What does transparency conceal?

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1.

Welcome to the wonderful world of transparency. A world, in which "sunlight is said to the best of disinfectants" (Justice Louis Brandeis), in which "information wants to be free" (Stewart Brand), and in which everybody knows just about everything they need to know about everyone and everything else. In this world, transparency can achieve the most amazing things. It makes democracy work by submitting the powerful to public scrutiny; it prevents inefficiencies and streamlines resource allocation in bureaucracies; it empowers ordinary citizens to understand and check upon their rulers; and it opens up a window on organizational activity that would otherwise be out of reach. Not surprisingly therefore, everybody loves transparency. The U.S. Department of Treasury, the Department of Homeland Security, the European Commission, the City of Ottawa, the Sunlight Foundation, the International Monetary Fund, Walmart, Barack Obama, Google, the CEO of Goldman Sachs, Oxfam, DJ Krust, and the Dalai Lama — if it comes to transparency, everyone agrees: the more, the better. In fact, transparency is so wonderful that it is virtually impossible to find anyone *not* loving it.

But how come, then, that transparency is so conspicuously absent when it seems to matter most? Why is it so incredibly difficult to achieve transparency in practice? How to account for the observation that every "revelation" or "disclosure" seems to generate another layer of obscurity that triggers even more calls for transparency? What does transparency conceal?

2.

If you are looking for a good definition of transparency, look again. For it turns out that the precise meaning and nature of transparency are surprisingly obscure. Or maybe, given its virtually universal appeal and currency in public life, this self-perpetuating lack of clarity is not surprising after all. At any rate, a good starting point for a short expedition into the inner workings of transparency seems to be the organization that named itself after it: Transparency International. Founded in 1993 by German national Peter Eigen, Transparency International is a non-governmental organization that monitors and publicizes corporate and political corruption. With chapters in more than 100 countries and an operating budget of € 28 million in 2013, the organization aims to create "a world in which government, business, civil society and the daily lives of people are free of corruption" (Transparency International 2013). And indeed, the Transparency International website offers

a comprehensive answer to the foundational question of what
transparency actually, really, and beyond all reasonable doubt
is:

> ## 2. WHAT IS TRANSPARENCY?
>
> Transparency is about shedding light on rules, plans, processes and actions. It is knowing why, how, what, and how much. Transparency ensures that public officials, civil servants, managers, board members and businessmen act visibly and understandably, and report on their activities. And it means that the general public can hold them to account. It is the surest way of guarding against corruption, and helps increase trust in the people and institutions on which our futures depend. [top]

Fig. 1: Transparency according to Transparency
International (2013)

The explanation given here is quite instructive in that it
highlights a number of important features of *grammar* of
transparency as it is commonly mobilized in law and policy
discourses.

Three observations seem particularly useful. First, you
might notice a strong presence of optics. Besides the word
"transparency" itself, optical metaphors like "shedding light
on" or acting "visibly" enact a world of seeing and not seeing,
of visible and invisible, of light and dark. Like a good
storyline from the Marvel Universe, this dichotomy comes with a
strong moral order built in for easy operation. The "dark" side
is the one to be afraid of, where bad things are concealed under
shadows of secrecy, only waiting to bite back from nowhere when
we least expect it. The "light" side, instead, is the one where

the sun always shines, where we can see clearly what is going on, and where events take place in blue-ray quality right in front of our eyes.

Second, transparency tends to be conceptualized in terms of information and knowledge. In this case, for example, it is specified as "knowing why, how, what, and how much". While this might appear like stating the obvious, it highlights a rather strong assumption about politics, namely the belief that truth is the basis for political action. According to this reasoning, we have to *know* before we *do*. The better and more accurate the description of the situation, the better will we be able to handle it. Needless to say, this is a pervasive idea in public policy and modern thought more generally, not unlike the wild dreams of "perfect information" or "informed consent" in economics and medical research, respectively.

Third, transparency is invoked here as part of a familiar cluster from political theory aka the holy trinity of governance: transparency, accountability, democracy. In a first step, "[t]ransparency ensures that public officials, civil servants, managers, board members and businessmen act visibly and understandably". In a second step, this very understanding means that "the general public can hold them to account". In a third step, accountability, in turn, "helps increase trust in the people and institutions on which our futures depend". In

other words, transparency is enacted as a crucial ingredient in the conceptual framework of good governance. Even more, it is enacted not only as the basis for accountability and democratic citizenship, but also as that noble thing, on which not more or less than "our futures" depend.

In short, a close reading of Transparency International's definition suggests a number of interesting insights into the conventional grammar of transparency: a strong recourse to optical metaphors, a resilient belief in truth as the basis of political action, and a tight integration with discourses of accountability and democracy.

3.

Given these rather strong assumptions about the import of transparency in many areas of public life, the difficulty of operationalizing it in specific situations makes a bit more sense. For the most part, transparency tends to loose its clarity when it comes to subsuming various events under its rubric. Specifically, the grammar of transparency does not lend itself to specificity. As a result, transparency tends to blur into the background with its toothlessness disguised by rehabilitating phrases about "the devil in the details", suggesting it will be fine except for the specifics. But up to this point, transparency tends to be appreciated for its instant

moral order of light/good and dark/bad, which is most
suggestively invoked when people demand "transparency",
"openness", "freedom of information", and so on.

However, there is a further and arguably more profound
reason why claims about transparency — be it diagnosing,
rejecting, proving, resisting, denying, defining, or doubting
transparency — are so prone to turning into political
battlegrounds. To illustrate this point, it might be useful to
briefly recall a slightly antiquated artifact that goes by the
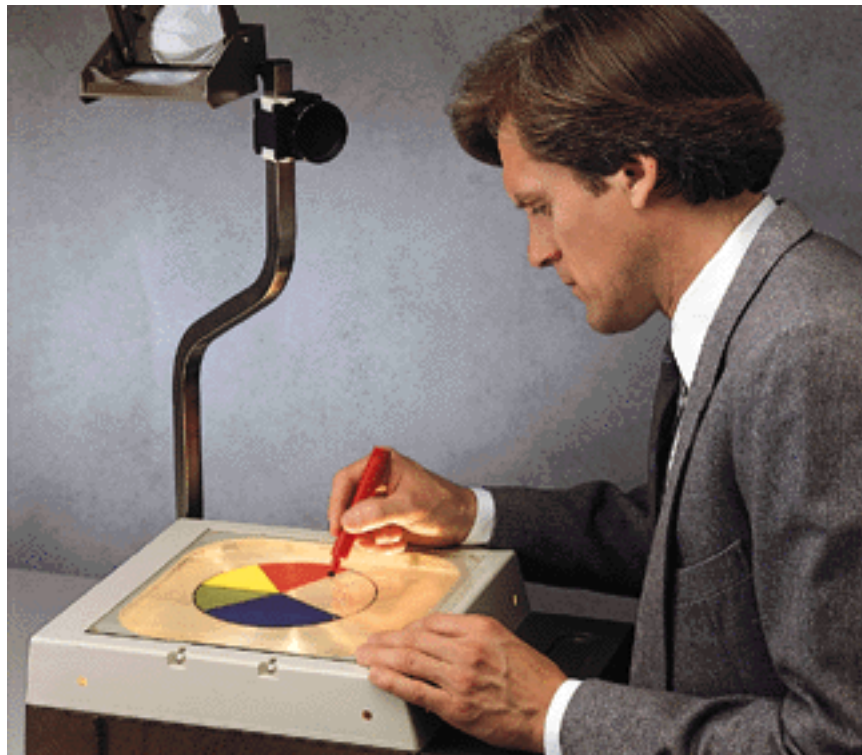very name of transparency.

Fig. 2: Transparency in action

The way transparencies work is actually quite interesting. Yes, they are transparent in that they let light and sight pass through. But while the language of transparency tends to emphasize this unrestricted passage, what eventually captures our attention are the elements that are exactly *not* transparent, namely the letters, words, and diagrams on them. This might sound trivial, but it is consequential. While transparency claims tend to be associated with an imagery of clarity, enlightenment, insight, see-through materials, and unrestricted access, what we *actually* get is just another layer of accounts.

Now, if transparency exercises do not eliminate but generate accounts, we are back at the familiar language game of politics and its ongoing struggles and negotiations over who gets to define the situation and what comes to matter most. This is because every account (or knowledge claim) is eventually open to contestation: what exactly is the problem here? Who says so? Who, which, or what counts as a "who"? And what would be considered a "good" or "bad" course of action? It always *could* be otherwise.

And while these ongoing struggles may appear a bit frustrating, they actually offer a plausible explanation of the strange dynamics surrounding claims about transparency highlighted the beginning of this text. In quite a fascinating way, the promise of transparency turns out to be a genuinely

self-perpetuating one. If every transparency exercise generates another account that can be challenged, there will inevitably be another call for clarification and, well, transparency.

Against this backdrop, transparency exercises can be regarded as just another arena in which the various entities, relationships, and moralities of public policy are enacted, negotiated, debated, contested, refuted, rearticulated, and resisted. Transparency does not appear to be the term of art as which it tends to be invoked, but as another example of what Ian Hacking called an "elevator word": a word that "in philosophical discussions raise[s] the level of discourse" (Hacking 1999; 21) and therefore (literally!) can take you anywhere.

4.

So does that mean that transparency is meaningless and that we should stop worrying about it once and for all? Certainly not. Its continuing use in claims about the good, the bad, and the ugly suggests that it is in fact consequential. Maybe just not in the ways it wants us to believe it is. In the spirit of becoming more critical users of transparency, here are a few questions and examples that might be useful for thinking transparency differently.

--> How is transparency achieved in practice?

This is a line of inquiry that tries to move away from grandiose
notions of transparency by studying specific situations, in
which transparency claims are made or, to put it differently, in
which transparency is *done*. A good example is the work of Daniel
Neyland (2007), who followed the various meetings, documents,
exchanges, and activities involved in a British university's
attempt to meet the Higher Education Funding Council for
England's (HEFCE) transparency review. Focusing on how the
process of acquiring a new IT system was made "transparent" in
the everyday interactions of administrators, board members,
HEFCE representatives, and various policy documents, guidelines,
and checklists, Neyland demonstrates how the pursuit of
transparency did not open the officially desired window on
organizational activity and greater sense of responsibility, but
rather turned into a cumbersome exercise in politics in its own
right.

--> What does transparency conceal?

This is another angle on transparency that has been explored in
very different areas. Brian Rappert (2009), for example, reports
on five years of attempts within the international diplomatic,
scientific, and security communities to develop a Code of
Conduct for dealing with biological weapons. Encountering a

complex world of secrecy, security, and classified information, Rappert shows that purportedly critical information is traded, among other things, over canapés and Chardonnay at international conferences and negotiations. The boundary between revealing and concealing is virtually disappears in these interactions, where every "important" piece of information generates another question, doubt, or secret. In a similar vein, Tanja Schneider and Steve Woolgar (2012) take on the illustrious field of neuro-marketing. "Technologies of ironic revelation" like fMRI scanners and EEGs, for instance, promise a look inside the customer's brain, but end up producing more or less aesthetic visualizations that raise more questions than answers.

--> *What are the evils of transparency?*

There are a couple of great studies that tackle what might be called the "evils" of transparency. A fun one is an article called "The Tyranny of Transparency" by social anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (2000). Her main concern is that techniques for assessing, auditing, and evaluating institutions are often defended on the grounds of transparency.

> What is interesting about this case is that in a social world where people are conscious of diverse interests, such an appeal to a benevolent or moral visibility is all too easily shown to have a tyrannous side--there is nothing innocent about making the invisible visible. How are we to understand such deliberate striving for transparency when it is applied, for instance, to research and teaching in

higher education? (Strathern 2000: 309)

Strathern has also done some fantastic work on audit and accounting technologies, especially on how such systems tend to develop their own rationalities, for instance, when measures become targets.

--> *How is transparency being institutionalized and what are the implications?*

This is another fascinating line of thought. The idea here is to better understand how clusters of activity and institutions emerge and coalesce around focal concepts like transparency. Steven Sampson (2010) has done this for corruption (and, in a sense, transparency). Basically, he reconstructs how a seemingly innocent concern with corruption has developed from the focus of a few selected activists into a fully-fledged "anti-corruption industry" that occupies (and pays) an army of activists, policy-makers, social entrepreneurs, journalists, researchers, and funding agencies these days. So can we speak of something like a "transparency industry"? How could this idea challenge our current beliefs about accounting systems, audit firms, rating agencies, evaluation societies, online reviews, and open access initiatives?

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