

Session title: Electronic Filing Roundtable

Moderator/Panelists:

M. Bob Stern, Former President, Center for Governmental Studies of Los Angeles

M. Albert Grimes, directeur des technologies de l'information et de la communication au Bureau du financement des campagnes et des partis politiques of Massachusetts

M. Craig Holman, lobbyiste en affaires gouvernementales, Public Citizen de Washington, D.C.

Mme Denise Roth Barber, directrice administrative, National Institute on Money in State Politics de Montana

Date and time: Sunday, December 8, 9:30

Rapporteur: Simon Bérubé

Session Summary

As the session unfolded, all participants portrayed the situation in their organization, highlighting the challenges faced during the process of drafting and disclosure of various documents and data bases that focus, in particular, on campaign financing, conflicts of interest and lobbying.

Notable challenges include the growing number of documents to be processed and put on line, the obsolescence of certain software, and the need for a recurring systems review. Costs related to program development and recourse to external resources concerning information technologies were also among the issues addressed.

Mr. Grimes presented his organization's website, where stakeholders may post various documents required by law. On the site, it is also possible to carry out an effective search concerning, in particular, political contributions and election expenses. For instance, thanks to various intuitive filters, the searcher will be able to access reports filed by elected officials, information concerning their contributors, the reason for their political contribution (in favour of or against) and the nature of the amount contributed. Mr. Grimes pointed out that all information on the site is there to stay in eternity. Very substantial savings were made possible by resorting to "cloud computing" rather than physical servers.

Ms. Barber presented her organization's site, followthemoney.org, intended as the most complete tool for disclosing data campaign financing of elected representatives and lobbyists at the state level. Her organization also issues bulletins assessing the transparency of these data for each state. As regards lobbying, she believes that it is crucial to uncover information concerning lobbyists' clients, the election expenses connected with their actions, and the target of these initiatives (legislative or executive branch).

Mr. Holman enumerated certain provisions to be included in legislation designed to control the political contributions of companies doing business with governments. In his view, a definition of "business entity" must be found that includes a company's executive personnel: including key officers and employees. A pre-certification program is needed in order to prove that companies are in compliance with the law. Lastly, a system of complete data disclosure must be developed, without which the law cannot be successfully applied.

At the conclusion of the round table, a few potential solutions, intended to facilitate the development of effective and accessible electronic archiving systems, were put forward, including the possibility of devising user-friendly ways of conducting searches and downloading the data base. The website and software must remain low maintenance, and it is in fact recommended that the software be produced internally or that programming codes and intellectual property rights to data be conserved. Lastly, public consultation is essential during the entire process of developing the platform so as to ensure that it is user friendly and meets users' needs.