

How Mass Media Simulate Political Transparency

J.M. Balkin
Yale University

Abstract. Without mass media, openness and accountability are impossible in contemporary democracies. Nevertheless, mass media can hinder political transparency as well as help it. Politicians and political operatives can simulate the political virtues of transparency through rhetorical and media manipulation. Television tends to convert coverage of law and politics into forms of entertainment for mass consumption, and television serves as fertile ground for a self-proliferating culture of scandal. Given the limited time available for broadcast and the limited attention of audiences, stories about political strategy, political infighting, political scandal and the private lives of politicians tend to crowd out less entertaining stories about substantive policy questions. Political life begins to conform increasingly to the image of politics portrayed on television. Through a quasi-Darwinian process, media events, scandals, and other forms of politics-as-entertainment eventually dominate and weed out other forms of political information and public discussion, transforming the very meaning of public discourse. In this way the goals of political transparency can be defeated by what appear to be its central mechanisms: proliferating information, holding political officials accountable for their actions, and uncovering secrets.

Introduction

This essay concerns the mass media's contributions to the political values of openness and democratic accountability that go by the name of 'transparency.' In fact, the metaphor of transparency encompasses three separate political virtues, which often work together but are analytically distinct. The first kind of transparency is informational transparency: knowledge about government actors and decisions and access to government information. Informational transparency can be furthered by requiring public statements of the reasons for government action, or requiring disclosure of information the government has collected. A second type of transparency is participatory transparency: the ability to participate in political decisions either through fair representation or direct participation. A third kind of transparency is accountability transparency: the ability to hold government officials accountable – either to the legal system or to public opinion – when they violate the law or when they act in ways that adversely affect people's interests.^[1]

In theory, at least, mass media can make the political system more 'transparent' in all three respects: mass media can help people understand the operations of government, participate in political decisions, and hold government officials accountable. In practice, however, its effects are often quite different. In the age of mass media, democratic governments and politicians may find it useful to simulate the political virtues of transparency through rhetorical and media manipulation. This simulated transparency does not serve the underlying political values that motivate the metaphor of transparency. Instead, it is a transparency that obscures and obfuscates, that frustrates accountability and hides important information in a mass of manufactured political realities. It is a form of transparency that is not transparent at all.

Today political transparency is virtually impossible without some form of mass media coverage. However, mass media can frustrate the values of political transparency even while appearing to serve those values. When politicians and political operatives attempt to simulate transparency and appropriate the rhetoric of openness and accountability, the mass media does not always counteract the simulation. Indeed, it may actually tend to proliferate it.

People often oppose transparency to secrecy. However, governments and politicians can manipulate the presentation and revelation of information to achieve the same basic goals as a policy of secrecy and obfuscation. There are two basic strategies: divert audience attention, and supplement politics with new realities that crowd out and eventually displace other political realities and political issues. In this way political transparency can be defeated by what appear to be its own mechanisms: proliferating information, holding political officials accountable, and uncovering things that are secret.^[2]