Whatever happened to transparency?

Elizabeth Ayer
FWD50 2024

Image: Fractal Frost by Jack Hunter

Whatever happened to transparency?

Theory 1: Mission Accomplished!

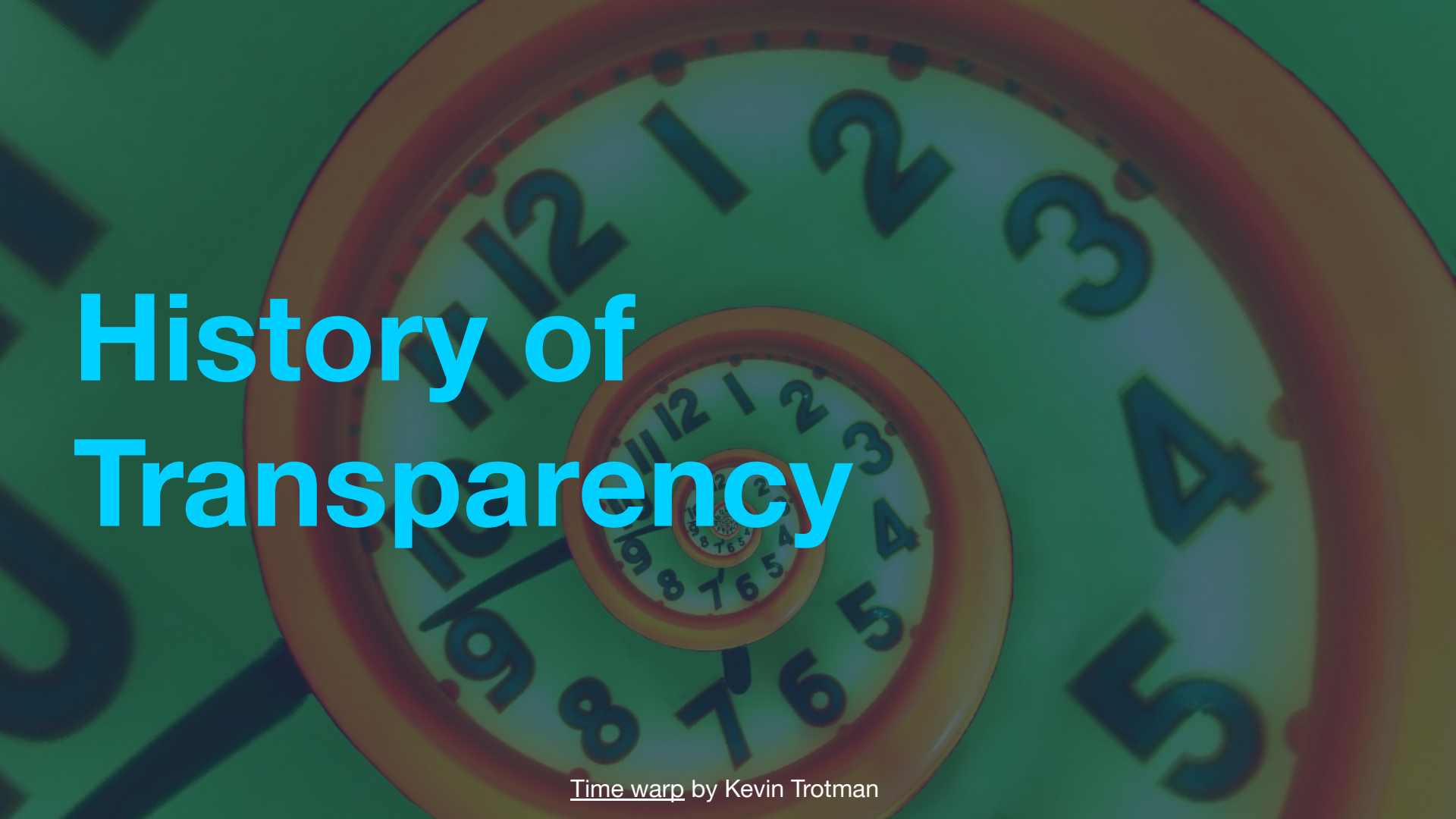
Whatever happened to transparency?

Theory 2: What civic tech community?

Whatever happened to transparency?

Theory 3: It’s not working that well for us, so we’re quietly backing away…

History of Transparency



Time warp by Kevin Trotman

History of Transparency

First wave: progressive reform

"**Publicity** is justly commended as a remedy for social and industrial diseases.

Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman"

- Louis Brandeis, *Other People's Money* (1914)

Illustration from **Other People's Money and How Bankers Use it**

AMERICANS.....

DON'T PATRONIZE REDS!!!!

YOU CAN DRIVE THE REDS OUT OF TELEVISION, RADIO AND HOLLYWOOD.....

THIS TRACT WILL TELL YOU HOW.

WHY WE MUST DRIVE THEM OUT:

1) The REDS have made our Screen, Radio and TV Moscow's most effective Fifth Column in America . . . 2) The REDS of Hollywood and Broadway have always been the chief financial support of Communist propaganda in America . . . 3) OUR OWN FILMS, made by RED Producers, Directors, Writers and STARS, are being used by Moscow in ASIA, Africa, the Balkans and throughout Europe to create hatred of America . . . 4) RIGHT NOW films are being made to craftily glorify MARXISM, UNESCO and ONE-WORLDISM . . . **and via your TV Set** they are being piped into your Living Room—**and are poisoning the minds of your children under your very eyes ! ! !**

So REMEMBER — If you patronize a Film made by RED Producers, Writers, Stars and STUDIOS you are aiding and abetting COMMUNISM . . . every time you permit REDS to come into your Living Room VIA YOUR TV SET you are helping MOSCOW and the INTERNATIONALISTS to destroy America ! ! !

History of Transparency

End of the first wave: McCarthyism

From 1950-1954 Senator Joe McCarthy turned the spotlight of transparency on alleged communist sympathizers.

History of Transparency

Second wave: the Freedom of Information / Access to Information Acts

To promote democratic **accountability** and public **trust,** challenging arbitrary power of the state.

Transparency's Ideological Drift, D Pozen, 2018

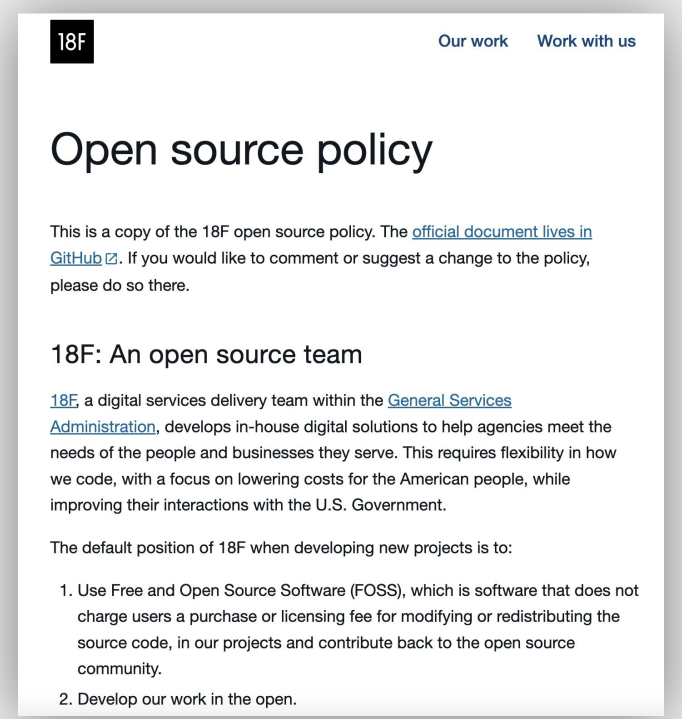
FOIA button by *Insercorp LTD*

History of Transparency

Open source and civic technology

“Open” was a founding principle of digital services:

- UK Government Digital Service (2011)
- USDS/18F (2014)
- Canadian Digital Service (2017)



https://18f.gsa.gov/open-source-policy/
retrieved 11/1/24

https://www.gao.gov/blog/why-do-i-feel-somebodys-watching-me-workplace-surveillance-can-impact-more-just-productivity

History of Transparency

Today transparency's shine is waning

Transparency is used to justify workplace surveillance, with negative effects on mental health.

Special interests are hammering FOIA processes with thousands of requests.

Transparency as surveillance

> “[T]ransparency is a form of aggressive **surveillance**, and like any other surveillance it’s **valuable**, **effective**, and **costly**, and it should be used **judiciously**.”
>
> — *Transparency is Surveillance*
> C. Thi Nguyen, 2022

Transparency is not the answer.

Reframing transparency

Image: Technicolor by Chris (a.k.a. MoiVous)

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FOIA button by *Insercorp LTD*

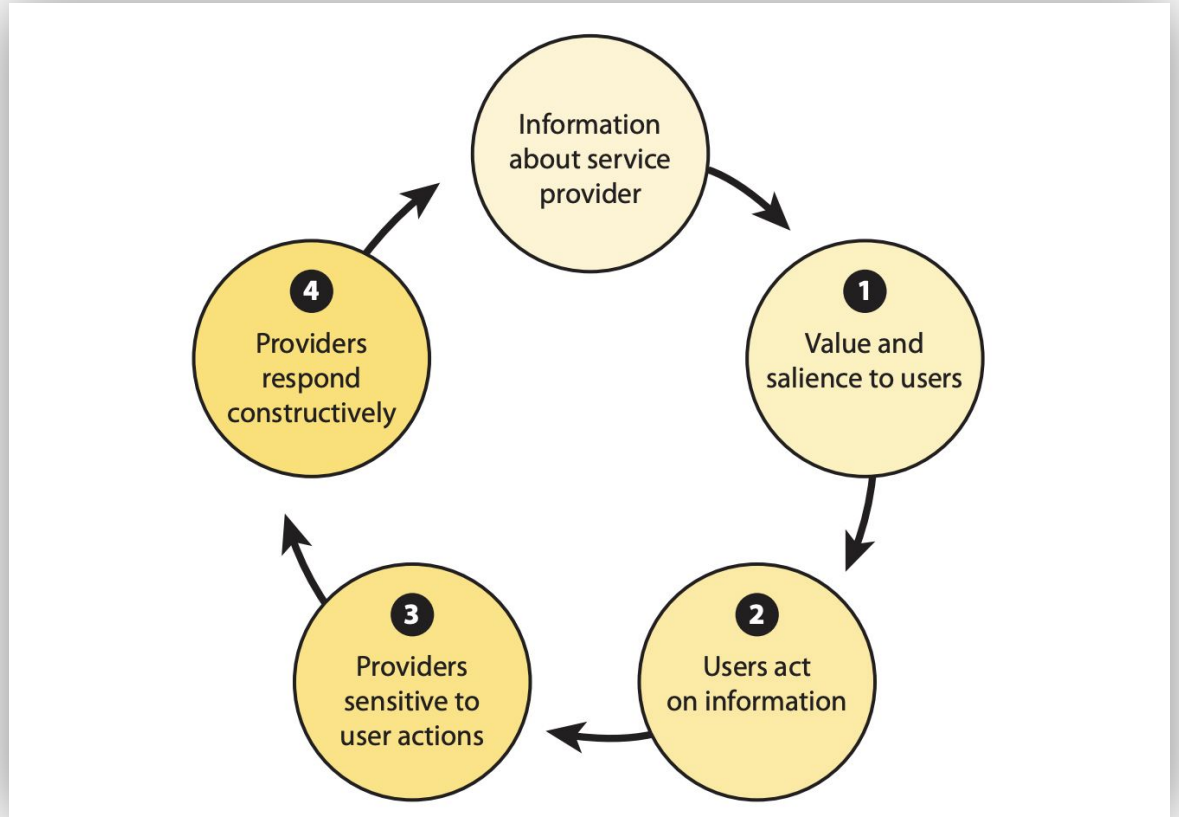
Transparency for governance

> “[T]here is **no consensus about whether transparency improves concrete outcomes**. The answer, as with so many other questions in political science, seems to be that ‘it depends.’”
>
> — Does Transparency Improve Governance?
> Kosack and Fung, 2014

Transparency for civic outcomes: Report cards in Ugandan health care

- Ugandan health services underwent a sudden loss of funding and infrastructure
- An “transparency intervention” was designed by a UN-funded agency:
  - Collected service data, e.g. equipment usage, waiting times
  - Hosted meetings: staff, citizens, interface
  - Designed action steps
  - Checked back in
- Saw marked improvement in health outcomes and staff engagement

How transparency can improve outcomes



Does Transparency Improve Governance? Kosack and Fung, 2014

Transparency for civic outcomes: Citizen's report cards in Uganda

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The meta-story here is how much *work* it took.

“It costs a lot of money to look this cheap.”

- Dolly Parton

It also takes a lot of work to be transparent.

Dolly Parton, 2005

~~Transparency~~ → Accountability

On losing safe spaces

“You idiot. You naive, foolish, irresponsible nincompoop. There is really no description of stupidity, no matter how vivid, that is adequate. I quake at the imbecility of it.”

-Tony Blair in 2010 on the Freedom of Information Act

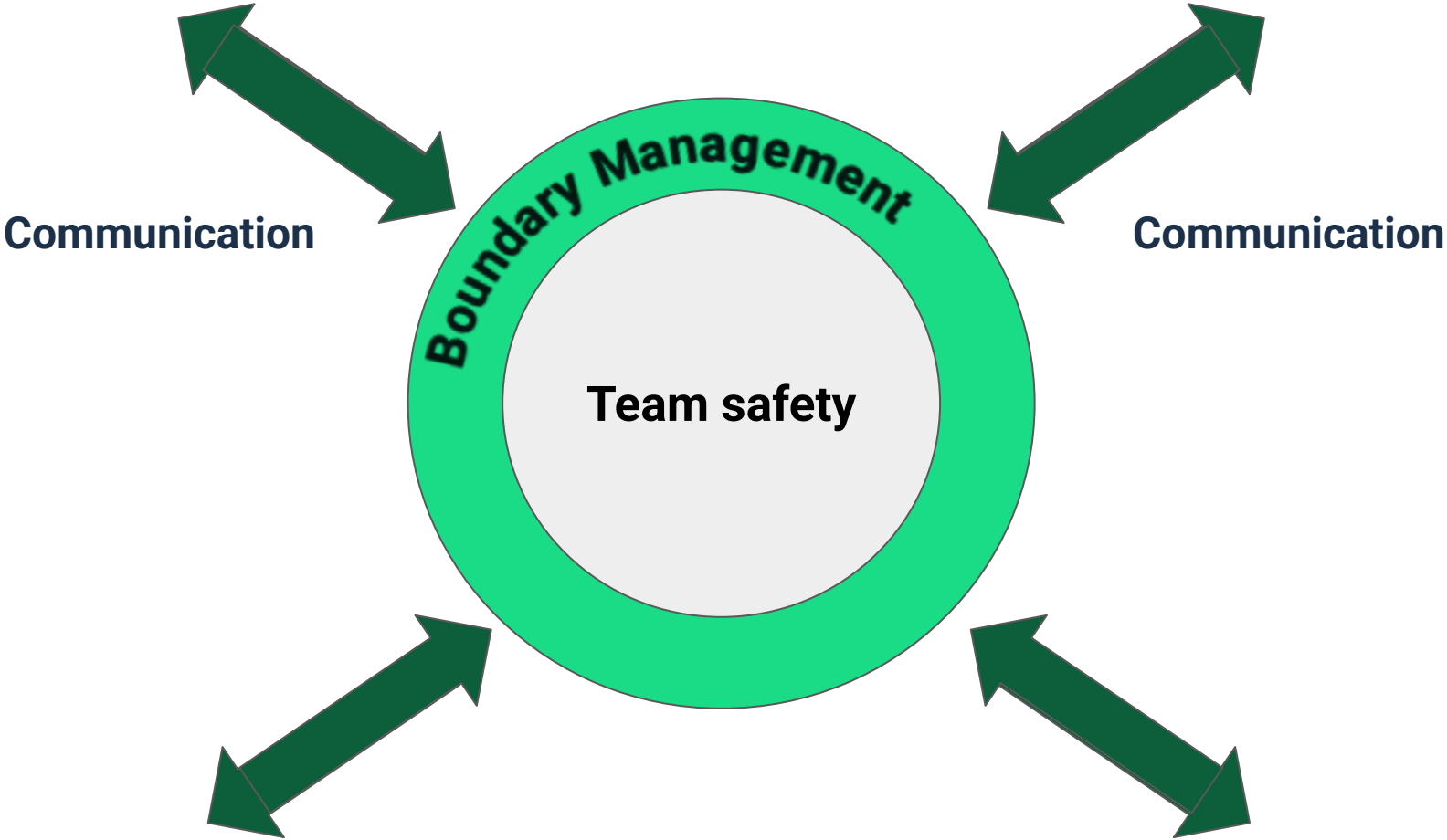
Tony Blair in 2012
Open Government Licence v3.0

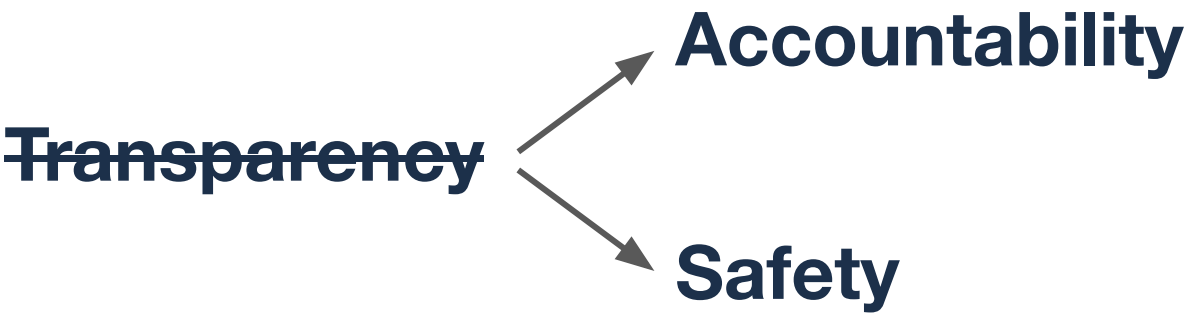
Fundamental question

How can we promote accountability without the chilling effects of surveillance?

Fundamental question

How can we promote accountability while maintaining safety?


Communication
Communication
Boundary Management
Team safety


~~Transparency~~
Accountability
Safety

Whatever happened to transparency?

We’ve outgrown it.

Thank you!

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