

Albu, Oana Brindusa; Christensen, Lars Thøger

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Shadows in the Spotlight: Navigating Organizational Transparency in Digital Contexts

Oana Brindusa Albu  · Lars Thøger Christensen

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Abstract This article examines the potential implications of pursuing organizational transparency ideals in contemporary datafied societies, i.e., societies where multiple aspects of social life take the shape of digital data. The article develops a communication perspective of transparency which is valuable because it not only considers transparency as a matter of providing and accessing information about already existing practices but conceptualizes transparency as a *performative* practice with the potential to shape subjects, relations, and forms of organizing. The article identifies common trends in extant research on transparency, discusses different ways of thinking about transparency, and examines their implications for organizational settings. Taken together, the article problematizes predominant tendencies that theorize transparency simply from an informational standpoint, (i.e., as information disclosure) and identifies key challenges specific to digitally driven transparency. The article ends by discussing some implications of digitally driven transparency practices and sketches future research directions for organizations that face transparency challenges in the current social contexts where data is abundant.

Keywords Transparency · Digitalization · Performativity

The authors Oana Brindusa Albu and Lars Thøger Christensen contributed equally to the manuscript.

✉ Oana Brindusa Albu · Lars Thøger Christensen
Department of Management, Society and Communication, Copenhagen Business School, Dalgas
Have 15, 2000 Frederiksberg Denmark, Denmark
E-Mail: oba.msc@cbs.dk

“How could anyone be against transparency? Its virtues and its utilities seem so crushingly obvious. But I have increasingly come to worry that there is an error at the core of this unquestioned goodness. We are not thinking critically enough about where and when transparency works, and where and when it may lead to confusion, or worse. And I fear that the inevitable success of this movement – if pursued alone, without any sensitivity to the full complexity of the idea of perfect openness – will inspire not reform, but disgust. The “naked transparency movement”, as I will call it here, is not going to inspire change. It will simply push any faith in our political system over the cliff” (Lessig 2009)

1 Introduction

For centuries, transparency has been regarded as a sign of accountability, participation, fairness, and justice (Hood 2006; see Hansen et al. 2015 for a review of the status of transparency in late modernity). Under the impact of new technologies, current public conversations herald transparency even more, assuming that digitalization will increase trust, accountability, and innovation to a new and hitherto unseen level. This assumption mirrors the emergence of multiple societal transformations based on digitalization, i.e., the conversion of analog objects and activities into digital form and datafication. Today, numerous dimensions of social life take the shape of digital data in ways that make it increasingly easy to observe the behaviors of people, collectives, and technological devices (Leonardi and Treem 2020; Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013). These developments have given rise to an important phenomenon that we call *digitally driven transparency*¹. Such type of transparency is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon characterized by different rationales (e.g., market, fame, or civic), objectives (generate evidence, collaboration, popularity, or positive reputation), as well as multiple practices (consultations, information dissemination campaigns or surveillance tactics, Edwards 2020) associated with the growing potential for observation. Such transparency, we shall argue, affects that which is being rendered visible and mediated by technologies surrounding its deployment (Albu and Krause Hansen 2021).

A critical stream of emerging research has already drawn attention to multiple challenges and unintended consequences when organizations are pursuing transparency. Among the most obvious challenges are information overload, privacy invasion, surveillance, manipulation, and resistance (Christensen 2002; Albu and Flyverbom 2019; Ringel 2019; Heimstaedt and Dobusch 2020). Specifically, studies have indicated that transparency can have a complex relationship with technological developments that can undermine democratic values (Zuboff 2022). Digitally driven transparency differs from information driven transparency by the fact that multiple

¹ Digitally driven transparency refers to the practice of utilizing digital data, often derived from various sources and technologies, to enhance disclosure and openness in organizations. Consulting conglomerates such as BCG advocate the creation of digitally driven transparency for improving environmental, social and governance performance, see BCG (2022).

aspects of social life now take the form of digital data. The collection, extraction, and curation of such data fuels unsubstantiated promises of social progress. Tsoukas (1997), for instance, shows that “making more information on an expert system publicly available entails that more opportunities for conflicting interpretations are created, and so it is less likely for trust to be achieved” (1997, p. 835). Such side-effects of pursuing transparency through digital means can be seen, for example, in China, where a data leak from Shenzhen-based SenseNets, a Chinese company that carries out mass facial recognition monitoring exposed personal details of 2.5 million residents (GPS coordinates, ID numbers, home addresses, photos, and employers). This incident shows that surveillance and privacy invasion often take place under the rationale of digitally driven transparency (Albu and Krause Hansen 2021). Digitally driven transparency, thus, is both a marker and a means of democratic governance, as well as a potential threat to democratic values (Heald 2006b).

Despite its immense relevance in contemporary society, our knowledge about the detrimental effects when organizations implement (or circumvent) different forms of transparency through digital transformations remains limited (Reischauer and Ringel 2023). With this article, we aim to challenge traditional understandings of transparency as a static or objective condition and contribute to a theorization of digital transparency from the vantage point of communication and organization studies. A communicative approach makes it possible to foreground the limitations, challenges, and multifaceted nature of transparency. Specifically, such an approach conceptualizes transparency as a dynamic and performative process where disclosed objects are shaped both by the digital infrastructures as well as by the interactions and interpretations of various actors. Digital transparency initiatives, in other words, do not only reveal and illuminate through disclosing information; they simultaneously involve complex communication processes that produce new organizational and social realities; that is, they are performative² (Albu and Flyverbom 2019). Challenging conventional assumptions in this arena, this article is relevant not only to transparency scholars. It is also of value to practitioners who aim to develop and manage strategies in response to increasing demands for transparency. In particular, we envision that it may inspire more nuanced approaches as how to transcend unexpected problems resulting from an increased reliance on digitalized transparency initiatives.

The article proceeds as follows. In Sect. 2 we provide a theoretical framework that allows us to problematize existing conceptualization of transparency, address its limitations, and identify key theoretical approaches. In Sect. 3 we discuss how transparency in its contemporary digital form is characterized by different challenges. In Sect. 4 we reflect on the practical implications that digital transparency strategies

² Performativity here builds on the idea that the world is enacted in communicative practice (Ashcraft et al. 2009; Schoeneborn et al. 2019). A constitutive notion of communication is based on the study of the enactment of identities (Butler 1997), markets (MacKenzie 2006) or transparency (Hansen and Flyverbom 2015). In this view, realities such as identities, spaces, markets, secrecy, or transparency are performed—made real—in ongoing and inseparable social and material practices (Scott and Orlikowski 2014).

bring to organizations³ by discussing the potential opacities resulting from these efforts. In Sect. 5, finally, we conclude with brief suggestions for future research.

2 Prevailing Transparency Perspectives

2.1 Revisiting Conventional Understandings of Transparency

Since the Enlightenment, modern societies have regularly celebrated transparency as an essential and necessary source of knowledge, insight, and emancipation (Christensen and Cornelissen 2015). Gradually, however, slightly less abstract understandings have come to define what it means to achieve transparency in practice.

Information availability and access, in particular, have in many different contexts come to represent what in colloquial terms is understood as transparency. At the same time, this understanding is frequently reproduced in academic works. Rawlins (2009, p. 35), for example, defines transparency as “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, to enhance the reasoning ability of publics and holding organizations accountable for their actions, policies, and practices”. Active and deliberate information provision, in other words, is generally considered a *sine qua non* of contemporary transparency practice.

Moreover, such provision is often idealized as unbiased, assuming that social actors, including organizations, are able and willing to present themselves and their activities in ways that are devoid of skewed selection, unfair framing, and other types of improper manipulation (Christensen and Cheney 2015; Fenster 2006). Rawlins (2009, p. 79), thus, imagines that organizations voluntarily “share information that is inclusive, auditable (verifiable), complete, relevant, accurate, neutral, comparable, clear, timely, accessible, reliable, honest, and holds the organization accountable” (see also Bandsuch et al. 2008). Even though such purified understanding of information is frequently contradicted in practice—for example, by selective disclosures (Fung et al. 2007), signaling (Heil and Robertson 1991), or strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg 1984; Etzioni 2010; Henriques 2007)—the ideal of an all-inclusive, balanced, and unequivocal information access remains the assumed pinnacle of a transparent society.

The predominant assumption, which is rarely questioned in public debates, is that transparency in the shape of information availability and access can enhance the reasoning ability of publics in ways that allow them to hold organizations and politicians accountable for their actions, policies, and practices. Relatedly, and as Strathern (2000, p. 313) critically remarks, the general expectation is that transparency facilitates organizational and social progress: “... if procedures and methods are open to scrutiny, then the organization is open to critique and ultimately to improvement”. Transparency, information, openness, and accountability, thus, are

³ Our focus is organizational, but we are nevertheless broad in our approach since in our analysis we refer not only to conventional organizations but also to alternative forms of organizing such as social movements, think tanks, or political networks with various degrees of organizationality (Schoeneborn et al. 2019).

frequently used interchangeably, assuming (1) that information is neutral and speaks for itself, (2) that openness facilitates knowledge, and (3) that accountability captures the essence of the object in focus in ways that generate public insight. Combined, these conditions are expected to increase social responsibility and enhance public trust (Jahansoozi 2006; Schnackenberg and Tomlinson 2016; Williams 2005). Given these lofty assumptions and expectations, it is therefore not surprising that transparency has become one of the most powerful and seductive concepts in public and political discourse (Owetschkin and Berger 2019).

More recently, and influenced by growing digitalization and datafication of life, transparency is increasingly discussed in terms of “visibility management”, a term referring to the efforts of organizations to handle the consequences of increased data accessibility and visibility (e.g., Flyverbom 2019; Leonardi and Treem 2020). While the exact relationship between visibility and transparency is precarious and occasionally problematized (e.g. Stohl et al. 2016), the assumption that transparency and visibility are closely linked is reproduced in much of the transparency literature (e.g., Garsten and de Montoya 2008; Neyland 2007; Zyglidopoulos and Fleming 2011). While some transparency writings are focused on the disciplinary effects of visibility (Thompson 2005), assuming that “the more closely we are watched, the better we behave” (Prat 2006), others are concerned about how visibility might enhance practices of posing and make-believe (e.g., Christensen and Cheney 2015).

2.2 Key Theoretical Perspectives in Transparency Research

At the core of the transparency ideal lies, as we have seen, the assumption that an organization unveils itself by providing a broad spectrum of accurate information to pertinent audiences. This trend in mainstream literature on transparency can be called *informational* because it assumes that transparency is characterized by an attempt of full information disclosure. However, the knowing subject assumed by such informational approaches—a human being willing and able to decode information perfectly in line with how it was encoded—often overlooks the complex ways in which interpretation works and the choices made by the “imaginary public” (Fenster 2015, p. 159). Another trend in literature that we identify as *performative* does not equate more information with more insight or better conduct. Instead, it stresses the complexity of communication and interpretation processes and focuses on the paradoxes generated by the digital infrastructure that makes transparency projects possible. A performativity approach takes into account material objects and settings such as mediating devices and technological infrastructures and their affordances (Hansen and Flyverbom 2015). In this perspective, research presupposes that the information that is revealed or omitted in the pursuit of transparency simultaneously gives rise to specific realities and influence behaviors, often in unforeseen ways (Christensen and Cheney 2015; Albu and Flyverbom 2019). Transparency practices and metrics, in other words, are *doing* something more than simply disclosing or revealing an otherwise hidden reality. Such performative impact can be seen especially in present times when activities such as consumption or elections are taking place predominantly online. The data traces that such activities leave behind on various digital platforms are curated, circulated, and aggregated to make the behavior visible

and subject to influence (e.g., Cambridge Analytica debacle where user profile data improperly obtained from Facebook was used to build voter profiles, Confessore 2018).

Whether one takes an informational or performative standpoint in approaching transparency, a multifaceted understanding is crucial. Both perspectives need to consider the opportunities and challenges resulting from the ways platforms, media conglomerates, institutions, or various forms of organizing engage with transparency ideals. Although performative approaches to transparency have become more frequent in recent years, they are still relatively under researched. Thus, significant gaps exist in the literature, especially given that contemporary societies are undergoing constant digital transformations all the while the assumption that digitalization of information can enhance transparency and efficiency persists (Ahmed et al. 2022).

Recent analyses of transparency that adopt a performative standpoint usually follow three avenues (Albu 2022), namely: (1) one that identifies how the interpretations, translations, and meaning making of actors can retroactively affect emerging transparency ideals and practices (Christensen and Cheney 2015; Ringel 2019; Heimstaedt and Dobusch 2020); (2) one that maps how transparency ideals in various institutions and organizations shape subjects, relations, and forms of organizing (Garsten and de Montoya 2008); and (3) and one that looks at how the different multi-directionalities of vision and observation in the digital age affect governance and behavior (Hansen and Weiskopf 2021; Ringel 2019). Despite these insights, we know relatively little about the opportunities and challenges resulting from digital transparency initiatives. Emerging technologies are not simply tools that “kill secrecy” (Flyverbom 2019, p. 45) but should be approached as digital systems that not only increase insight but also create new forms of secrecy and opacity (cf. Fan and Christensen 2022). These infrastructures significantly influence what is being disclosed and in what format, and this is why there is a growing need for further research on how such types of transparency decisions and practices impact organizations. Differently put, emerging technologies and their social and material performances need more scrutiny because they inevitably shape how we make things visible or invisible, knowable or unknowable, and governable or ungovernable (Albu 2023). In the next section, we discuss in more detail the potential challenges organizations may face when pursuing transparency strategies in digital contexts.

3 Digitally Driven Transparency and Its Potential Challenges

3.1 General Limitations of the Transparency Pursuit

Digital transparency is part of a broader complex of transformations that create new practices and strategies aimed at increasing the disclosure of information (see Power 2022; Zuboff 2022; Flyverbom 2022). The growing amount of available information facilitated by digital technologies is a serious burden for the public when seeking relevant knowledge in its pursuit of insight. A growing body of literature has identified several significant challenges associated with the actual transparency pursuit. In the following, we briefly mention some of the most significant ones.

Not only is rationality inevitably “bounded” by information overload, as Simon (1997) pointed out, but the limited capacity to process the expanding piles of information poses a real threat to the transparency ideal (Tsoukas 1997). Increased access to information, for example, risks hiding the object in plain sight (Stohl et al. 2016). At the same time, information ostensibly produced in the name of transparency can serve other purposes than insight such as creating an image of openness and objectivity, even though the disclosures are carefully selected and timed (e.g., Heil and Robertson 1991). As Lamming et al. (2004, p. 299) indicate, the disclosed information may be deliberately chosen to “blind or dazzle the receiver” in ways that help organizations keep certain practices out of sight (see also, Drucker and Gumpert 2007). Relatedly, Eisenberg (1984) has argued that deliberate ambiguity allows organizations to reveal and conceal at the same time. Even without such manipulative practices, however, the transparency challenge remains unsolved: while information providers cannot describe themselves and their practices in toto and without idealizing and framing (Christensen 2002; Vattimo 1992), users of the information are often unable to navigate the amount of information and assess its quality without the help of third parties such as standards, labels, or experts. Hereby, transparency becomes a question of which representations or proxies to trust, rather than which information is available (e.g., Henriques 2007; Power 1997).

Moreover, organizational transparency practice should not be understood as passive information provision (Christensen and Cheney 2015; Fenster 2006). A growing number of organizations seek to handle expectations and demands for information by turning transparency into a proactive communication competence (e.g. Oliver 2004; Drucker and Gumpert 2007). Business consultants, thus, frequently advise organizations to carefully choose the areas and activities where they prefer to demonstrate transparency to their stakeholders (e.g. Holtz and Havens 2009). As long as stakeholders lack detailed expert knowledge about the objects in question, which is often the case when it comes to areas such as finance or sustainability (Henriques 2007), such self-inflicted transparency practice may help organizations avoid unwanted disclosures and thereby circumvent demands for substantial changes in their practices. At the same time, a proactive approach can help organizations sustain their image of being open and accountable.

Yet, as a growing number of scholars have pointed out, accountability may not in any simple sense serve the transparency ideal (Fox 2007; Messner 2009). Since accountability suggests an ability to account for one’s policies, decisions, actions (Roberts 2009), it involves the art of mastering a persuasive language that can keep critical stakeholders at an arm’s length distance. In that sense, “[g]iving an account is seen to be a way of avoiding an account ...” (Power 1997, p. 127). Along the

Table 1 Digitally driven transparency challenges

Challenge	Drivers	Counter-Strategies
Privacy breaches	Individual tracking (RFID, IoT)	Privacy-by-design
Power dynamics	Platformization	Transparency regulations
Civil liberties encroachment	Live mass biometric tracking (facial and gait recognition)	Encryption, concealment, obfuscation

same lines, visibility management can be used proactively to channel stakeholder attention in desired directions, thereby avoiding focus on activities that organizations prefer to keep out of sight. Such use of visibility and channeling of attention allows powerful organizations to affect transparency regimes and practices to their own advantage (Zyglidopoulos and Fleming 2011). While acknowledging these general limitations of the transparency pursuit, especially as they play out in the context of organizations, we focus in the following subsection on three challenges associated specifically with digitally driven transparency: privacy breaches, power, imbalances, and the undermining of civil liberties (see Table 1). These challenges have become more pronounced with the advent of technological infrastructures that collect, store, and analyze vast amounts of data in the name of transparency (Leonardi and Treem 2020).

3.2 Privacy Breaches

While transparency is considered a virtue that promotes accountability, trust, and ethical behavior (Palanski et al. 2011), it tends to undermine privacy. For instance, the adoption of “big data” digital tracking to register the use of email, messaging, calendars, platforms, workflows (through real-time output monitors), patterns of movement (through closed circuit television or digital maps), and even moods (through facial recognition) are pervasive in many contemporary organizations and institutions (Shefali and Bernstein 2021). Studies show that in many organizational settings, transparency values that were initially seen to foster employee engagement and public trust can ultimately foster mis- and dis-identification because employees are constantly feeling under peer scrutiny (Reischauer and Ringel 2023; Ringel 2019). Given that the same technological advancements facilitating organizational transparency can equally serve as tools for extensive surveillance, such as the monitoring and tracing of user activities via key cards, mobile phones, global positioning systems (GPS), radio frequency identification (RFID), and interconnected devices like those within the Internet of Things (IoT), these two aspects are frequently intertwined in practical application. Transparency, even when explicitly celebrated, can therefore be perceived as intrusive and even Orwellian as is the case with the Chinese Social Credit System for instance (Albu and Krause Hansen 2021). This makes the desire for transparency and the need for privacy conflicting challenges for contemporary organizations, not only in the Global South but also in the Global North. For instance, in corporate contexts such as Buffer—a California-based social media company that made all emails public (Lee 2014), or Amazon which tracks all workers’ movements—employees are concerned about the constant monitoring of their activities, experiencing a need to cope with feelings of surveillance and a lack of autonomy (Bernstein 2012).

There are several possible counter-strategies for dealing with potential threats to privacy in organizations that pursue digital transparency strategies. On the one hand, organizations can take a privacy-by-design approach, which means integrating privacy principles and safeguards into the design and development of data-driven systems, products, and services (Rahnama and Pentland 2020). On the other hand, conducting regular tests and audits of data-driven systems might ensure that the

organization complies with the relevant regulatory and ethical requirements in ways that do not violate the privacy rights and interests of stakeholders. These are by no means bulletproof solutions for privacy protection but a starting point to appreciate the significance and power of data collected in the name of transparency beyond its more obvious utility effects. Questions such as how, when, and for what purposes might our data be accumulated and utilized are crucial because the data traces we leave incidentally through our engagements in everyday life provide a “new frontier of power” that, if left unchecked, will transform the future in ways that might “threaten individual autonomy and the democratic order” (Zuboff 2019, p. 20).

3.3 Power Dynamics

Reducing privacy breaches may nevertheless be difficult to achieve, especially because transparency is intimately linked to power dynamics. It is therefore essential to grasp how digital transparency practices and metrics may generate unexpected power dynamics (Hansen and Flyverbom 2015). The increased reliance on digital technologies in organizations has reshaped the traditional Benthamian panopticon conditions, in which “the few” can observe “the many” (O’Dwyer 2007). While this potential has increased, digital technologies simultaneously make it possible to reverse the direction of observation. For instance, organizations increasingly rely on platforms for creating work infrastructures (Agile, Stack technologies, etc.) and knowledge-sharing (e.g., X, Meta, wikis, etc.), which fundamentally allow anyone in an organization to disclose and access large amounts of data (Heimstaedt and Dobusch 2020). As a result, we now encounter in many organizations and institutions what has been described as a synoptic scenario (Mathiesen 1997), where “the many” can observe and, perhaps, monitor “the few”. Of course, those who have access to such data infrastructures have considerable benefits over other stakeholders. Such advantages can be used for various purposes (creating transparency in real time, or in retrospect, or about specific events, demographics, etc., Heald 2006a), with both positive and negative implications. For example, when public institutions and think tanks engage in areas such as public policy advocacy and election campaigning, the data collected and combined through text mining from various platforms can be used to generate transparency and build granular insight concerning individual voters. Such visible behavior is then used to better understand important zones of ‘persuadability’ for grass-root campaigning (Andrew and Baker 2022). This type of real-time transparency concerning voting behavior puts certain political organizations in a powerful position as they use voting preference data for micro-targeting individuals with specific content and political advertisements often characterized by disinformation and foreign interference (Matthes et al. 2022). Issues of political advertising on digital platforms and transparency have raised many debates given that in both Europe and the USA such strategies are common including native advertising, sponsored search results, paid targeted messages, promotion in rankings, promotion of something or someone integrated into content such as product placement, influencers, and other endorsements (Mehta and Erickson 2022). One potential counter-strategy for addressing these power complexities is to first develop new transparency regulations for political advertising (e.g., where actors can easily

obtain information on whether they are being targeted with an ad, who is paying for it, how much is being paid, and to which elections or referendum it is linked, etc.). Such regulatory efforts are underway, but significant roadblocks exist given that online users rarely disclose political and commercial intent (European Commission 2024). This could in turn allow organizations to assess how different types of transparency can impact the power dynamics of the individuals and organizations involved.

3.4 Civil Liberties Encroachment

Governments often assert that transparency initiatives in the form of surveillance based on big data tracking (e.g., real-time facial and gait biometric recognition, etc.) are crucial for safeguarding national security and preventing crimes⁴. However, the highly divided and polarized political environments that characterize the world of today may undermine the justification of surveillance in the name of the greater good (Mohanani 2021). Apprehensions regarding the infringement of civil liberties such as freedom of expression and assembly and the possibility of power abuse have become common in many countries that are characterized by liberal democracies (e.g., as shown in the use of mass facial recognition surveillance on social movements such as Black Lives Matter, Amnesty International 2022). Regardless of one's objectives or motives, the adoption of digitally driven transparency comes therefore with its own set of potential risks for civil rights. While transparency, and scientific vision more broadly, represent an extension of the Enlightenment and the subsequent scientific revolution (Hansen et al. 2015), this modernist ideal has arguably implied advancing a particular type of knowledge that tends to consolidate white power through the subjugation of nature, women, and racial minorities (Nielsen 2011). One fundamental risk of valorizing transparency is therefore that doing so occludes the ways that relations of domination are indelibly encoded into transparency systems and practices (Mohanani 2021).

Challenges resulting from how to handle vast amounts of data traces and internal information not only surface in public institutions and politics but increasingly also in business (Whittington and Yakis-Douglas 2020). Reischauer and Ringel (2023), for example, show that organizations increasingly experience power struggles between members who engage in competing modes of information disclosure. This typically happens when organizational members may combine different transparency practices of unregulated disclosure of information (e.g., leaking confidential documents across decentralized cloud storage on various platforms) with using citizen journalism applications (e.g., myScoop) to share videos, emails, etc. A possible consequence of such competing transparency initiatives is that it could violate the civil rights of those who expose wrongdoing by corporations that claim to be “open” and “transparent” in the first place such as Google or Facebook (Segal 2021). As research shows, whistleblowers have in several cases faced termination, intimidation, and long legal battles after they spoke out against covert military contracts, racism, or sexism

⁴ See for instance routine deployments of live facial recognition technology by the MET Police in the UK (Fussay and Murray 2019).

in such companies (Porlezza and Di Salvo 2020). One potential counter-strategy for dealing with the undermining of civil liberties is the use of a wide repertoire of encryption, concealment, and obfuscation techniques of resistance against mass tracking, predictive policing, and unlawful surveillance (see Albu 2023). These can also amount to anti-surveillance camouflage or the use of jamming devices (Mohanani 2015).

Taken together, some of the key challenges (among many important others) that transparency can introduce are privacy breaches, power imbalances, and encroachment on civil liberties. These are critical issues in today's digital world, with profound implications for organizations, institutions, and individuals. Achieving a balance between different types of transparency and privacy, as well as addressing imbalances in power relations and protecting civil liberties, are complex and ongoing challenges. To expand on the underlying rationales of transparency, we next delve into the practical implications of transparency and discuss what specific transparency strategies are likely to hide.

4 Practices of Digitally Driven Transparency

Organizations are increasingly reliant on digital technologies when developing their transparency practices and promoting a sense of openness and trust among stakeholders. In the following, we extend our discussion of transparency limitations by presenting three of the most common digital transparency practices along with their drawbacks.

4.1 Open Data Initiatives

Open data initiatives involve making non-sensitive, but relevant organizational data available to the wider public (Wirtz et al. 2022). This can include financial reports, performance metrics, and other information that stakeholders are expected to find valuable. Open data initiatives such as the Open Knowledge Foundation, which is the world's largest open data community, aim to foster trust by demonstrating a commitment to openness (OKF 2019). In a broader sense, open data can be understood as data that is: available as a whole and accessible online; machine-readable for use and re-use and redistribution; and, for universal participation, by means that everyone must be able to use, re-use and redistribute (Davies and Perini 2016; Verhulst and Young 2017). One of the main limitations of such initiatives is that they are costly. Preparing and maintaining open data sources can be resource-intensive, particularly for smaller organizations. Privacy concerns are a second limitation. Publishing open data raises privacy issues especially when it involves personal or sensitive information. Finally, data quality is another important limitation. Ensuring ongoing accuracy and quality of open data is challenging, and lack of verification can potentially lead to misinformation. At the same time, "openwashing" is a common risk when organizations employ and monitor such initiatives (Heimstädt 2017). Thus, organizations typically involve selecting and bending the information to retain control over its representative value or orchestrating new information for particular audiences.

4.2 Transparency Portals

Transparency portals are websites that aim to provide public access to information related to the activities, finances, and performance of governments, organizations, or institutions. Such portals intend to make it easy for stakeholders to access relevant data, thereby potentially enhancing transparency and accountability, and eventually fostering citizen engagement and trust. Recent studies have reported that the use of transparency portals affects processes that have contributed to transparency in areas where corruption, wastage, and inefficiency take place the most (Hogan et al. 2017). For instance, Van Schalkwyk and Cañares (2020) provide an overview of the anti-corruption projects in international development programs taking place in countries such as Malaysia, Moldova, Kosovo, Indonesia, and Africa highlighting their efficiency in reducing unwanted behaviors. However, a key drawback of international development programs reliant on transparency portals, like Transparency International, is the potential inaccuracy of data. Inaccuracy stems, for example, from the frequent use of standardized measures, such as corruption perception indexes, which may not faithfully capture the experiences of the individuals and countries they intend to portray. At the same time, the metrics involved might overlook the voices of citizen groups who fall outside the scope of measurement, thereby diminishing diversity, civic capacity, and social cohesion within the country (Albu and Murphy o.J.). Another constraint of transparency portals involves the risk, mentioned earlier, for data overload and information fatigue. Such overload can lead to fatigue and ennui, making it difficult for individuals to concentrate on essential updates (Albu and Wehmeier 2014).

4.3 Collaborative Platforms

Collaborative platforms or intranets such as Slack facilitate internal and external collaboration and knowledge sharing and are used by many companies to generate a culture of transparency. Organizational members tend to seek information sharing and open communication especially when they deal with a task that requires collaboration outside their team (Bui et al. 2019). Previously hidden interactions within an organization, when conducted through collaborative platforms, enhance information exchange by making communication visible to external observers. Moreover, collaborative platforms have been found to enable employees, partners, and customers to participate in decision-making processes, thereby fostering diversity and inclusivity (Vaast 2023). At the same time, this type of transparency allows third parties to enhance their metaknowledge, understanding both what individuals know and their connections within the organization (Leonardi 2014).

Research suggests, however, that despite organizational members becoming more reachable and knowledgeable, and able to align their work through enhanced transparency and participation, they simultaneously tend to employ sophisticated methods to uphold personal opacity (Dobusch et al. 2019). This occurs for several reasons, including a need for privacy and an aversion towards surveillance (cf. Bernstein 2012). In the specific context of collaborative platforms, the desire to uphold personal opacity can be attributed to a notable downside of the form of transparency

enabled by platforms, marked by the amplification and dissemination of inaccurate information. As multimodal content (images, videos, audio, and text; or even by combining these modalities) is continuously published and propagated, it is difficult not only for end users but even for companies to check and validate the available material (Caled and Silva 2022). At the same time, bias and manipulation are common downsides of crowdsourced data on collaborative platforms. Bots (i.e., software robots) or deepfakes (i.e., a video, that has been digitally manipulated to replace one person's likeness convincingly with that of another, often used maliciously to show someone doing something that he or she did not do) can increase the risk of bias or manipulation, potentially affecting the trust in the information shared (Li and Lyu 2019). Finally, resistance to sharing might shape the use of new collaborative platforms, affecting adoption, and increasing opacity (Hogan et al. 2017). Individuals engaged in collaborative platforms consistently navigate the dynamic equilibrium between maintaining personal opacity and ensuring transparency in the interest of knowledge-sharing (Vaast 2023).

In short, heeding the various digital infrastructures used for fostering transparency and their limitations, it becomes obvious that “complete transparency is impossible” (Costas and Grey 2015, p. 53; see also Birchall 2021). In present times of digital transformations, there are ongoing debates about “radical transparency” (Birchall 2021, p. 102) and “radical forms of disclosure” (Flyverbom 2019, p. 124) where an organization aims to implement openness at all levels of operations. Yet, an organization may face significant challenges pursuing such an unattainable ideal. Returning to the Buffer example, when employees were placed under a “default transparency” policy (Lee 2014), in which all emails were initially visible to everyone, there was a notable shift towards the predominant use of private messages. As a result, in time, Buffer's internal communication shifted to private messaging and employees faced unforeseen complications such as diminishing levels of trust and collaboration across teams. Transparency and its tactics are inseparable from insidious issues about misinformation, inaccuracy, secrecy, and opacity.

5 Brief Future Research Perspectives

Organizations cannot escape growing demands for transparency. Increasingly, organizations use digital strategies to navigate and respond to such demands. Thus, more attention is needed to understand the different ways in which transparency is negotiated, managed and unmanaged in digitized contexts (Reischauer and Ringel 2023). This article has made a first attempt to point out some of the connections and implications of transparency in contemporary societies where datafication is transforming all aspects of social life (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013). Delving deeper into these matters holds paramount significance for individuals interested in the study of communication and organization.

Overall, we encourage a more nuanced understanding of transparency in digital contexts. Given that meeting the current expectations and requirements for transparency involves a combination of actors, organizations, and technological devices as well as their different concerns, interests, and affordances, it is valuable to investigate

how the actual enactment of transparency is dependent on both data infrastructures and the social practices that ensue in their wake. More insights into these matters are needed because actors have differential agencies and resources related to managing their visibilities and opportunities. At the same time, constraints vary along with changes in datafied environments (Leonardi and Treem 2020). Moreover, empirical studies concerning the infrastructural aspect of transparency and associated practices would be useful.

While technological transformations have fostered new types of transparency and thereby dramatically increased the potential for knowledge and insight, the very same transformations have led to breaches of privacy and algorithmic forms of surveillance, imbalances of power and an infringement of civic rights. Contemporary enactments of the transparency ideal, for example, are based on automated monitoring methods that can be used to recognize people and patterns through the identification of behavioral and psychological characteristics (Mohanam 2021). The fragmented online data footprints left by individuals are aggregated, analyzed, and used for different evaluation and profiling purposes (potential criminal, customer, voter, etc.). It is striking that there is seemingly an increasing acceptance of such data capitalism practices (Myers West 2019; Zuboff 2019) despite the unforeseen complications they imply (biases, racial profiling, power dynamics, etc.). There is, accordingly, a need for future interdisciplinary research that problematizes invocations of openness and transparency, and that intervenes rather than accepts dominant boundaries and conditions of visibility (Ringel 2018; Flyverbom 2019). Such inquiries could be pursued through communication perspectives and performative methodologies (e.g., participatory action research) that “would involve workers and citizens making decisions about what kind of disclosure is the most effective in a given situation and about the scope of sociopolitical change that disclosure can precipitate” (Birchall 2021, p. 91). The concept of the “data multitude” (Birchall 2021, p. 143), for example, could be useful for future inquiries into the potential for creating political subjects and identities that refute data surveillance and communicative capitalism (Dean 2009). Studies of transparency based on digital initiatives could explore in what ways and in what settings such subjects could be capable of putting forth the demand that data collection and aggregation serve horizontal, community-forming rather than only profit purposes.

Availability of data and material There is no empirical material. The article is conceptual

Conflict of interest O.B. Albu and L. Thøger Christensen declare that they have no competing interests.

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