Conversation with Tom Lee on October 4, 2013

Participants

- Tom Lee — Director, Sunlight Labs, Sunlight Foundation
- Alexander Berger — Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Tom Lee.

Summary

Tom Lee is the director of Sunlight Labs at the Sunlight Foundation. The Foundation works to increase government accountability and transparency.

GiveWell spoke to Tom Lee as part of its investigation of government accountability and transparency as a philanthropic cause. Conversation topics included the importance of the field and Sunlight's goals, metrics, and successes.

The importance of government accountability and transparency

Many technologists (including Mr. Lee) believe in transparency and accountability as core values and want to apply those values to the political system. From a practical standpoint, the US policy process is the most powerful tool in the world to control resources through a consciously designed, non-market system. There is a broad sense that the policy process could work better. Influence on policymaking is currently unbalanced, with the sides of issues that have more money dominating the less-funded sides. It is important to make more people aware of this and to further policies that will encourage transparency and accountability.

The Sunlight Foundation

Sunlight Foundation employs about 50 people and has an annual budget of about $7 million.

Sunlight's goals

Sunlight wants policy to more closely reflect public opinion. As such, Sunlight avoids taking a stance on the value of particular policies (other than accountability and transparency policies) and simply advocates for the public voice. It recognizes that the public can be wrong in some cases but believes that overall a better functioning democracy is good for the country.

Sunlight is to some extent a countervailing force against lobbying by moneyed interests. However, it is unrealistic to think that foundations like Sunlight could ever be as well-funded as lobbyists. Sunlight attempts to expose the influence of lobbyists and lower barriers to popular advocacy.

Sunlight would like to see less money spent on lobbying and less flow of personnel between industry and policy-making positions. Sunlight has increasingly deemphasized the goal of increasing public trust in government, because experimental evidence shows that while people appreciate having more
information about the workings of government, that information often makes them trust the
government less rather than more.

**Sunlight's metrics of success**

Metrics are unable to reliably measure progress towards Sunlight's goals of changing the political
system. They do, however, keep the Foundation accountable to doing work that will attract public
attention.

Sunlight has experimented with a variety of metrics over the years:

- Sunlight reports to donors on measures of efficacy and spending.
- The Foundation does not focus on the number of bills it has gotten passed, because there are too
  many external factors influencing these outcomes for this to be a useful metric.
- Sunlight used to measure press mentions, op-eds placed, and social media mentions, but it
  found this to be expensive and time-consuming. It may also be unrealistic to aim for a constant
  growth rate in media mentions, because at some point, Sunlight will begin to saturate all the
  media outlets interested in reporting on transparency and accountability issues.
- The Foundation has also used web traffic analytics and aimed to increase traffic to its website
  every year. However, trying to meet this goal led to pressure to create pages, such as a Super
  PAC name generator, that tended to be more fun then substantial. Sunlight began to use
  statistical procedures to scrub outlier weeks from web traffic metrics in order to avoid the
  pressure to produce these homerun pages.
- Sunlight used to measure calls to its APIs offering data on the government, but it recently
  switched to measuring keys generated instead. Calls are an unreliable metric because an
  inefficient computer script, for example, could generate as many calls as a popular campaign.
- The Foundation now measures partnerships with nonprofits and other organizations working on
  government transparency and accountability.
- It also measures "cultural impressions," including press mentions but also, for example, its work
  with Occupy D.C.

**Major successes**

Sunlight is celebrating its one-billionth API call. The API makes advocacy easier by providing
information about government. It has been used by Wikipedia on its anti-SOPA/PIPA campaign, by the
Tea Party, by the Obama campaign, by Greenpeace, and by other organizations.

An example of a less tangible accomplishment was Mr. Lee's recent testimony before the Senate
Budget Committee on the quality of government spending data. Currently, the figures reported by
USASpending.gov are off by perhaps one trillion dollars if you count inconsistent, delayed, and
incomplete reports as incorrect (more details at http://sunlightfoundation.com/clearspending/). This
issue is unlikely to get wide media coverage that would generate strong metrics for Sunlight, but it is
important for government transparency and hopefully for eventually improving efficiency.

The Foundation is proud of getting its message into major media outlets. For example, major media
picked up Bill Allison's work on Dennis Hastert's land investments.

Sunlight entered the field of technology-driven work on government accountability and transparency
when the field as a whole was growing rapidly, but it is likely that the Foundation helped drive further
growth. Sunlight's influence may have contributed to the growth of Data.gov and the technological components of the Open Government Initiative. The growth of the field was also driven by factors such as donor interest in technological solutions. It is hard to define a strong counterfactual for what would have happened in the field had Sunlight not existed.

**Sunlight's work with funders**

Sunlight has found that technology is relatively easy to find funding for, whereas communications are not. It has been hard to find funding for a domestic policy shop, even though such policy work is essential to the Foundation and the technology that it builds. On the other hand, an international policy shop was much easier to fund.

Sunlight has received substantial funding from the Omidyar Network. Since the Network expects grantees to eventually find other sources of funding, its support for Sunlight will likely end in 2014.

Other Sunlight Foundation funders include the Knight Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, amongst others. The full list of Sunlight's funding sources is at: http://sunlightfoundation.com/about/funding/

**Other organizations working on government openness and accountability**

Some other organizations in the space include Common Cause, Public Citizen, Judicial Watch, and the Project on Government Oversight.

**People and organizations for GiveWell to talk to**

- Hudson Hollister, Founder and Executive Director, Data Transparency Coalition.
- Waldo Jaquith, ran the State Decoded project to make state law codes accessible on the Internet.
- Josh Tauberer, Founder, GovTrack.

*All GiveWell conversations are available at* [http://www.givewell.org/conversations](http://www.givewell.org/conversations).