

TRANSPARENCY

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A man that looks on glass
On it may stay his eye
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass
And then the heavens espy.

George Herbert (1593-1633)

WHAT IS TRANSPARENCY?

- In Science
 - The transmission of electro-magnetic rays without distortion
- Commonly
 - Allowing light to pass through a medium (like glass) so as to see things on the other side.
- Today
 - Allowing knowledge of activities that are of public interest, to provide for accountability.

ANALYSING THE DEFINITION

- What knowledge?
 - Knowledge about human activity.
- Why this knowledge?
 - Because the information is of public interest.
- Why public interest?
 - So that someone can be held to account for wrongdoing.
- Is this passive or active?
 - Increasingly we expect active disclosure.

FURTHER REFINEMENTS

- The opposite of secrecy?
 - ‘Secrecy means deliberately hiding your actions: transparency means deliberately revealing them’
Florini, 2000.
- Voluntary or imposed?
 - Laws and regulations that impose transparency are increasingly common.
- Is transparency the opposite of privacy?
 - No, privacy should remain (when there is no public interest in revelation).

WHY TRANSPARENCY IS IMPORTANT

- Transparency is a basic protection against corruption
- Corruption can be:
 - Petty corruption
 - Small payments to officials to avoid penalties or obtain services
 - High level corruption in business, government and administration
 - Predatory corruption of rulers and oligarchs.
- All of these thrive on secrecy.

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- The purpose of transparency is accountability:
 - Criminal investigation seeks to make perpetrators accountable
 - Business audit is intended to identify illegal financial dealings
 - Scrutiny of government activity is intended to ensure that representatives and officials act responsibly towards the public.
- Effective action against wrongdoing is impossible without transparency.

TRANSPARENCY IN PRACTICE

- Transparency should be pervasive in society in ways that include:
 - Open government processes including freedom of information laws
 - Accountability and effective audit in the business sector
 - Protection of public interest disclosure (whistleblowing)
 - A free press, investigative journalism and independent authors
 - Ethical Information and Communication Technology
 - Libraries that fight censorship and promote and protect access to information

OPEN GOVERNMENT AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

- Open government is the concept
- It includes open meetings, publication of official information, and freedom of information legislation, for example
 - UK Freedom of Information Act 2000
 - Creates formal access channels to information held by public authorities
 - In force from January 2005
 - Many prominent successes already
- Governments hate such laws and respond as little as possible.

BUSINESS AUDIT

- Business corporations are obliged to reveal their financial activities to open scrutiny and detailed audit.
- After the Enron case and other scandals the US passed a stricter law on corporate auditing accountability and responsibility:
- Sarbanes Oxley Act 2002.
- This affects foreign companies with business in the US, and,
- Various countries including Japan, Germany, France, Australia, South Africa and India, have since passed similar acts.

WHISTLEBLOWERS

- Edward Snowden has exposed massive electronic surveillance by US and UK agencies
- There is little protection for whistleblowers, although in the UK there is -
- Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998
 - Recognises that employees may need to expose wrongdoing in the organisation
 - Provides guidance how to respond
 - Protects whistleblowers who respond as recommended.

PRESS FREEDOM

- There is tension in the press between principled and corrupt use of freedom. A UK case:
 - Revealed (partly using freedom of information law) that private investigators had hacked into the phones of celebrities and others on behalf of newspapers .
 - This infringed privacy and data protection.
 - *News of the World* closed down and senior police offers forced to resign.
 - Metropolitan Police claimed that *Guardian* had infringed Official Secrets Act to expose this.
 - Investigation dropped, Sept 2011, on principles of public interest disclosure.

ETHICAL INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY

- Internet is a new battleground in the fight for transparency, because
 - States restrict access and prohibit certain types of content
 - People and organisations filter content and block certain categories
 - Some libraries filter public access terminals.
- A free Internet ignores national borders, avoids censorship and finds ways to bypass filtering.

FINALLY, LIBRARIES AND TRANSPARENCY?

- Libraries can support transparency in:
 - Traditional ways
 - Accessible collections and systems
 - Acquisition and promotion of socially relevant documentation
 - Supporting good management of official records
 - Social engagement
 - Fighting censorship
 - Promoting transparency and campaigning on transparency issues