Public oversight and Deepbills

Delivering Government Transparency

"The history of liberty has been in no small measure the struggle between diffuse and encompassing interests, on the one hand, and special interests, on the other," John McGinnis of Northwestern University has written. Before the printing press was invented, these interests included both rulers and aristocrats. But the mass dissemination of information "allowed the middle class to discover and organize around their common interests to sustain a democratic system that limited the exactions of the oligarchs."

Today, the Internet is the new printing press. With the launch of Cato's Deepbills Project, the Institute is generating data that will allow the information superhighway to have its salutary effects for liberty.

"Democracy in America is not working: the formalities are strong, but the substance is hollowed out," says Jim Harper, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute specializing in information policy. While there is quite a bit of public-sector information online, it is buried in archaic practices and unusable formats. In effect, the government is beyond the reach of the people. The Internet has remade old industries and created new ones, yet it has barely touched the federal government. The solution to this information problem, Harper argues, is detailed accessible information about the government's deliberations, management, and results.

To this end, Cato's Deepbills project gathers the XML versions of legislation, annotating 99 percent of the bills introduced in the current Congress in order to make key elements of their content easily readable by computer. This data allows automatic discovery of the laws that pending bills amend, the agencies they affect, and the spending they authorize. Not content to merely advocate for transparency, Cato has shown the way by producing data that makes the government more transparent.

The data is already beginning to see use. The *New York Times* began employing Deepbills data to flesh out information about bills in Congress that it publishes on its website. On Wikipedia, the Institute has initiated an automated system for generating article skeletons that include the pros and cons of legislation in Congress. Bit by bit, a community of editors is starting to grow.

The project is currently developing open-source markup software that will add this data to bills automatically. Publishing well-structured data will allow search engines, websites, researchers, reporters, political scientists, and the public to discover, process, and use government information in any way they choose. Cato's work will set public expectations that government data is available, making government's improvement in this area a political imperative. "By adding data sets to what's available about government deliberations, we're beginning to lift the fog that allows Washington, D.C., to work the way it does—or, more accurately, to fail the way it does," Harper concludes.

MORE INFORMATION ON THE INSTITUTE'S DEEPBILLS PROJECT CAN BE FOUND AT CATO.ORG/RESOURCES/DATA.

IN DEFENSE OF TRUTHINESS

Believe it or not, it's illegal in Ohio to lie about politicians. In *Susan B. Anthony List v. Driehaus*, the Supreme Court is weighing the state's election law that
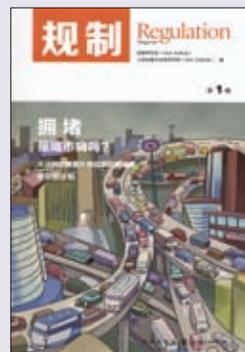

makes it a crime to "disseminate a false statement concerning a candidate." Joined by the Institute's H. L. Mencken Research Fellow P. J. O'Rourke, Cato filed an amicus brief reminding the Court of the importance of "truthiness"—facts you feel in your heart, not in your head—in American politics, as well as the role of satire and spin more broadly.

Ilya Shapiro, a senior fellow in Cato's Center for Constitutional Studies, writes, "We ask the Court a simple yet profound question: Doesn't the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech protect one man's truth even if it happens to be another man's lie? And who's to judge—and on what scale—when a statement slides 'too far' into the realm of falsehood?"

REGULATION IN CHINA

The Cato Institute has long stressed the importance of bringing the ideas of individual liberty, free markets, and peace to China.

With that in mind, we are pleased to report that *Regulation* magazine is now being published in Chinese by the Shanghai Institute of Finance and Law. For close to four decades, this quarterly publication has examined virtually every market—from agriculture to health and transportation—and nearly every government intervention—from interstate commerce to labor law and price controls. With easy-to-understand insights anchored in microeconomic analysis, *Regulation* will continue to make the case for those policy instruments that are more effective, and less intrusive, both here at home and across the world.