

Transparency

Mediation and the Management of Visibilities

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Transparency: Mediation and the Management of Visibilities

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This article challenges the view of transparency as a matter of providing openness, insight, and clarity by conceptualizing it as a form of visibility management. We tend to think of transparency as a process of ensuring accountability through the timely and public disclosure of information. But with the ubiquity of digital technology and data, transparency efforts have more elaborate and complex effects. To conceptualize these, this article discusses the technological and mediated foundations of transparency and the dynamics of visibility practices resulting from efforts to make people, objects, and processes knowable and governable. This implies that we shift our attention away from the provision of information and consider the wider social processes and dynamics at work in transparency efforts. Using empirical illustrations from organizations with an explicit commitment to transparency, this article articulates the complexities and dynamics of visibility management and highlights a set of critical questions about the politics, technologies, and power effects of contemporary transparency regimes.

Keywords: organizational transparency, affordances, visibility, mediation

Transparency is often understood as a matter of disclosing timely and publicly available information for purposes of openness, accountability, and the generation of trust (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2014). The underlying logic is that if companies, organizations, and public institutions establish transparency measures, they enable “the public to gain information about the operations and structures of a given entity” (Etzioni, 2010, p. 1). Along these lines of thinking, information produces insight, and insight creates accountability and better conduct (Christensen & Cheney, 2015). Furthermore, such accounts base their hopes about the positive effects of transparency on the belief that “sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman” (Brandeis, 1913, p. 92). With the ubiquity of digital technologies and the massive growth of and access to digital data (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013), increased transparency in organizational and societal affairs seems more possible and straightforward than ever before.

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But transparency efforts involve complex mediation processes, such as the aggregation, circulation, and interpretation of information, and they have an array of possible effects that require more nuanced conceptions than the utopian hopes that transparency will reduce misconduct and cure problems in regulation, management, and organizations. Transparency does not simply create insight and cleansing—it also has ominous and ambiguous effects. To conceptualize these complications and paradoxes, we need to articulate (a) the technological and mediated foundations of transparency and (b) the dynamics of visibility practices involved in efforts to make people, objects, and processes knowable and governable. As to the first complication, mediating technologies, or “disclosure devices” (Hansen & Flyverbom, 2014), have distinct organizing properties that shape what comes to be presented as transparent. These conditions become apparent if we give attention to the technological foundations and mediations of transparency, such as the techniques and devices used to manufacture transparency. In particular, insights from affordance theories (Gibson, 1977; Hutchby, 2001) and sociomaterial approaches (Orlikowski, 1992; Treem & Leonardi, 2012) are useful starting points because they invite us to consider the constraints and opportunities provided by specific mediating technologies and give attention to the production and significance of transparency in particular contexts and interactions (Hansen & Flyverbom, 2014). That is, our understanding of transparency can be enhanced if we give more attention to the affordances of the various technologies, devices, and techniques used to manufacture (what comes across as) transparency. Focusing on these sociomaterial mediations starts from the basic tenet that all efforts to make objects, phenomena, or processes visible or transparent rely on mediating technological devices. The important role of mediation is a point that has been made forcefully in the literature on affordances and medium theory (Deibert, 1997; Gibson, 1977; Hutchby, 2001) and in the field of science and technology studies (Hackett, Amsterdamska, Lynch, & Wajcman, 2008). This approach considers digital technologies to have affordances that facilitate certain communicative practices and phenomena, such as visibility, editability, persistence, and association (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; see also Couldry, 2012; Deibert, 1997; Hutchby, 2001). Mediating technologies cannot be separated from the forms of knowledge and social interactions they facilitate and constrain, but we often tend to believe that they provide direct access to reality. Failing to grasp the importance of such mediating devices is a fundamental problem, leading to the confusion of objects and instruments involved in a given effort to make something visible, knowable, and governable. Think for instance of the potential consequences if the operator of a nuclear plant or airplane is unable to distinguish between the signals transmitted through control panels and the actual state of the system or engine. As Bolter and Gromala (2003) remind us, “the danger of transparency is that the interface will mask the operation of the system exactly when the user needs to see and understand what the system is doing” (p. 55). Thus, if we consider such mediating technologies to provide direct access to a given object, mistakes may happen. Transparency technologies and disclosure devices must be understood as proxies for the direct observation of individual or organizational performance and assessments of (the quality of) various forms of organizational practice. Transparency efforts thereby contribute to “action at a distance” by permitting actions and calculations established in one place to shape actions elsewhere (Miller & Rose, 1990), such as when entire industries adopt shared standards for disclosure in the name of accountability (Flyverbom, Christensen, & Hansen, 2015).

As to the second complication, this article challenges the prevalent view of transparency that equals the disclosure of information with openness, insight, and clarity. Instead, it suggests that we should conceptualize transparency projects as a form of visibility management with extensive and often

paradoxical implications for the organizations and actors involved. To this end, insights from the literature on visibility in media studies and sociology (Brighenti, 2007; Thompson, 2005) can help us shift our attention from the quality, quantity, and timeliness of information disclosure to the intricate dynamics of transparency. Transparency efforts can then be understood as attempts to account for and act on the world by managing possibilities for seeing, knowing, and governing (Fung, Graham, and Weil, 2007; Roberts, 2009). As a form of management or governance, transparency *reconfigures*—rather than *reproduces*—its objects and subjects. Transparency projects create particular visibilities and possibilities for observation that make some parts of organizational and social life knowable and governable, but they also keep others inaccessible and out of sight (Flyverbom, 2015). That is, if we approach transparency as a form of visibility management, a number of complications to the equation between information disclosure, clarity, and accountability can be articulated. Transparency efforts, like other visibility practices, always involve *selectivity*, *directionality*, and *interpretation*. First, transparency always involves decisions about what to disclose and to whom and what to keep out of sight. This helps us articulate that transparency involves choices and divisions and is ultimately about the management of visibilities: that is, who can observe whom, which activities are opened up and kept closed, and which objects and processes are subjected to transparency efforts and which are not. Second, transparency efforts involve particular flows of information and directions of visibility. As Heald (2006) points out, we can differentiate between “upward,” “downward,” “inward,” and “outward” forms of transparency. This paves the way for a conception of transparency as intimately connected to power (Flyverbom, Christensen & Hansen, 2015) because “Who [can] see what, whom, when, where, and how . . . remains an integral dimension of the everyday operation and experience of power” (Otter, 2008, p. 1). In the same vein, Brighenti (2010) reminds us that “The management of visibilities lies at the core of all forms of social control, whether formal or informal. More precisely . . . control consists of a purposeful and contextual asymmetrisation and hierarchisation of visibilities” (p. 148). The concept of visibility management highlights such dynamic configurations of visibilities and invisibilities. Third, transparency is not “a property of messages or organizations per se, but a result of sense making that involves active, productive and creative audiences” (Christensen & Cheney, 2015, p. 82). This focus on processes of interpretation is central to the conceptualization of transparency that I propose.

The discussion of these two complications paves the way for the main arguments of this article: that transparency is conditioned by the techniques and mediations through which it is produced, and that the results of transparency efforts are rather managed visibilities than insight and clarity.

The article offers a set of empirical illustrations and theoretical reflections in support of these arguments. Using empirical examples from organizations with an explicit commitment to transparency, the article articulates the complexities and dynamics of visibility management and highlights a set of critical questions about the politics, technologies, and power effects of contemporary transparency projects. It is important to note upfront that the point is not to critique transparency as such or to call for less transparency. Clearly, transparency has many benefits, and increased disclosure of information may have a range of important effects in areas such as corruption and organizational misconduct. But to fully grasp the phenomenon and its ramifications—and to further existing transparency efforts—we need to examine the dynamics and unintended consequences of transparency in a more critical and detailed manner. Cast in more theoretical terms, the main point is that discussions of transparency will be enhanced if we focus

not only on the provision of information but also on the broader array of visibility practices and regimes that it is part of and on the wider social and technological dynamics shaping these. The article returns to these conceptual discussions at the end, but let us first look at a few empirical illustrations that support the argument that transparency is a matter of *sociomaterial mediation* and *visibility management*.

To illustrate these arguments, we will look at various organizational practices shaped by transparency ideals. The following illustrations from corporate management, organizational processes, and strategic attempts to position organizations all show that transparency is rarely about clarity and often involves mediations, paradoxes, and managed visibilities. In various ways, the examples invite us to think about how such dynamics of visibility play out and support the argument that we need to pay more attention to the mediated and managed nature of transparency.

Going Transparent

One shape that transparency efforts take is to offer direct access to organizational phenomena and processes. Metaphorical images such as “opening a window on reality” and the existence of “naked organizations” (Tapscott & Ticoll, 2003) point to such approaches to transparency. They often involve the use of security and body cameras, wearables, and more recently, digital platforms such as Periscope that promise that we can “explore the world through someone else’s eyes” (www.periscope.com). Also, they are often based on ideas about transparency as ways to create very direct and ostensibly undistorted forms of insight that allow for observational control, such as in principal-agent relations and traditional conceptions of the Panopticon (Flyverbom, Christensen & Hansen, 2015).

Many organizations “go transparent” by crafting extensive policies and procedures for the disclosure of information to employees, customers, and stakeholders. Such efforts increasingly take shape through digital solutions such as websites, intranets, and social media platforms where information can be shared, circulated, and accessed. Most organizations striving for transparency focus on how to share information and document what they do most effectively. Glass buildings and open office layouts are in fashion, and especially technology companies seem to be competing on how far they can go when it comes to transparency. Consider, for instance, the social media company Buffer, which makes the salaries of all employees publicly available within the organization and has equipped everyone with Jawbone UP wristbands that track physical activities, sleep patterns, and nutritional intake. As one of the founders puts it:

One of our key values at Buffer is to work smarter, not harder. Personal improvement is a big part of that, so giving employees a tool that can help improve their sleep patterns is a no-brainer. A few weeks in it’s already had an incredible effect. Browsing everyone’s sleep patterns and talking about how to get more *deep sleep* has an amazing effect on productivity. (Haden, 2013, para. 9)

Although most organizations tend to pursue transparency at more moderate levels, we do see other corporations with very ambitious aspirations about being “open by default,” as a Google newsletter puts it (Google newsletter, 2011). What is often overlooked, however, is the importance of the

affordances and limits of the transparency devices being deployed and the ways in which they guide the attention to some parts of organizational life and distract from others.

We can also look to other areas of social and organizational life marked by a strong belief in the value of going transparent. Similar processes seem to be at work in current attempts to make police work more accountable through the use of body cameras. Such initiatives seek to remedy problems about accountability, trust, and legitimacy through observational control (Flyverbom, Christensen & Hansen, 2015). But cameras do not provide objective information, because pictures also require interpretation and contextual knowledge that cannot be part of any recording. As Ready and Young (2014) put it:

Two people observing the same police activity may see different things because each person will focus her attention on details that are most important to her own self-interest. A video clip from body cams is part of a larger story, some of which is not caught on camera. People interpret what they see on video through the filter of their own experiences. An officer may interpret what he sees on a video differently than a civil rights lawyer or a young person from an urban area. Different viewers may contextualize the event differently in terms of how it is framed in their mind, how they think it was precipitated, and what they think happened in the 30 seconds before the camera started rolling. The technology doesn't provide this context—being human does. (para. 5)

Accordingly, what is captured on video cannot simply be treated as unanimous representations of what happened, partly because it is conditioned by technological affordances and contexts of production and interpretation. Also, like any other kind of information disclosure, such recordings must be understood as selective and managed forms of visibility that only capture parts of what happens in a given situation. Thus, "it is possible that on-officer video creates a polarizing effect on some controversies because people with strong convictions about what has transpired during a police shooting may use the 'facts' that they see in the video footage to support their expectations about what occurred in the blind spots" (Ready & Young, 2014, para. 7). As with the other examples, we need to consider carefully how body cams are shaped by sociomaterial forces and how they produce managed visibilities.

Manufacturing Transparency

Transparency projects also take the shape of the purposeful and strategic production of insight and openness in attempts to position organizations as attractive and willing to engage with their employees and stakeholders. Unlike the types of (seemingly) direct forms of transparency delivered by cameras and wearables, these involve more orchestrated efforts such as meetings and Q&A sessions that seek to open organizations up and allow for participation and engagement.

For instance, Internet companies such as Google and Facebook actively seek to position themselves as transparent organizations—built on and managed by principles such as information sharing, employee participation, and openness. They hold weekly employee meetings or do online Q&A sessions that allow employees to voice their concerns or ideas and to get a sense of the strategies and thinking of

their managers. Unlike the efforts to go transparent discussed above, such projects are often intended to create more symmetrical forms of transparency (Heald, 2006).

Along these lines, Google has a tradition for Thank God It's Friday (TGIF) meetings, where employees can ask all kinds of questions. More recently, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has initiated Townhall Q&As in which he responds to questions on Facebook for an hour. Such projects launched—explicitly and implicitly—in the name of transparency are highly popular among employees and users and are emphasized repeatedly by the companies involved. But we need to keep in mind that such transparency projects unfold in particular sociomaterial settings that condition and shape what is said, disclosed, and made known—that is, what comes across as transparent. For instance, TGIFs are social events bringing together large numbers of employees on Friday afternoons, and these features may invite only particular kinds of questions and discourage others. Also, we need to consider how the offer to respond to questions during an online Townhall Q&A is constrained by sociomaterial conditions such as navigating and selecting from close to 70,000 questions and comments within an hour, and other technological affordances that allow organizations to manage visibilities while claiming transparency. Thus, we cannot understand transparency projects without careful attention to the formats, processes of socialization, and other affordances of the technologies and environments in which they play out, including the need for actors to pose in certain ways.

Furthermore, whenever organizations decide to produce more transparency, they do not disclose everything, as this would undermine many organizational processes and often be detrimental to innovation, profit generation, and competition. Full transparency is impossible and would certainly be a challenge for anyone trying to absorb and make sense and use of so much information. Also, we need to keep in mind that many kinds of transparency projects make it necessary for employees to manage their online selves and to “curate” their “digital visibility” quite carefully if there are parts of their lives they prefer to keep private (Berkelaar, 2014; Flyverbom et al., 2015). These are some of the reasons why it makes sense to understand transparency projects as efforts to manage visibilities in particular ways. By conceptualizing transparency in these terms, we are better equipped to grasp the paradoxes, unintended consequences and power effects of organizational attempts to produce transparency.

Transparency as Organizational Positioning

A third shape transparency efforts take is the attempt to enhance the value of organizations or products by disclosing information at advantageous moments or for political purposes. Such forms of transparency are more subtle and less direct than the ones discussed above but are equally significant if we want to grasp how visibilities are managed.

Transparency has become a component in attempts to position particular organizations as different from traditional corporations, for example, as attractive places to work and spaces for continuous innovation driven by involvement and information sharing. When companies such as Buffer, Google, and Facebook launch extensive transparency projects, they often tie them to the particular style of management or organizational culture they seek to develop. That is, having open offices, sharing information, and “defaulting to open” will increase productivity, engagement, and trust among members

and have positive impacts on how outsiders perceive the organizations. But the sorts of transparency projects that organizations pursue to such ends often take different shapes from going transparent or sharing information internally. Some companies pick up on such different political agendas as government surveillance, data sharing, and "open government" and connect to these through more extensive and externally oriented transparency projects that propel transparency as a societal and political goal and use transparency efforts as ways to position organizations in advantageous ways.

One example is Google's Transparency Reports, which disclose how and when governments have made requests for information to be removed or have blocked the Internet altogether in particular countries or situations. Transparency Reports disclose important information about the Internet infrastructure, but they also guide our attention to particular issues and practices at the expense of others. By naming and shaming restrictive governments, Transparency Reports respond to public concerns about government surveillance, such as NSA schemes unveiled by Edward Snowden. But they also foreclose and downplay other types of intervention that could be made to address the problem and create awareness of how the Internet is governed by both state and nonstate actors (DeNardis, 2014; Flyverbom, 2011). Google's voluntary, proactive reporting about the actions of other entities, such as states, can be seen as a way to distract attention from the role of the company and the broader Internet industry in this area. For instance, it was only after the Snowden revelations that Google began to speak of the limits of Transparency Reports, including the fact that the company is not allowed to include information on how it feeds the NSA with data on users. As Google stated in a blog post about the limits of its reports:

We want to go even further. We believe it's your right to know what kinds of requests and how many each government is making of us and other companies. However, the U.S. Department of Justice contends that U.S. law does not allow us to share information about some national security requests that we might receive. Specifically, the U.S. government argues that we cannot share information about the requests we receive (if any) under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. But you deserve to know. (Google official blog, 2013, para. 3)

It should come as no surprise that some parts of even a Transparency Report contain secrets, but the decision to not include any information on these limits may disappoint some and has added to the uncertainty about what is actually reported in these and similar attempts to account for government surveillance.

Also, the format and contexts of production, mediation, and reception of these reports deserve scrutiny because it is not clear how data are compiled and interpreted, and many aspects of the contexts and conditions of such reports remain implicit. These examples show how transparency ideals become connected to advocacy projects that fit the goals of companies that seek to position themselves in relation to particular political projects or societal transformations. In this case, it takes the shape of transparency evangelism and similar attempts to position organizations as political players in the shaping of Internet governance and the future of the Internet.

But such strategic uses of transparency also involve decisions to withhold multiple kinds of information and highlighting some aspects of the organization at the expense of others. Companies withhold information about new products as a way to create anticipation in the market and to get the best returns on research and development investments, but it also seems that companies leak information strategically for similar reasons. For instance, one of the biggest tech stories in 2010 was about a prototype of the iPhone 4 left in a bar. Such stories, particularly those about a company like Apple that is known for its secrecy (Diaz, 2010), are fit for the logic of news outlets and help to build excitement among customers before a product launch or similar attempts to gain attention. In such situations, the management of visibilities often involves careful balancing of the attraction of openness and involvement and the attraction of a degree of opacity and secrecy when it comes to building organizational cultures, images, and myths.

This illustration points to the ways in which the management of visibilities are intimately involved in the creation of organizational cultures and norms and in attempts to position companies in particular ways. In such contexts, the management of visibilities often involves careful balancing of the attraction of openness and involvement and the attraction produced by a degree of opacity and secrecy to spur myth building. These empirical examples point the need to understand dynamics of transparency and other forms of visibility management, particularly the multiple directions and conflicting meanings involved.

Transparency as Information Control

Finally, transparency projects also take the shape of efforts to give users and customers a sense of control and insight into the way corporations and other organizations use their data—that is, to enable others to gain transparency. With the rise of big data and algorithmic operations in organizational settings—such as data-driven segmentation, marketing, and new forms of business intelligence—there are growing concerns about data protection and privacy. Customers and users are slowly realizing that when they sign up for a free service such as Facebook or Gmail, they also agree to sign off all their rights over the data they share and produce on those platforms. Such concerns have also been propelled by Edward Snowden’s revelations of how the NSA collects digital traces for purposes of surveillance and a general realization that digital technologies are what Zuboff (2014) has termed “weapons of mass detection.”

One response to this growing data skepticism is the development of various types of user controls and dashboards that give users opportunities to manage the data they share and to define the degree of privacy they prefer. Such dashboards take the shape of Facebook privacy settings that allow users to decide whether they want to share posts only with friends or to make them publicly available. Similarly, Google provides a range of possibilities for user control, such as how much data is compiled from different devices and platforms associated with users’ Google accounts, but also ways to migrate data from, for instance, Gmail to another e-mail service and various individual privacy and security settings. These user controls are often presented as transparency efforts, such as when Google presents its dashboard as “an effort to provide you with greater transparency and control over your own data” (Google official blog, 2009, para. 3). But it is worth keeping in mind that dashboards and user controls are also inseparable from the sociomaterial settings in which they are developed and operate. For instance, a Facebook privacy setting is a very minor possibility for information control within a platform that is

unreservedly set up to compile and reuse data produced by users. Like a growing number of companies that are “born digital” and rely primarily on data, Google and Facebook are offering free services as a way to tap into the digital traces left by the billions of people using them. Accordingly, the platforms and services they offer are set up to afford data aggregation and algorithmic operations and to allow for knowledge production and other forms of value creation (Flyverbom & Madsen, 2015). What is surprising is not that data are used and circulated but that Internet companies have been able to frame these dashboards and user controls as forms of privacy protection. They have effectively institutionalized a particular understanding and meaning of privacy at the expense of other ones, such as the fact that the moment we accept the terms and conditions of these platforms is the moment when we give up all control over our data. What is left for users to control is very limited and more a matter of selecting audiences than protecting privacy. At the same time, these phenomena can be used to support the argument that what is presented as transparency is often rather a matter of visibility management. What we get from Google and Facebook is not really clarity or insight about how our data are used but opportunities to select the parts of our digital traces that we make available to other users and to manage our visibility vis-à-vis these corporations and others.

While these illustrations pertain particularly to Internet companies and the Internet domain, I believe they have a broader appeal and help us make sense of organizational dealings with transparency more generally. The conceptualization of transparency as a form of visibility management is a useful starting point if we want to push beyond the simple equation of information, clarity, and accountability. Information disclosure does not simply produce transparency, and this also goes for other prevalent visibility practices. For instance, in the wake of the Snowden revelations, discussions about surveillance have exploded and entered public, political, and everyday discourse. But the result is also that all forms of observation—looking at social media posts, aggregating data from online consumer behavior, and tracking citizens for purposes of crime prevention—are termed surveillance and considered to be problematic forms of control and abuse of power. This is problematic, as the word gets inflated with too many meanings and we lose track of the dynamics of visibility management at work in these observational practices. Rather than simply associate surveillance with domination and transparency with empowerment, this article has explored how digital technologies condition the management of visibilities in complex and surprising configurations of control, recognition, and other social processes and moral values (Brighenti, 2007). These conceptual discussions and the empirical illustrations add substance to the conceptualization of transparency as sociomaterial mediations and managed visibilities.

Conclusion

Many accounts consider contemporary moves toward openness and transparency in corporate and political affairs to be direct results of developments in the realm of digital technologies (Finel & Lord, 2002; Sifry, 2011). Such hopes for societal and political re-engineering through technology are driven by a belief in transparency as a panacea and have given rise to an increasingly institutionalized transparency movement with organizations, corporate actors, and activists peddling this ideal. Also, this “triumph of transparency” (Braithwaite & Drahos, 2000) revolves around a belief in increased information and communication as a direct path to accountability, trust, and legitimacy (Garsten & de Montoya, 2008; Power, 1997). The transparency literature often relies on a simple and deceptive formula that equates

information with transparency and considers this clarity to be a direct path to accountability and good governance (Christensen & Cheney, 2015; Roberts, 2009). That is, if information is shared, we can see things as they really are, and if everything is visible, no bad behavior takes place. But this conception conflates and simplifies a much more dynamic and complex relationship between transparency efforts and organizational and regulatory effects (Hansen, Christensen & Flyverbom, 2015).

This article contributes to existing research by exploring how our understanding of transparency projects can be enhanced and nuanced if we conceptualize them in terms of mediations and managed visibilities. Such an approach paves the way for more disenchanting, analytical accounts of multiple dynamics of transparency and shows how transparency is both performed and performative in organizational settings (Flyverbom & Albu, in press). Digital technologies do not simply produce transparency (in the sense of simple reflections or direct observations) but create refractions and reconfigurations. That is, digital technologies fundamentally alter the way we collect, circulate, and make sense of information, and such questions are best understood as forms of what I term managed visibilities. With this more dynamic, multifarious analytical conception of transparency, we are better equipped to understand how transparency ideals and practices relate to seeing, knowing, organizing, and governing. This approach articulates how transparency is managed, the sorts of (in)visibilities it produces, and how transparency operates as a source, technique, and rationality of organization and governance. Drawing on empirical examples, I have used this conceptualization to show how digital technologies and managed visibilities shape organizational transparency ideals and practices.

Future research may provide more detailed analyses of how digital technologies afford and produce managed visibilities with consequences for recognition, control, and other social forces. Such accounts may push us beyond both the current fears about digital technologies, big data and algorithmic calculations, and the laudatory focus on how transparency can be used to make organizations, societies, and political institutions more accountable and less susceptible to corruption and other kinds of misconduct.

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