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What Is Transparency?

CAROLYN BALL

Abstract

This article examines the evolving definition of transparency from a postmodernist approach. It traces the meaning of transparency from its use by nongovernmental and supranational organizations to its use in the international relations, nonprofit, public policy, and administration literature. It finds that the definition of transparency reveals three metaphors: transparency as a public value embraced by society to counter corruption, transparency synonymous with open decision-making by governments and nonprofits, and transparency as a complex tool of good governance in programs, policies, organizations, and nations. In the first metaphor, transparency is subtly intertwined with accountability. In the second, as transparency encourages openness, it increases concerns for secrecy and privacy. In the third, policymakers create transparency alongside accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness. The analysis concludes that these meanings affect the way organization members conduct and will conduct their day-to-day activities and how policies are and will be created. Transparency is becoming an unofficial mandate by the public and is often a legal mandate.

The words “transparent” and “transparency” are creeping into the public’s vocabulary and into political and policy academic writing. Over the years, particularly in the aftermath of Watergate in the 1970s, new laws and administrative rules have given the public greater access to governmental information, increasing the accountability of businesses, civil servants, and politicians for their actions, and making decisions more open (Vaughn 2000). These include the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) (1966, amended in 1974), the Sunshine in Government Act (1976), and the Presidential Records Act (1978), which together give the press and the public access to many government documents on request, to most meetings, and to many presidential materials. The Whistleblower Protection Act (1989) provides protection against termination for federal civil servants and contract employees who report illegal activities in the federal government or its contractors. The Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (1977) prohibits corporations from seeking to influence foreign governments with bribes. Other laws and regulations similarly increase the accountability of government programs by requiring the measurement and reporting of outcomes (e.g., the 1982 Job Training Partnership Act). State and local governments have passed comparable legislation.

Today these pieces of legislation might be described as creating transparency. Presidential candidates call for greater transparency and accountability in government when in the past they might simply have called for greater accountability (Karp

The evolution of the use and meaning of transparency has much to do with supranational organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

2005; Obama 2006). The Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006 and the Legislative Transparency and Accountability section of the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007 use the word “transparency” side by side with “accountability.” The purpose of the former is to require increased disclosure by

entities receiving federal contracts. The purpose of the latter is to control activities of lobbyists and require greater disclosure of earmarked legislation by members of Congress.

Why add the word “transparency” to the names of these recent legislative acts or use it to describe earlier acts, such as the FOIA? Would not “accountability” convey the same purpose and value? This article explores the way in which “transparency” has become part of common parlance. The approach taken to this topic is to trace the use of the term “transparency” in the lexicon of the public and academicians from a postmodernist perspective. Postmodernists posit that words take on meaning from the way they are used and their incorporation into the workplace and society (Weick 1995, 4–16; Yanow 2003, ix). Words become more than parts of speech; they become symbols of ideas or metaphors. This happens in organizations through the interaction of employees as they make sense of a word over time. In the public arena, agenda setters begin using words that become part of the public’s vocabulary. They may press for legislation as an understanding of an idea develops. Policymaking becomes the expressive act confirming a particular belief held by a public (Yanow 2003, 23). Stone finds that the words chosen may have paradoxical properties (2002, 8). For example, “transparency” conveys openness but also generates secrecy. If a word becomes value laden and an accepted norm of behavior, it leads to certain actions and behaviors (Holzner and Holzner 2006, 12–13; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Further, the choice of a word (in this case “transparency”) may create a perception of a problem that heretofore has not been readily apparent and may offer a solution or strategy to resolve a problem (Stone 2002, 261–262). Using Weick’s vocabulary (1995, 30), this process of enactment is occurring with the word “transparency.”

To describe the process, the first section below discusses the origins and meanings of transparency in the international arena. It shows the role of an international nongovernmental organization (NGO), Transparency International, and its influence in spreading the idea of transparency. Then the meaning of transparency in the fields of international relations, nonprofit, public policy, and administration research is examined. Finally, the analysis concludes with a discussion of the meanings of transparency from a postmodernist perspective, proposing that three transparency metaphors exist. Understanding these metaphors is important because language itself is important. People make sense of their environment through progressive clarification of the sense of the words they use, resolving ambiguities and modifying their writing and actions (Weick 1995, 15). An organization is much more than an organizational chart and a leader, just as a policy is much more than a legal or

administrative mandate. Both convey and use metaphors of language. These metaphors shape what managers, policymakers, and politicians do and what the public expects.¹ The present analysis does have a limitation. It is not a study of lexicography, but rather a study of the evolving use of “transparency” rather than other words. Further, it relies largely upon information available in English and in the United States. Admittedly, this is a gap in the analysis, since the use of the term probably has international and not American roots.

The Idea of Transparency Begins

The evolution of the use and meaning of the word “transparency” has much to do with supranational organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Of course, the *Oxford English Dictionary* records many early uses and meanings of the word and its adjective, from transmitting light to something that is apparent or understood. With a few sporadic exceptions (discussed later), its presence in organizational documents begins in the 1990s surrounding the creation of the European Union (Lodge 1994), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (Qureshi 1990), and activities of other European institutions and NGOs (Cooper and Yoder, 2002; Holzner and Holzner 2006; McIntosh as cited in Roberts 2006, 187). But probably the choice of the name “Transparency International” for a newly created NGO and the subsequent activities of this organization helped define the word for the broader public and the academic world.

The story begins in the early 1990s, when Peter Eigen, a manager at the World Bank, became increasingly distressed by the bank’s failure to address corruption in its loan-giving to nations. The bank’s so-called politically neutral position led to little economic progress, high costs for the citizens of developing countries because of the siphoning off of money, and mass protests. Eigen, a German, joined with Michael Hershman, an American, Kamal Hossein, a Bangladeshi, and Laurence Cockcroft, a Briton, in a series of informal talks on how to reduce government and business corruption.² As the discussion progressed, Eigen became convinced that he could not address corruption from his position within the World Bank, and the group decided to form a new organization, Transparency International (TI), with Eigen at its head (Eigen 2003; Holzner and Holzner 2006, 188–189). The organization would examine the effects and consequences of corruption for *citizens*, report on its findings across nations, and advocate policy changes in global institutions to address corrupt practices. By not singling out a particular institution or nation, the group hoped that TI could remain politically neutral but in a different way from the World Bank. During these discussions of TI’s mission, the group came up with a name for the new organization. Hershman suggested Integrity International, others suggested Honesty International, but Transparency International won out because the word’s meaning had long been understood by Europeans and others throughout the world as conveying the idea of openness. For Hershman and, for that matter, most Americans, a transparency is a film used on an overhead projector or, even less appealing, a condom, and not an organizational value (Eigen 2003, 38–39; Michael Hershman, personal communication, August 14, 2008).

One of TI’s first projects was to advocate against corruption and for transparency through its Latin American chapters working with the Organization of American States (OAS). The OAS placed corruption on its 1994 Summit agenda. It ratified a

convention calling on member states to criminalize the taking or receiving of bribes by businesses and governments (OAS 1996). Although the convention did not contain the word “transparency,” it was the forerunner to additional OAS forums and conferences in which the word began to be used regularly along with “accountability” and “good governance.” The use of the word spread to the World Bank’s policies (Woods 2001),³ to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

(OECD) conventions (2001a, 2001b, 2002), and to congressional directives to the International Monetary Fund (Toby McIntosh, as cited by Roberts 2006, 187). The documents of these organizations provided policy recommendations for countries to adopt to ensure transparency through credible conflict-of-interest policies, open preparation and execution of budgets, freedom of information and participation of citizens in

the formulation and implementation of public policies, and accountability of state-owned enterprises.

Transparency International also began to work on an index that would measure perceptions of corruption across specific countries. Prior to completion of the project, TI accidentally released the first Corruption Perceptions Index before it was ready, causing a stream of controversy, albeit raising media and political awareness of TI and the idea of transparency (Alisdair Roberts, personal communication, September 5, 2008). It also developed what came to be known as the National Integrity System (TI 1995, 2000). Systems of integrity include more than transparent official structures that are open; they also require a free media, an honest private sector unwilling to use or take bribes, and a civil society of citizens who use information and expect business and government to act openly and honestly.

In addition, TI spread its anti-corruption message by gathering together well-known and respected international figures to serve on its advisory board. Fritz Heimann, the chair of Transparency International (from its founding in 1993 to 2005), raised awareness of transparency when he spoke to the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the need to ratify the OECD convention against bribery and corruption (U.S. Congress 1998). Writing in 2006, Ben Heineman and Fritz Heimann opined that the global changes taking place in “rules [anti-corruption laws], rhetoric, and awareness” had occurred across nations, much to the credit of Transparency International.

The interconnectedness of the many supranational organizations and NGOs popularized transparency (Eigen 2003, 35–42). “Transparency,” rather than meaning a clear film for an overhead or something that is visible, is a metaphor or symbol for a host of ideas. First, it indicates that a problem exists: corruption (Stone 2002, 5). And it offers a solution: information provided to the public by open decision-making, meetings, and actions creating official accountability. In its adjectival form, “transparent,” rather than describing a material that one can see through, is a synonym for honest and accountable officials and decisions.

As Stone (2002, 305–306) notes, the use of facts and information, seemingly neutral, conveys a particular viewpoint. TI addresses corruption and undemocratic rule in a seemingly neutral way by advocating greater access to information for the

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public. It does not attack undemocratic rulers but seeks changes in the organization of government agencies and business itself. It seeks greater oversight by governmental and non-governmental bodies. Transparency is value laden as the opposite of secrecy; that is, if transparency occurs, it conveys honesty and integrity.

Transparency International and other NGOs and supranational organizations helped set the public or systemic agenda (Cobb and Elder 1971) for fighting corruption through its choice of a name for itself. The agenda setters in TI, while attacking corruption, created a metaphor for openness, honesty, and accountability. Befitting its goal, TI provides an archetype of the transparent organization; TI places its latest audit, annual report, governance process, code of conduct, and ethics policy on its Web site (www.transparency.org).⁴ TI, in short, helped make transparency part of the language of political officials and the public.

As scholars became aware of transparency, they, in turn, interpreted, reinterpreted, and expanded its meaning from a means to battle corruption to a means to encourage open decision-making and public disclosure, to increase accountability, and as a value to incorporate in policies and by which to evaluate policies. The next section discusses the academic notions of transparency, beginning with the international literature, followed by the findings of nonprofit, public policy, and American politics and administration research.

Academic Notions of Transparency

International Relations Research

The international relations field has routinely addressed the politics and strategy of negotiations, the power struggles among nation states, the role of NGOs, and corruption. The use of the term “transparency” in the field began in the 1980s with brief mentions of transparency as one aspect of the behavior of supranational NGOs (van Bael 1989) and as a value in foreign policy creation (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986; Kudrle and Bobrow 1982). It was not until the 1990s that transparency became a major emphasis of research and started to appear in the titles of articles (Florini 1996, 1998; Hill 1996; Mitchell 1994, 1998). Transparency along with power now becomes an attribute of strategic negotiations. Transparency, or the degree of openness in conveying information, is seen as a device signaling the trustworthiness of the actor in negotiations (Clark and Reed 2005; Cowhey 1993; Finel and Lord 1999). External actors press it as a goal for nondemocratic nations. Increasing the level of transparency in governmental decision-making increases the likelihood of democracy and citizen involvement. At the very least, transparency makes the decision-making of nondemocratic regimes more available to their citizenry. NGOs, including TI, play a major role in creating transparency by conveying information about government decisions, increasing the effectiveness of government management, and pressing for standards of ethics (Backstrand and Saward 2004; Cooper and Yoder 2002).

The writings of international relations scholars during the 1990s also begin to define transparency as a norm of behavior or public value for nations and NGOs (Cooper 2004; Cooper and Yoder 2002; Florini 1996; Lewis and Gilman, 2005). They present it as conveying openness with the public, a lack of secrecy between actors, the sharing of information to make decisions, and a means to hold nations and

NGOs accountable. Finel and Lord (1999, 316) provided the most comprehensive definition of transparency in a discussion of its role in strategic negotiations.

Transparency comprises the legal, political, and institutional structures that make information about the internal characteristics of a government and society available to actors both inside and outside the domestic political system. Transparency is increased by any mechanism that leads to the public disclosure of information, whether a free press, open government, hearings, or the existence of nongovernmental organizations with an incentive to release objective information about the government.

Mitchell (1998) added the idea: Transparency constitutes the demand for information, the ability of citizens to obtain information, and the supply and actual release of information by government and NGOs. Underlying this thought is the idea that the citizenry must be active participants if transparency is to occur; it is not enough for governments to simply publish information.

The same literature also identified a downside to transparency defined as openness. Greater openness can make negotiations lengthier by making frank communication more difficult. Interest groups with greater access to ongoing discussions can derail, disrupt, or change the agenda. The asymmetry of information between democratic and nondemocratic nations may put democratic nations at a disadvantage. Even in negotiations between democratic states on trade or other agreements, sovereign nations may *not* wish to share some information with the public or with other democratic nations (Finel and Lord, 1999; Florini 1998; Roberts 2004; Schultz 1999).

Accordingly, the evolving definition in international relations contains the seeds of a paradox. At the same time that government actors support greater openness, they also may wish for privacy and secrecy (Brin 1998; Fung, Graham, and Weil 2007; Roberts 2006). NGOs, too, may be reluctant to open decision-making, believing that they have a responsibility to the nations that fund them not to reveal certain information (Katt 2006; Woods 2001). Thus, believing in the value of transparency does not mean support for the activities of transparency in all situations. When transparency is implemented, secrecy is reluctantly given up.

The international relations literature is important because scholars began to explicitly give a definition and reason for transparency: to reduce corruption, increase public disclosure, and create trust. This trust characteristic should carry over into the nonprofit literature. A major theory in this literature is that nonprofits exist because of public trust (Ortman and Schlesinger 2003). Instead, the nonprofit perspective interprets transparency as similar to accountability through greater public disclosure and only secondarily as a mechanism to create trust.

Nonprofit Research

An understanding of transparency is only now beginning in nonprofit research. If corruption is a concern for NGOs globally, it is exorbitant salaries and a lack of accountability in the use of donations to nonprofits in the United States. Gibelman and Gelman (2001, 2004) have described serious problems with the accountability of nonprofits: incidents of theft, mismanagement of resources, misconduct, excessive compensation, personal life-style enhancement, and sexual misconduct. To remedy some of these problems, Congress recently called for greater transparency, and the

Internal Revenue Service enacted a new reporting form for nonprofits (Grassley and Baucus 2007; Panepento 2007b).

At the same time that Congress was calling for greater transparency, the major professional association for hospitals, the American Hospital Association, embraced the idea of transparency by aggressively responding to congressional concerns (2006a, 2006b, 2006c). The associated practitioner literature quickly adopted the word “transparency,” defining it as a means to create accountability and credibility, and as a defensive measure to maintain nonprofit tax status (Ferman 2007; Galvin 2007; McPherson 2006; Mueller 2007). Transparency is a series of actions creating credible governance systems, visible performance measurement systems, and readily available decision-making information about pricing of services and the amount of charity care (Summers and Nowicki 2006). Corruption does not enter the transparency definition except in the sense that high executive salaries are a misuse of donor funds.

Transparency references in the nonprofit scholarly research are largely synonymous with accountability, particularly financial accountability.⁵ Nonprofits create accountability by releasing IRS 990 forms and other information to the public, such as the costs of fundraising (Thornton 2006) and the pricing of health care (Altman, Shactman, and Eilat 2006; Summers and Nowicki 2006). In the evolving definition, transparency increases the public trust in the work of nonprofits and is part of good governance (Melendéz 2001). As is true in the international relations literature, transparency is a double-edged sword. Fear of greater government regulation and loss of flexibility is an issue (Panepento 2007a). Melendéz (2001) argues that the amount of information available to the public is already substantial, and what needs to occur is improved access to the information.

Just as there is an element of reaction to pressure in the creation of transparency noted in the international literature, so too is the same element present in the nonprofit literature. Crossing from the actions of government and business (James D. Bentley, personal communication, September 25, 2008), nonprofit transparency is more closely related to accountability and regulation. At least for now, it does not contain the same positive idea of openness found in the international relations corpus of knowledge, although that is a likely outcome of accountability mechanisms. Rather, transparency has negative connotations of regulation, something that developed when nonprofits and researchers had not yet made sense of the word. This contrasts with policy researchers, who see transparency not only as a solution but also as part of every component of the policy process.

Public Policy Research

Transparency as a solution to problems has a global flavor in public policy research. The first scholarly uses of transparency flow nicely from the international field to comparative public policy and monetary policy. *Transparency in Public Policy: Great Britain and the United States* (Finkelstein 2000), authored by a group of ten scholars and practitioners, describes the differences in the degree of transparency or opaqueness in public policies in the United Kingdom and America. Coming from and studying widely divergent fields, the members of the group had little in common. What they did recognize was that some policy decision-making is veiled in secrecy. The word “transparency” was not particularly well known to the group,

but perhaps slightly more familiar to the health analysts and practitioners (Thomas Judge, personal communication, September 30, 2008; J. Leitzel, personal communication, September 5, 2008; O'Sullivan 1997). As discussion progressed in writing the book, transparency became the common theme for studies ranging from gun control to education to health care.

Transparent policies also provide information to citizens and improve their ability to make choices about the services they receive. A transparent policy is deemed effective when the public acts on the information the policy provides.

The authors of *Transparency in Public Policy* accept transparency as a given attribute of policy, and they reason that transparent policies are better than opaque policies (Finkelstein 2000, 1). Good transparent policies contain methods of accountability. Transparent policies also provide information to citizens and improve their ability to make choices about the services they receive. A transparent policy is deemed effective when the public acts on the information

the policy provides. If an education agency provides information on the quality of schools through performance measurement, and parents choose their child's school based upon this information, the policy is said to be effective. Transparency, then, relates to inputs, outputs, and outcomes of decisions.

How to design transparent policies is less than clear. Conflicting goals in policy design make it difficult to create transparency, and as a result the degree of transparency differs from one policy to another and from one country to another. For example, many policies are established to promote competition (school choice, utility competition) or to regulate (occupational safety, environmental protection), and some are a conflicting jumble of regulation, competition, and professional discretion (Judge 2000; Prottas 2000; Shekelle and Roland 2000; Woolf 2000). At an administrative or programmatic level, the degree of transparency has transactional and informational costs. Programs designed on transparency do not simply report to oversight bodies, they must provide understandable, usable, quality information to the public on inputs, outputs, and outcomes.

Other public policy research is tied to the international relations field in subject matter, but examines its subject from a policy-analytic perspective. This research line further identifies and defines transparency within the policy process (Geraats 2002; Libich, 2006; Stasavage, 2003). Geraats (2002) first recognized that transparency created greater openness and hence accountability in central banks by reducing the asymmetry of information between the public and the bank. But information availability in itself does not create transparency. Libich (2006), elaborating on Geraats's initial work, spelled out five types of transparency and made clear that all five—political/goal, economic, procedural, policy, and operational transparency—have an effect on the outcome and implementation of the policy. Political/goal transparency has to do with the mission of the organization. It occurs when the ultimate purpose is known and is likely to increase if leadership is accountable (in the case of monetary policy, the purpose would be to maintain low inflation and high employment). Economic transparency takes place when banking institutions make their decision-making tools (e.g., forecasting models) available to the public. This type of transparency increases the credibility of decisions once made and provides information about why the bank did or did not meet its goal (in a broader policy context, this type of

transparency might be called input transparency). Procedural transparency refers to the process whereby decisions are made. The use of formal voting procedures, open and publicized meetings, and the recording of meeting minutes are all familiar components of government sunshine laws, but are not necessarily used by some institutions, such as the Federal Reserve and the World Bank. Finally, operational transparency takes place through such activities as performance measurement and admission of errors in planning or meeting goals, all of which enable the public to determine the extent to which the institution has met its goals.

In one of the earliest uses of the word “transparency,” Kudrle and Bobow (1982) label a desirable outcome of foreign direct investment policy as impact transparency. The selection of the term “impact transparency” foreshadows one of the current uses of transparency. Kudrle and Bobow chose impact transparency more by happenstance than by a desire to coin a term or to note an important value in policy-making (Kudrle, personal communication, September 4, 2008). A policy is transparent not only if the goal is clear, but also if the impact is clear. This is most likely to occur when information about the policy is available and easily obtainable.

If nonprofit scholars partially define transparency in negative terms, policy analysts embrace transparency as more positive than negative, one more tool in the policy analyst’s basket. By incorporating transparency into the policy process language, analysts broaden the meaning of transparency, moving it from the simple idea of creating greater accountability and reducing corruption to an attribute for policy-making.

American Politics and Administration Research

Which transparent policies are enacted and implemented is the work of politicians and administrators. State-level research assessing transparency moves from international monetary to fiscal and budgetary transparency, crossing over into politics and administration studies. In state level research transparency has a specific purpose, to increase information and trust of the public.

Alt, Lassen, and Skilling (2002) operationalize transparency as visible decision-making. They explain transparency in terms of principal-agent theory. Transparency increases confidence in the decisions of government and elected officials by reducing asymmetries of information between political actors and voters, in turn creating a greater degree of public trust in political actors.

Using different approaches, Piotrowski and Van Ryzin (2007) and Roberts (2006) add to the definition of transparency to include the ability of the public to access government information. The degree of government transparency is both a legal construction and a perception. Roberts judges transparency by the degree of secrecy written into law. Piotrowski and Van Ryzin judge it by the public’s desire for transparency. Public perception is measured by the frequency of contacting government, the level of concern about secrecy, and the perceived amount of access to government (too much, too little, or about the right amount).

Hirsch and Osborne’s (2000) theoretical work embraces transparency as a means to improve government outcomes. Transparency improves administrative effectiveness as well as policy effectiveness. It means greater information for decision-making and, in the end, for the public, so that citizens can support policy decisions. Hirsch and Osborne identify transparency by its opposite, policy opacity, as did Libich

(2006) and Roberts (2006). Policy opacity occurs when policymakers decide to contract services out without the full benefit of cost-comparison information or without making that information available to the public. Publication of such information is more likely to reduce union opposition and garner citizen support for contracting out. Indeed, many unions and managers have embraced win-win or interest-based bargaining in which both sides openly share the same information, creating input transparency and operational transparency (Ball 1996). Lewis and Stiles (2004) counter that when transparency is the priority in decision-making, it leaves no room for cross-subsidies and leads to shortsighted managerial decisions.

Stirton and Lodge (2001) take up an idea similar to what was proposed by Geraats (2002) and Libich (2006) but from an organizational-design perspective. They identify four mechanisms to create transparency in organizations: voice, representation, information, and choice. Transparency occurs when organizations promote visible decision-making, are open to public input, allow the public the maximum choice of services, and work in cooperation with other organizations for common public purposes. Voice and representation relate to the process of creating a service; information and choice relate to the implementation and provision of the service. Recognizing the blurring of sectors, Stirton and Lodge theorize that these mechanisms can maintain the public character of services even when government itself does not directly provide the service.

Through state-level research, transparency gains a new antonym, secrecy, rather than corruption in the evolving definition of transparency. Transparency is not an either/or situation. It is on one end of a continuum, and opaqueness is on the other. The academic notion of transparency flowing from international relations scholars is at home to those who study political decision-making on secrecy and openness, the dance of the media and politics, and the more mundane but possibly more relevant financial and budget decision-making of states and nonprofits.

Three Metaphors

It is clear that transparency is generally accepted worldwide by many activists and their organizations as a process, a way of conducting business. Its institutionalization may have caught on by an accident of translation that assumed that the German, French, and English meanings of *Transparenz*, *transparence*, and *transparency* are similar (Kudrle, personal communication, September 4, 2008). Many academics who have used the word in their writings are not sure how it came to be part of their vocabulary. Bobrow (personal communication, September 4, 2008) recalls that the choice of transparency in his article cowritten with Kudrle (1982) might have occurred because their subject matter, foreign direct investments, often involves acts of corruption and subterfuge rather than an above-board policymaking process. Whether a specific person coined the term, it undoubtedly became more popular because of the interconnectedness and networking of the supranational organizations. In addition, media attention increased when Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index was prematurely released.

In its evolving meaning, transparency is a public value or norm of behavior to counter corruption. In this metaphor, transparency is indirect: When citizens have information, governance improves. Transparency occurs through the support of society, government, media, and business for open decision-making. Yet this

metaphor relies upon and is subtly entwined with accountability. Transparency is an intrusive mandate with associated rules created by the pressure of international conventions and national laws. Distinctions between private, nonprofit, and public organizations erode as all activities become more open to public scrutiny. Within the shared meaning of transparency as combating corruption is a hope for democracy, but also a paradoxical acceptance of the current state of international affairs, which includes both democratic and undemocratic nations. Accordingly, transparency is the counter to corruption if democracy is not possible. Through this metaphor, organizations and nations bring about or restore the trust of their publics.

Transparency is also open government and organizations (Piotrowski, personal communication, September 7, 2008). In this second metaphor, transparency has little or less to do with accountability and corruption than with the process of governing or managing. In the first metaphor, open decision-making is a component of transparency, but in the second metaphor, open decision-making is synonymous with transparency. Transparency is about the ease of access and use of government and nonprofit information. The more open and easy it is for the public to obtain information, the greater the transparency. Paradoxically, transparency brings about greater concerns for privacy and secrecy. In the second metaphor, policy and organizational design focus on determining when privacy and secrecy are appropriate and when they are not. Practitioners and scholars hope to stem legislative, executive, or judicial interpretations that reduce public access to decision-making. Yet they recognize that new technology—the Web, huge databases, and computerization—make the protection of confidential personal information necessary.

A third metaphor of transparency is one of complexity and relates particularly to policy and program analysis. Analysts and politicians create transparency in the design of policy and through their evaluations of organizational actions and programs. Transparency is complex because who decides, what decisions are made, and how to use information are all part of transparency. A policy, organization, or nation cannot be said to be corrupt or not corrupt, open or not open, transparent or opaque, because transparency is a continuum. In this third metaphor, transparency does not address a specific problem of corruption or secrecy; rather it is component of good policy. Academicians, in helping to define transparency, have created an attribute as complex as measuring effectiveness and efficiency and equally as important as accountability.

Conclusion

This article introduced a rhetorical question: Does transparency convey the same purpose as accountability? Transparency, in fact, has many meanings, and will continue to have many meanings that in part subsume accountability. Transparency metaphors convey a way that organizations and nations are expected to conduct their day-to-day activities. Policy analysts and politicians are expected to create transparency as a norm and as a means to evaluate programs and actions. Given the newness of the idea, the confusion over its many meanings, and the tug for privacy and secrecy, some elected officials, managers, and analysts may ignore transparency. Ignoring the unofficial mandate, however, can be problematic and may lead to the

enactment of legal mandates. For example, in the 2009 financial crisis, a chance to increase the trust of the public was lost when Congress failed to establish legal requirements for banks to report their use of bailout funds, the Treasury secretary failed to provide oversight to the same end, and bank officials were not forthcoming with relevant information.

NOTES

1. The analysis in this article relied upon JSTOR for older journal articles and Academic Search Premier and Business Source Premier for current articles with “transparency” in the abstract or the article title of the major journals in political science, public policy, and public administration and the major nonprofit journals: *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, *Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *Voluntas*, *Health Affairs*, *Journal of Healthcare Management*, *Journal of Health and Human Services Administration*.

2. At the time of TI’s founding, Eigen was on leave from the World Bank and had worked as a lawyer managing African and Latin American economic development programs. Michael Hershman had served in a number of positions, including deputy staff director of the Senate Subcommittee on International Organizations and deputy auditor general of the Foreign Assistance Program of the Agency for International Development. Kamal Hossein was one of the authors of the constitution of Pakistan and former foreign minister of Bangladesh. Laurence Cockcroft worked as a development economist advising governments and international NGOs and had recently written a book chapter on South African economic development (1993). Also involved was Hansjörg Elshorst, a German, and chair of the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), a sustainability and economic development organization, and Frank Vogl, an American and a former World Bank director.

3. The World Bank has focused on creating transparency primarily by disclosing documentation after the fact, i.e., after entering an agreement with a member country, rather than on transparency in its internal processes. It has, however, provided more and more documentation on its Web site.

4. This article does not attempt to assess whether the organization is truly transparent or to assess its success in pushing for transparency in other organizations or states.

5. The search also uncovered one article in *Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Quarterly* that was about nonprofits in Spain as opposed to American nonprofits. Transparency is a specific value of nonprofits along with good governance and political independence.

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