

# Governing In The New Media Age: Prime Ministers meet the Web pundits (WEF at Davos)

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The only way we are going to forward the transparency agenda is if we can bring together the powerful with the new mediators. We need to put Prime Ministers and leading business folk in the same room as activists like Ushahidi and pundits like Clay Shirky, Jonathan Zittrain and Jeff Jarvis. That's exactly what happened at Davos.

I am chair of the WEF council on informed societies so the workshop on Governing In The New Media Age was the perfect opportunity to put our proposals to the global experts and the people who really matter, the governments.

I was surprised at the generally positive understanding that we are now living in a glass room and that transparency is what the citizen expects as the default setting for governance. There was even a general sense that Wikileaks is something to work with, not to eradicate.

A very senior Eurocrat pointed out that governance is now synonymous with transparency and connectivity. Budgets may be down, but the expectations of the 'critical voter' are up.

So what to do? I was pushing my idea of media citizenship. There's no point having all this data open if the public don't have the literacy to understand it and use it.

A former Prime Minister pointed out that this means that ones own civil servants should be unleashed. The young people who will run government expect to be able to use social media in their lives and this must be extended to their professional work, too. But they will have to become much more professional at communication. A current Prime Minister added that means a much more flexible work culture from civil servants who currently still have a 9-5, 'need to know' mentality.

There was also a positive response to the Shirky/Jarvis/Ushahidi idea that the public is an asset for governance. People know loads of stuff – like where the potholes are – that can be crowd-sourced to make government more efficient. The debate about governing in the new media age should not just be about secrets. Information is a resource, too.

There was a wide-spread feeling that we need to have new principles and even rules to help foster the positive effects of this new data-politics ecology. Both rights for the citizen but also responsibilities. How do we filter all this information in a way that gives it value and promotes trust?

There were numerous examples of the limits on transparency.

As one former Scandinavian leader said, they have always had the presumption that government should be open. But now the problem is that transparency can threaten the privacy of the individual. Do you want all your medical records to be open, for example?

And as internet security experts pointed out, it is much harder to code for confidentiality. PC-based systems are vulnerable, but with more data going mobile, the risks are increasing of leakage. Data might be redacted but it is increasingly possible to de-anonymise information. You might approve of that if it tells you what, say, bankers are doing. But what if it's your deleted teenage Facebook pages being reconstructed by a potential employer?

Diplomacy is generally much more open now, it was argued. But there will always be sensitive negotiations that require confidentiality. Governments will have to learn new ways to record their work, while protecting policy-creation



at critical moments. So the question then becomes not whether you should disclose, but when? Of course, in the UK with our notorious 30 year (or 50 or 60 year) rule, that might mean not for a very long time.

But as one very senior computer technologist put it, it is possible to design systems that at least get closer to addressing all these competing demands. To do so, however, we need to frame what we want from the process. This workshop was a very useful attempt to do just that.

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