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THE PUBLIC'S BUSINESS//MORE PEOPLE ARE KNOCKING AT THE DOOR. LET THEM IN

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March 15-21 is Sunshine Week, and it's time to celebrate the right to know. But some of our government officials seem reluctant to come to the party.

We start with the presumption that the government's business is the public's business. You have the right to know what the government is up to. It's your right to look at a copy of a bridge inspection report or to watch the Coleman-Franken recount trial or to attend a school board meeting.

Sometimes you'll be able to do these things yourself. But most of us can't take the time to do that. We depend on journalists to gather the news and to make it available to us.

Once upon a time, that meant publishing a print newspaper or magazine. Then along came radio and television. Now the Internet is the primary source of news and information for many people. Whatever the medium, the goal is the same: to inform the public.

But ever since Gutenberg published his first Bible, whenever new technology has come along to deliver news, some government officials have resisted it.

Judges worry that cameras in the courtroom will frighten off witnesses and discourage victims from coming forward to testify. County commissioners complain that "snippets" of their meetings that are posted on the Internet will be taken out of context and mislead the public. Legislators dither about security threats posed by hordes of bloggers descending on the Capitol. And everybody claims that access will disrupt their operations. In other words, if we'd all just go away, the government could operate a lot better.

This is nonsense. When we cast our ballots in November, we aren't giving elected officials the equivalent to the keys to the family car, to drive anywhere and any way they please. We not only expect them to tell us what they're doing, we demand the right to check up on them for ourselves.

Government officials are supposed to understand that. Some of them do, and they enthusiastically embrace and encourage public participation and oversight. You'll never hear any of them say they don't support the First Amendment. In fact, the Minnesota

House of Representatives unanimously passed a resolution on Thursday to "ensure the fundamental constitutional right of freedom of the press and freedom of expression."

This extraordinary resolution followed a dispute earlier in the week between legislators and online journalists that resulted in a set of proposed rules -- quickly withdrawn -- that would not only restrict who could record public proceedings at the Capitol, but how they could do it. For example, individuals seeking credentials to record committee meetings had to agree not to focus on particular members or their "interactions" before or after a meeting, and to refrain from photographing members of the audience. In order to exercise their First Amendment rights, they had to agree to give some of them up.

This is a classic ploy by those in government who think that information is just too important to entrust to the public. It doesn't take a law degree to figure out that this is unconstitutional. So it wasn't surprising that both the House majority and minority leaders decided it would be prudent to reaffirm their commitment to the public's right to know by supporting the resolution.

That's all very well, as far as it goes. The trick will be putting it into practice.

No one would argue that government officials can't establish rules to allow public access while maintaining decorum. They've done so in the past, and often the old rules worked pretty well. But it wasn't much of a challenge to strike a balance when only a tiny minority of the public actually used them.

Today, journalism is no longer the monopoly of the mainstream media. Publishing on the Internet is possible for anyone with a computer and a modem. This is daunting to many in government. You'll hear them whine that no one should be subjected to scrutiny 24/7, because before the explosion of online journalism, they weren't. Most of the news media simply didn't have the resources to provide that kind of oversight.

But now, the "new media" do. Whether you call them citizens, journalists or citizen-journalists, they're coming to the courtrooms, the committee rooms and the statehouse to report on the government. They have every right to be there, because you have every right to be there. It's your government at work. It's your business.

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