

Conclusion

If you search for ‘transparency’ on an internet search engine, it will provide more than 87 million hits to choose from. By clicking through the results, a diverse variety of types of transparency can be found, ranging from governmental or state transparency to transparency in the financial sector to transparency in sports. While some hits provide state or corporate policies on transparency, others refer to organizations that push for increased openness of organizations. Transparency is a concept that can be applied to a broad variety of different situations and domains in our social, political and economic world, often making it difficult to grasp clearly defined conditions. Since transparency seemingly illustrates a concept with unparalleled possibilities of application, it was referred to as a ‘buzzword’ throughout this volume.

The contributions of this volume sought, however, to give more substance to the ‘buzzword’. In which fields of social life do matters of transparency come up? What specific role does it play? Do we understand it in an instrumental or consequential way? Who or what is at the focal point of transparency – individuals, public persons, institutions or professions? The answers to these questions, which seek to define the characteristics and criteria of transparency, and the expectations attached to the concept will differ from case to case. What is needed, therefore, is further refinement of what is actually meant when speaking about transparency. Such refinement is inevitably context-based. This is exactly what this volume aimed to do: it analyzes the concept of transparency within specific cases and attempts to show what implications it can have for individuals, politics, social media, international development aid and the pharmaceutical industry.

In this regard, the approaches of our authors followed the rationale that transparency is not to be understood as a value in itself, but as instrumental in achieving specific objectives. The instrumental perspective illustrates how the understanding of transparency may differ, what role it plays in different situations and the importance that is attached to it. Expectations of transparency will depend on the function it is sought to fulfill. At the same time, an instrumental conception leaves space for criticism on how transparency is used and illuminates possible trade-offs between transparency and other matters of societal importance, such as privacy or effectiveness. It has been shown that the mere step towards more transparency will not necessarily suffice to make the world a better place.

As the title of the volume *Transparency Trends: changing expectations of transparency in a globalizing world* indicates, all authors position their concept of transparency in a world of increased globalization. Notwithstanding the fuzziness of the conception of globalization, the link between transparency and globalization has been seen as a

necessary step. If we understand globalization as the “intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring miles away and vice versa”, it allows us to grasp the role that transparency plays in our contemporary society (Giddens, 1990, p.64). The world in which we live today is characterized by flows of information that transcends traditional borders of the nation-state; they open up the ‘black box’ of companies, institutions as well as they blur the boundary between private and public space. As information streams and the networks built on and around them become ever more complex, the need is felt for (re-)gaining structure and control. The same can be said about monetary streams, as in the case of development aid.

At the same time as complex interactions and interrelations increase due to the advances in information and communication technologies, the very same developments also facilitate the operation of transparency, possibly even causing it to work at its best. Communication today is strongly associated with the internet, and more particularly, with Web 2.0 applications that enable more participatory exchange of information. Several contributions explicitly focused on the functioning of transparency in the internet and the Web 2.0. To the former, Roome and San Nicoló’s study of the Commission as an e-government depends on the ‘e’. With regard to Web 2.0, an assumed new form of transparency – personal transparency – depicts the frame of reference. Theunissen shows how new social media can be used by politicians to overtly communicate political as well as personal information. Social networking sites allowed for the type of personal transparency to develop that Beckmann et al. speak of. In sum, the way our information society deals with transparency today could not have been established without globalization and its forces.

Transparency as bound to the globalizing world has the potential to change relations between actors and organizations. Accordingly, all contributions reveal that transparency is linked in some way or another to trust. Two contributions explicitly dealt with the instrument of transparency in achieving trust. Stiller observed the politics of information of German MPs during the financial crisis. Roome and San Nicolo focused on the use of the European Commission’s website to become both more transparent and closer to its dispersed citizenry. Both accounts found that transparency, understood as the sheer provision of information, cannot be sufficient to establish confidence in political actors. Rather, information should, amongst other things, be intelligible and selectively structured in order to avoid an overload of information. In how far there can be a general recipe for success remains open for debate and further research. However, implicitly, other contributions showed that transparency serves the purpose of developing a meaningful

interaction between two actors: as one actor opens up the black box, the addressees, in turn, can build up confidence in his or her actions.

On an institutional and political level, transparency illustrates one of the means to increase accountability and legitimacy, which also involves components of trust. Nowadays, accountability is thought to be an integral part of good governance beyond conventional political lines. Whereas traditionally the main subject of accountability used to be political actors, other actors increasingly have to respond to demands of accountability regarding their actions. Lindner touches upon corporate and scientific accountability with regard to the pharmaceutical industry whilst Gombert makes social accountability explicit for the case of the development sector. The latter identifies transparency as constituting an essential part of social accountability, but also highlights other important factors without which the Aid Transparency Movement will not succeed in its aims.

For the individual, transparency is intrinsically bound to the blurring of the private and public sphere. What used to be the private sphere has become challenged by technological novelties such as social networking sites or Twitter as more and more personal information is published on the internet. Politicians, as Theunissen shows, rely partly on personal transparency in order to strengthen their position in the public domain. While most politicians indeed choose to inform their electorate via Twitter, hence taking a perspective on transparency as a sheer political tool, other policy-makers also promote the personalization of politics, by making their private life transparent. The private component is also essential to the concept which Beckman et al. utilize for their analysis. Their idea of personal transparency is sought to bridge the gap between recruiters and job-seekers in order to lower asymmetric information for the former. The results of the survey carried out suggest that job-seekers care about their privacy and primarily understand their commitment to personal transparency towards friends and family as a 'semi-public' transparency, but not necessarily towards public superiors such as recruiters. Although the contributions of Theunissen and Beckmann et al. share two parameters, new social media and a narrow conception of personal transparency with the focus on individuals, transparency and its subsequent change of the private and public realm can hardly be compared. Since the hierarchical dimension and the perceptions of the transparent individuals differ tremendously, generalizations and assessments of how private and public sphere are and will be converging are difficult to establish. At the same time, normative questions about in how far borders could and should be blurred cannot be based upon those examples.

For transparency to have positive influences, the audience or the persons for whom transparency is established need to make use of this transparency in a skillful and

informed manner. The audience, here, is broadly defined as the group that can benefit from increased transparency of either the job seeker or the development aid donor. Some of the contributions have concluded that the sheer existence of information, on the internet for example, does not necessarily lead to the ultimate aim to which transparency was sought to contribute. As Beckman et al. discovered, even though recruiters may use the transparency of job-seekers during the recruitment process, the potential of the information provided is not yet fully harnessed by recruiters. Research suggests that profiles on social networking sites can convey character traits that may be helpful in assessing the job-seekers' fit to the organizational structure of the company. However, most of the recruiters judged the quality of information on social networking sites as being too low for a correct assessment.

Similarly, Roome and San Nicoló have shown that transparency cannot foster trust in the European Commission without citizens having interest in the working of the supranational institution. Roome and San Nicoló propose to expand the concept of transparency towards further criteria including improved accessibility, meaningful interaction and effective promotion. Only if those criteria have been fulfilled, they argue, transparency can link the Commission and the European citizenry, and thereby help in achieving trust. As with the case of social networking sites and recruitment, the audience is important to make transparency work.

The significance of the skillful audience arguably poses a problem for advocates of transparency. Since the information society faces an immense and diverse flow of information that needs to be processed and evaluated, transparency bears the danger of leading to informational overload rather than an added value for society. The question of how to apply social as well as technical mechanisms for structuring and analyzing available information hence needs further elaboration for the respective fields. The case of Wikileaks, for instance, shows that media could only partly succeed in making sense of the information. As Gombert also argues for the development aid sector, the Transparency Aid Movement should incorporate work on contextualizing the transparent information in order for the audience to grasp its meaning. This pre-structuring, however, makes transparency vulnerable to corruption. As a response to that, writing on transparency of the scientific approval of psycho-pharmaceuticals, Lindner takes impartiality as an essential element of transparency. How institutions, such as NGOs, or media linking transparent objects and the audience can and should play a role in communicating the information is a crucial question for analytical and normative research.

This volume aimed at providing more conceptual depth to transparency. As has already been shown in the introduction with the discussion of Heald & Hood (2006), transparency

differs, first, with the object that shall be open or assessable, and second, with the audience. The dimensions of the concept have been operationalized differently by the contributors to this volume. Whereas there is some consistency or similarity between the various conceptions, for example, with the relation to trust, each contribution emphasized different peculiarities of the concept of transparency. Generalizations and refinements of the concept are thus very difficult to deduce. The instrumental nature of transparency as understood throughout the volume makes transparency probably context-dependent and even more prone to complexity and particularity. The bottom-line that is to be suggested is to take transparency as a radial concept that includes some main elements defining it, though their presence as well as importance may differ for the case in question.

Ultimately, our contributors' expectations on transparency have been of mixed nature, especially regarding the normative implications of transparency. Transparency is usually considered to be a positive feature of our contemporary world; this attitude probably contributed to its emergence as a buzzword and an apparent panacea. However, normative questions must be raised and trade-offs between transparency and other societal values be discussed. Equivalently to the context-dependency of transparency in the conceptual field, normative questions cannot provide for a general response either. Take for instance the two contributions on political transparency. While Theunissen considers transparency in light of a new and old media dichotomy, arriving (implicitly) at a point where transparency of politicians may lead to the boulevardization of politics, Stiller positions transparency in a deliberative democratic framework where he takes it as a positive benchmark.

Further, transparency has often been associated with effectiveness and efficiency, though the relation between both notions is sometimes understood as being proportional while it is sometimes perceived as being opposing. Beckmann et al. take the first stance by raising the point that personal transparency could lead to a better, more efficient recruitment procedure in which the person-organization match can be determined. Besides the fact that their results are mixed, another value easily enters the scene: privacy. Does the assumed positive relationship between transparency and efficiency excuse for the violation of job-seekers' privacy? Can there be a balance between both? Beckmann et al. suggest increasing the awareness of personal transparency and possible consequences for the individual. With regard to institutional efficiency, in how far is there a trade-off between procedural transparency, as Stiller suggests, and efficiency, not to mention effectiveness? How do we deal with claims that open negotiations receiving media attention are often considered to be a major stumbling block to effective policy-making? The case studies presented in this volume shed light on transparency in very different fields

of application. The richness of perspectives from which the concept is depicted constitutes the strength of this volume, providing ground for cautious generalizations as well as for the illustration of conceptual clashes. What can be deduced from the four divisions of the articles along the line of personal, political, institutional and professional transparency is the fact that transparency is a concept too broad for specific generalizations. Rather, each of the thematic fields should be taken separately and be the focus of comparative analysis.