development of such measures for reporting on progress should be conducted openly as there are many interesting viewpoints that can contribute value in the process.*

*Finally, beware the involvement of vendors who insist on restricting access through incorporation of proprietary tools and techniques that cannot be easily copied and re-used by others.*

In other words, just making data about government programs accessible isn't enough; the data also has to be made available in a form that can be understood and applied by those involved with the programs the data describe.

In the past, this wasn't always the case. Government program data were hidden, hard to find, hard to organize, and hard to interpret. Those with a direct [read: "financial"] stake were willing and able to devote the time and expertise to gathering, organizing, and interpreting government-sourced data. Professional and trade associations often played this role, especially when the actions of government programs had the potential for impacting the interests of their members.

With increased program transparency the possibility exists that, if government programs open up enough, members of the unaffiliated general public might be able to wrangle the data themselves without the need for professional intermediaries — or gatekeepers. This could actually reduce the need for professional and trade associations.

But a lot will depend on how the government "opens up." Look at the increasing use of public social networks such as Facebook by individual Federal agencies (disclosure: one of my clients, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, is one such Federal agency that is increasing its use of Facebook).

Use of Facebook by both civilian and military agencies varies widely in terms of actual engagement. Some agencies use Facebook as an extension of their web site's one-way publishing activities. Others take seriously the potential for two-way engagement that Facebook enables.

Is there a role for professional and trade associations in an environment where a Federal agency can speak to and engage directly with members of

the public? My answer is a qualified “yes” assuming that associations actually help their members to learn about and use emerging social media, social networking, and collaboration systems to communicate honestly and openly with the government agencies that impact them, their professionals, and their businesses.

Based on my own experience, some associations are doing this. Others still view social media and social networking with suspicion. What seems clear is that traditional roles of government agencies, associations, and media are changing as people increasingly learn how to organize and communicate on their own using readily available public media.

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