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Your right to know

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Access to information laws make a difference to our everyday lives and are essential to an open and democratic society. That's cause to celebrate the 10th International Right to Know Day on 28 September, says Access Info Europe

27 September 2012

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South Africans march for access to information in Cape Town last September

Jordi Matas / DEMOTIX

By Helen Darbishire

In 2004 journalist Genka Shikerova investigated the issue of illegal constructions in the seaside resort of Nessebar, Bulgaria. By cross-referencing documents



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- [International Freedom of Expression Exchange \(/ifex/\)](/ifex/)
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- [Privacy International \(/pi/\)](/pi/)
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obtained through access to information requests, she found that many of the building licences had been issued in a dubious and possibly illegal manner, on land owned by public officials but which had been classified as belonging to "poor, homeless people." The resulting widespread media coverage of the story reached the central authorities and had such an impact on public opinion that the local mayor did not stand in the next elections.

In India, an 18-year-old boy reportedly used his right of access to information to help villagers gain access to their proper food rations. He let a non-governmental organisation know that official documents on food ration distribution had been falsified, which eventually led to the state government taking new policy decisions.

These examples are typical of many to be found globally, and highlight how access to information laws make a difference to the everyday lives of ordinary people and are essential to an open and democratic society.

Each year, on 28 September, global civil society celebrates International Right to Know Day. This year, being the 10th anniversary of the day, special events will be held around the world, with civil society, media outlets and information commissioners celebrating the progress being made on the right to information and highlighting the major challenges ahead. But what are these successes precisely?

In 1990, there were 12 countries with access to information laws. More than 90 countries have laws today. They vary in quality and scope, and implementation remains a challenge in many countries, but the recognition that no serious democracy can be without an access to information law is a significant achievement. In as many as 55 countries, the public's right to know what the government is doing is recognised as a constitutional right.

Access Info Europe was founded in 2006 to fight for the right of access to information in Europe. We are part of a global movement which is promoting these changes and we do so not because we love laws and declarations from international human rights bodies but because we believe that the public's right to know is an essential democratic instrument, that without information we can't fight against corruption or prevent abuses of power or violations of human rights.

For instance, we've been working with civil liberties organisation Reprieve to get information about the routes of illegal CIA flights to and from Guantanamo Bay. Remarkably, seven years after the extraordinary rendition programme was first disclosed, many EU member states have still not made public all the

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KEY REPORTS AND INFORMATION

Human Rights Watch World Report 2013 [↗](http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013) (<http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013>)

Human Rights Watch 31 January 2013

2013 World Press Freedom Index [↗](http://issuu.com/rsf_webmaster/docs/2013index/1) (http://issuu.com/rsf_webmaster/docs/2013index/1)

Reporters Without Borders 30 January 2013

Freedom in the World 2013 [↗](http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FIW%202013%20Booklet.pdf) (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FIW%202013%20Booklet.pdf>)

Freedom House 16 January 2013

2012 deadliest year for journalists [↗](http://www.freemedia.at/home/singleview/article/2012-deadliest-year-for-journalists.html) (<http://www.freemedia.at/home/singleview/article/2012-deadliest-year-for-journalists.html>)

International Press Institute 31 December 2012

Number of jailed journalists sets global record [↗](http://www.cpi.org/reports/2012/12/imprisoned-journalists-world-record.php) (<http://www.cpi.org/reports/2012/12/imprisoned-journalists-world-record.php>)

Committee to Protect Journalists 11 December 2012

Prohibiting incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence [↗](http://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/3548/ARTICLE-19-policy-on-prohibition-to-incitement.pdf) (<http://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/3548/ARTICLE-19-policy-on-prohibition-to-incitement.pdf>)

ARTICLE 19 6 December 2012

Journalists in Exile 2012 [↗](http://cpi.org/reports/2012/06/journalists-in-exile-2012-crisis-in-east-africa.php) (<http://cpi.org/reports/2012/06/journalists-in-exile-2012-crisis-in-east-africa.php>)

Crisis in East Africa

Committee to Protect Journalists 19 June 2012

information they hold about the routes the flights took. This evidence is essential to those representing the individuals who were passed through the CIA's secret prisons network and in many cases tortured: that this took place on European soil is a major failing of our post-World War II human rights protections.

As with any right, the right to know needs to be defended daily. Governments try to hide information that shows wrongdoing or corruption, particularly during times of crisis. The new energy around open government data is resulting in many public data sets being released. But journalists and civil society organisations investigating contentious issues like the financial crisis or the use of public funds still find that key government-spending databases or company registers are not accessible to them, or are only available at a price. Not much can be done with information that is only available in a locked PDF.

This is changing. In the U.K., for example, the Open Knowledge Foundation secured the entire government spending database and put it into their budget visualisation software, "[Where Does My Money Go](http://wheredoesmymoneygo.org/) (<http://wheredoesmymoneygo.org/>)", so that can compare how their tax contribution are spent in each sector of government activity.

A request for the EU budget database submitted earlier this year using the [AsktheEU.org](http://www.asktheeu.org/) (<http://www.asktheeu.org/>) request platform means that now for the first time all 500 million European citizens have access to this data in a machine-readable format that can be easily reviewed and analysed.

In the past 10 years, a highly professional global civil society movement that promotes and defends the right to know has been developed and consolidated. We work on law reform and legal cases. We assist journalists in obtaining data for news stories. We train civil society organisations on how to get the information they need for evidence-based advocacy. And we help individual members of society obtain the information they need to make their lives better. That is something worth celebrating on the 10th International Right to Know Day on 28 September.

Access to Information: At a Glance

Access to Information: A fundamental human right of members of the public to ask for information directly from all public bodies and to receive it.

Access to Information is a right: The UN Human Rights Committee confirmed in July 2011 that the right to know is a fundamental human right and an inherent part of the right to free expression.

10 Most Censored Countries [↗](http://cpi.org/reports/2012/05/10-most-censored-countries.php) (<http://cpi.org/reports/2012/05/10-most-censored-countries.php>)

CPJ's analysis identifies Eritrea, North Korea, Syria, Iran as worst

Committee to Protect Journalists 2 May 2012

Getting Away With Murder [↗](http://cpi.org/reports/2012/04/impunity-index-2012.php) (<http://cpi.org/reports/2012/04/impunity-index-2012.php>)

CPJ's 2012 Impunity Index spotlights countries where journalists are slain and killers go free

Committee to Protect Journalists 17 April 2012

2011-2012 World Press Freedom Index [↗](http://en.rsf.org/IMG/CLASSEMENT_2012/C_GENERAL_ANG.pdf) (http://en.rsf.org/IMG/CLASSEMENT_2012/C_GENERAL_ANG.pdf)

Crackdowns on Protests Cause Big Changes to Index Positions

Reporters Without Borders 25 January 2012

KEY REPORTS AND INFORMATION

Nepal media 2012 round-up: physical security still key challenge for Nepali media [↗](http://www.fninepal.org/media/?p=1108)

(<http://www.fninepal.org/media/?p=1108>)

Federation of Nepali Journalists 7 January 2013

Kenya: The right to information for internally displaced persons [↗](http://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/3563/12-12-17-RE-kenya-IDP.pdf)

(<http://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/3563/12-12-17-RE-kenya-IDP.pdf>)

ARTICLE 19 17 December 2012

A Pilot Study - Situation of Aid Transparency in Nepal [↗](http://freedomforum.org.np/content/publications/books/finish/15-books/241-study-report-situation-of-aid-transparency-in-nepal-.html)

(<http://freedomforum.org.np/content/publications/books/finish/15-books/241-study-report-situation-of-aid-transparency-in-nepal-.html>)

Freedom Forum 4 December 2012

Transparency of Media Ownership in the Republic of Moldova [↗](http://www.ijc.md/Publicatii/studii_mliu/transparenta%20media%20eng/studiu-transparenta-eng.pdf)

(http://www.ijc.md/Publicatii/studii_mliu/transparenta%20media%20eng/studiu-transparenta-eng.pdf)

Over half the world's population lives in countries

with Right to Know laws: In 1990, there were 12 countries with access to information laws. More than 90 countries have laws today.

International human rights courts have upheld the

right: The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (Claude Reyes v. Chile, 2006) and the European Court of Human Rights (TASZ v. Hungary, 2009) ruled that the public needs information to act as "watchdogs", a role which journalists and non-governmental organisations have in particular.

Helen Darbishire is a human rights activist who is founder and Executive Director of Access Info Europe, headquartered in Madrid. She is author of numerous publications on access to information, including the [Legal Leaks Toolkit](http://www.legalleaks.info/downloads.html) (<http://www.legalleaks.info/downloads.html>) for journalists.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

16 months later: Nigeria's Freedom of Information Act (IFEX) (http://www.ifex.org/nigeria/2012/09/27/foi_act/)

10-10-10 Statement: Achievements, Challenges and Goals on the 10th Anniversary of the Freedom of Information Advocates Network (FOIANet) (http://www.foiadvocates.net/dmdocuments/News_Documents/10-10-10.pdf)

Interactive freedom of information maps (ARTICLE 19) (<http://www.article19.org/maps/>)

Independent Journalism Center 30
November 2012

Kicking at the cornerstone of democracy: the state of press freedom in Australia

(http://issuu.com/meaa/docs/press_freedom_2012)

Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance 3
May 2012

North Korea: Defending freedom of information against Kim Jong-Il's regime

(http://issuu.com/rsf_webmaster/docs/northkorea/1)

Reporters Without Borders 29 March
2012

Most covered countries for this issue

PHILIPPINES
([/PHILIPPINES/](#))

MONTENEGRO
([/MONTENEGRO](#)


SERBIA
([/SERBIA/](#))

UNITED STATE!
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TAKE ACTION!

**Sign a petition to release
Burundian reporter
Hassan Ruvakuki**
(/burundi/2013/01
/09/appeal sentence/)



(/burundi

/2013/01

/09/appeal sentence/)

Hassan Ruvakuki, a reporter for Bonesha FM and Radio France Internationale, was sentenced on appeal on 8 January 2013 to three years in prison after previously being sentenced to life. Sign the petition now to free him!

► (/burundi

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LATEST TWEET: Des soldats mutins prennent d'assaut le ministère de l'Information en #Érythrée (<https://twitter.com/#!/search/%23Érythrée>) <http://t.co/FT4MxeHM> (<http://t.co/FT4MxeHM>) | [@rsf_rwb](https://twitter.com/rsf_rwb) (https://twitter.com/rsf_rwb) - 24 minutes ago (<https://twitter.com/ifex/status/298830867319619585>)

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Take Action!

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**Campaign
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IFEX-ALC (/alc/)

**International
Day to End
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(http://daytoendimpunity.org/)

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