

The Internet and Transparency

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TRANSPARENCY is a multifaceted concept with a long history in discussion of governance and institutional design.¹ Variations on the transparency theme include openness, surveillance, accountability, simplicity and notions of rule-governed, predictable governance processes which fulfill citizens' 'right to know' about government and policy making and acting as the 'key to better governance' by enhancing certain administrative values, such as integrity, fairness and efficiency.² This article investigates the effect of widespread use of the Internet on transparency, outlining the Internet-based applications that seem to be drawing institutions towards greater transparency and examining the variant of transparency emerging. It could be that this latest twist in the transparency tale emphasises certain elements of the concept—openness and surveillance—over others, such as predictability and accountability. By reducing trust in governmental institutions and necessitating trust in other groups or individuals, Internet-based transparency may be injecting uncertainty and unpredictability into governance.

It is uncontroversial to say that the Internet has the potential to enhance transparency in democratic states, particularly where its penetration rates are high. It is already facilitating easy and free access to all documentation of government and policy making; arrays of government websites provide an electronic window on almost all governments (even the government of North Korea runs a portal), while increasingly links to social media sites provide possibilities for more interactive government–citizen

relationships. These applications provide citizens with easy insight into processes of government from mundane changes at the micro level, such as publication of governmental decision-making processes through to more dramatic revelations regarding the actions, words and even thoughts of policy makers through Wikileaks. The Internet has 'automated' the process of Freedom of Information so that citizens as well as journalists may easily make FOI requests. Social media such as the micro-blogging site Twitter have 'democratised' aspects of the media's formerly privileged position to open up issues by giving every citizen some kind of access to a publicity machine, weakening the capacity of the courts and other institutions of the state to block the transfer out of information. Civic groups have used social media to great effect in putting the state under pressure to make policy change. In the United Kingdom, we will never go back to the time when a parliamentary or governmental report could only be obtained for a substantive payment from one of only four HMSO shops in the country.

Thus the internet drags the United Kingdom government up to levels of transparency its citizens have never known before, often kicking and screaming. HMSO, for example, long used copyright issues to resist the move to make reports freely available and many governments have taken drastic measures to suppress the Wikileaks site. Transparency on this scale is likely to bring some important changes to citizen–government relationships, particularly the nature of citizens' trust in government and may reveal natural limits to the benefits that

transparency can bring, or at least some new requirements for how we think about transparency.

So what type of transparency has emerged from this new information environment? Certainly, there is greater openness; it is far more difficult for governmental institutions to restrict information, and far easier for citizens to conduct their own surveillance, for example, through 'peer-to-peer' sharing of information such as their experiences of education and health services, or through the use of social enterprise sites such as theyworkforyou.org which make it very easy for citizens to scrutinise the activities of their elected representatives. As well as generating an 'open culture that benefits us all',³ such developments could even make government more efficient through the generation of new 'free' information by citizens themselves and through the phenomenon of 'crowd-sourcing'.

However, some elements of transparency are underplayed or even diminished in this environment. First, transparency may reduce levels of trust, meaning that citizens feel alienated from governmental institutions and suspicious of policy-making practices. A recent experiment into the impact of Internet-enabled transparency in Dutch local government showed that while more transparency increases citizens' perceptions of benevolence and honesty of government, it actually reduces their perceptions of competence, thereby lowering levels of trust in government agencies.⁴ This innovative experiment used relatively modest increases in transparency (the revealing of minutes of council meetings) but provides a pointer to what could be a much more widespread phenomenon resulting from the more radical disclosures of Wikileaks or user-generated ranking of services such as education (see www.ratemyteacher.com), or health (see www.patientopinion.org or www.Iwantgreatcare.com).

Second, increased transparency may mean that some groups, individuals or

applications gain the trust that governmental institutions have lost, raising new questions of accountability. Open data initiatives, citizen audit and rating, and ranking systems based on user-generated content all allow citizens to question official accounts, the actions of policy makers, the workings of institutions and the performance of service delivery organisations, and hence take less on trust. But citizens may find themselves thereby implicitly putting trust in some other person, institution or group. Open data initiatives in over fifteen nations (such as Open Data in the United Kingdom and the Open Government initiative in the United States⁵) have made huge quantities of data freely available to every Internet-using citizen, including detailed expenditure data. In 2011, the British government pledged a 'quantum leap in transparency', including a public consultation on open data, transparency standards, a 'right to data' and public service performance data.⁶ Yet in both the United Kingdom and the United States, it has been observed that so far these initiatives have tended to be developer-led, with highly skilled technology consultants or companies using the data for social or commercial purposes. If as citizens we can neither interpret nor use the data, then we must trust those that can. Open source software has been heralded as the way around the problem that many administrative processes are now locked in the closed world of proprietary software (such as electronic vote counting machines), for example by the computer scientist Jean Camp in a 2006 British Academy book on Transparency.⁷ But trusting open source software implies trusting those who can write it (people like Jean Camp), people with technical skills way beyond that of ordinary citizens and not necessarily incentivised to maximise democratic accountability.

Likewise, to reap the benefits of the openness and surveillance tools that Wikileaks provides, we must trust Julian

Assange and the system that he has developed for ensuring the integrity of the (more than a million) leaks publicised on the site. The enigmatic Assange's description of himself as 'the heart and soul of this organization, its founder, philosopher, spokesperson, original coder, organizer, financier and all the rest'⁸ (and the site's description of itself as 'an uncensorable system for untraceable mass document leaking') does little to substantiate the idea that the transparency facilitated by Wikileaks will lead to a more rule-governed, predictable form of governance. Likewise, citizens must often trust other parties to analyse the vast range of digital data now available, in quantities that no individual would have the time or the resources to process. In 2009, when FOI legislation required Britain's Parliament to disclose the expense claims of all parliamentary representatives, the data was leaked and subsequently analysed and published, drip by drip by the *Telegraph* newspaper, which had a 'bunker' of 'data journalists' working on the four million pieces of information, having paid an undisclosed sum for the data.⁹ Trust shifts then, from institutions to technologically and statistically skilled—and often well-resourced—organisations and individuals with the capacity to take advantage of the transparency that the Internet can provide.

In the end, Internet-enabled transparency is surely a generally positive development. The Internet does provide citizens with far greater potential to observe and understand what is going on in government, blurring the boundaries between citizens and state and opening up processes for scrutiny. It allows ordinary citizens to make their own evaluations and ratings and share them with other citizens, generating previously unavailable data for policy making with the possibility of enhanced efficiency and effectiveness. These developments allow citizens to take transpar-

ency into their own hands, trusting in themselves, which can only be a good thing. But it is a digital, technologically aided transparency available only to those with Internet access and skills, and citizens will need to 'tool up' or find intermediaries to be able to reap the benefits. In some cases, where the transparency gain involves huge quantities of data or the translation of governmental processes into computer code, it will imply trust in new actors whose trustworthiness is yet to be proven and who are subject to none of the checks and balances that governmental systems have developed. Governance will be more exciting and interesting to citizens in this information environment—but also more complex and unpredictable.

Notes

- 1 See C. Hood, 'Transparency in historical perspective' in what is the most comprehensive recent discussion of transparency from a range of perspectives: C. Hood and D. Heald, eds, *Transparency: The Key to Better Governance?*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 3–23.
- 2 For a review, see F. Bannister and R. Connolly, 'The trouble with transparency: a critical review of openness in e-Government', *Policy & Internet*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2011, <http://www.psocommons.org/policyandinternet/vol3/iss1/art8>
- 3 Hood, 'Transparency in historical perspective'.
- 4 The experiment is reported in S. G. Grimmelikhuijsen, 'Transparency of public decision-making: towards trust in local government?', *Policy & Internet*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2010, <http://www.psocommons.org/policyandinternet/vol2/iss1/art2>
- 5 See <http://www.data.gov.uk> for the United Kingdom, and <http://www.data.gov> for the United States.
- 6 BBC reporting of Francis Maude's speech, 7 July 2011; Cabinet Office consultation is at <http://www.data.gov.uk/opendata> consultation
- 7 J. Camp, 'Varieties of software and their implications for effective democratic gov-

ernance', in Hood and Heald, *Transparency*, pp. 183–5; see also H. Margetts, 'Transparency and digital government', *ibid.*, pp. 197–207.

8 *New York Times*, 23 October 2009.

9 Estimated by the *Guardian* at the time as between £70,000 and £300,000. See Martin Moore's blog at <http://www.martinjemoore.com>, 19 February 2011, for a discussion of 'data journalism'.