

Archives, tools of transparency!

Following the outbreak of cases of corruption that have been in the news recently, it would appear that the public authorities have discovered the word *transparency* or that being accountable is something new that we are importing from the Nordic or English-speaking countries, a benchmark in participatory democracy. What a shame nobody took any notice of the professionals who have been demanding more clarifying legislation in regard to transparency and access to information.

In this respect, it is paradoxical to discover that, although we hear constantly that we live in the information society, Catalonia and Spain have no law on transparency and access to information and documentation, a regulation that exists in practically every member state in the European Union and the Council of Europe.

Since the mid-nineties, when many international institutions had already set to work defining guidelines and recommendation to promote the right of access to information, our politicians chopped and changed and were not up for the job. Meanwhile, a significant part of society looked the other way, as though these policies of good governance weren't their thing. So, while in Spain the pre-constitutional Official Secrets Act of 1968 remained in force, the EU approved The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which qualifies access to documents as a fundamental right, complemented by the duty of the public authorities to make available to citizens the maximum amount of information and documentation possible.

An acting president of the government deleted files from 1996-2004 before leaving the Moncloa, while prestigious international bodies like the Council of Europe highlight the importance of transparency of the public authorities in a democratic, plural society. And they do so considering that the exercise of the right of access to public documents provides a source of information for citizens, helps society to form an opinion of the state of society and of the public authorities, and fosters integrity, effectiveness, efficiency and responsibility of the public authorities, thus helping to assert their legitimacy. Along the same lines are the UNESCO Code of Ethics for the Information Society and the more recent Universal Declaration on Archives.

Other signs that we are not moving in the same direction are the declaring of all documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs secret, considering the salary of a public servant to be 'personal data', qualifying data on official trips made by members of parliament as 'confidential information' or denying access to the cost of trips made by the president of a high court. These are just a few signs that ethical regeneration is required, along with a genuine desire to apply policies of transparency and accountability, because the tools, instruments and technical studies have been around for years.

The list is long and varied, but the main connection between cases is the failure to comply with agreements and recommendations. Specifically, our professional sector has made the question of access the subject of two congresses of Catalan archivists (1991 and 2009) and has requested a specific law on access to information.

The Catalan Parliament approved a transparency agreement in 2001 which has stayed in a draw so far, then there was a report on good governance and administrative transparency that the Catalan Government approved in 2005, which is still to see the light of day, and more besides. The same goes for reports by the Anti-Fraud Office of Catalonia, the Ombudsman and the National Document Access, Assessment and Selection Committee, amongst others.

As we never tire of saying in our professional sector, it should be noted that we archivists-records managers play a fundamental role in society's development, and we contribute to the constitution and safeguarding of the individual and collective memory, but also, and most especially, to the enriching of our knowledge of society, protecting the rights of citizens by means of policies of good governance and administrative transparency with the aim of improving the democratic operation of our societies. Despite verifying the important role we play in this sphere, the little importance given to our role in organisations means that in many cases, instead of working on records management planning, most of us end up as fire fighters when information cannot be found or a file has been lost.

Why is this so? Well, because when an organisation does not apply corporate policies on records management, undesirable situations arise, such as double accounting in famous notebooks published by a newspaper, the emails in the Nóos Foundation case or the reports on alleged Swiss bank accounts of Catalan politicians drawn up by the UDEF, although it is not certain that they exist, or whether they are genuine or who wrote them. Therefore, we could concede that without the active collaboration of archives, the implementation of transparency policies is simply a statement of good intent, nothing more than that.

So, what's next? First of all, we need to pass a law on transparency and access to information which is far more open than those currently being processed, with the aim of considering access the rule and not the exception.

Such recognition would contribute to reinforcing the new direction of good governance, based on the principles of quality, freeness, responsibility and linguistic pluralism of information.

Secondly, the organisation of archives should be given the importance it deserves in this respect and, therefore, regulations should be made to the effect that the public administrations have records management systems, which would mean a quantum leap in the application of the principles of access to information and documentation. Without this, the right of access to information would lack the main avenue of implementation and practical application.

At this moment in time, when we need a law on transparency and access to information more than ever, we must celebrate the fact that both the Catalan Parliament and the Anti-Fraud Office of Catalonia have approached the AAC asking for our collaboration and opinion on the legislative initiatives being processed in Catalonia.