

**Deceptive Transparency:  
Problems in the New Conceptual Framework of Global Communication**

**Allen Palmer, Ph.D.  
Brigham Young University**

**ABSTRACT**

The new conceptual language of “transparency” that pervades much of the dialogue about globalization is the logical result of dramatic expansion in the scope and sweep of technological, political and social changes. A sampling of the uses of transparency by global interests reveals that it is used inconsistently across various spheres of discourse. Further, its popular usage poses a contradiction in terms of the naïve realism that it connotes. In spite of numerous efforts to promote, cultivate and measure “media transparency”, the concept remains poorly defined. One of the lessons to be gleaned from this new idiom for democracy is, more specifically, how transparency denies the power of mediation. This essay samples some of the divergent uses of transparency in its technological, political and social-cultural dimensions. The discussion focuses on the varied uses of the transparency metaphor in global communication; the implications for technological and institutional spheres; and clarification of how the public sphere can subordinate the “hidden transcripts” of marginalized social groups.

## **Deceptive Transparency:**

### **Problems in the New Conceptual Framework of Global Communication**

The global aspirations of democratization and openness are captured in the conceptual language of *transparency*. Transparency encompasses the new pervasiveness of electronic technology and political accountability. As one internationalist observed, it is, “the new buzzword of the international community, cropping up in all of the official communiqués” (Anjaria, 1999). From an idealistic perspective, global communication assumes a substantial degree of transparency. It arises from the convergence of forces, including: (A) The *technologies* of surveillance that form a convincing backdrop of transparency (e.g. the internet, miniaturized transmitters, satellite monitoring, etc.); (B) The *institutions* of transparency, include media, which have rapidly expanded throughout developing nations; (C) Lastly, the *norms* of transparency at work in transitional nations giving rise to democratic aspirations. At the same time, transparency glosses the creative impulse of subordinated people to survive, and perhaps thrive, under repressive conditions.

In this essay, I seek to clarify some of the epistemological and definitional problems invoked with this new language as part of a larger project examining the new conceptual framework for mediation of global problems. It confronts the recent assertion that the sobering lesson of the last twenty years is that the global spread of free-market democracy has been a principal aggravating cause of racial and ethnic violence throughout the non-Western world (Chua, 2003). This project was initiated with research conducted in Kosovo in 2001 to examine obstacles faced by international news media in

covering the NATO bombing campaign against Slobodan Milosevic (Palmer, 2002). Despite aspirations of global transparency, one experienced international journalist described the Balkan region as a “disinformation trap” (Poggioli, 1993). The Balkan chaos was a virtual laboratory of global information in which old media frameworks of global strife failed to provide adequate historical or social-cultural understanding (Buckley, 2000; Chandler, 1999; Dyker & Vejvoda, 1996; Chomsky, 2000; Clark, 2000; Hammond & Herman, 2000; Mertus, 1999; Pettifer, 2002).

In main currents of political discourse, for instance in the emerging European Union, there has been a continuing debate over transparency, suggesting the kind of uncertainty that exists in many quarters over the relationship of governance to the public (Battini, et al, 1998; Clifford, et al, 1998; Doyle, 1996-7; Gronbech-Jensen, 1998; Osterdahl, 1998). At its heart, this discussion deals with the implementation of the much-discussed *public sphere* in new global regimes (Kalb, et al., 2000).

To date, there has been relatively little interdisciplinary effort to interrelate these applications—and some notable abuses—of the language of transparency. As one analyst put it, the discussion remains “murky” (Grigorescu, 2002, p. 61). Among the notable efforts to sort it out is the work on political implications of global transparency on the end of the age of secrecy (Florini, 1998); unfolding developments in satellite imaging (Baker, O’Connell & Williamson, 2000); international power relationships negotiated around transparency (Finel & Lord, 2000). The ironic conclusion drawn from many of these studies, however, is that transparency is neither entirely practical, nor desirable, in the global arena.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Another level of transparency less directly applicable to this analysis is the so-called “narrative transparency” (Olson, 1999), suggesting that American hegemony in entertainment arises from Hollywood’s mastery of global story -telling.

While there are ambiguities in usage, the phenomenon of transparency exists in global communication for good and valid reasons, some of which are congruent with the experiences of globalization, while others are not (Ferguson, 1992; Rosenberg, 2000). Further, where the usage of the term is valid, the phenomena of transparency draws important insights into the emergence of new frameworks of international communications, as well as the dystopian limits of global logic.

### **The Contours of the Metaphor of Transparency**

Taken as a whole, transparency connotes a level of naïve realism, denying the fundamental processes of mediation. The metaphor itself assumes both that a medium is indistinct from the object of interest to be viewed on the other side, and the process of seeing through the medium does not alter the nature of the object viewed. Among critics of transparency are those who have written about transparency as a false ideal, especially the kind of transparency fostered by television's entertainment values (Balkin, 1998). Others have argued the metaphor of transparency glosses other apt characterizations of globalization (e.g. stretching, shrinking, networking, flows, etc.)(Moores, 2002).

Others have suggested that unrestrained transparency might be detrimental because:

- (a) openness might aggravate conflict in the absence of universally shared, or at least mutually compatible, norms of behavior;
- (b) some secrets are legitimately worth protecting if revelation will betray, for instance, competitive market advantage; and
- (c) information can easily be misused or misinterpreted because transparency reveals behavior but not intent (Florini, 2000).

Analysts have sought to identify different kinds of transparency in typologies. For instance, J.M. Balkin (1998) identified three kinds: (a) *informational* transparency based on knowledge about government actors and decisions; (b) *participatory* transparency, the ability to participate in political decisions either through fair representation or direct participation; and (c) *accountability* transparency, or the ability to hold government officials accountable when they violate public interests.

Also, Steven Livingston (2000) has suggested that transparency should be separated into three conceptual levels. At the first, a free media meets its obligations to open democratic society in the preservation of transparency, even though democratic governments may object to transparency in specific cases. In the second level, new information technologies actually constitute a threat to state security, since they may reveal tactically significant information to an enemy. The third level is what he describes as “systemic transparency,” in which micro technologies contribute to “regulation by revelation” as individuals use them to function as the eyes and ears of a public audience eager to tap into the restricted realms of forbidden documentation.

The interplay between those already possessing political and economic power, and those who envy it, or desire to acquire it, is indeed complex. Stephen Holmes (1997) pointed out that “successful office holders throughout the post-communist world have no immediate interest in the creation of political transparency or a rule governed polity and economy”.

## **Technologies of Transparency**

The technologies of transparency are inseparable from the clandestine motives of surveillance and spying. Progress in communication has long been associated as a by-product of surveillance through, among others, satellites. In addition, 24-hour news coverage, instantaneous reporting of major events, etc., constitute the “mechanisms that facilitate the release of information about policies, capabilities, and preferences to outside parties” (Finel & Lord, 2000, p. 137). Analysis of these information technologies bringing changes to the diplomatic arena and give rise to such concepts as the “transparency web” (Livingston, 2000). “Transparency provided by satellite imagery is particularly comforting,” wrote one technology policy analyst. “Security depends on detailed, broad-scale timely information about Earth’s surface...especially since...[development of] access to high-resolution satellite imagery” (Williamson, 2002, p. 13).

Despite earlier Cold War optimism that high-resolution satellite imaging would enable diplomatic equilibrium through the UN policy of “equal access/open skies,” critics point out that information access to previously closed state defense secrets would eventually conflict with security interests. They predicted state secrecy would ultimately prevail when confrontations occurred (Krepon, Zimmerman, Spector & Umberger, 1990). Still, the steady movement toward private commercialization of satellite imagery, and the enhanced power of that technology, creates moments of tension between contending nations. Outside of armed conflict, international organizations emphasize the potential usefulness of satellite imagery for science and humanitarian missions (see, for example, Bjorgo, 2002).

In the European Union, discussions about the need to increase transparency began in October 1992. By 1994, the EU took internal steps to open public access to their internal documents, and increased momentum with the accession of Finland and Sweden, both considered among the most transparent nations in greater Europe. When EU leaders outlined a campaign early in 2002 to further improve institutional transparency among European Parliament member nations, the question of transparency was addressed in these words: “How can anyone expect people to take interest in Europe when they are being denied access to information?” asked European Parliament Vice-president Charlotte Cederschiöld. In response, Secretary General of the European Commission David O’Sullivan, argued against radical changes toward institutional openness: “the political process should not be undermined with requests for too much transparency...sometimes an open discussion is best held in confidence. The trust of people is important but it is not always best served in things happen in the open” (EUobserver.com, Jan. 7, 2002).

Indeed, the success of the EU has been ascribed by some observers to its resistance to transparency. The “culture of secrecy” within the leading councils of the EU was the deliberate design to achieve greater efficiency by not publicizing dissent.

### **Institutions of Transparency**

From a pragmatic perspective, a transparent government is one bound by determined institutions who exercise a will to oblige the release of information to citizens even when government would prefer not. Shortly after the wave of democratization that swept across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Bloc in the late 1980s and early

1990s, there was a “reverse” wave back toward authoritarianism in some nations. The initial test of a new democracy, free elections, soon gave way to the recognition that other elements—including institutions—are relevant to the survival of new democracies. From a narrow political standpoint, transparency is frequently defined as “the ability of any citizen to gain access to information held by government” (Grigorescu, 2002, p. 61).

Two main types of institutional changes support government transparency: (A) legislation assuring access to otherwise restricted information, such as the Freedom of Information Act in the United States; and (B) freedom of the press. These two institutional developments are linked, insofar that legislation on access to information has little impact on accountability of governments if the information accessed cannot be disseminated, and a mass media system, even if free, is severely constrained if it is limited to information provided by back channels and anonymous sources.

These kinds of institutional developments are now accompanied by sporadic calls by some critics for *media transparency*, suggesting a significant level of institutional distrust in media ethics and accountability.

A strong case for media transparency was outlined in 1994 by the Council of Europe, arguing for the free circulation of information without interference by either corporate media conglomerates or public authorities (Council of Europe, 1994). European ministers on the council argued that corporate concentration would have an adverse impact on media independence, contrary to the argument popular among some political and social historians who argue that historically international institutions have promoted openness and democracy (Mattleart, 2000).

Much of the Council of Europe's media code focuses on disclosure of financial stakeholders in mass media, suggesting that public confidence rises or falls on perception of media control. Other institutional influence has been deliberately exercised by NATO, focusing on issues of security. The internal ethnic conflicts that erupted early after the end of the Cold War led NATO to emphasize domestic factors. For instance, the Partnership for Peace sought to support democratic reforms in the new democracies. The subsequent scramble by Eastern European countries to qualify for EU and NATO membership has accelerated the institutional influence over domestic reforms leading to transparency.

### **Norms of Transparency**

Even the tangible influences of technologies and institutions do not assure seamless transitions, if a spirit of democracy does not underlay such changes. Such ineffable characteristics required for success are tolerance for dissent, commitment to orderly and peaceful changes in government, and the good will and faith of citizens in support of a "social contract". These norms are emphasized in the kind of substantive democracy in terms of the processes that allow the governed to influence to decisions of those that govern.

The alternative norms—secrecy, deception, lies and corruption—are already embedded in many societies. Reasons for so-called "culture of secrecy" is easily affirmed. One example was the European Union's Council of Ministers drafted its first report on its new code on access to public documents, the new report itself was kept

secret at the insistence of two member states, France and the Netherlands. After two months of argument, the report was made public.

The emergence of global organizations with transparency aspirations, such as “Transparency International,” highlights more generally the problem of international graft and corruption. Transparency International began issuing a measure of corruption in 1995, based on surveys from different institutions reflecting perceptions those doing business and research in different countries. The average corruption score was 4.44 out of a possible score of 10 for the least corrupt countries.

Similarly, the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) initiated a program to promote what its described as global media transparency based on narrowly sampled opinions of international public relations practitioners about local media ethics (IPRA, 2003). Based on the survey’s results, the organization drafted a “Charter on Media Transparency” in March 2002 that stipulates that the organization calls on media managers providers to observe the following:

- Editorial.** Editorial appears as a result of the editorial judgement of the journalists involved, and not as a result of any payment in cash or in kind, or barter by a third party.

- Identification.** Editorial which appears as a result of a payment in cash or in kind, or barter by a third party will be clearly identified as advertising or a paid promotion.

- Solicitation.** There should be no suggestion by any journalist or members of staff of an editorial provider, that editorial can be obtained in any way other than through editorial merit.

- Sampling.** Third parties may provide samples or loans of products or services to journalists where it is necessary for such journalists to test, use, taste or sample the

product or service in order to articulate an objective opinion about the product or service. The length of time required for sampling should be agreed in advance and all loaned products or services should be returned after sampling.

•**Policy statement.** Editorial providers should prepare a policy statement regarding the receipt of gifts or discounted products and services from third parties by their journalists and other staff. Journalists and other staff should be required to read and sign acceptance of the policy. The policy should be available for public inspection.

Notwithstanding questions about the IPRA survey validity, it reflects genuine concern in the business community about ethical standards and practices of media. While corruption among public officers and media managers is problematic in some part of the developing world, ethical standards are a continuing focus of journalistic associations in the more developed regions. Corruption, however, remains an important indirect measure of behavioral levels of opaqueness. While low levels of corruption does not necessarily correlate with high levels of transparency, in most cases, high corruption clearly thrives in an environment of low transparency.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Subaltern Boundaries of Transparency**

Cultural theorists have envisioned the shape of new “global communities” through such conceptual tools as “ethnoscapes” and “mediascapes” (Appadurai, 1996), “frontstage” and “backstage” behaviors (Meyrowitz, 1992), but the potential global sweep over a staggering stage of wrenching human problems has its own range of meaning and significance. From an audience perspective, a global gaze made possible by

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<sup>2</sup> Other recent efforts to quantify and measure transparency has been proposed, but it is not yet clear whether they will be useful (Grigorescu, 2002).

communication technologies presupposes a daunting emotional challenge. Evidence of the problems associated with the new scope of surveillance is found in the diagnosis of “compassion fatigue” as a reason the larger public might become disinterested in international news (Moeller, 1999).

Neither should we underestimate the force of local mentalities—folklore, language, tradition and stereotypes. Such identity formations are not easily displaced by other community formations such as globalization (Bugrova, 2000). Even in relatively advanced, developed societies, where globalization more directly affects everyday life, local identities and self interests persist, reacting to various kinds of state policies and ideologies of control, containment, and development, precipitating strikingly volatile situations and social cleavage (Warren, 1993). At their base, however, persist the historical roles and functions of ethnic and cultural patterns.

The cultural currents that shape national identity arise from massive structural changes affecting identity and consciousness, involving significantly diminished role of religion, dynasty and temporality. In this view, the transformation of national identity is grounded in the means of communication production because it creates a unified field of communicative exchange. Transparency is also relative to the “openness of places” in which the boundaries are becoming “far more open than they have been in the past” (Massey, 1995, p. 58). How those boundaries might be reconfigured in globalization is of considerable interest in social and cultural studies (Chan & McIntyre, 2002).

Contrasting “weapons of the weak” and “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1985, 1992) also suggests how ethnic and cultural groups stubbornly maintain their subaltern identities, interests and meanings, even when confronted with threats to their physical and

cultural survival. In this framework, hidden transcripts consists of the discourse that takes place “offstage” by either dominant or subordinate social groups. Echoing the earlier notion of the “spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann, 1984), the suppression of a group’s discourse is not a matter of what is true or false empirically. The public transcript is the normative ideal of an open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate the public sphere.

In James C. Scott’s analysis of hidden transcripts, the “masks” of discourse are a reaction to mastery and control, contrasted with the so-called masks of humility, obedience and loyalty of subordinates. He further identifies *double-meaning discourse* as an additional level of political discourse that functions beneath the formal level of media communication. Double-meaning discourse can be found in rumor, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes and euphemisms. The act of making these hidden transcripts publicly explicit can erupt in an “explosion” of social confrontation, Scott argues.

To avoid confronting dominant forces and to deal with domination, subordinates engage in a variety of creative and divergent behaviors, including:

- Backstage talk*—What is said outside the earshot of power holders. Domination creates backstage resentment that is sometimes reinforced by the subordinate group through punishing the over dutiful. The strength of sanctions deployed to enforce conformity depends on the cohesiveness of the subordinated group.

- Manipulative acting*—The subordinate performance of encouraging smiles, attentive listening, appreciative laughter and comments of affirmation, admiration or concern. The strength of sanctions deployed to enforce conformity depends on the cohesiveness of the subordinate group.

•*Fantasies of misfortune*—Expression of anger and reciprocal aggression consciously suppressed. The subordinate feel joy at the misfortune of the dominant, and on occasion may take action to bring about the misfortune directly.

Such subaltern strategies further confound and obscure the normative standards of transparent discourse, even while they sustain local interests.

## **Summary**

Considered together, these varied uses of the language of transparency suggest the broad scope of democratic political and social changes on the global stage. Although the metaphor of transparency is widespread in popular institutional discourse, it deflects deeper problems toward democratic inclusiveness and institutional accountability. At bottom, these calls for transparency lack adequate grounding in the hegemonic influence of mediation.

More specifically, the mass media are implicated as a key mechanism in the processes of transparency, both prescriptively and ascriptively. The strengthening of independent media is believed by most analysts to promote democratic reforms, but institutional campaigns against corruption have recently focused on promoting “media transparency” by institutional interests that are sometimes charged with influencing the same media. The momentum toward global transparency presumes the weakening of the “culture of secrecy” that prevails in some nations, including reforms against various levels of corruption.

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