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The Management of Visibilities in the Digital Age

Introduction

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What we see, what we show, and how we look are fundamental organizational concerns made ever more salient by the affordances, dynamics, and discourses of the digital age. Contemporary organizing practices are awash with material, mediated, and managed visibilities: Companies erect glass buildings with open and networked office spaces to efficiently share information, respond to stakeholder demands by crafting extensive transparency policies, and orchestrate the massive distribution of information online in the name of accountability. At the same time, states and corporations aggregate digital traces to track and profile citizens and users, and activists use the same tools to expose corporate and state malfeasance.

The issue of what to disclose and to conceal has always been an essential part of organizational life across civil, business, and government sectors. The ubiquity of digital technologies and the mediation they afford further accentuate the organizational, societal, and political dynamics of seeing and knowing. Thus, if we want to understand how contemporary organizations operate, we need to investigate how they "manage visibilities"; that is, how they make things transparent, keep some things hidden, and seek ways

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to monitor others. Many have argued that digital technologies fundamentally alter the ways we collect, circulate, and make sense of information. Building on these insights, the authors of the articles in this Special Section go a step further to ask whether and how digital technologies fundamentally alter organizational decisions about what to disclose and to whom, how information flows, and how insight and scrutiny are controlled. We term these practices "visibility management." Focusing an analytical lens on practices of visibility management enables scholars to explore the tensions and ambiguities associated with the fundamental issues of visibility in the digital age. The five articles included here set out to conceptualize the organization and management of visibilities and their related phenomena—including transparency, opacity, secrecy, disclosure, and surveillance—in the context of ubiquitous digital media.

The goal is to make both applied and conceptual contributions. First, we seek to establish the practical and strategic importance of the management of visibilities as a timely issue with significant implications for organization. We contextualize the discussion of digital technologies and visibilities in relation to current concerns about surveillance, transparency, and secrecy and articulate the workings of various forms of visibility management. Second, these articles contribute to theoretical development by providing a more general conceptualization of visibility management and related discussions about seeing and knowing, disclosing and hiding in the digital age—each of which has important consequences for communication and organizing.

The approach we take in this Special Section is to articulate the "family resemblances" (see Hansen, Christensen, & Flyverbom, 2015) and varieties among these organizational phenomena by framing them in terms of visibility management. To this end, the articles conceptualize different forms of visibility management, including the management of transparency, disclosure, opacity, surveillance, and secrecy, and their intersections. Within the broad framing of visibility management, we explore questions about the social, organizational, and political dynamics and tensions involved in the production and maintenance of visibilities; we pay attention to materialities and affordances of mediating technologies in use; and we consider the power and governance effects of such practices related to seeing and knowing in organizational settings.

This introductory essay first articulates the understanding of digital technologies that underpins this Special Section and stresses the importance of an affordance approach to the study of visibility management with and through digital technologies. It then clears some basic conceptual ground to outline the key concepts and theoretical discussions that form the backdrop to the argument developed by each of the authors in their contributions. Finally, this essay highlights how the articles in the Special Section contribute to our understanding of the dynamics and ambiguities of visibilities in the digital age.

Affordances of Digital Technologies

This section articulates the understanding of digital technologies that underpins this Special Section and argues for a perspective that focuses on the affordances that digital technologies provide for enabling visibilities and their management. The term *affordance* refers to the potential for action that new technologies provide to users. All technologies are constructed out of material features that have properties that transcend their context of use. Although social constructivist approaches to technology use

rightly argue that individuals can exercise their human agency to make choices about how to use the features of new technologies in their work (Barley, 1986; DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Jian, 2007; Orlikowski, 2000), those features are constructed out of materials that allow certain actions and limit others (Leonardi, 2012). When individuals perceive that those features allow them to perform certain actions, the technology can be said to provide an "affordance." In other words, through the imbrication of human agency (people's goals) and material agency (the things a technology's materiality allow or do not), individuals construct perceptions of a technology's action possibilities—they decide what the technology affords them the ability to do or to not do (Leonardi, 2011).

This affordance perspective on technology use, which focuses its gaze on the intersection between people's goals and a technology's material features, is a useful perspective for understanding the role of digital technologies and the management of visibilities (Hansen & Flyverbom, 2014). Its utility comes from recognizing that digital technologies are constructed out of certain material properties that enable the presentation, storage, and flow of information in ways that are difficult or impossible in other media. Recently, Treem and Leonardi (2012) analyzed the large corpus of articles written about how people use digital technologies (social media in particular) in the workplace. Using an affordance perspective, the authors sought to identify affordances of digital technologies that were commonly enacted in the modern workplace. Their review articulated four affordances: "visibility," "persistence," "editability," and "association."

Visibility affordances capture the tendency for individuals to use digital technologies in ways that make information viewable to others within or outside the organization. For example, routine communication conducted between two people on a social networking technology can be seen by third parties not involved in the original communication. Consequently, communication (or other digital information) becomes visible in ways that it was not when communication occurred through other media such as e-mail or the telephone.

Persistence affordances refer to the fact that the information that is produced through the use of digital technologies often remains in some accessible form for future access. For example, traces of file access protocols are stored and can be later viewed by people throughout an organization. The fact that these protocols persist means that they can be enrolled in conversation and interaction at later points in time, thus extending their rhetorical force from the past into present discussions.

Editability captures the notion that digital technologies often afford people the ability to practice and rehearse their contributions and the information they present before it goes live. This extended control over the presentation of information means that individuals are often strategic in what, how, and where they present information, as editability enables more reflexivity about how and why information is presented.

Finally, association refers to the fact that because so much information is visible and persistent on digital technologies, people can associate with it in various ways. For example, individuals can signal their affiliation or disposition around certain kinds of files or documents, they can engage in communication with others—communication that can be seen by third parties—and the people watching

them will begin to associate those individuals with each other. Association affords connection and the development of a set of inferences about what kind of things and people go together.

Treem and Leonardi (2012) refer to visibility, persistence, editability, and association as affordances because they are action possibilities that lie at the intersection of human and material agency. Although digital technologies provide some material features that makes doing each of these actions more feasible, affordances do not arrive until individuals perceive that digital technologies can allow them to do those things. Moreover, perception and action are reciprocal and recursive. For example, as individuals begin to perceive that digital technologies allow the information they produce to persist past the here and now, they sometimes consciously shift what information they produce or present. For this reason, an affordance perspective on digital technology use for understanding visibility management seems appropriate in that it allows scholars not only to focus on the features of technologies that enable visibility but also to simultaneously probe how those features interact with and produce people's goals in ways that encourage them to orient toward visibilities in entirely new ways.

Unlike Treem and Leonardi, who present these four affordances as though they were on equal footing, we argue that the affordance of visibility supersedes the rest. In other words, visibility is a root affordance in the digital age that helps to enable other branch affordances, including persistence, editability, association, and likely many others. In other words, these other affordances are possible because of the visibility affordance. The essays that appear throughout this Special Section make this point clearly as they discuss how visibility is shaping communication and organizing in fundamental ways by enabling actions that were difficult or impossible to achieve in previous technological eras. These new activities have important implications for organizations and society, making it imperative that we understand how visibilities are managed. To move our scholarship in this direction, we next turn to considering how organizational actors manage—implicitly and explicitly—this important visibility affordance.

Rethinking Received Views: Conceptualizing Visibility Management

This Section develops key concept of visibility management and outlines the implications and contributions of our attempt to rethink transparency, opacity, disclosure, surveillance, and secrecy along these lines. Through the production of the affordance of visibility, digital technologies fundamentally affect the production and management of information flows, and these developments invite us to revisit a range of central discussions in communication and organization studies about seeing, knowing, and governing. By *visibility management*, we mean the many ways in which organizations seek to curate and control their presence, relations, and comprehension vis-à-vis their surroundings. In this context, management should be understood in an encompassing manner—more as forms of ordering or steering organizational processes than in terms of the work of a manager to regulate the actions of his or her employees. Thus, the management of visibilities is about attempts to act on the world by controlling and facilitating possibilities for seeing, knowing, and governing. We consider visibility management to be both a fundamental social process and an analytical vocabulary and approach that invites us to conceptualize organizational processes in new ways. Against this backdrop, many organizational efforts can be understood as a form of visibility management. That is, organizational life not only always involves

decisions about what to disclose and to whom but also questions about flows of information and directions of visibility in concrete settings and projects.

Our conception of visibility management has a focus on the dynamics and asymmetries at work when digital technologies shape organizational matters related to seeing, knowing, and governing. This implies an intimate relationship between knowledge and power—every act of making something visible and knowable is also a matter of creating opportunities for control and the exercise of power (Brighenti, 2007; Foucault, 1988). Likewise, all processes related to seeing and knowing involve choices and divisions, such as who can observe whom, which activities are opened up and which kept closed, and which objects and processes are subjected to visibility management and which are not. As a starting point, we can differentiate between "upward," "downward," "inward," and "outward" forms of observation (Heald, 2006). But as the articles in this Special Section articulate, a dynamic conception of visibility management and its workings pays attention to the multidirectional and polycentric nature of vision and observation in the digital age. Attention to the relational, ambiguous, and dynamic workings of visibility provides an entry point for studies of the intersection of the digital technologies and organizational communication. The overall argument is that visibility is intimately connected to organization, communication, and management, and the articles all offer theoretical and empirical support for this point.

This Special Section presents vibrant and valuable theoretical discussions of issues such as transparency, opacity, secrecy, surveillance, and disclosure in communication, organization, and management research. We extend such efforts by exploring how our understanding can be enhanced and nuanced if we conceptualize them in terms of the management of visibility. Such an approach paves the way for a more disenchanted, analytical account of multiple dynamics of visibilities in and through digital spaces. As a starting point, we conceptualize visibility management and its implications for existing discussions of transparency, opacity, disclosure, surveillance, and secrecy. This implies thinking along the three following lines: (a) how the literature usually conceptualizes these topics (i.e., what the received understanding is); (b) what it implies or involves to conceptualize these as a forms of visibility management (i.e., what we set out to challenge); and (c) what no longer can be taken for granted or what is gained by thinking about these topics in this way. These discussions allow us to connect the focus on visibility management to existing research and to articulate our claims and contributions.

Transparency

Scholars interested in transparency have refined our understanding of information sharing and accountability and challenged underlying assumptions about clarity, the transmission of information, and the effects of transparency to work as a "disinfectant" that will remove corruption, secrecy, and other kinds of misconduct. But still, most research in this area holds on to somewhat simplistic assumptions about the direct relationship between observation, clarity, and behavior, such as those implied in principal-agent models (Christensen & Cheney, 2015; Hansen, Christensen, & Flyverbom, 2015). Also, much of the transparency literature implies a transmission model of communication that pays little attention to the production, circulation, and reception of information. By conceptualizing transparency not simply as disclosure of information for purposes of clarity and accountability but also as a form of visibility

management, our conception of this phenomenon can be nuanced and enhanced. Drawing together insights from a wide range of discussions in sociology and beyond, Brighenti ambitiously develops visibility as a "sufficiently general descriptive and interpretive social scientific category" (2007, p. 340) that may enhance and nuance our understanding of a range of social phenomena. This focus on how visibilities are created and managed raises intriguing questions about the paradoxical and often competing logics at work in attempts to disclose information for purposes of insight and accountability. That is, this approach challenges the prevalent focus on of the role of information disclosure in both close-knit and more distant social relations (Etzioni, 2010) and the potentials of "sunlight" to work as a "disinfectant" (Brandeis, 1913). By conceptualizing transparency as a form of visibility management, we both open up these received understandings and explore the intersections and related dynamics of different kinds of visibility practices and regimes.

Disclosure

Increasingly, scholars are also interested in questions related to disclosure, both of the voluntary, controlled kind carried out by organizations and more disruptive and surprising instances when information leaks or control is lost. While the first kind is clearly related to the emergence of transparency as a societal, political, and organizational ideal, the latter has gained wide attention in the wake of phenomena such as WikiLeaks and the Snowden affair. For instance, Cammaerts' (2013) work has explored how WikiLeaks relates to more general dynamics involving "mediated opportunities for disruptions" (p. 420) and attempts to control and limit such opportunities for disclosure by organizations seeking to protect information.

The conceptualization of disclosure as a form of visibility management invites us to consider the role of digital technologies in the production of different kinds of disclosure—both voluntary and involuntary ones—and their subsequent political effects. That is, how do digital technologies shape the work of individuals and organizations when it comes to sharing, leaking, and controlling information; resisting existing transparency regimes; and using information to name and shame particular organizational or political practices? Thinking about disclosure in terms of the management of visibility highlights the intimate connections between information, power, and freedom. With digital technologies, both voluntary and involuntary kinds of disclosure take on new meanings, and these transformations have consequences for political matters such as governance and autonomy. That is, the attention to the management of disclosure captures that which sets limits and opportunities for others in society and actors who practice disclosure as a form of autonomy.

These politics of disclosure are explored by Heemsbergen in this Special Section, as he offers a typology of disclosure that accounts for both political position and autonomy in the management of disclosure. These logics are explored empirically through the practices of digital leaking and social media shaming as subsets of disclosure devices that engender what Heemsbergen asserts is "radical disclosure." Further, Heemsbergen argues that the material affordances of network time and interoperability are key enablers for radical disclosure in the digital age and have complex implications for future turns in democratic governing.

Secrecy

Scholars have long considered the workings and effects of secrecy, and our discussion extends these concerns in numerous ways. Ever since the articulation of *arcana imperii* ("secrets of the empire"), the secret as a social and political form has clearly accrued and is attributed power. Yet, while there is a general acknowledgement of the secret's ability to confer the secret keeper with some form of strategic advantage, since the Enlightenment, secrecy has fallen out of favor as a social and political practice. Contradictions regarding covert state intelligence for security purposes aside, advanced liberal democracies today all reiterate the link between democracy and openness. "Government ought to be all outside and no inside," and "secrecy means impropriety," Woodrow Wilson (1913/2008, p. 70) wrote in 1913. In popular business literature, too, private organizations are encouraged to go "naked" (see Tapscott & Ticoll, 2003). At the level of subjectivity, we are all encouraged by confessional popular culture and social media to reveal "what's on our minds," as Facebook puts it. Though a dystopian fiction, we might look to Dave Eggers' aphorisms in *The Circle* to sum up the zeitgeist: Secrets are lies; sharing is caring; privacy is theft.

Placing this moral distaste for secrecy in context, much sociological and anthropological literature on secrecy, particularly after Simmel (1906), positions it as a social formation: a practice that creates social bonds but that also distinguishes between insider and outsider groups (see Bok, 1989). As Costas and Grey (2014) observe, organization studies tend to look at secrecy as that which protects information. As an alternative, they suggest that secrecy be studied in organizational settings for its functional, social, and symbolic value, coming back, in a sense, to Simmel.

The premise of this Special Section, however, extends and challenges existing understandings of secrecy. Configuring secrecy as a form of visibility management alongside other forms, rather than as a social process of information protection, tells us several things. First, it tells us that secrecy is value free—neither inherently morally reprehensible nor a marker of power (although in certain contexts, both might be true). As a form of visibility management, that is, secrecy simply marks off certain phenomena—secrets it out of view (even when in plain sight, as in the case of open secrets). Such a neutral position for secrecy opens secrecy up as a productive resource for a radical politics previously too wary of such a degraded concept and process (see Birchall's contribution in this Special Section; Birchall, 2014; and Bratich, 2007). Second, by thinking of secrecy as the management of visibility rather than, say, information, we begin to move from a politics of knowing to a politics of seeing. Who or what is permitted to see? Who or what is permitted to be seen? Who or what can tell us that there is nothing to see? We should note, of course, that such seeing and seen apparatuses do not need to be human in form. As Brighenti observes, "Secrecy is technically and technologically managed, and increasingly so" (2010, p. 66), meaning that we need to think about secrecy less as only a subjective, interpersonal enterprise and more in terms of the technological affordances that enable it on a grand scale today. Third, placing secrecy alongside other forms of visibility management helps us to see the fluidity between certain practices and phenomena. When does secrecy turn into (and, alternatively, retreat from) surveillance, transparency, opacity, and disclosure? What are the conjunctural conditions of these transformations? This continuum of concepts helps us to see beyond the often unhelpful presentation of problems in the

contemporary public sphere as simplistic oppositions, such as secrecy versus transparency. Rather, we begin to understand both as forms of management that simultaneously obfuscate and disclose.

Thus, as Birchall (this Special Section) argues, it is imperative to consider secrecy as a form of visibility (and visuality) management because what is and what is not secret at any time can determine the political settlement. Rather than just considering secrecy as a social and political phenomenon, however, Birchall encourages us to think and act with secrecy. Drawing on Édouard Glissant's "right to opacity" (1997), she argues that coming forth and making oneself transparent might not always be the most politically productive position to take in the current configuration of visibility management.

Opacity

Although they are often outside the mainstream gaze, questions about opacity are central if we want to grasp the workings and effects of visibility management. In this Special Section, Stohl, Stohl, and Leonardi question the assumptions prevalent in much of the social science and popular literature (Brin, 1988; Tapscott & Ticoll, 2003) that greater visibility is always a good thing and that greater visibility translates into greater transparency. Stohl, Stohl, and Leonardi begin by arguing that visibility is the combination of three attributes: *availability* of information, *approval* to disseminate information, and *accessibility* of information to third parties. Although transparency is generally believed to be achieved when high levels of each of these attributes are present, they provide an explanation for and examples of how highly visible information can lead to an increase in opacity and how each attribute of visibility independently or co-jointly contributes to the degree to and the manner in which the relationship between visibility and transparency is managed. Their contribution discusses, with organizational examples for each, mechanisms through which managing the three attributes of information visibility can create opacity—both inadvertently and strategically. They make clear that transparency does not automatically arrive with the greater visibility of organizational processes, information, or data.

In an age of rapidly expanding sources and dissemination of information and ever greater capabilities for storage, retrieval, and processing of that information, Stohl, Stohl, and Leonardi also make clear that it is the combination of the 3As—not only the *availability* of information but also the *approval* to access and the *accessibility* of the information in the context of organizational settings and purpose—that illustrate the complex relationship between visibility and transparency and their effects on understanding and using the information. They specify how these mechanisms enable (a) disentangling visibility from transparency, (b) understanding the individual and interactive importance of each of these three attributes, and (c) an understanding of what they label the "transparency paradox" that opacity can result in even when all three attributes of visibility operate at high levels, and they illustrate how opacity can result both inadvertently and strategically. Uncovering the transparency paradox raises important questions for scholars with respect to open decision making and deliberative democracy. These include how much information is too much information to enable (a) making decisions effectively, (b) monitoring organizational conduct effectively, or even (c) being well informed about the issues and choices. As a consequence, they ask for further investigation of the trade-offs among the three attributes of visibility identified to produce more effective and visible organizational processes and decisions.

Surveillance

Of all the visibility practices discussed in this Special Section, surveillance is probably the one that gets the most attention at the moment. There are not only a coherent research field and extensive literatures on the topic but also a range of empirical developments that have solidified the realization that surveillance and related monitoring practices play a key role in social life. Just think about the impact of PRISM and related surveillance programs set up by the National Security Agency (NSA) and the scholarly assertions that we now live in a "surveillance society" (Lyon, 2001) or a "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2015). Compared to the other theoretical discussions outlined here, scholarly work on surveillance has the most developed conceptualizations of the relationship between this visibility practice and phenomena such as power and control, hierarchy and societal formations.

Still, surveillance is rarely discussed in conjunction with transparency and other visibility practices. Liberal democratic ideals of transparency prevail in both research and practice, and these ironically tend to obscure issues of surveillance, treating surveillance as an aberration rather than as a fundamental dimension of visibility management itself. Understanding surveillance as a form of visibility management helps to complicate easy distinctions from an earlier generation of surveillance studies between the managerial surveilling agent and the object of surveillance and also between surveillance and resistance to it. Additionally, when seen as a form of visibility management, contemporary surveillance is seen to be characterized by communication abundance rather than scarcity and as individual rather than organization-centric.

What Ganesh's article in this Special Section suggests is that rather than a series of discrete acts, surveillance should be seen as a formative social dynamic, as an endless cycle of observation. The phenomenon of "sousveillance"—individuals surveilling each other—becomes central to our conceptions of how surveillance is managed and enacted. By considering surveillance and its mutations in times of ubiquitous digital technology, the article thus contributes to the aspiration shared by this collection to point to the significance and paradoxical implications of managed visibilities in and across organizational settings.

Contributions: Organizational Dynamics of Visibility Management in the Digital Age

Taken together, these articles illustrate the theoretical and practical force of thinking about transparency, secrecy, opacity, surveillance, and disclosure as part of a family of visibility practices. Across social contexts, it has become commonplace for scholars to discusses the permeability of private-public boundaries within the contemporary media environment (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005) and the potential dangers this poses for democracy (e.g., McChesney, 2013), economic transactions (e.g., Metzger, 2007), workplace dynamics (e.g., Stohl, Etter, Banghart, & Woo, 2015), and interpersonal relationships (e.g., Petronio, 2002). At the same time there is great anticipation, and often celebration, about how the affordances of digital media enable easy accessibility to more information and insight for organizational decision making (Bennis, 2008), economic management (Einav & Levin, 2014), political action (Noveck, 2009), and personal experiences (Fung, Graham, & Weil, 2007). Indeed we live in a global regulatory environment of "sunshine" laws, demanding that governments, corporations, and civil-sector

organizations make information readily available in order to shed light on and enable monitoring of their activities and decisions. But these same regulatory agencies are also seeking mechanisms and rules by which to protect individual rights to privacy and enable people and information to keep information hidden. The tensions between keeping certain types of information *out of* the open while demanding other information be *out in* the open is what our conceptualizations and investigations of the management of visibilities bring to the fore. These articles illustrate both that the everyday practices of organizing invariably implicate visibility management and that the valences attached to transparency and opacity are not simple and straightforward but are dependent upon the actor, the context, and the purpose of organizations and individuals.

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