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Review Article

TRANSPARENCY THROUGH INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY IN A DIGITAL DEMOCRATIC NATION

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ABSTRACT
Transparency is an increasingly important but weakly understood phenomenon. Bringing together relevant literatures, this review puts up a broad definition of transparency and observes its relationship with trust, organizational strategies and information effectiveness. Recent contributions from management research are also highlighted to enlighten behavioral constraints on transparency and full disclosure. A number of studies are reported including research on the private information paradox in competitive policy, insider trading in technology-intensive companies, figurative corporate governance development and attribution theory and corporate responsibility. In recent years, many governments have worked to enhance transparency and openness in their dealings. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are have taken up as a cost-effective and fitting resource to encourage openness and transparency and to reduce corruption. E-government, in particular, has been used in many prominent, wide-ranging transparency efforts in a number of nations. While a few of these in person efforts have received significant interest, the question of whether these ICT-enabled efforts have the prospect to generate a substantive social change in approach toward transparency. This paper surveys the probable impacts of internet and ICTs, particularly, e-government and social media on cultural mind-sets for transparency.

Keywords: *Transparency, Management Strategies, ICTs, E-Government, Social Networking*

INTRODUCTION
A great deal of interest has come together around the topic of transparency in the recent years (Patel *et al*., 2002). Majority of the periodicals such as Shades of grey and Changing course in 2009 quote transparency as an essential tool for successful venture, well-functioning financial markets (Ackermann, 2008), effective national governance (Theil, 2010) and reestablishment of organizational trust (Fifield, 2010). Few scholars argue that transparency is an essential component to effective organization management (Fleischmann and Wallace, 2005) while others dispute it to be an “overrated” concept (Pirson and Malhotra, 2008).
The word *transparency* has a bipartite latin meaning, consisting of *trāns*- meaning ‘across’ or ‘through’ and *pāreō*- meaning ‘be seen’. Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes a transparent object as having the ability to transmit light with less scattering so that bodies lying beyond are seen clearly. Social scientists have metaphorically taken on this definition to bring the skill of concerned parties to look for or else private information to know the intentions of the sender. In the past, the term "transparency" was rarely used in organizations whereas in other disciplines, such as architecture, engineering, and technology, transparency is more common. In current management literature, several definitions exist for organizational transparency, one of which actually strikes the point — a condition opposite to secrecy. Ann Florini in The End of Secrecy explains that Secrecy means consciously hiding your actions while transparency means consciously revealing them. It is a deliberate attempt to move from a secretive or opaque organization to one that promotes open access to information, participation and decision-making which eventually builds a higher level of trust among the stakeholders. Empirical studies examining transparency in finance have evaluated it as both the dependent variable (Hodge *et al*., 2004; Patel *et al*., 2002) and independent variable (Board and Sutcliffe, 2000; Gemmill, 1996; Rosengren, 1999; Winkler, 2000) under question. Some studies define transparency as the timely disclosure of information (Bloomfield and O’Hara, 1999; Madhavan *et al*., 2005; Pagano and Roell, 1996; Securities and Exchange Commission, 1995; Securities and Investment Board, 1995) whereas other studies define transparency as

the level of clarity in information (Bushman *et al.*, 2004; Jordan *et al.*, 2000; Winkler, 2000) or as the level of accuracy in information (Flood *et al.*, 1999; Granados *et al.*, 2006). Overall, the literature in finance attributes to three primary dimensions in constructing transparency. That is transparency is the degree to which information is disclosed, clear, and accurate.

The purpose of this article is to share some key action controls on transparency, which are hardly addressed in the professional literature for executives, public policy makers and securities analysts. Focus would be on the unforeseen and possibly sensitive issues of transparency and full disclosure. The paper also reviews new researches which question 'conventional wisdom' and states that there are a few negative aspects to transparency and full disclosure. Due to conventional wisdom, transparency, openness and full disclosure create efficient financial markets and exemplary corporate governance. It is convincingly argued that there are also a few disadvantages for transparency. One such reason is that it is considered inappropriate, if not undemocratic, to argue for the opposite – secrecy. Despite of that all, there is always room for quality research which might elucidate some of the unintended, if not counterintuitive notions, of "transparency." Such research might inform public policy makers, management practitioners and securities analysts of consequences that might be unforeseen or even adverse to public or private interest.

Transparency, Information and Society

As an international issue, transparency came to fame after World War I in the post-war consultations (Braman, 2006). It took a huge time for many nations to pursue transparency. In the mid-1980s, only 11 nations had autonomy of information laws, but by the last part of 2004, 59 nations had (Relly and Sabharwal, 2009) and (Roberts, 2006). Transparency and the right to access government information are now globally observed as an essential to democratic contribution, reliance to government, prevention of corruption, well-informed decision-making, precision of government information and provision of information to the public, companies and journalists along with other essential functions in society (Quinn, 2003; Mulgan, 2007; Reylea, 2009a; Cullier and Piotrowski, 2009 and Shuler *et al.,* 2010).

Government transparency usually crops up through several channels (Piotrowski, 2007) like proactive dispersion by the government, release of requested information by the government, public meetings and discloses from whistleblowers. A study in 2006 from 14 countries found that nations with committed transparency laws were thrice more probable to respond to requests for information in comparison to countries lacking transparency laws acknowledging less than half of the requests (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2006). Countries that embrace transparency have a tendency to generate more information than other governments and are more liable to share this information (Lord, 2006). More than 30 countries have even launched a national-level, centralized anti-corruption agency (Meagher, 2005). Transparency ultimately serves to keep government honest—"Good government must be seen to be done" (Kierkegaard, 1998). In terms of international practices in transparency, Internet has significantly reduced the cost of collecting, distributing and accessing government information (Roberts, 2006). As a result of these capacities, recent years have seen trends toward using e-government for greater access to information and for promotion of transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption goals (Anderson, 2009; Cullier and Piotrowski, 2009; Fuchs, 2006 and Shim and Eom, 2008). However, all efforts to promote openness and reduce corruption are heavily shaped by the cultural milieu of a nation, ranging from societal attitudes towards the value of information to level of identification by citizens with the government and from viability of an independent press to information policies enacted by the government (Brown and Cloke, 2004).

Values of Business Transparency

Although, some management professionals still invalidate the actual benefits of a transparent culture, many business professionals pledge by it. Companies with a more transparent culture tend to see an increased employee engagement, sales, excellence and profit rise because everyone focuses on goal-based initiatives. Assuming full and open disclosure of company strategy, does disclosure affect the company strategy itself? Do managers with full knowledge that their strategy will be "open and notorious," water down or temper their strategy because of a concern, use to the advantage of competitors, or worse can be if it fails, the managers might be identified as the provider of a failed strategy? Does that, in turn, cause managers to choose strategies which "regress to the mean" so they will not be blamed, in retrospect, if matters go wrong? Stated another way, does this add to the pressure for management to be risk averse, given the requirement for openness and transparency? Little research has been done in this area, not surprising given the relative regency of "full disclosure" accountability and of course, the difficulty of designing a meaningful study.

Management theory is also known as the pressure between "doing the right thing" and "knowing the right thing to do" and identifies it as the "private information paradox". The general unfeasibility for managers is to share the investors' private information, which is primary to the company's competitive advantage, also without giving access to the competitors for that same private information, thus, eliminating the company's advantage (Makadok, 2003). There is some anecdotal evidence that managers of public companies hold back full guidance on financial prospects and strategy to investors – admitting, "If we are sharing those metrics with you, we would also be sharing all of those metrics with competitors". Management research is just gearing up to look at these issues. Has the shift in the quality and timing of corporate disclosure and transparency in the wake of financial scandals and the highly publicized collapse of international auditing firms caused capital to flow from public markets, where disclosure is mandated by law, into private, rather than public, equity funds? Or are there other reasons having little to do with disclosure and transparency that account for the huge capital transfers into private equity funds in recent years. And, if that is the reason, will this tend to push upward the accumulation of wealth as only those with substantial financial resources have access to such investment opportunities. Or, is it of little consequence if such private equity investments perform no better than, say, publicly traded index funds? Does full and open disclosure enhance the likelihood of insider trading or create incentives for the few to sneakily discover high value material events before they are publicly available? Intangible resources such as patents, unpatented results of R&D projects, proprietary software, brand names, reputation and the competence and skills of employees are crucial to the innovation process, particularly in R&D companies and are at the heart of creating economic value. In spite of their obvious importance, investors are provided with little information about these assets, even under newly revamped disclosure requirements. We are aware however, that intangible resources matter to company managers. Certainly, management theory has positioned "resource-based" competitive advantage at the top of the agenda. Moreover, recent work looks closely at stock purchases by company insiders and finds that shareholders view R&D intensive companies differently and that managers in these firms are able to time trades to take advantage of imminent breakthroughs in technology (Coff and Lee, 2003; Ahuja *et al*., 2005). Research prospects in these areas are abundant and are reminders of the magnitude of disclosure issues that remain unresolved. To what extent is it feasible or desirable to develop a procedure for measuring and reporting of opportunities lost, i.e. measuring the implications of a failure to act? Is this not as important a measure of company performance and strategy as overt action? Is there not room for research, perhaps through case studies or intensive interviews to determine whether negative company performance might be recognized to the failure to act inventively or quickly rather than the typically disclosed, explicit and transparent actions. How may we make transparent those invisible actions, never taken, in order to better assess management? Conversely, how may we determine whether visible or proactive interventions have "caused" adverse or positive outcomes, an area hardly touched by current corporate disclosure policy? And, how such findings be made transparent? Although, academic research has looked at the inferences of failing to execute meaningful corporate governance reforms, it finds only "symbolic" reforms to be frequent and widespread, particularly where management dominates the board of directors (Westphal and Zajac, 1998, 2001).

The element of "human behavior" has been heavily researched in the cognitive and behavioral literature, i.e. do we attribute mistakes to others to avoid being identified as the contributor of imprudent interventions, build up mechanisms of "plausible deniability," or shift blame for negative outcomes but take credit when results are good? Rarely are managers held to the test of proving, they are hardly even asked for their intervention "caused" a given effect and that the outcome was not appropriate, random or coincidental. In the world of management and politics, outcomes are seldom tested by cause and effect analysis. All of these rather human characters are of still greater impact when strategy and performance is public, transparent and attributed. Early work in management has used attribution theory, as how people explain their own and others' behavior to understand how managers rationalize company performance (Bettman and Weitz, 1998; Staw *et al.,* 1983). Basic work is just beginning to look at the essential role of "intentionality" in explaining how a specific intervention leads to a given result (Malle, 2004). Prospects for management research in this area will obviously need better cognitive models and disclosure of corporate "intentions" at the time they are initiated in order to conduct this kind of research (Welch and Rotberg, 2006). New qualitative methodologies possibly will help check the optimistic claims by managers of favorable causal conventions. Moreover, it does not mean that transparency has failed or has produced negative cost which has overshadowed its worth. To the contrary, transparency has offered a vehicle for new and imaginative research techniques in the academic community and in some cases is an extension of research methods and subject matters already being looked at. Transparency embodies honesty and open communication because to be transparent someone must be willing to share information when it is uncomfortable to do so. It is an individual being honest with him or her about the actions they are taking. It is also the organization being upfront and visible about the actions it takes, and whether those actions are consistent with its values. The most innovative companies combine selective transparency with strong ideology about the nature of their business, in other words knowing what they want to build and validating that with a well-defined group of employees which bring value to the end user. However, it is also advisable that professional managers, analysts, and commentators should look for ways to improve practice and inform public policy by using new research methodology and research findings.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTS) and Transparency Initiatives

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) offer a new approach to the countries for creating transparency and promoting anti-corruption. Many nations with transparency laws have directly tied the implementation of these laws to the implementation of ICT-based schemes, often through e-government (Relly and Sabharwal, 2009). ICTs can lessen corruption by promoting good governance, intensifying reform-oriented initiatives, reducing potential for corrupt behavior, enhancing relationships between government employees and citizens, permitting for citizen tracking of activities and by monitoring and controlling behavior of government employees (Shim and Eom, 2008). However, in order to successfully reduce corruption, ICT-enabled initiatives must move from increasing information access to ensuring that rules are transparent and applied for building abilities to track the decisions and actions of government employees (Bhatnagar, 2003). Several governments envisage the use of ICTs as a mean to promote efficiency and transparency at the same time (von Waldenberg, 2004). ICTs in general assure as an effective way of reducing corruption, but social attitudes can decrease the effectiveness of ICTs as an anti-corruption tool (Shim and Eom, 2009). Case studies and statistical analyses designate that ICTs embrace a great deal of potential for anti-corruption, particularly by enhancing the effectiveness of internal and managerial control over corrupt behaviors and by promoting government accountability and transparency (Shim and Eom, 2008). By evaluating changes between 1996 and 2006 corruption data through ICT-enabled e-government schemes, one study concluded that "implementing e-government significantly reduces corruption, even after calculating for any tendency for corrupt governments to be more or less hostile in adopting e-government initiatives" (Anderson, 2009).

Challenges and Future Prospects

The combination of e-government, social media, web-enabled technologies, mobile technologies, transparency policy initiatives and citizen desire for open and transparent government are fomenting a new era of opportunity that has the potential to create open, transparent, efficient, effective and user-centered ICT-enabled services. Furthermore, governments, development agencies, organizations and citizen groups are progressively linking investment, governance and support to the creation of more open and transparent government. It is rare to have such an alignment of policy, technology, practice, and citizen demand, all of which bode well for the creation of technology-enabled government that instills the trust of citizens in government. A wide range of nations with varying technology infrastructure have created plentiful procurement, tracking and anti-corruption systems that assisted national and state governments engagement in transparent government activities. Likewise, the systems opened government to citizen scrutiny, thereby reducing corruption.

Coinciding with technology access is the need for users to be able to understand and use the technologies through which transparency tools are available. The digital divide is long documented (Bertot, 2003; Barzilai-Nahon, 2006; National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1995; National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2004) and broadly defined as the gap between those who have access to technologies and those who do not. However, there are in fact multiple divides that exist, of which access to the ICTs is but one. These include i) Technology literacy, i.e. the ability to understand and use technologies; ii) Usability, i.e. the design of technologies in such a way that are spontaneous and allow users to engage in the content embedded within the technology; iii) Accessibility, i.e. the ability of people with disabilities to be able to access the content through adaptive technologies, for example, some mobile technologies are completely inaccessible to people with visual impairments due to the touch screen design which lacks a tactile keyboard; and iv) Functionality, i.e. the design of the technologies to include features, such as search, e-government service tracking, accountability measures, etc. that users desire. Thus, it is important to use technologies that are broadly deployed to provide a broad base of technology access, but there is also a substantial need to provide training and engage in usability, functionality and accessibility testing to ensure the broadest ability to participate in e-government services and resources.

The use of social media as a core part of transparency initiatives can also create both new prospects and new challenges. For example, the use of social media in amalgamation with open government data has been encouraged as a new mode of enabling and aiding transparency (Brito, 2008; Robinson *et al.*, 2008). In United States of America, this approach is symbolized by the nascent and ambitious plan of Obama administration to make vast amount of government data available through the www.data.gov site (White House, 2010). These types of transparency initiatives are directed towards a more technically inclined citizen as researchers, technologists, and civic-minded geeks. While everyone can benefit from the data and the by-products and analyses that the more technically inclined citizens would produce to truly "democratize the data" which would ultimately require a better, more conscious effort to make this initiative more inclusive and participatory to all citizens. Another form of opportunity for social media in openness and anti-corruption is through the improved opportunities for citizen journalism. Through social media, citizen journalism can report when the traditional media fails, when the media are strongly influenced or controlled by the state or those in power, or when the media provide insufficient coverage of a story. Looking beyond technological issues, the research on transparent and open government points to two critical success factors, firstly a culture of transparency implanted within the governance system and secondly, a transparency "readiness" factor that is, factors on ground such as technology penetration, technology capabilities and access of government agencies, and social and technology readiness of the public (Brown and Cloke, 2005; Kolstad and Wing, 2009; Kolstad *et al*., 2009; Mehlum *et al*., 2006; Robinson *et al.*, 2006). These two issues are basically two sides of a coin; one needs the culture of openness to infuse governance structures and operations while at the same time needing the technical and social potential to truly implement e-government transparency initiatives. Without the two factors operating in tandem, it is highly improbable that the essential trust between government and those governed will develop and thus truly create an open and transparent environment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the fact that social and ICT technologies can be disruptive, promote transparency and create significant change, the cultural, social, and technology access factors likely require incremental and verified successful change (Bertot *et al.*, 2010). There are, however, several short-term actions that are possible which can lead to long-term success in terms of transparent and open government that reduces corruption that can be well thought-out. Firstly, to develop measures of transparency. It is clear that the term transparency is used with great liberty, but with little evaluation criteria, measures or methods for determining the extensiveness and success of transparency efforts. Secondly, to develop transparency "readiness" criteria. As the above review recognized that all nations or states within nations are not able to engage in e-government initiatives for several reasons, it is therefore, important to develop readiness criteria for transparency initiatives and metrics against which to gauge counties along those criteria in order to promote initiatives, pilot programs, and other strategies. The strategy of working with the leading edge to uncover development and implementation issues can lead to more successful investments and longer term projects across a broader range of countries. It may be the case that different nations group along the criteria developed and that different strategies are more or less successful within those groupings. This is an area that requires additional research and exploration. Thirdly, to evaluate existing system for portability and expansion. Successful ICT-enabled transparency system exists and can be further studied.

Fourthly, to reuse rather than reinvent. In line with the above recommendation, it is likely the case that other existing transparency and anti-corruption systems are reusable in a variety of ways. Lastly, to create and invest in collaborative pilot projects. Targeting initiatives, projects, technologies and countries to serve as pilots for overarching transparency initiatives can serve as fertile test beds. The strategies of many international organizations indeed include large-scale transparency goals and objectives. Supranational and regional organizations can consider cross-national pilot projects and sharing of best practices. In addition, collaboratively testing technologies, approaches and projects on a smaller scale will enable nations to work in tandem to develop solutions that can be scaled and implemented to meet strategic objectives.

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