ONLINE

Sunshine: Without laws, government keeps lots of secrets.

Laws ensure that ‘democracy thrives in the light of day.

Open records pave path to changes.

Sunshine Week BRIGHT IDEAS
Amy Gahran, a Boulder-based content strategist and “info-provocateur,” offered tips to make the most of Sunshine Week online and linked to online examples such as the Blogshine Sunday effort and other blogs, online resources from the Society of Environmental Journalists and others, and a Flash animation from OpenTheGovernment.org. “Despite its ephemeral reputation, online media can vastly extend the life and reach of a time-focused event like a one-week campaign. By today, most print newspaper subscribers have tossed out their Sunshine Week papers. But those Sunshine Week links live on, continuing to attract visitors and discussion,” she wrote.

WashingtonPost.com created a special Sunshine Week package with links to special reports that “represent an effort by The Washington Post and washingtonpost.com to hold government accountable and to keep our readers informed of and engaged in some of the important issues facing the country.” Reports included the 9/11 Commission; Budget, Taxes & Spending; Congressional Votes Database; Dangerous Intersections; Faces of the Fallen; Guantanamo Detainees; The High Price of Homeland Security; Gulf Coast Hurricanes; Medicare Spending Waste; NSA: Spying at Home; and Off the Rails, a report on Washington’s Metro system.
The Journal News, White Plains, N.Y., kicked off Sunshine Week with an editorial noting, "It's time for another push." Posted on its Web site were reports on its follow up to an earlier public records audit with a link to the special report, reporters' audit notebooks and legislative updates. The Journal News also offered its interactive Ten Steps to Getting Government Information. As users progress through the 10 steps, they are prompted with tips, cautions and the opportunity to utilize sample letters – including an appeal if a request is denied.
The Idaho Statesman in Boise supplemented its print coverage with an extensive Sunshine Week online package under the headline, “Your Right to Know.” Included were links to the Statesman’s weeklong series on “Public Records You Can Use” involving day care, charity groups, school districts, criminal records and more. There also were links to a special set of civics lessons and Associated Press headlines. On the rail, the Statesman provided links to related informational sites and organizations, and to the Idaho Public Records Law. To give readers a voice, the page offered the opportunity to e-mail a question or letter to the editor.

The Journal Gazette of Fort Wayne, Ind., posted online its main Sunshine Week feature, which examined the difficulty prisoners have in getting public information. The Journal Gazette also directed readers online to state and federal resources, documents such as a handbook on access laws and a sample request letter. Stories, with links, to reporting using public records also were featured. Topics included fire crew response times, officials’ salary reviews, the state of Indiana’s dams, the relationship between city vendor contracts and political donations, chemical plant safety and bus driver records.
The Times in Ottawa, Ill., showed that open government is out of this world and really rocks. In addition to online resources for state and federal freedom of information issues, the newspaper provided readers with links to Web sites for celebrity mug shots, unidentified flying objects and even Elvis Presley’s meeting with President Nixon. As the headline described it, “Freedom of Information Web sites – for knowledge and fun.”

The Honolulu (Hawaii) Advertiser featured extensive reporting on open government issues, including an analysis of how the state ranks against others for openness, and coverage of public forums hosted by the state’s Office of Information Practice. The Advertiser also asked readers to participate in an online poll. The results pictured here, though unscientific, clearly show respondents overwhelmingly believe they have less access to state and county information than they did 10 years ago.
Patricio Espinoza, an Emmy-award winning broadcast journalist based in Houston, was instrumental in the development of Spanish-language resources for Sunshine Week 2006. On his blog, My Reporter’s Notepad, Espinoza first noted the lack of Spanish-language resources in the national Toolkit. He enlisted the help of his brother Pablo, an anchorman for Univision in Sacramento, and worked with the Sunshine Week team – including Mike Vasilinda Productions in Tallahassee – on production of public service ads and a Sunshine Week resource Web page in Spanish. Once completed, Espinoza noted the accomplishment and linked to the Spanish-language materials from his blog.

Lawyer and journalist Robert J. Ambrogi, who serves as executive director of the Massachusetts Newspaper Publishers Association, utilized his blog, Media Law, to discuss Sunshine Week and link to nearly 50 articles on open government coverage that week in Massachusetts newspapers. Ambrogi also covered the unveiling of legislation to reform open meetings laws in the state, which was based on recommendations from the MNPA. Ambrogi explained the key points of the proposed law and included links for more information.