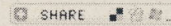


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Transparency is a common task

Posted by [Brigitte Alfter](#) in [EU](#) on March 23, 2011

Politicians have said it. The European Ombudsman has said it. Now even the European Court is getting close to saying it: Freedom of information is a fundamental right in a democracy. My point today is, that rights wither away, if we do not use them. So we need [tools](#) to help us do so. I'll be back to that later.

The Court did not go quite as far as saying, that access to information held by public authorities is a fundamental right. However it did say that [the European people shall have the widest possible right of access to information](#). The latter was said in a court case decided yesterday, just read from point 55 of the court decision and onwards. The Spanish NGO Access Info had asked which EU countries are in favour and which are against the new draft EU regulation on access to documents. It thus challenged the Council tradition of not disclosing member states arguments in negotiations. A recent report shows that only five countries released documents on the positions. But how, then, can there be any political debate?

The Access Info court case is one of numerous where NGOs, politicians, companies and individuals fight for the right of freedom of information.

The EU as well as most of its member states have laws regulating this particular to the public. Those countries, who still do not have a law, do at least have the EUs access to environmental documents directive.

However once a law is in force, it has to be used. Particularly, maybe, in Europe. We have the very open traditions giving large access to information to the public in the Nordic countries. Not only is it a public law to provide information to the citizens, it is an explicit aim by the ministerial administrations. Also the United Kingdom, Estonia, Slovenia, the Netherlands and others have strong and efficient laws.

Now when it comes to efficiency, it's not easy to divide in good and bad. We have to look at habit. If citizens, NGOs, journalists, lawyers, companies do use their right to freedom of information, a practice will evolve to obey by the law. Court cases (as the one of yesterday) or decisions by ombudsmen and information commissioners strengthen the respect for the public's interest to know. And numerous requests give officials the habit of sharing public information with the public - which, too, is a question of habit and respect.

Citizens and more importantly even journalists have the task to use the law intelligently and persistently. We have to consider our requests carefully and target them clearly - in respect for the workload that a decent and thorough answer (which we have a right to and expect) may bring to often understaffed departments in the administration. We have to be polite, clear and efficient in our contact with officials. Using our right is not an act of aggression - as it is considered in many countries without a tradition for openness. Filing a request for information is nothing but using an administrative option inhabitant in any vital democracy which citizens can expect to be administrated as any other administrative task within a certain time frame and in a constructive spirit.

In order to help journalists and others to use our right to access to information, we have updated and improved an obvious tool for using our right. Do have a look at the new wobbing-site. Wob is Dutch journalists' slang for freedom of information laws, and it can be changed easily into a verb: Have you been wobbing today?

If not, go to www.wobbing.eu and have a look. If you want to know how to use the website as a too, have a look at the [various options](#), it provides.

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Cross-border story quoted widely

Posted by [Brigitte Alfter](#) in [EU](#), [investigative journalism](#), [alternative funding of journalism](#), [cross-border research](#) on March 4, 2011

Two journalists, one story - but how to achieve impact? In the story about the Latvian Brides, cooperation of journalists from two countries led to research so thorough, that the story was quoted in various European countries.

Aleksandra Jolkina from Latvia and Jamie Smyth from Ireland have been researching the story of sham marriages in each their end of the EU. Latvian



Watchdog



Is transparency just a buzz-word - or is there true openness and scrutiny? How comes, that European stories often are limited to coverage in one member state? How are journalists doing in Europe? Is there or can there ever be a European public sphere? Follow journalist Brigitte Alfter's Watchdog Blog.

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