Transparency Reporting Index FAQ

Last update: October 2, 2019

What is the Transparency Reporting Index?

Launched in November 2014, Access Now's Transparency Reporting Index (TRI) records **transparency reports from leading companies on their use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) that impact human rights worldwide**.

Through the TRI, we highlight innovation in non-financial disclosures and corporate responsibility in the tech sector. By filling a gap in understanding of how companies process government requests that impact human rights, for example, the Index aims to be a useful resource for private sector decision-makers, civil society, and researchers alike, while inspiring a race-to-the-top with more companies joining the trend.

What is Transparency Reporting?

A transparency report is a regularly released publication detailing how an organization, such as a corporation, government office, or university, processes third-party requests and enforces internal rules regarding people's data, including content they post or engage with, and mitigates risks to their digital rights.

These reports live in the universe of "non-financial reporting," or disclosures on topics like social, environmental, and governance matters beyond the traditional profit-and-loss indicators. (If you want to learn more about this universe, see this book chapter by Peter Micek and Deniz Aydin).

Different from what is usually called "sustainability reports," transparency reports have two main functions: 1) to review the operations of the organization that specifically impact privacy or freedom of expression, and 2) to disclose original and statistical data on government and third-party requests for user data and content and account restrictions, during the relevant previous time period (quarterly, biannually, or annually).

Transparency reporting enables technology companies to disclose threats to user privacy and free expression. With the practice of regular reporting, companies can instantiate their commitments to respect human rights, establish their independence, educate the public about

company policies and safeguards against government abuses, and reinforce a positive, rights-respecting brand identity. While still evolving, transparency reporting has become a norm for the tech sector.

What qualifies as transparency reporting?

Transparency reporting should record government and third-party requests for user data and content and account restrictions. Additionally, the reports often include relevant policies for digital rights and can provide timely disclosure of particularly harmful actions that threaten users' human rights – such as an internet shutdown – as well as context for what precipitated the action, and how many times it occurred. The reports should specifically include:

- Requests from government and third parties;
- Number of requests for both user data and content and orders for restricting access or blocking content, including for network disruptions or internet shutdowns, and;
- Reporting at minimum on an annual basis.

Which corporations do we include in the TRI?

Currently, the corporations we include in the TRI are companies in the ICT sector. We will expand the scope of this index when other industries pick up the practice of transparency reporting. We have updated the TRI when companies notify us that they have published a new transparency report publicly online or during our own periodic scans in our transparency research. We have removed some companies from the TRI for the reasons listed below:

- **eBay:** Their online report doesn't have the statistics required in transparency reporting.
- **Cheezburger:** They showed no sign of regular updating. The only report easily available was the first one released.
- **Internet Archive**: They have only a screenshot of a table from 2014. It does not align with our reporting standard.
- **Time Warner Cable (Spectrum):** They have only an FAQ page about the transparency report instead of the report itself.

How do we classify each type of business?

- **"Internet and mobile ecosystem"** companies include:
  - Social media platforms
  - Messaging services
  - VPN providers
  - Online media services, such as streaming services
  - Internet-based services, such as e-commerce and peer-to-peer services
  - Internet-based ecosystem companies
  - Internet service providers
- **"Telcos"** include:
  - Telecommunications service providers and operators

- **"New Technology"** companies are companies that sell technology that is emerging in the market, including but not limited to:
  - Bio-tech
  - Artificial intelligence and machine learning
  - Robotics
  - Internet of Things, including connected vehicles
  - Space technology

How do we count the years of reporting?

We mark the year when a company publishes a new report. Given that the frequency of transparency reporting varies from company to company, these reports may or may not include data from previous years. For example, a report published in January 2019 may include data from 2018, whereas a report published in June 2019 may only include data from 2019. In either case, we mark the report as 2019.

Why did we not explicitly include frequency?

In retrospect, we discovered that many companies did not publicize the data as frequently as they promised. Therefore, we removed frequency data from the TRI, as the promises were not substantiated.

How did we choose to record the countries?

In this release of the TRI, we chose to include only the countries and regions in which the headquarters of each company is based. We chose to do this, rather than including all of the countries that each individual transparency report assesses, because one purpose of the TRI is to encourage further transparency by the companies themselves. Our hope is that by highlighting the diversity of the countries and regions where companies are **based**, we will galvanize other companies in those countries and regions to follow suit.