**Agency, scale, and the ethnography of transparency**

Commentary for PoLAR special issue on Transparency

Kregg Hetherington

Concordia University

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The four papers collected here take us deep into the trenches of a transparency-obsessed world, offering us rich ethnographic glimpses of people coming into contact with new documentary assemblages meant to bring clarity to bureaucratic action. All of these papers depict transparency as a fickle project, an ethical scene (to use Webb’s felicitous borrowing) which is recognizable across contexts but which creates new subjects and objects in unpredictable ways. In some, as in Thomson’s refugee camp, the hermeneutics of global suspicion gives rise to inscrutable documentary systems. In others, transparency merely shuffles hierarchical social relationships, as when a regime of inclusion like the Right to Information only creates new forms of brokerage and dependency. And everywhere audit creates and destroys what it claims to represent: a Costa Rican NGO that achieves (rather than represents) its identity through its own self-auditing experiment, or projects in rural India that simply grind to a halt due to the demands of self-description. Each is critical of transparency’s explicit promise, and as Ballestero remarks in her introduction, they move beyond the dyad of transparency and opacity that transparency ideology makes too easily available. At same time, these studies also rub transparency along its own grain, becoming part of an ethical scene in which political agency and the appropriate scale of political power are the central matters of concern.

Transparency ideology, as Ballestero calls it, takes very explicit, if at times productively ambivalent, positions on political agency and scale. First, following cold war discourses about censorship, transparency was supposed to redistribute political agency to individual citizens, creating democratic participants who could rise from under the yoke of communist and dictatorial regimes. Second, broader access to information was supposed to promote economic development by spurring innovation and empowering market actors to make more optimal choices. In both of these projects, which were always analogically linked, the freedom of the rational individual is often presented as good in itself. But, like the invisible hand to which it is heir, informed rational self-interest also has the collateral benefit of creating better societies, with individuals bearing the responsibility for voting out autocrats, rooting out corrupt bureaucrats, generating market efficiency or wisely investing both private and public forms of capital. In other words, individual freedom may be a good in itself, but it also produces a “greater” good, a scaled-up aggregate which is organized in a desirable (democratic, efficient, productive) manner. Curiously, though the rational individual plays the key role as both means and ends for transparency, it is only at the level of the aggregate that proponents of such reforms can find empirical measures that truly matter (GDP or quality of life indices being the most obvious). In its own evaluation, then, the individual is the true black box of transparency, the obscure space between information inputs and desirable social outputs.

As all of these papers show, of course, transparency rarely plays out this way. More often than not, the agents of reform find themselves dangling as before in inscrutable webs of social relations and dependency. But if transparency fails to empower an ideal individual that it takes to pre-exist its own ministrations, it does succeed in redistributing agency in a variety of other ways. This is clearest in Webb’s article, where agency does not accrue to individual citizen-subjects but instead to middle-class brokers whose earnest pedagogy of rights creates new clients. But there are two other forms of agency in these papers that most seem to undermine the ideal of the empowered individual, and which seem to haunt transparency almost everywhere: the first is the stubborn agency of the very documents whose invisibility is supposed to facilitate the emergence of the seeing individual. The second is the equally stubborn, though oddly ephemeral presence of state and state-like entities that refuse to be reduced to mere governance machines – they appear to remain as specific loci of power even though ethnography is not much closer to explaining what that specificity is than it was twenty years ago. I’ll take these two agents in turn.

Since the 1980s, the people and structures of a previous brand of political ethnography have seen their capacity for action leached away by documents, the prosaic bundles of papers that were only ever supposed to be their tools. Individual functionaries in bureaucracies were never supposed to have a great deal of decision-making power, and transparency is seen as a way to control some of the arbitrariness that slips in as bureaucrats make decisions in the space between codified norms. But since arbitrariness still happens, one of the frequent narratives to emerge is that the bureaucratic discretion no longer rests with functionaries but with the whims of documents themselves. In Thomson’s epilogue, it is the envelope that reopens Toyi and Mwitali’s stagnant case by attracting, with its thickness, the attention of some unknown person other than Steve. It is a convincing enough performance that others in the camp begin to invest in making such documents and charging *them*, rather than the bureaucrats they can actually meet, with ameliorating their situation.

The recent analytic interest in materiality in the social sciences explains some of this displacement, but there’s good reason to think that it’s part of the general experience of transparency as well. For Mathur’s regional bureaucrats the documentary demands of new transparency laws makes them ineffective bureaucrats. The very word “paperwork” has always implied a kind of labor whose only obvious end is the documents themselves, and whose further utility is only barely fathomable. And since labor is here conceived as a finite resource, the amount of it consumed by paper grinds everything else to a halt. This is not the only way of conceiving of such work (Ballestero’s paper offers a wonderful counterpoint). But the explosion of documentary requirements under transparency laws, especially given that those filling transparency’s forms are often the very targets of the suspicion that makes the form-filling necessary, invites either direct subversions of the practices (see, e.g., Sharma 2010) or a kind of documentary despair that the meaningful part of work has been taken away.

All of this is due in part to the interest in things provoked by Bruno Latour’s influence in the discipline, but also by Foucault’s legacy of studying power at the scale of the capillary. In a sense, transparency’s project to empower individual citizens is all about scaling the state down in relation to its citizens, and anthropology has been analytically implicated in this project to the extent that ethnography has tried to demystify the state or otherwise describe it away. The same can be said of other powerful organizational structures, like the UNHCR, which appear so often in ethnography as a jumble of local practices, at best loosely coordinated. Nonetheless, it’s clearly a stretch to say that such practices as bureaucratic filing are *all there is* to a state or NGO, and it is notable that in ethnographic description state-like organizations continually recede as singular entities but never disappear. Two decades after ethnographies of the state became de rigueur, most are still at some level working out the relationship between the mundanities of bureaucratic practice that are so available to ethnography and the metaphysical presence of some singular power that recedes every time we cast an ethnographic glance in its direction.

For instance, in Thomson’s discussion of the envelope she delivered to Steve, the UNHCR representative, there are at least two impulses. One is to see Steve, the UNHCR aid worker, as having a fundamentally similar relationship to transparency as that of the refugees who appeal to him: both sense themselves caught up in an economy of documents that they don’t fully understand, and wish were otherwise. In another sense, of course, they are completely different: their capacities to intervene in that economy are of quite different consequences and scale. It is this combination of the obviously hierarchical nature of bureaucratic relationships with the ethnographic deconstruction of any specific office that makes these ethnographies continually reproduce the suspicion that we are still in the presence of some singular structure or logic that is never fully available to description. The analysis of transparency reproduces this logic in its theoretical binaries, like the distinction between form and content, or between representation and indexicality. These pairs, which continually fold in on each other, create hierarchies of elements that may not be stable but nonetheless hint at a higher order sitting just beyond the ethnographic horizon. It is no wonder that transparency often dances so closely with conspiracy (West and Sanders 2003).

One of the real treasures of this collection is how much the papers allow us to pick out ethnographic objects and practices that mediate between these scales. Ballestero’s work is particularly instructive here. Rather than merely “making things auditable” (Power 1997) or suspending governance in the overwhelming materiality of paper, the “short-circuited type of transparency” that she looks at “makes explicit the ability of indicators to create.” The self that Joaquin and Veronica seek to produce through their audit is necessarily responsive both to the dictates of a hierarchical presence (in this case both an international development apparatus that names “the Spanish taxpayer” as its ultimate arbiter and a vaguely-imagined public for whom “numbers” communicate more effectively than text) and the materiality of survey forms and quantifiable questions that turn into “little tricksters” the moment that they try to straddle too many scales. Joaquin and Veronica continue to claim authorship even while they try to get a handle on a stable identity in relation to these other demanding presences. The field is saturated with effective actors, and it is hard to imagine agency as a zero-sum game. At once observers and observed, participants value audit as an opportunity at self-awareness, objectifying themselves in auditable but quite whimsical ways.

One other way to open up the ethical scene, I would suggest, is through a return to the concept of “information,” which never fails to make an appearance in the ethnography of transparency but is rarely defined. There are good reasons for this: despite its evocation of denotational clarity, the word information is surprisingly polysemic in most spheres of modern life. Even in development economics, where information is often prescriptively invoked, there is very little agreement about what object the word actually refers to (Stiglitz 2000). And yet if our apprehension of bureaucratic documents (among other things) has changed over the course of the 20th century it may be largely due to the belief that they ought to “contain information.” Weber, for one, never characterized documents in this way because the idea of information as a noun didn’t come along until several decades later (Day 2008). Over the course of the 20th century we became used to thinking of human communication as analogous to electrical signals which could be easily quantified and spoken of as a kind of substance. By the end of the Cold War, though, when transparency became a global buzzword, it was the noun information, not the written document, that underwrote the new ethical value.

Information is subject to the same kinds of doubt, paranoia and acquisitiveness as documents, and it is attributed similar powers of influence over people, but the two objects do not map easily onto each other. As Mathur shows, sometimes having lots of documents is equivalent to having no information, just as having a lot of paperwork is equivalent to not having any work. In my own attempt to get bureaucrats in Paraguay to define information, I elicited deeply convoluted and circular views which made reference to an object which could only be apprehended as the cause of a desired effect--that is, the only way you could be sure that what you had was really information (and not, for example, just a heap of paper) is that people who came into contact with it acted in the optimal way expected of people who have information. Of course, this more often worked in reverse – reformers knew that they *didn’t* have information because the system didn’t appear to be working optimally. In this clear echo of mid-twentieth century cybernetic thinking, information had come to mean that valueless set of internal signals that made a system (a government, a market, a company) work efficiently. In its absence, all they had were documents, which stood for everything that was mundane, duplicitous and promiscuous about bureaucracy (Hetherington 2012). This is the same kind of bait and switch as the one Webb describes, where citizens use Right to Information requests to intimidate bureaucrats without actually caring whether or not they receive a reply to the request. The specific end for which transparency is prescribed (reducing corruption) is achieved, and it becomes a moot point whether that reduction had anything to do with visibility, rationality or the movement of something called information.

A final reason to revisit this relationship between documents and information is because much of the work on the materiality of documents describes spaces that are fast becoming obsolete as bureaucracies digitize and adopt forms of storage that are only partly analogous to classic paper documents (Hull 2012). It’s more than significant that the rise of transparency was underwritten by an “information revolution” that was all about new technologies, and which had, by the first decade of this century, begun either to supplant paper or at least to link paper into new assemblages of electronic storage and retrieval. Among other things, this deeply affects how we think about the scale of bureaucratic action. Legislation like the Right to Information Act creates not only inscription and filing practices but also complex forms of statistical aggregates which are certainly social but are not experienced in the interactive spaces preferred by ethnographers. Transparency practices at these scales are more likely to refer to the cumulative effects of complex property-protected algorithms than to the accessibility of documents per se. And the ideology that accompanies these practices is that of a control revolution, first dreamed of in the 1940s, in which humans as well as documents disappear from the wrinkles of a perfect governmental machine (Mirowski 2002). In some places these practices are very much happening; in others it is mainly the stuff of transparency reformers’ aspirations, as with the many bureaucrats I’ve interviewed sitting in warehouses full of documents decrying “we just don’t have the information!” In these places bureaucratic agency is suspended in the hope for new kinds of aggregates that, by bringing together on a massive scale all of the inscriptions that functionaries have been busily committing to paper for the last 150 years, might bring some interpretive clarity to the whole business of governance, and finally allow some real work to start getting done.

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