

OPENNESS: THE ECONOMIC DRIVER

GOVERNMENT AGENCIES HAVE VAST RESOURCES OF INFORMATION, AND WEB 2.0 APPLICATIONS HAVE MADE THAT INFORMATION MUCH MORE VALUABLE, WRITES **NICHOLAS GRUEN**.

■ We're all in favour of openness – at least, as Sir Humphrey might say, “in principle” – but of course it means different things to different people.

The original US Freedom of Information Act was passed in 1966 in the US, although it took until 1982 for something similar to find its way into Australian law. But placing the act in its historical context illustrates how FOI was seen as a matter of essential civil rights. The Freedom of Information Bill introduced to Federal Parliament last year bore the marks of a new sensibility. Freedom of information, it tells us, is there not just to defend people's civil right to information – particularly information about them.

It extends the objectives of the old FOI act. FOI now seeks “to promote Australia's representative democracy”. And this is offered not simply as an ethical or constitutional value. The new FOI bill proposes to increase “public participation in Government processes, with a view to promoting better-informed decision-making”.

This focus on utility resurfaces when the bill emphasises the Parliament's intention “to increase recognition that information held by the Government is to be managed for public purposes, and is a national resource.” FOI has become micro-economic reform – it's as much about making the best possible use of our resources as it is about addressing people's undoubted civil rights to information about them or which bears on their interests.

The Government has vast resources of useful information. And the internet, particularly Web 2.0 applications which facilitate broadly based collaboration between all and sundry, has vastly increased the potential value of that information.

FOR EVERYONE

Agencies which have always collected information and produced ‘content’ for public distribution, like the Australian Bureau of Statistics and Geosciences Australia, have been doing great things to open themselves up and provide access to all comers on the internet. Most have embraced ‘creative commons’ licencing to sweep away some of the cobwebs that can prevent publicly funded information flowing freely through the internet being copied, recopied and ‘repurposed’ as people find new uses for it.

The FOI Act will often help but if it doesn't agencies tend to regard the information they generate – say in administering a program – as their own property. True, some information will have to be withheld for reasons of privacy, confidentiality or security. But often these concerns can be met while publishing the information – for instance, in anonymised form.

To take a simple example, to cope with the sheer size of the task, the authorities who sent out the family payments that made up the early part of the Government's fiscal stimulus staggered

payment by postcode. Information about which suburbs got their cheques when can be used for econometric estimation of the efficacy of the stimulus. Working out how effectively about \$20 billion of your money was spent is no trivial matter. But the first instinct of the relevant agency was to refuse to release the information.

I've been advocating for a decade or more that firms' workers compensation premiums are often the best measure we have of firms' workplace safety. Shouldn't we be making it as easy as possible for workers to get hold of that data?

Further, these examples don't factor in the incredible power of the internet to transmit information – and indeed of Web 2.0 to facilitate broad-based collaboration – between citizens and governments. Established in the UK by non-profit foundation MySociety, Fixmystreet creates the infrastructure to enable people to register maintenance problems in their local area. The site then conveys the information to government and tracks governments' response to the data.

In an ideal world such facilities would have been built by governments themselves, but Fixmystreet shows how much can be done by citizen action – and how governments can then come to the party. Here, the ‘national resource’ is information which, in the first instance, is in the possession of the populace rather than the government. But the internet permits that information to flow to government in the best possible way, allowing all to observe how well government is collaborating with the citizens it serves.

DRIVING EFFECTIVENESS

Which brings me to the other main way in which openness should be thought of: as micro-economic reform rather than just a principle of ethical and constitutional hygiene. It's a truism that what gets measured gets done and strong information systems generate strong incentives to get things done. Before Fixmystreet there were the usual pressures on government agencies to fix things, but the citizens were the amateurs with poor information except for their own knowledge of their own environs. Now the scales are tipping in their favour.

As a general principle, the more government information we can get out into the community, the more information from the community we can bring back into the mix. The better things will work; the more effective our governments will be.

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