The Transparent Society: Will Technology Force Us to Choose Between Privacy and Freedom?
by David Brin

Reviewed by David W. Gill  www.ethixbiz.com

David Brin has a Ph.D. in space physics but left his career in research and academia to be a writer. His novels include The Postman, The Uplift War, Startide Rising, Earth, and Heaven’s Reach. The Transparent Society is a brilliant, challenging, frustrating book that I would recommend to everyone concerned with issues of privacy, freedom, encryption, regulation, and our electronic future.

Brin’s discussions of present and coming technologies of communication and surveillance are wide ranging and learned. He is not an evangelistic technophile dreamer (Kevin Kelley, Alvin Toffler, et al) but he is good at spinning out possible futures (e.g., miniature “wasps” that fly into your office, attach to the ceiling, and transmit photos to the outside as you key in your password and kiss your wife). He is good at exploring both sides of the encryption/hacking arms race.

Brin’s biggest contribution is his discussion of the deeper issues of privacy and freedom. He points out that traditional village and family life did not include the privacy many think it did. Furthermore, he asks, are we best protected in a world of secrecy and darkness—or in a world of transparency and light? Brin argues for the latter. Crooks, knaves, and demagogues thrive in the darkness; privacy will always work most to the advantage of rich and powerful business, government, and criminal elites. Better to force them, along with everyone else, into the light, than to lobby for darkness.

Brin rejects the anti-government paranoia of the privacy/anonymity/encryption crowd. Napoleon, Hitler, Lenin, Mao, and other tyrants came to power when government was too weak! We need balance and perspective. A great study.