

# 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 officers 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