Disentangling the Power-Transparency Nexus

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Introduction

During the last decade, transparency has attracted increased public, political and managerial attention (Lord, 2006; Piotrowski, 2010, proliferated into a wide variety of organizational practices (Tapscott & Ticoll, 2003; Bennis, Goleman & O’Toole, 2008), and emerged as an exciting, cross-disciplinary research topic (Heald and Hood, 2006; Fung et al, 2007). The growing commitment to transparency rests, as Strathern (2000: 313) puts it, “in the proposition that if procedures and methods are open to scrutiny, then the organization is open to critique and ultimately to improvement” (see also, Tapscott & Ticoll, 2003). This we see in areas such as corporate social responsibility, auditing, public administration and global governance, in which notions of organizational improvement have become enmeshed with ideals of transparency, performance management and democratization. The growing volume and diversity of empirical and theoretical work in these and related areas is gradually paving the way for more nuanced understandings of norms and aspirations of transparency, its contextual meanings, as well as practical and unintended consequences (Garsten and Lindh de Montoya, 2008; Drucker and Gumpert, 2007; Strathern, 2000; West and Sanders, 2003).

Still, many key issues remain unexplored or convoluted and need to be addressed more explicitly if we want to advance theories of transparency. In particular, we argue that the relationship between power and transparency – while often implied in the literature – is rarely addressed sufficiently. Much research on transparency indirectly involves questions about power and control. For instance, transparency has been explored as a doctrine of “good governance” (Hood and Heald 2006), as the “power of information” (Fung et al, 2007), as
surveillance or other forms of control (Waiton, 2010; see also, Thompson, 2005), as risk management at the intersections of public and private forms of authority (Hansen 2011), and as the emergence of new relations and boundaries in and around organizations (Cheney and Christensen, 2009; Hansen and Flyverbom, manuscript). However, the relationship between transparency and power has yet to emerge as a central and explicit concern. In this paper, we unpack some of the implicit assumptions in the transparency literature, such as a ‘conduit’ view of communication, a belief in the ‘knowing subject’ and the existence of directly accessible objects. By problematizing these, we point to some blind spots and (unintended) power effects of transparency, such as passivity, gatekeeping, and barriers to access and participation. But we also point to the value of a more activity-oriented and performative conception of transparency, which implies a more dynamic understanding of the workings of transparency in processes of ordering, communication and organization.

While transparency is often seen as a panacea to problems of democracy, accountability and ethics, the actual pursuit of transparency tends to have complex, layered, ambiguous and even contradictory effects. To capture its subtle operations, we need a much more dynamic understanding of transparency than those on offer in the normative and managerial literature. In this paper, we start from the proposition that while transparency may sometimes be a solution to problems of power, it should itself be regarded as a significant source of power.

We flesh out this argument in three steps. First part of the paper reviews the literature on transparency and discusses the implicit trust in transparency as a solution to problems in communication, organization and governance. Secondly, the paper outlines how studies of transparency as a performative and multi-layered phenomenon can be cast in terms of power. The third section focuses on two broad types of transparency practices, namely ‘transparency as information control’ and ‘transparency through mediations and proxies’.

We argue that a more refined understanding of the making and operations of transparency can 1) help us disentangle some largely implicit conceptions of power and control underpinning current research on transparency in the domains of communication, organization and governance; and 2) constitute the conceptual backbone in an analytics of power and transparency that we consider useful for future empirical studies of the transparency-power nexus. The paper brings out how questions of power and control emerge at many different levels within and outside the organizational context. Our problematization of the power-transparency nexus points to the need for a focus on the practical and dynamic operations (“how”) of power, and the value of a conception of transparency as performative and constitutive in relation to power. Along the way, we point out how empirical studies of the power-transparency nexus along these lines may be carried out.
THE TRUST IN TRANSPARENCY

This section sets the stage for our investigation of the power-transparency nexus by surveying how and why calls for transparency currently pervade discussions about governance, organization and communication. In particular, it brings out some underlying views of the transparency-power nexus, such as the importance of information and communication technologies, and the hope that more transparency will lead to democratization and a fairer distribution of power. Epitomizing this trust in transparency, Finel and Lord’s book *Power and Conflict in the Age of Transparency* (2002: 2) opens up with the statement that “we are living in an age of unprecedented transparency. Thanks to the revolution in information technology, the spread of democratic institutions, and the rise of global media, keeping secrets has become harder than ever before. These trends have distributed power away from centralized governments and placed it in the hands of organizations, multinational corporations, and international regimes, among others”. Such accounts imply 1) that we can easily identify the drivers of transparency; 2) that the effects of transparency are uniformly positive; and 3) that power is a resource which can simply be transferred from one to the other. This paper problematizes all three.

The attraction of transparency

The quest for transparency in corporate and political affairs has become central to calls for social responsibility, information and insight, democratization, good governance and participation. For instance, when things go wrong in organizations, the response is often to call for increased transparency. As we have seen in the wake of corporate scandals and the collapse of the global economy, transparency constitutes a widely accepted solution and norm. In organizational settings, transparency is often invoked as a solution to problems such as fraud, mistrust and the lack of accountability. Organizations are often hard to understand and make sense of for outsiders and newcomers and one way to address such problems is to call for and install increased transparency (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010). In attempts to develop more horizontal, dialogical and participatory relations between organizations and their environments – be it stakeholders, the public or regulators – organizational disclosure practices figure prominently. In order to respond to demands for transparency from the outside world, organizations need to know and be able to describe and map out themselves in sufficient
detail to satisfy external stakeholders (Christensen, 2002). As pointed out by Power (1997), disclosure practices such as auditing are based on a fundamental mistrust, and transparency often involves attempts to scrutinize, monitor and evaluate the conduct of organizations and their members.

In the different accounts outlined above, transparency is often presented as a solution to problems and inequalities of power, such as those concerning access, participation and democracy, and as a form of control that will solve problems of illicit conduct, corruption and other dark sides of organizations. But the widespread excitement about the potentials of transparency does not stand alone. For instance, there is also an awareness that organizations simultaneously need some closure, as pointed out by Garsten & Lindh de Montoya (2008), all organizations and states rely and thrive on some degree of opacity. Accordingly, organizations constantly balance openness and closure. Also, not everyone agrees that transparency is a panacea to problems such as power abuse, illicit conduct and the withholding of information. For instance, recent research has argued that the effects of transparency are not only overrated, but also poorly understood (Garsten and Lindh de Montoya, 2008; Hood and Heald, 2006; Strathern, 2000). And this ties in with a growing awareness that the pursuit of transparency may also takes the shape of control and surveillance (Garsten and Lindh de Montoya, 2008: 82), for instance in the shape of monitoring people and processes in the name of management, crime prevention, efficiency, costs and competition (Lyon, 2007:14). This paper picks up on these divergent interpretations of the (power) effects of transparency and develops an analytics of the power-transparency nexus that is more attuned to the practices, circulations and layered effects of transparency.

**Drivers of transparency**

Phenomena such as globalization, transnational forms of governance and the growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs) are often seen as drivers of transparency. With the cross-border flows associated with globalization, many organizational activities, corporate value chains and regulatory demands have become increasingly complex and impenetrable – not only for organizations, but also for their stakeholders. One solution to this complexity is the demand that organizations should disclose and communicate more information about their activities and engage in the development and implementation of standards and principles for good corporate governance, such as those advanced by the UN Global Compact. Others argue that the growing focus on transparency can be seen as closely tied to liberal political democracy and economic
neoliberalism (Garsten and Lind de Montoya, 2008). Also, we can see transparency as intertwined with the emergence of multi-layered, polycentric forms of global governance, which also make questions of accountability exceptionally complex. For instance, the mechanisms for accountability that are institutionalized in the democratic nation state government cannot simply be replicated on a larger scale since the forms of constraints on power found in domestic governments cannot easily be implemented at the global level. If we look at the relations between organizations and regulation, transparency also figures prominently in current attempts to strengthen good governance and ethical behavior in all types of organizations. One practical implication of the fragmentation of contemporary global governance is the necessity of dispersed and shared practices of accountability, and the increasing attention to transparency in studies of global governance and public management often revolves around accountability.

It is worth noting that the form of accountability typically discussed in most of these literatures is theoretically embedded in the normative concept of democratic governance. In recent work Scholte (2011) has analyzed accountability and transparency in a way that provides further illustration of the normativity at play. Here accountability is seen as pivotal to the creation and maintenance of effective and legitimate global governance. Scholte identifies four qualities inherent to accountability: transparency, consultation, evaluation and corrections. If we focus on transparency, accountability presupposes that affected individuals or organizations must always, from the start to the finish of a given action, be able to see what the affecting actor is doing and how. Without such information, Scholte points out, the affected is left ignorant and cannot effectively scrutinize the affecting part. Implicit in Scholte’s normative approach to accountability and transparency are strong notions of responsibility and trust, notions that deserves further attention.

Another development which shapes current demands for transparency, organizational insight and information access is the proliferation and development of advanced ICTs, which are expected to facilitate faster produc-

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1 As to responsibility, Wenar (2006) has argued that the legal maxim: “Justice must be done, and justice must be seen to be done” carries a parallel maxim: “Responsibility must be fulfilled, and responsibility must be seen to be fulfilled.” On this view, accountability comes out as a kind of second-order responsibility. It indicates the responsibility to account for, or more broadly speaking, to communicate about the degree to which a responsibility has been fulfilled. Being responsible for something does of course not per se entail any requirement to account for or demonstrate that responsibility is fulfilled. In many everyday situations people can be responsible without being accountable: for instance, adults are generally responsible for washing their hands, but they usually are not accountable to others for this. Often we have the ability or authority to act or decide on our own, without any requirement of reporting on such matters. This also means that we are not subject to correction. But accountability in contemporary societies is about the extra responsibility to make visible the fulfillment of an original responsibility, which in practical terms implies a subsequent layer of surveillance mechanisms that enables outsiders to judge whether responsibilities have been complied with. The information generated by procedures of accountability can not only be seen as instrumentally valuable but also as morally superior: “Some may also think that a more transparent system is morally better in itself, or that transparency is constitutive of a system that has some other virtue like justice” (Wenar 2006:8).
tion and circulation of unprecedented amounts and novel forms of information. The focus on transparency seems to have been intensified considerably with the advent of new communication technologies, notably the Internet. As stated in a report by the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants, “web-enabled technology has united traditional financial reporting and the Internet in a way that will increase the speed and the accuracy of gathering and disseminating relevant financial information” (CIMA, 2002: 13). From such perspectives, the digitization of communication facilitates information availability independent of time and space, and organizations, partly driven by these technologies, are expected to contribute to transparency themselves by sharing relevant information with their surroundings (Bennis, Goleman & O’Toole, 2008). Clearly, the hope is that computer-based communication technologies will allow broader access to information, not only vis-à-vis external audiences but also for lay members of the organization. In this process, the power of traditional gatekeepers may be circumvented and, eventually, reduced. This way, computer-based communication potentially undermines established patterns of control (Sproull & Kiesler, 1995). This is not to suggest, of course, that full transparency is suddenly possible, or that gatekeepers disappear or that control vanishes into thin air. Clearly, such hopes for technological fixes to longstanding problems abound in many contexts and are not always fulfilled. In spite of such difficulties, ICTs are seen as a key driver of transparency and central to the reconfiguration of power relations and control practices.

TRANSPARENCY MEETS POWER

We start from the premise that ideals and practices of transparency do not simply report or reflect some real state of affairs in the world. This argument is similar to those made about the constitutive properties of language, numbers or other types of communication, namely that these have ‘ordering’ (Bowker and Star, 2000; Law and Mol, 2008; Kendall and Wickham, 2001) or ‘organizing’ properties (Cooren, 1999), which shape and generate regularized practices, organizations, and their perception of reality (see also, Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Taylor & van Every, 2000; Weick, 1979). As productive forces in the constitution of social and organizational reality, such practices and forms of communication are closely related to power. When we discuss the anatomy of the transparency-power nexus, thus, it is follows that transparency as an ideal and
practice actively shapes the world as a historicized representation and object which is always subject to acceptance and/or contestation. As such, transparency contributes to the organization of meaning, which is often, but not always realized through language. Building on insights from the well-established work on surveillance and the emergent literature on transparency, transparency can be understood as an “assemblage of normativity that mobilizes actors to respond in certain ways” (Garsten and Lindh de Montoya, 2008: 82, see also Haggerty and Ericson, 2000). This implies that transparency as a social ideal and practice does important work in the contexts of organization, communication and governance, such as negotiating boundaries, shaping rationalities and setting courses for future action. Transparency, in other words, is performative.

**Transparency as performative**

Conventional accounts of power (Lukes, 2004; Weber, 1968) view power as the capacity to change behavior, and tend to focus on force and constraint, i.e. situations and relations where A has the resources or position to force B to do something B would not have done otherwise. Such resource- and constraint-oriented views of power have been described as attempts to capture the ‘what’ and the ‘who’ of power. In contrast, there is a growing focus on more subtle and relational conceptions of power, which give more attention to the practices, normalizations and interactions that make relations and circulations of power possible. These studies, often referred to as the ‘how’ of power, focus less on restraint and force itself, but rather on the intricate ways in which power relations are produced and facilitated (Clegg, Courpasson et al. 2006; Clegg and Haugaard 2009). Expanding on these distinctions between different forms of power, Goehler (2000) has suggested a distinction between ‘transitive’ and ‘intransitive’ conceptions of power: Transitive (as in verbs requiring a subject and an object) conceptions of power focus on the exercise of power in the shape of direct subordination, force and restraint. Much of the foundational research on power, such as the work of Weber (1968) and Lukes (2004), revolved around such conceptions of power as a zero-sum game (Goehler 2000). The view of power as domination, however, has little to offer when we look at situations without such direct lines of command, at relationships that are not simply about the domination of A over B, or at contexts where A and B are not easily identified, such as those marking norms and forms of transparency.

Instead, we propose a conception of transparency as performative, which paves the way for novel investigations of the power effects of transparency. Understood in this way, the shifting meanings and operations of
transparency shape and facilitate what Foucault (1982) calls the ‘conduct of conduct’): The intersection of knowledge, power, and discourse, as Michel Foucault and now many others have shown, can normalize or naturalize specific ways of thinking and doing things, often with a claim to scientific or other expertise, which produces effects of truth and power. To appreciate the view of transparency as performative we need an understanding of power drawing on these Foucauldian and related insights.

Such forms of power may be better understood if we start from an ‘intransitive’ perspective on power, where the performative and constitutive effects of, for instance, ideals and practices of transparency move to the fore. As Goehl (2000: 45) puts it, “Intransitive power encompasses the ensemble of relationships constituting a group of people as a community; it exists in the common practices of actors”. Power in this shape facilitates actions, boundary-creation, subjects and relationships, that is, the understanding of power indebted to Foucault. The understanding of transparency as performative implies a view of power as decentred, networked and productive. Particularly the work of Foucault (Foucault 1982) and the ensuing literature on governmentality (Burchell 1991; Miller and Rose 1992; Rose 1999) has advanced such conceptions of power as productive. They have paved the way for a growing focus on power as the creation and normalization of boundaries and forms of knowledge that shape conduct (Foucault, 1977), and subjectification or self-formation, i.e. the ways in which human beings are made into subjects (Foucault 1982; Dean 1994; Dean 1995; Fleming and Spicer 2007). More than anything, the value of a Foucauldian conception of power lies in the analytical approach it advances. Rather than considering the strengths or weaknesses, or the value or pitfalls, of transparency, a Foucauldian analytics sets out to disentangle how and with what power effects transparency has emerged as a key concern. Assuming as little as possible about the intrinsic value or outcomes of transparency, a Foucauldian analysis sets out to account for the practical and regularized ways in which transparency becomes an increasingly normalized response to a wide range of questions and concerns. That is, how did transparency become so normalized that we no longer question its existence or relevance, but instead seek to advance it, limit it or otherwise engage with it? And how do ideals and practices of transparency enact the boundaries between the good and the bad, the legal and the illegal, and set the course for individual and corporate conduct? Those are the types of questions that a Foucauldian analytics of the power-transparency nexus focuses on, and they are also central to our discussion of transparency as performative. The implications of this starting point is also that power is understood as decentred and networked (Miller and Rose, 1990, Rose and Miller 1992) in the sense that we do not take for granted that power simply resides somewhere, and also refrain from reducing power to individual
capabilities, such as resources and positions. The Foucauldian understanding of power as the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Foucault, 1982) implies that we pay attention to the techniques and rationalities (Rose and Miller, 1990) involved in transparency as a form of steering. Thus, rather than simply view transparency as information provision this analytical approach seeks to account for the ways in which objects, subjects and action are made governable through transparency devices. For example, rather than a simple solution to problems of democracy and accountability, the provision of information becomes part and parcel of norms about transparency, it shapes the conduct of organizational openness at a distance, and involves contestations about the normalization of transparency. Power, therefore, becomes central because we see how transparency is performative (Law and Urry 2004; Mackenzie, 2006): it produces, classifies and stabilizes relations and boundaries, (Bowker and Star 2000), and acts on the world in multiple and layered ways (Law 1994; Mol 2002). From this also follows the analytical principle that power must be studied as practices, and that power operates through systems of knowledge – discursive and non-discursive (Hindess 1996). As will become clear in the following this vantage point invites us to pose somewhat different empirical and analytical questions about transparency and its relation to power – in particular through a focus on practices, and a bracketing of normative assumptions about transparency.

This view of power as practical and performative directs our attention to the concrete ways in which power is achieved and comes to play a central role in the creation and stabilization of human interactions and social realities. Combining the insights about power as intransitive and transparency as performative allows us to explore how practices and ideals of transparency constitute an assemblage that mobilizes power in many different forms and shapes. Transparency, thus, have layered and intricate power effects, for instance in shaping the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Foucault, 1982) and facilitating ‘action at a distance’ (Miller and Rose, 1990), as well as the ordering of relations and boundaries (Law and Mol, 2008). Following this perspective, the paper picks up a growing awareness in the literature that transparency is not only a normative promise with some practical policy relevance, but rather a phenomenon with the capacity to shape relations, rationalities, boundaries and practices across the domains of communication, organization and governance.
Based on this discussion of the power-transparency nexus, we dig deeper into the practices and understandings of power at play in transparency. This part of the paper explores a range of transparency ideals and practices currently shaping organizations, focusing on two general categories: 1) transparency as information control and 2) transparency through proxies and mediations. The first of these involves transparency practices in the shape of (direct) information control, such as organizational attempts to ‘open up the books’, withhold sensitive information, or otherwise engage in the management or steering of disclosure. The second category we look at involves transparency in the shape of (indirect) mediation, such as performance measures, reporting techniques, and other forms of disclosure through proxies. Moving through our discussion of these two sets of transparency practices, we problematize the underlying views of power and reflect on the added value of a practical and performative reading of the power-transparency nexus.

**Practices of information control**

Transparency is often cast as a matter of disclosing and controlling information, and by problematizing this understanding of transparency we open up the exploration of the power-transparency nexus.

**The illusion of full disclosure**

Transparency is increasingly associated with notions such as ethical communication, accountability, participation and democracy. Most common sense understandings equate transparency with unlimited visibility, openness and insight (Henriques, 2007; see also, Oliver, 2004). From such perspectives, the disclosure of information in itself is a significant act that promises to increase trust, ethical conduct and empowerment. Transparency, in such a view, is simply the ability to “see” what’s going on, and most official understandings of transparency reduce transparency to a question of information provision. Williams (2005: 361), for example, define transparency “as the extent to which the organization provides relevant, timely, and reliable information, in written and verbal form, to investors, regulators, and market intermediaries”. Likewise, Millar,
Eldiomaty, Hilton and Chong (2005: 166) describe “institutional transparency” as “the extent to which there is available clear, accurate information, formal and informal, covering practices related to capital markets, including the legal and juridical system, the government’s macroeconomic and fiscal policies, accounting norms and practices (including corporate governance and the release of information), ethics, corruption, and regulations, customs and habits compatible with the norms of society”. In a recent publication, Rawlins (2009) confirms this understanding of transparency as information provision by stating:

Transparency is the deliberate attempt to make available all legally releasable information – whether positive or negative in nature – in a manner that is accurate, timely, balanced and unequivocal, for the purpose of enhancing the reasoning ability of publics and holding organizations accountable for their actions, policies, and practices. (Rawlins, 2009: 75)

Following this definition, Rawlins urges organizations voluntarily to “share information that is inclusive, auditable (verifiable), complete, relevant, accurate, neutral, comparable, clear, timely, accessible, reliable, honest, and holds the organization accountable” (Rawlins, 2009, p. 79). In addition to an understanding of transparency as passive information provision, thus, we are presented with the idea that it is possible to represent the reality of the organization and its activities in an all-inclusive, balanced and unequivocal manner (see also Bandsuch, Pate & Thies, 2008).

While accuracy, timeliness, balance, unequivocality, certainly are values worth pursuing in corporate and institutional communication, such prescriptive approaches to transparency as a simple matter of information provision are problematic in a number of ways. Firstly, as argued by O’Neill (2006: 81), this optimistic view of the effects of transparency is “one-sided” because it “encourages us to think of information as detachable from communication, and of informing as a process of ‘transferring’ content”. In contrast, O’Neill calls for a more “complete view”, which acknowledges the importance of the reception and use of information, and of the process of communication. Even if organizations were able to supply all the types of information prescribed by Rawlins (2009) and others, such understanding reduces transparency to a feature of the sender without considering the abilities of receivers to actually handle the information made available. Viewing transparency as communication rather than the transmission of information reminds us of the interpretive and relational complexities involved in transparency practices.

Secondly, the view of transparency as information provision fails to acknowledge the powerful role of language in constituting our world, including the political and organizational contexts which we inhabit (Burke, 1966). No
representation of an organization is neutral; there is always a perspective implied if not explicitly offered: for example, in the selection of what counts as “good information.” As a consequence, extant research is unable to account for transparency as a power play in which reality is constructed, either through deliberate attempt to define and shape what transparency is or indirectly through contributions to public discourse about the topic. In practice, the meaning of transparency is not given once and for all, not a fixed set of expectations and pressures to which organizations adapt by passively supplying the required level and type of information, as Rawlins (2009) seem to suggest (per the quote above).

By contrast, the subtleties of power relations are captured well by Sproull and Kiesler (1995) in their discussion of new communication technologies and the often concomitant assumption that everyone share or want to share accurate information with each other:

Other things equal, if groups send and receive accurate and complete information, they potentially compromise their strategic positions and threaten the balance of control in the organization. Senders, knowing this, misrepresent information. Recipients, knowing this, discount information. Simply increasing the rate and scope of information sharing might only increase the number of misleading and discounted communications (Sproull & Kiesler, 1995, p. 117).

As it appears, the exercise of power through information filtering is not simply a one-way affair, in which one party controls another party by determining the limits of information access. The power-play goes both ways, as the seemingly controlled party may choose to ignore, doubt or misrepresent the information made available by the gatekeeper. Thus, transparency is a moving target shaped by the interpretations, negotiations and enactments by legislators, regulators and other agenda-setting stakeholders, in other words an arena of communication where ideals, expectations and demands are continuously formulated, enacted and contested. In a society that celebrates transparency as an antidote to corruption, fraud and other types of organizational or institutional evil and increasingly call for organizations to contribute to transparency themselves, the interesting questions, following a Foucauldian perspective on power, is how transparency is defined and with what effects. Considering the social and organizational significance of these questions, it is striking that most research has addressed questions of power in very traditional terms, such as resource-oriented perspectives and principal-agent models. By giving relatively little attention to the practical ways in which transparency is constructed and performed by organizational and institutional actors, this leaves the impression that the
meaning of transparency is evident or given in advance and that the parameters of transparency are defined outside a context of power and control.

Thirdly, the view of transparency as the transmission of information fails to account for power effects in more profound ways. The ideal of full disclosure and visibility must also be understood as performative and disciplinary practices, which come to shape conduct, for instance in the shape of self-regulatory modes of behavior and thought. Along these lines, our conception of transparency as performative foregrounds the relations, boundaries and forms of knowledge that the normalization of transparency gives rise to. We explore these ideas further below, starting with a discussion of the balance between organizational openness and closure.

The limits of transparency

While transparency is a prevailing ideal in contemporary society, limits on transparency abound. Functional understandings of transparency would claim that society and its organizations can only exist if certain limits to transparency are tolerated. Openness is rarely the only consideration when organizations and institutions seek to advance the interests of their many stakeholders. As Eisenberg (2007: 65) puts it: “While it is admirable to strive for an organizational climate in which people feel comfortable speaking openly with each other, such a goal is unreasonable unless we are realistic about the good reasons people have for concealment.” Thus, for example, we know that lack of transparency may help managers avoid suspicion or jealousy (over, for example, unequal rewards), breaking into open conflict and that bargaining games and conflict resolution both inside and outside the organizational context often involve differentiated messages and some level of dissimulation – strategies that can only work if transparency is limited (Heald, 2006b; cf. Cheney, 1991). When it comes to issues such as state security, industry and corporate trade secrets, marketing, etc. it is easy to acknowledge how some limitations on transparency may be unavoidable, if not always desirable. Innovative products, path-breaking strategies and financial arrangements rarely benefit from having everyone watch, and potentially copy or publicize the plans. The danger of not controlling information is far from hypothetical. As Fung et al. (2007) point out, most requests for information access with reference to freedom-of-information laws come from businesses seeking to gather information about other businesses (Fung et al., 2007: 27). Likewise, too much openness in interorganizational networks and relationships may endanger the interests and relative positions of participating organizations (e.g., Ebers, 1999; Lamming et al., 2004). And, although this is rarely recognized explicitly, marketing and branding often contravene the demand for more transparency. Marketing
and branding, thus, constantly seek to strike a balance between releasing information about products to powerful and enlightened consumers and maintaining the secracies necessary to secure commercial confidentiality or differentiate the product from its competitors (Christensen, Morsing & Cheney, 2008). Moreover, in the context of domestic privacy some limitations on transparency are essential to protect the individual against the intrusion of the political system or the media. As Heald (2006b: 70) puts it: “Some limits on transparency may afford some protection against centralized political power and/or intrusive media, especially when these have developed close manipulative relationships”.

Understood as information provision and information control, transparency is therefore a question of balancing openness and closure. The practices and rationalities involved in such boundary work demands attention if we want to make sense of the power effects of transparency. So rather than considering the normative questions of whether openness and closure are fair or democratic states of affairs, or focus on the (functional) benefits of one or the other, we need to focus on how this balancing work is carried out, and how it potentially shapes and orders organizational and social life.

We can approach the unintended effects and workings of information control in a number of ways. While Goffmann (1959/1990), for example, emphasized the importance of “face” in social interaction and thus a need to maintain some distinction between front stage and back stage, other writers point out that transparency potentially undermines trust in experts and expert systems – a trust, which is essential in order for a society to function properly (Tsoukas, 1997; see also, Heald, 2006). Community and peaceful co-existence is not necessarily compatible with full information access, and often people, states and organizations avoid information sharing for good reasons. As Power (1997) points out, transparency is not only about information but also about appearances and image management. Although this is not the full story of transparency, we need to recognize that impression management plays a significant part in contemporary public relations and marketing discourse. From a more critical perspective, Creamer (2007) describes transparency – or what he refers to ironically as corporate nudity – as “one of the sexiest PR poses” of our times. Likewise, Drucker and Gumpert (2007) remark that the appearance of transparency has become a popular leadership style because it holds out the promise of efficiency while building credibility, trust and collaboration. Thus, there is nothing innocent about transparency, as Strathern (2000) puts it.

Even when transparency moves beyond impression management to include substantial elements of organizational openness and information provision, it is essential to keep an eye on how the power dimension is at
play when, for example, measures of transparency are produced, staged and publicized. Although these practices are not always described in terms of transparency, we know from the literature that organizations carefully select, simplify and summarize data before they are revealed, that they selectively disclose or leak information, for example through “competitive signaling” (e.g., Heil & Robertsen, 1991) and that they shrewdly manage the timing of disclosure, sometimes with the intention of deflecting critique or handling potential issues. O’Neill (2006), for example, talks about “defensive risk management” when transparency is reduced to strategic information disclosures (e.g., warnings or limitations printed in small letters) designed to limit or transfer organizational liability and thus, in practice, avoid communication between organizations and their surroundings. Likewise, Rindova (2001) coined the notion of “polished transparency” to refer to certain forms of marketing aesthetics: for example, beautifully designed environmental reports or aesthetically pleasing CSR-conferences. Such designs are intended to signal openness to educated and inquisitive stakeholders without inviting dialogue or discussion. In such cases, transparency becomes a spectacle or a show in which the question of staging takes preponderance over information dissemination. Eisenberg (2007) generalize this observation by pointing out that organizations and organizational members, when pressed for more openness than they are inclined to produce voluntarily, tend to reframe their behavior “as a kind of public performance” (p. 175).

In addition, the language used to convey openness may often be vague and unclear. Acknowledging that organizations and organizational members have many good reasons for concealment, Eisenberg describe strategic ambiguity as a necessity in a complex environment with many different, and sometimes hostile, audiences (see also, Eisenberg, 1984). While most communication researchers and practitioners encourage message clarity, such advice ignores the fact that communicators often have multiple and conflicting goals when communicating inside and outside the organizational setting. Communicators, for example, constantly need to strike a balance between being understood, maintaining a specific self-image and not offending others. The strategic use of ambiguity promotes what Eisenberg calls “unified diversity,” the ability for differences to co-exist within the unity of the organization. At the same time, strategic ambiguity, however, may also be a source of control (Markham, 1996) that may help organizations avoid revealing confidential details while giving off the impression of openness and dialogue with internal and external stakeholders (Leitch & Davenport, 2002).

Based on this research, it is tempting to suggest that organizations do not want transparency at all, even when they officially celebrate it as a social value and subscribe to its organizational implications. However, such a
conclusion is premature because it prevents us from fully understanding the extent, impact and implications of corporate initiatives in the area of transparency management. In analyzing such initiatives we should ask how corporate initiatives to increase organizational transparency help (co)-produce and shape transparency as a collective norm, and how such a norm in circulation can be seen as a form of power.

Christensen and Langer (2009) argue that contemporary organizations seek to manage and enclose the growing pressure for transparency through *policies of consistency*, that is, by formalizing all communications and pursuing uniformity in everything they say and do. Such endeavours manifest themselves, for example, in programs of integrated communications and in projects of corporate branding. The current emphasis on consistency, however, extends far beyond the marketing endeavours of the past. While early articulations of integrated communications were driven by an interest in aligning tangible marketing or design parameters, today the most powerful driver behind integration seems to be a potent combination of inquisitive publics asking for insight and information, and critical media and journalists zealously looking for gaps, contradictions and ambiguities in corporate messages (Christensen, Frat & Cornelissen, 2009). Faced with such pressures, organizations and institutions across sectors are compulsively focused on producing messages consistent for both internal and external audiences. And, as we can clearly see when political leaders or business managers are interviewed for the media, part of this endeavour entails avoiding or even denying communicative discrepancies of any kind: for example, between front stage and back stage, between messages and behaviour, between ideals and practice and between messages of the past and messages of the future. Designed to avoid or reduce inconsistencies or discrepancies between and among these different types of corporate messages, programs of integrated communications imply tighter control of all information and communication flows (Christensen, Torp, & Frat, 2005). In the name of consistency there are attempts to intensify workplace surveillance (Drucker & Gumpert, 2007) and efforts to discipline messages about corporate design and promotions. We even find the values, ideas and aspirations of organizational members subjected to such standardization (Christensen, Morsing & Cheney, 2008; see also Kunda, 1992). Organizations, in other words, use transparency claims to discipline organizational voices (Heald, 2006a). Members of political parties, for example, are expected to articulate only the official voice of the party, and corporations often limit the voice to an official spokesperson, especially in times of crisis. Paradoxically, such disciplining of organizational communications may prevent unofficial, but relevant, information about corporate practices “percolating the ‘sides’ of organizations” (Heald, 2006a, p. 38) and thereby become accessible to the general public. In the name of openness, thus, organizations may produce new types of closure.
Since transparency has attained a “quasi-religious significance” (Hood, 2006: 3) in today’s society where debates over corporate governance and organizational design are increasingly shaped by references to openness and accountability, transparency is a powerful signifier in and of itself. It can signal an aspiration for accountability as well as a general commitment to the democratic ethos of openness, insight and participation. Attempt to manage the demand for transparency and reassert control over its meaning may produce new types of blind-spots or opaqueness. Insights about the layered and surprising effects of transparency have been addressed in recent literature on transparency (Garsten and Lind de Montoya, 2008), but need to be explored further. A more explicit focus on power is one way of capturing how transparency practices constitute forms of ordering and steering: Transparency practices enable the circulation of information across multiple settings, they create relations and stabilize boundaries, just like they turn site-specific activities into forms of ‘action at a distance’ (Miller and Rose (1990). Engaging Foucauldian insights, all these are important starting points if we want to capture the power effects of transparency.

**Transparency by mediation and proxies**

So far, we have largely talked about transparency in general terms without specifying the practical ways in organizations are or can be transparent. To fully understand the performative character of transparency, we need to grasp the importance of mediation: transparency usually presupposes a notion of direct access or co-presence, thus overlooking the fact that that transparency involves representation and mediation and always occurs by proxy. As we noted in at the beginning of this paper, hopes for transparency are often linked to the emergence of increasingly important media institutions. For instance, Thompson (2005) argues that communication media have reversed the direction of discipline in contemporary society. The media’s power to make the invisible visible for us all to see has a disciplining effect that Foucault’s perspective on surveillance neglected. Acknowledging the work of Foucault, Thompson argues that while the Panopticon make the many visible to the few, the media makes the few visible to the many. In this respect, contemporary society bears resemblance to societies of the ancient régime. Traditional societies, as Foucault pointed out, were societies of spectacles – societies where the power to rule was linked to the ability to demonstrate strength and superiority to the general population, for example through public executions. In a similar manner, the communication media allows the rulers of today’s world, political or corporate leaders, to display and celebrate their strength and
importance to the masses. In contrast to the spectacles of the ancient world, however, the new type of visibility, facilitated by the media, does not necessarily serve those in power.

Today, according to Thompson, it is primarily those who exercise power who are subjected to the discipline produced by mediated visibility. No matter how carefully political and corporate leaders seek to manage their media visibility – often with the help of advertising or PR consultants – their ability to control it is limited. Such ‘synoptic’ processes are at work when organizations or political and corporate leaders become the targets of public scandalization (Thompson, 2005). Clearly ICTs make it possible for broader publics to gather information about centrally located actors. This information and the kind of technologies involved take multiple shapes, ranging from video cameras and remote sensing to ratings and written reporting, statistics and performance calculations such as publically available league tables and figures, comparisons and contrasts. Not only is transparency and surveillance today multidirectional, it also rests on *proxy technologies* that pose a simplifying and calculative prism through which certain contours of a reality that observers might like to control or make an influence upon can be depicted (Power, 2004).

In the following, we look at some different and less visible forms of mediation, such as the reliance on proxies like reporting, auditing and performance measurements. With this focus on mediations, proxies and other forms of disclosure devices, we now turn to an exploration of the organized and structured ways in which transparency practices and standards develop and circulate. The investigation of indirect and mediated transparency practices – such as indexing, auditing and reporting – paves the way for a more nuanced understanding of the power of transparency.

**Transparency through performance measurements**

We have already noted the close relationship between the availability of information, surveillance and transparency. All these aspects are included in the concept of *performance management*, which in recent years has come to be of increasing importance in the administration and reform of the public sector. Performance indices are intended to allow for direct observations of (the quality of) various forms of organizational practice (Power et. al, 2010), and public administrators are now required to justify their actions not only with reference to efficiency but also to the outcomes they produce. The logic behind this development is directly tied to the normalization of transparency. There is a growing expectation that public sector organizations should produce performance information, which can be used as a foundation for decision making. The creation, dissemination
and deployment of performance information are believed to improve decision making in government, public and political accountability, efficiency, and budget decisions. For the general public, the availability of information about public sector performance provides an explanation of how well the government is doing. Seen from the outside, the availability of information becomes synonymous with transparency. In turn, for elected officials, performance information makes it possible to exert policy control and the availability of information comes to serve the ambition of surveillance and monitoring.

The assumption behind this line of thinking is that administrators have weak incentives to focus on performance and lack the information needed to do this. As a consequence, they are inwardly focused and concerned with the compliance of rules rather that goal compliance. However, government can transform itself to become efficient and make more rational decisions by establishing performance techniques such as information systems, which is claimed to allow a move from an inefficient, error avoiding compliance culture to a more effective public service (Moynihan 2008:29). The focus on performance information will on the one hand hold administrators to higher standards of results-based accountability, implying clear goals, with results measured against these goals, while on the other provide greater managerial flexibility in using resources. By implication, rather than focusing on inputs and procedures, government decisions and controls will focus on outputs and outcomes, just as administrators will be held accountable for the use of resources and the results being produced.

The project of making public sector organizations, as well as corporations, accountable today through the production of performance information involves the creation of standards of reporting. Moreover, it requires uniform indicators based on quantification to classify and order performance with a view to visibility. Importantly, the proliferation of standards of accountability and performance indicators within an expanding area of non-financial issues, such as corporate sustainability, labor and anti-corruption, has made it possible to conduct audits congenial to those traditionally associated with budgeting and financial statements. Such developments reflect how modes of financial calculation have increasingly become imposed upon areas previously managed according to either professional, bureaucratic or other norms characteristic of the traditional welfare state (Rose 1999). Clearly, performance measurements are forms of ordering and control working in the name of transparency – often in the shape of ‘management by objectives’ (Drucker, 1954; Heintz and Vollmer, 2011)
But, as the more critical literature has noted, performance indices also make things observable in ways that are shaped by political orientations, social institutions and organizational strategies, which serve to “selectively mask or reveal, allow entry or exit” (Drucker and Gumpert, 2007: 495). And not only are such measurements forms of interpretation – they are also in themselves sources of social, political and organizational ordering. Systems of classification and categorization are largely invisible, but as Bowker and Star (2000: 5) remind us: “Each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another”, and like other ways of ‘sorting things out’, also performance measurements must scrutinized if we want to capture the “material force of categories” (Bowker and Star, 2000: 3). Power (2004) observes that quantitative indicators rest on calibration, that is, the creation and determination of quanta that can be subject to further calculation. Rendering diverse phenomena countable quanta in the first place involves an abstraction from many specific qualities by establishing categories of similarity, which ultimately ignore purportedly ‘unimportant differences’ and thereby reduce complexity. Importantly however, once accepted, such systems appear natural and incontestable.

Such insights drawing on actor-network theory (Latour, 2005), Science and Technology Studies (Hackett et al, 2008) and Foucault’s work (1973) on ordering, pave the way for an understanding of performance measurements as novel forms of steering. In this vein, the neoliberal or advanced liberal mentalities of governance identified by Rose (1999) and Dean (1999) refer to the increasing tendency to develop markets where there used to be public provision, to the independence, responsibility, and empowerment of hitherto welfare-dependent institutions and individuals, to the increasing importance of accountability and evaluation in order to measure and ultimately regulate the performance of empowered agents, and, importantly, to the generation of multiple and new organizational forms with the capacity of ruling within such a decentralized and participatory liberal model of society. One cluster of governance techniques closely related to advanced liberalism revolves around performance. Performance techniques are designed to make individuals or organizations accountable. Performance indicators, auditing, best-practice schemes such as benchmarking and award programs, competitions, and other modes of external verification make up an ensemble of indirect means whereby people and organizational entities, some of which have been empowered and given voice can be governed. By promoting accountability, transparency, and democratic control of the activities of a variety of organizations - ranging from public organizations to private companies - these techniques of performance present themselves as ultimate ways of restoring trust, of stimulating learning, and enhancing innovation and change.
Furthermore, steering through performance measurements has the capacity to make decisions appear to
descend from a ‘neutral’ logic of quantification rather than subjective judgment. As Power (2004: 769) has pointed out, it is one of “the defining characteristics of measurement, as compared with judging or guessing that we expect the former not to depend on who is doing it. In short, measurements are in principle replicable and not dependent on when, where and by whom the measurement is done. This is the foundation of their impersonality and objectivity.” Thus, it is important to pay attention to the role of the epistemological priority of judgment in all forms of calculations and classifications. Performance measurements often rely on the ability to translate complex information into simple numbers, and therefore it is important to critically discuss any ‘trust in numbers’ (Porter 1995), in particular drawing attention to the power consequences of performance measurement systems which tend to make visible and valuable only a part of a complex whole. When attention is directed to performance information such as indicators, they are often treated as convenient representations of a reality from which they are in fact disconnected. For casual users of indicators in the shape of numbers this may be due to the apparent obviousness with which numbers can stand in for objects in daily routines, while for professionals, such as accountants or scientists, trust in the unproblematically representational capacities of numbers is central to the purpose, acceptance and success of their work. Yet even in the most casual use of indices and numbers there are clues that they do more than simply represent objects—that they also make it possible for objects to be defined, ordered and controlled in predictable ways.

In this section, we have stressed that it is necessary to examine performance indicators more closely given their increasing centrality in transparency regimes. Categorizing and measuring what counts as good performance when it comes to transparency is itself as source of power, and this is often overlooked in the more managerial and/or celebratory accounts of performance measurements.

**Transparency by auditing and reporting**

Transparency is enacted and displayed by organizations in multiple ways. Among these, reporting and auditing are increasingly central organizational approaches to transparency. Investigating the ascendance, practices and effects of these forms of organizational disclosure is useful if we want to unpack the power-transparency nexus.
Reporting is a good example of how transparency is adopted, co-opted, and re-engineered into a paradigm of measurement and comparison. In fact, while there is obviously more to be transparent about than what is typically being reported (Henriques, 2007, p. 69), transparency is often equated with reporting. Reporting, thus, illustrates how transparency is related to power, particularly in the shape of attempts to develop widely circulating standards for conduct.

The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), which has pioneered the development of the world’s most widely used sustainability reporting framework, defines transparency as the “full disclosure of the processes, procedures, and assumptions” of the reported information. GRI defines and promotes standardized principles and indicators that organizations can use to measure and report their economic, environmental, and social performance. According to GRI’s website, “more than 1,500 companies, including many of the world’s leading brands, have declared their voluntary adoption of the Guidelines worldwide.” Whether corporations or institutions chose to follow GRI’s guidelines or not, their reporting practices are faced with a number of significant challenges, which illustrate how the issue of power enters the scene – and eventually affects public insight and knowledge – when the management of transparency is being formalized.

Standards of transparency management are provided by social conventions and institutions and tend, as a consequence, to become so formalized that we rarely question their ability to create knowledge and insight. This, for example, is the case with auditing and reporting. As Strathern (2000) points out, the notion of audit epitomizes our understanding of transparency and its underlying notion of accountability. This is true because we tend to equate publicity and visibility with transparency: “An organization being audited is ipso facto being transparent about its dealings” (p. 313). The problem with auditing, however, is that it presupposes a trust in financial experts and rarely involves open debate and deliberation. Auditing, according to Power, is a program or regime that shapes public conceptions of what accountability is. By institutionalizing certain types of regulation and control, auditing holds the seemingly clear promise of organizational transparency. Yet, the products of auditing rarely form a basis for public communication and dialogue. Consequently, the audit process is, as Power (1997) puts it “…a dead end in the chain of accountability” (p. 127):

Giving an account is seen to be a way of avoiding an account […] the fact of being audited deters public curiosity and inquiry and the users of audits are often just a mythical reference point within expert discourses. Audit is in this respect a substitute for democracy rather than its aid. (Power, 1997, p. 127)
Auditing reports and statements, thus, are typically constructed as “labels” or one-way signals that must be trusted. However, as transparency is asserted more and more as a frame for corporate and governmental activities, the discussion of its relevance actually becomes preempted or shut down. In many uses of transparency today, thus, we find examples of what Deetz (1992) calls “discursive closure”: the premature truncation or containment of a discussion, in this case, even in the announced interest in democracy.

The normalization of auditing and reporting also involves subtle selections and classifications of target groups, and a growing and largely unacknowledged reliance on gatekeepers. Even in its least formalized versions, reporting involves important considerations about its proper target groups. Who should the report address? And who will actually read the report? While several audiences may be counted as relevant stakeholders, some prioritization needs to take place. And here, inevitably, reporting companies will tend to focus especially on powerful stakeholders, that is, stakeholders who are able to seriously influence the success and economic well-being of the sender corporation. Where such an approach used to privilege financial over non-financial reporting, new types of stakeholders have forced organizations to disclose more information about non-financial issues. As a result, corporate reports have not only become far more voluminous and comprehensive, they also demand the involvement of an increasing number of different expert groups. Consequently, fewer audiences are able to check the validity of all claims made in the reports. In the shape of reporting, transparency refers less to the ability of organizations to facilitate insight for the general public than to their skillfulness at producing formalized and authorized accounts that define and shape official rules for openness and responsibility.

Disclosure always involves multiple and intertwined relations between the work of measuring performance through accounting, making activities checkable by outsiders through audit, the particular bodies of legitimated expertise that make such judgments, and much more general norms and values of control (Power 2004). If performance measurement, for instance in the shape of a university ranking or good government index, always has a public face, which presents itself as visible and transparent to outside observers and expert analysts, it does so only in a very particular way. As Power (2004) notes, this kind of transparency can never be construed as a ‘true’ or ‘natural’ effect of performance measurement. Transparency rather reflects particular expert communities of practice in which certain values of measurement, audit and control converge and dominate. The influence of such intermediaries – for instance, the auditing profession – lies in their presumed capacity to translate and simplify complex company accounts into clear and acceptable signs of corporate soundness and responsibility. One of the problems with the simplification of information makes us, as citizens
and customers, highly dependent on intermediaries – community groups, environmental advocates, political advocates, associations of users, investigative reporters, financial analysts, and other experts – who can translate complex information into metrics that allow us to incorporate the information more easily into our individual lives. The problems with such a dependency are underscored by the doubtful advice provided by many financial advisors and analysts prior to the current financial crisis. Fairclough’s notion of “discourse technologist” (Fairclough, 1992, p.8) captures well the role that such expert intermediaries play in sorting out and prioritizing the myriads of information about corporate practices, in constructing knowledge about transparency issues and, thus, in achieving hegemonic dominance within the discourse of accountability. Given the increasing complexity of most accountability issues (financial, environmental, technological, etc.) and the growing amount of information available about these issues, our dependency of such “discourse technologists” is bound to increase in the future. While more information is produced and made available to the general public than previously, the chances of non-experts to decipher and fully grasp the underlying reality behind such accounts are slimmer than ever before. Henriques (2007) puts it this way:

There has certainly been a significant increase in the volume of financial reporting over the past century. Yet most of what is produced, however technically accurate it may or may not be, is extremely inaccessible to the average stakeholder. The highly impenetrable language and hundreds of pages of an annual report and accounts are only read in any detail by the analysts employed by institutional investors. (Henriques, 2007, p. 74)

This problem is not limited to financial reporting. In almost all areas of reporting, interest groups usually lack the resources necessary to judge every detail of a company’s performance in relation to a specific issue (Henriques, 2007) as well as the power to confront and challenge disclosers if their self-reports appear less than credible. In fact, it may be argued that most audiences lack the resources, the expert knowledge and the power needed to match corporate initiatives in the area of professional transparency management (Heald, 2006a; O’Neill, 2006). The combination of a previously unseen amount and complexity of information and the emergence of new discourse technologists in the area of organizational transparency seriously challenge our ideals about knowledge and insight. What looks like transparency on the surface may ultimately represent a deeper level of opacity as well as more subtle types of power.

The relationship between information access and power was formulated succinctly by Weber (1968) when he wrote about the “rule” of bureaucracy and the superiority of professional insiders. Weber addressed the fact
that information is a significant source of power and therefore often shielded against the intrusion of outsiders, including both absolute monarchs and elected politicians. Hereby he identified the power-transparency nexus in its classic organizational form as an issue of gatekeeping. While the practice of gatekeeping is not necessarily rooted in formal power positions, it has power consequences in terms of filtering and thereby shaping the information available for dissemination.

Our conception of transparency as performative adds an important facet to Weber's more traditional view of power as capacities, such as resources and positions. Transparency practices are not only shaped by gatekeeping, interpretation and the strategic management of meaning, but themselves sources of power because they establish and stabilize particular boundaries, relations and forms of conduct. Organizational disclosure, such as auditing and reporting do important ordering work. They classify and circulate standards for acceptable and unacceptable behavior, they produce and normalize boundaries between the knowable and the unknowable, the visible and the opaque, and in the process they connect organizations and other actors to one another in novel forms of 'action at a distance'.

We emphasize that reporting, accounting and auditing should not only be considered in terms of the performance or practice they make visible and transparent – a performance which appears as 'true information' while it is in fact a constructed representation of the reality in the shape of an indicator. They should also be understood for what they dismiss or conceal, that is, evidencing the highly constructed nature of what is not only made visible but also what is obscured. Importantly, the celebration of neutrality and objectivity inherent to the accounting and auditing of performance management renders virtually invisible the process and dynamics through which certain qualities have been made countable, and the process through which only some aspects, at the cost of others, are made auditable².

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² Power has described these invisible dynamics in terms of first-order measurement, which "relates to the institutions of classification that make counting possible." He argues that this first order "can be made to appear 'natural' and primitive when the work of classification becomes invisible and taken for granted (Bowker & Star, 2000), but in reality demands extensive negotiation over categories of similarity and relevance, which translate qualities into quantities..." He adds that "the organized machinery of counting and data capture is often conspicuous, as in the case of census surveys, cause of death surveys and tax collection. So the primitive nature of counting in this sense should not be misconstrued as being epistemologically realist and is consistent with the view that the production of numbers and organized projects of control are closely related" (Power 2004:771).
**Conclusion – unpacking the power-transparency nexus**

The point of this paper has not been to argue that a focus on power is absent in the emergent literature on transparency, but rather that issues of power, control and steering have not received sufficient and explicit attention. As we have seen, references to power abound in the literature on transparency – giving substance to Haugaard’s (2002: 1) argument that the array of discussions and perspectives on power is often ‘bewildering’. Scanning the literature on transparency, the issue of power appears in many different shapes, including hopes for ‘democratization’, ‘freedom’ and the ‘power of information’, fears about ‘surveillance’ and ‘control’, attempts to create ‘standards’ for ‘ethical conduct’, ‘accountability’ and ‘legitimacy’, the importance of ‘gatekeepers’ and ‘proxies’, and so on. Furthermore, in paving the way for our conception of transparency as performative and a source of power we have pointed to power in the shape of ‘framing’, ‘circulation’ and ‘interpretation’, stressed the value of a focus on ‘regularized practices’, ‘governmental techniques’ and ‘rationalities’, and foregrounded the power effects of ‘classification’, ‘steering’, and ‘boundary work’. Taken together, these facets or forms of power provide a valuable exploration of the power-transparency nexus.

In order to think of all these facets of transparency as somehow related to power, we need to acknowledge that power is “a ‘family resemblance’ concept. This entails that when we use the term in different contexts its meaning changes sufficiently so that there is no single definition of power which covers all usage” (Haugaard 2002: 1-2). But the fact that the power-transparency nexus lacks unity should not discourage us from trying to capture its contours. By foregrounding and problematizing these implicit assumptions about power in discussions about transparency, the paper has paved the way for a more explicit and dynamic understanding of the power-transparency nexus. Rather than thinking of transparency as the simple transmission of information – directly or via proxies – we propose that transparency research must pay attention to the organizing properties of communication, and replace a trust in the ‘knowing subject’, ‘objective measures’ and ‘direct knowledge’ with sociological and other empirical investigations of the techniques and rationalities at work in transparency practices. To foreground transparency practices and their power effects means to investigate, for example, how transparency standards emerge and develop into global regimes for organizational openness, how corporations seek to enact their own preferred metrics and types of measurements, and how institutionalized transparency standards are adopted, negotiated, challenged and otherwise resisted. The power-transparency nexus is thus far more complex than the information provision perspective tends to assume, and all forms of disclosure have multiple and layered effects.
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