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## ***The promise of global transparency: between information and emancipation***

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### **Introduction**

Few words in the contemporary political lexicon hold so much promise as 'transparency'. The promise is that of political by means of epistemic empowerment; access to information appears to offer the public a route to the inner workings of institutions and structures of governance and thereby to power. The pursuit of transparency has been taken up with enthusiasm by civil society actors in the hope that the provision of information will transform the relationship between institutions and citizens. Progress appears to be occurring; promises of greater transparency abound in the statements of corporations, governments, and intergovernmental organisations seeking to demonstrate their responsiveness and accountability. Transparency is, moreover, no longer something granted to citizens by governments but something which they have the technological means to independently pursue. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising to find activists and writers who herald an 'Age of Transparency' (Sifry 2011).

Against this backdrop, international politics appears to be especially opaque and therefore particularly in need of transparency. Secrecy has long been identified as a source of amorality and violence in the international sphere. A more recent concern is that the increasing influence of international institutions and transnational regimes governing everything from finance to atomic energy has not been matched by transnational structures of accountability. It is no surprise, then, that many of the more radical and prominent efforts to pursue transparency – such as Wikileaks' leaking of US State Department cables – have focused on the international sphere. It is at this level that the pursuit of transparency might appear to promise most – more peaceful international relations and the empowerment of citizens in relation to structures of global governance. The emancipatory promise of transparency is that knowledge of international institutions and systems, along with access to the information upon which they depend, will allow those whose lives they currently govern to better understand them, hold them to account, and better control them, thereby becoming a critical transnational public. The Wikileaks website describes this emancipatory goal in rather more dramatic terms, as that of enabling ordinary people to 'create their own history'.

The present essay asks whether transparency can live up to these expectations. It seeks to clarify the ideals and practices involved in the pursuit of transparency and to explore their implications. Such an exercise is necessarily limited in scope and its conclusions less 'policy relevant' than many discussions of transparency. However, given the widespread and often unreflective faith in transparency as a source of political progress and popular empowerment, the exercise is an important one. It reveals that there is reason to approach transparency with caution. Whilst much about the notion is superficially appealing, it potentially does as much to aid the technical goals of more effective and efficient governance as it does the emancipatory ones of giving a greater number of people more influence over global systems and institutions which shape the world in which they live.

More specifically, the hope that access to information will provide the means of empowering

a transnational public is misplaced, reflecting the mistaken belief that global power structures necessarily rely on secrecy. The assumption that international politics is inherently opaque obscures the ways in which both the interactions of states and more recent structures of global governance have relied on the controlled circulation of information. The pursuit of transparency does not necessarily empower citizens in relation to such structures, since their success has depended less on withholding information than on constructing an environment in which such circulation can occur. Many institutions have less interest in keeping citizens in the dark than in individuals being the sorts of actors who are, where necessary, reducible to objects of knowledge (data) or calculating consumers of information. The systematized pursuit of transparency as information is a problematic basis for popular empowerment in any general sense because, focusing on access to knowledge of a predetermined kind, it implicitly accepts the basic epistemic-social assumptions involved in this reductive process. A global public formed through the pursuit of such knowledge would not be in a position to challenge the prevailing structures of power, but would instead represent their extension.

An alternative understanding of transparency gives a better idea of its emancipatory potential. On this view, the *promise* of transparency rests on the hope for ways of knowing which might give individuals the space to judge the structures which govern their lives and therefore the opportunity to change them. The goal is not simply access to or control of pre-existing data, but rather the public interpretation of information and collective assessment of the goals which institutions pursue and the norms they promote. This view – ‘transparency as publicity’ – has existed for as long as ‘transparency as information’ and is often implicit in claims about the importance of public access to information. Failure to achieve significant progress in this second area explains the enduring appeal of ‘transparency’ and the persistent lack of trust in governments even as they make more information publically available (O’Neill 2006). It helps to flesh out accounts of the empowerment that is often hoped for by those calling for and pursuing transparency. In particular, it shows that the struggles involved should be understood as struggles over the quality of knowledge as well as its availability. However, this emancipatory transparency cannot be uncovered fully-formed or free from difficulties. The form of transnational publicity in question remains a promise rather than a presently existing resource, and the identification of the promise does not demonstrate that will be easy to achieve.

The essay proceeds by identifying key elements of transparency discourse, considering the conditions in which they have emerged and been pursued. Part I starts by identifying an early manifestation of transparency discourse in the work of Jeremy Bentham, who made some of the earliest calls for greater international transparency. Three key assumptions are apparent in Bentham’s work: the centrality of information to rational political interaction; the association of wider access to information with technical success (i.e. increased effectiveness and efficiency); and the association of wider access to information with normative progress or emancipation (i.e. liberty and justice).

The influence of these assumptions is traced through modern theories and practices of international relations. The story that emerges is one in which the connection between information and technical success is increasingly emphasised at the expense of popular empowerment. Despite – or more accurately because of – the apparent opacity of international politics, transparency has been discussed at some length by theorists of international relations, especially in relation to inter-state power politics and the functioning

of international 'regimes'. However, there has generally been little concern with popular empowerment in such discussions; the focus has been on the circulation of information in pursuit of technical success by actors in particular spheres such as security, environmental protection or arms control. Significantly, this 'transparency as information' view is also to be found in international practice, where it has helped to constitute current structures of global governance whilst doing little to empower those whose lives they shape.

Part II considers how the emancipatory promise of transparency might be salvaged. The obvious answer is that the systems described in Part I are closed to the public and therefore not truly transparent; empowerment will occur as true transparency is achieved and information is made publically available. However, such a view rests on the questionable assumption that knowledge is essentially a matter of rational actors providing, withholding and calculating with information. The result is a problematic account of knowledge and the public sphere which ignores the processes through which actors and information are created. It also ignores the political and social changes which have occurred since the ideal of transparency first emerged at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, a time when access to information had truly revolutionary implications.

It is in response to these difficulties that the advantages of 'transparency as publicity' are apparent. This aspect of transparency is apparent in Bentham's work but, it is argued, is most clearly reflected in Kant's 'transcendental formula of public right' which states that 'All actions affecting the rights of other human beings are wrong if their maxim is incompatible with their being made public' (Kant 1970, 126). Such an account of transparency, in terms of public critical reflection and interpretation rather than individualistic data consumption, can help us to understand the emancipatory promise of transparency. However, it remains a promise rather than a reality, and the essay concludes by highlighting the danger that identification of formal or empirical preconditions of global publicity leads back towards rather than away from the sorts of problems identified with 'transparency as information.'

## **I. Technical Transparency and International Politics**

International politics appears to be distinguished by its opacity. Whereas in the domestic politics of liberal democracies information is increasingly widely available to ordinary citizens, the international appears to have remained, to a great extent, the realm of *arcana imperii* – secrets or mysteries of state. This has been an enduring source of frustration for various political theorists, reformists and revolutionaries.

The contours of modern transparency discourse are already apparent in the work of Jeremy Bentham, who first applied the term 'transparency' to politics (Hood 2006, 9). For Bentham, this goal was as desirable in the international as in the domestic sphere. Transparency, an 'inspective architecture', could replace the administration of oaths as the basis for honesty in politics (Ibid., 10). In international politics this would bring an end to recurrent conflict since the transparency of foreign policy to the public would provide a check on the tendency of ministers to 'play at hazard with their fellows abroad, staking our lives and fortunes upon the throw' (Bentham 1838a). For Bentham, 'secrecy in the operations of the foreign department' was 'altogether useless, and equally repugnant to the interests of liberty and to those of peace'(Ibid.) The idea that transparency is at once

useful (in contrast with secrecy's uselessness) and a source of emancipation (i.e. liberty) remains at the heart of modern accounts.

In addition to these two characteristics, according to Bentham war and injustice are not unavoidable features of international politics but are partly the result of a lack of information, the provision of which might lead to a more just and peaceful state of affairs:

it is from ignorance and weakness that men deviate from the path of rectitude, more frequently than from selfishness and malevolence. This is fortunate;—for the power of information and reason, over error and ignorance is much greater and much surer than that of exhortation, and all the modes of rhetoric, over selfishness and malevolence (Ibid.).

Along with the confluence of technical and emancipatory concerns, this vision of smoother, information-based political interaction has remained at the centre of modern transparency discourse.

That the idea that secrecy was a source of war and corruption remained influential is apparent in the statements and writings of two men central in shaping the international relations of their age; Leon Trotsky and Woodrow Wilson. In 1917, before releasing details of secret negotiations between the Tsarist government and European powers, Trotsky stated that 'the abolition of secret diplomacy is the primary condition for an honest, popular, truly democratic foreign policy' (Trotsky 1917). A few years earlier, Wilson had declared that 'government should be all outside and no inside' and in 1918 the first of his 'Fourteen Points' called for '[o]pen covenants of peace openly arrived, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view' (quoted in Hood 2006, 11).

In the most obvious respects, however, calls for transparency in international politics met with little success. The USSR was ruled by the secret police, not the people. Wilsonian 'idealism' was proven to be disastrously naïve by the rise of militarism and fascism in the 1930s, the Second World War, and the superpower rivalry of the Cold War, developments which supposedly reflect the persistence of power politics and need for state secrecy (Carr 2001). In fact, even Wilson had maintained the need for secret diplomatic conversations at Versailles (Hood 2006, 12).

However, whilst the relative lack of information available to national or global publics (considered in the following section) cannot be denied, and as Wilson's apparently contradictory position suggests, the story of international politics and transparency is more complex than that of an opaque realm either awaiting or resisting illumination. The story is at least partly that of theorists and practitioners' increasing concern, already apparent in Bentham's work, with the circulation of information and the widespread perception that the interests and behaviour of international actors can be conceived of in terms of their access to that information. Despite the promise of empowerment which accompanies talk of transparency, it is the connection between the 'politics as information' assumption and the pursuit of technical success which has dominated in international theory and practice. Transparency is not primarily understood as a source of emancipation external to international politics but as the label for extensive availability of information to the actors (often, but not necessarily, states) in a given system. Transparency is one point on a spectrum of possible states of information-availability that runs all the way to total secrecy (Florini 2002, 13). Whether they are states, individuals, institutions, or corporations, actors

are understood as rational information consumers and political systems in terms of the circulation of information. The assumption which usually accompanies transparency discourse that the beneficiaries of transparency are the public is almost entirely absent from post-War IR. In some respects this reflects the shortcomings of a discipline in which domestic politics and the progressive goals which might be pursued there are banished from the realm of 'high politics' (see e.g. Waltz 1959 and 1979). At the same time, however, it demonstrates the extent to which, even as faith in its emancipatory powers increases, the pursuit of transparency might be more closely connected to the constitution of actors as rational information consumers than to popular empowerment. This section explores this technical (as opposed to 'emancipatory') transparency. Part II reconsiders the ways in which transparency might relate to the 'public' and in which it might still be said to be 'emancipatory'.

International Relations (IR) theorists have long emphasised the significance of the lack of information available to states in the international system. Realist IR scholars have argued that international politics is characterised by a 'security dilemma' which depends partly on 'the extent to which uncertainty and incomplete information produce misperception of intentions' (Kapuchan and Kapuchan 1991, 133). Since there is no other guarantor of their security in the anarchical international system, states must ensure their own security by accumulating power.<sup>1</sup> This accumulation of power for defensive reasons is interpreted as a threat by others, who cannot determine whether the move is defensive or offensive and therefore 'prepare for the worst'. The vicious circle in which defensive actions are assumed to be offensive spins on since, in the competitive world of international relations, complete security is never possible (Herz 1950, 157). Transparency is significant because if the defensive intentions behind the accumulation of power can be illuminated, states need no longer assume the worst and the security dilemma might be mitigated (Finel and Lord, 2002, 143). It involves the availability of information necessary for actors to act successfully within the international system, in which success is equated with security. In the words of Roland B. Mitchell

Transparency describes the availability of information about potential adversaries' capabilities and intentions. If information about potential adversaries is easy to obtain, then the world is said to be transparent. If information is difficult to acquire, the world is less transparent (or opaque)... The more transparency there is, the better a state can assess the threats it faces. The less transparency there is, the harder it is for a state to assess threats (Mitchell 1998, 110).

From this perspective, transparency has been especially important in the emergence of security cooperation, helping to increase confidence by reducing the possibilities for 'cheating' (Jervis 2002, 46). For example, some scholars have considered the role of transparency in the peace which accompanied the Concert of Europe in the 19th Century (Lindley 2003). Frequent communication and increased openness between the European powers allowed for more peaceful interaction and a more stable international system (Ibid.). In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, transparency was important in arms control agreements, which involved various 'verification' measures to ensure compliance. International transparency has even been characterised as arms control's contribution to international politics (Florini 1997, 51). On this view, transparency is not only useful to individual states, but also ensures the smooth functioning of the systems in which they interact, in this case the system of states

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<sup>1</sup> The Hobbesian assumption that a guarantor is necessary for the rule of law has been widely challenged in International Relations (Bull, 1995; Wendt, 1992).

(Lindley 2003, 228).

Transparency does not necessarily lead to peace, however, since states might be confused by an excess of information, leading to miscalculation (Finel and Lord 2002; Schultz, 2002, 60). It has been suggested that this is a particular problem in relations with democratic states, where discussion of intentions is relatively open and visible to outsiders (Finel and Lord, 2002). Similar problems have been noted in domestic politics, where 'naked transparency' or straightforward openness does little to improve the quality of the political system, since the volume of information will likely be too great for most citizens to deal with or too complex to for anyone other than experts to interpret (Fung et al. 2007; Fung 2013). In response to such concerns, Archon Fung has argued that what matters is that actors have access to relevant, easily understandable information (Fung 2013). This 'targeted transparency' is defined in relation to certain objectives; individuals have information about matters affecting them in their capacity as consumers of certain goods or as recipients of certain government services (Fung et.al 2007; Fung 2013).

The notion of targeted transparency captures the way in which, in any politically meaningful sense, transparency cannot be a matter of the availability of information in general but only of useful information tailored to particular roles and interests, which it helps to define. Implicit awareness of this wider point is reflected in IR discussions of transparency, where it is generally understood as 'the availability of regime relevant information' rather than simple openness (Mitchell 1998, 182). Thus, the transparency considered by many IR scholars lies in the relationship between states as members of particular systems or regimes, rather than in relation to other goals which they might have or to their citizens. Insofar as transparency has a function beyond serving the interests of individual states, it is that of ensuring the smooth functioning of the inter-state system. Greater transparency does not therefore, in itself, radically transform the international system and it is not necessarily aimed at improving accountability. Rather, transparency can serve the limited role of helping the systems through which states interact to function more effectively by making intentions and capabilities more apparent (Lindley 2003).

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that there is nothing 'progressive' about international transparency or that its international role is confined to inter-state politics. Increasingly, 'centralized control systems' of the kind which have characterised modern sovereign states are not capable of dealing with complex economic, environmental and security issues (Florini 1997, 52). The result is tension between the more traditional interest of states in security, which requires that information be very tightly controlled and transparency limited and highly targeted (but not absent), and those of other spheres of activity – economic and scientific, for example – where the interests involved are served by more extensive transparency to a greater range of actors, in some instances including citizens. Under such conditions, the international politics of knowledge is better understood in terms of the practices of global governance which have emerged to address complex transnational tasks. From this perspective, the international system is less state-centric, less opaque, and apparently more open to change. Even for states, transparency is a useful general tool with which to approach an increasingly complex international system (Florini 2002, 25-26). As the number of requirements states must meet multiplies and as their complexity increases, the task of monitoring and enforcing compliance becomes increasingly arduous. Transparency allows for much greater efficiency;

powerful states can simply enforce transparency rather than engaging in the far more difficult task of enforcing compliance across national borders in specific areas (Ibid.).

However, the development of structures of global governance has been closely linked to the emergence of transnational institutions and regimes – sets of rules and norms enabling cooperation in a particular policy area (Mitchell 1998, 181). Regimes or the states of which they consist 'must either have or create information about the activities they seek to regulate and the impact of those activities on the ultimate goal of the regime' (Ibid., 183). The importance of international transparency increased with the proliferation of international regimes in the late 20th Century. Initially, the primary concern was with arms control regimes, but financial, human rights, and environment regimes are now central to the international system. For example, since the end of the Cold War increased interdependence, the liberalisation of the global economy and concomitant reduction in the economic role of states has led to a relative decline in the desirability of secrecy and covert behaviour and a rise in the importance of shared knowledge and readily available financial information to a range of relevant actors (Wang and Rosenau 2001, 30). This has provided part of the context for the emergence of organisations such as Transparency International (Ibid.). Such regimes undermine, to some extent, the traditional international role of states. The transparency they involve is not targeted at traditional statist security concerns but towards policy areas and goals which not easily confined within borders.<sup>2</sup> This increases the significance of a range of international non-state actors, especially technical experts and inter- and non-governmental organisations.

The characterisation of transparency as the availability of relevant information to the actors in a particular system remains central to many theorisations of global governance. For example, discussing environmental regimes, Mitchell states that

Transparency is manipulable via the regime's information system – the actors, rules, and processes by which the regime collects, analyses, and disseminates information. The information systems consist of "inputs" related to reporting on, monitoring, and verifying behavior and the state of the environment as well as "outputs" related to aggregating, processing, evaluating, publicizing, and responding to this information (Mitchell 1998, 183).

Thus, whilst the structures of global governance are more open and more complex than those of the inter-state model, transparency is still frequently understood as involving a particular form of technical knowledge 'targeted' towards particular goals and roles. The information concerned is often highly technical and is created by and for the use of those occupying key roles in a given sphere of activity. The concept of 'transparency' is a key element in an account of politics as information-based interaction.

The emphasis on transparency as a route to effective global governance, and more generally to technical success, is not confined to international theory. The model of human activity in which, whatever their role, actors are rational information consumers and political practice involves the circulation of relevant information reflects a widespread and resilient set of ideals and practices. That the promise of transparency has partly been that of

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that states have no interest in transparency in other capacities. For example, the 2013 G8 summit in Lough Erne, Scotland, focused on global financial transparency partly in relation to effective taxation.



information-based technical efficiency and that theoretical statements about transparency's value cannot be easily severed from the pursuit of technical success in practice is already apparent in the case of Bentham. Whilst Bentham was concerned with the normative-emancipatory goals of liberty and the rule of law, his vision of transparency was also closely linked to his proposals for a new, rational approach to institutional design in the form of his infamous Panopticon. As Michel Foucault famously argued, these designs reflect the emergence of new forms of social power in which the creation, control and circulation of information enhances the efficiency with which power can be exercised (Foucault 1977). The social context for Bentham's interest in transparency was the development of new, more efficient architectures of governance based on technical knowledge and new forms of subjectivity (Ibid.).

The same combination of an emphasis on the political importance of information with a practical technical interest in efficient and effective interaction in a particular sphere is apparent in 21<sup>st</sup> Century world politics. For example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has stated that

Fiscal transparency — defined as the clarity, reliability, frequency, timeliness, and relevance of public fiscal reporting and the openness to the public of the government's fiscal policy-making process — is a critical element of effective fiscal management. Fiscal transparency helps ensure that governments' economic decisions are informed by a shared and accurate assessment of the current fiscal position, the costs and benefits of any policy changes, and the potential risks to the fiscal outlook. Fiscal transparency also provides legislatures, markets, and citizens with the information they need to make efficient financial decisions and to hold governments to account for their fiscal performance and their utilization of public resources. Finally, fiscal transparency facilitates international surveillance of fiscal developments and helps mitigate the transmission of fiscal spillovers between countries (IMF 2012).

Transparency is presented here as a matter of the circulation of relevant information in pursuit of efficiency, efficacy and stability, in this case in the global financial system. All the relevant actors, whether they are institutions or individuals, are presented as providers or consumers of information which they use to make 'efficient' decisions and to monitor the performance of others. This dimension of transparency – publicity as a route to technical efficiency – is already apparent in Bentham's Panopticon letters, where the prison is open to the public which can therefore monitor the performance of the management (Bentham 1838). Such statements promote ideals which enable practices such as the creation of information – in this case the conversion of economic interaction, material objects, and individuals into financial data – and the extension of their reach and influence into new areas – through IMF structural adjustment programmes, for example.

Thus, in the international sphere, we find that the concept of transparency is tied to the controlled circulation of targeted information which aids the decision-making of rational actors in specific spheres of activity. The pursuit of transparency depends on several simultaneously operating idealisations – of actors as the recipients and utilizers of information, of knowledge as the possession of information, of politics as the circulation of information. These are analytical devices with which scholars have sought to understand the international system, but they are also elements in the practical pursuit of effective governance. As a result, whilst, as shall be argued below, the assumptions accompanying the 'transparency as information' view are flawed, it is not entirely false – such assumptions are partly constitutive of contemporary global governance.

By examining IR theories which ignore the connection which is generally assumed to exist

between transparency and popular empowerment, it is possible to see that transparency's international political role might be as much to ensure the smooth running and extension of existing structures as to empower citizens in relation to them. Belief in the transformative power of information for international politics certainly motivated early transparency discourse, but the idea that it might empower citizens has had surprisingly little role in discussions or pursuit of transparency in international politics.

## **II. Emancipatory transparency**

Despite the technical character of many academic and institutional accounts of international transparency, the promise of empowerment and emancipation still accompanies the concept. However, once it is recognised that there is nothing inherently emancipatory about access to information, the task for those who believe that this promise might be redeemed is no longer to simply to call for greater levels of transparency, but to try to identify the specifically emancipatory transparency which would empower citizens in relation to structures of governance. In this section it will be argued that this is no easy task. More specifically, the pursuit of transparency is best seen in terms of an ongoing struggle over the *quality* of knowledge which began with the Enlightenment, rather than simply for popular access to a greater quantity of information. This is, in part, a struggle about the nature of publicity which has significant implications for the putative transnational public sphere (Fraser 2007).

At first glance the means by which emancipatory transparency might be salvaged seem straightforward: it simply involves granting the public access to the information circulating in the sorts of systems described above, thereby increasing accountability and reducing the 'distance' between the two. It might be a mistake to characterise international politics as entirely opaque, but this is a goal which has yet to be achieved; relations between citizens on the one hand and states, international institutions and corporations on the other have been far from transparent in this way. In the context of widespread and growing belief in the importance of information in all spheres of activity and increasing domestic 'freedom of information' measures, restricted public access to information concerning international politics disempowers the majority of the world's population in a manner which is increasingly hard to justify. This is the context for the frustrations which have driven recent acts of whistleblowing and mass online leaking of diplomatic, business or security documents. Overcoming this specific opacity would, it seems, give citizens a new level of influence over international institutions and practices which currently govern their lives. Access to information would help to create a critical global public.

The emphasis on public scrutiny dominates transparency discourse and, as we have already seen, the question of technical success has not been pursued without any reference to the accountability of politicians and bureaucrats to the public. The idea that the public would ensure responsible behaviour was at the heart of Bentham's calls for international transparency. Calls for open diplomacy more generally have not, of course, simply aimed at establishing a more efficient system of power-balancing between states but rather at allowing publics, who were assumed to have every interest in avoiding war, to monitor and discipline their leaders. And whilst organisations such as the IMF might value efficiency, they still emphasise the importance of citizens holding governments and institutions to

account.

It would also be a mistake to suggest that the control and creation of information has lain exclusively in the hands of technocrats. For example, in the case of human rights regimes, it often fell to civil society organisations to uncover and provide information and to work with states and intergovernmental organisations to systematize transparency (Sikkink 1993, 422). A more spectacular example of global civil society control of information lies in the way in which Wikileaks has 'tapped-in' to the information systems of governments and private companies such as Stratfor. Moreover, because effective action in one sphere often depends on activity in another, such 'tapping-in' can create 'shortcuts' across spheres. For example, flight information used by European air traffic control and gained through freedom of information requests has helped activists and academics to understand the CIA practice of 'extraordinary rendition' (The Rendition Project 2014).

There seems, then, to be room for a global public of individuals and civil society organisations, whose ability to hold states and international institutions to account lies in access to information. One view is that global civil society might appropriate information from current systems and institutions in a process of 'devolution' (Florini 2002, 26). Transparency might thereby provide 'the basis for a highly democratic, albeit nonelectoral, system of transnational governance based on the growing strength of global civil society' (ibid., 27).

The basic assumption that access to information gives individuals access to the inner workings of political and economic practices, and thereby empowers them, is certainly warranted in relation to specific goals such as addressing corruption or revealing human rights abuses. However, the assumption that global access to information would be politically empowering in the more general sense of sustaining a global public sphere is problematic. The difficulty is that, as we have seen, even at a domestic level it is not clear that 'naked transparency' is empowering (Fung 2013). It is also far from clear that it improves the quality of political interaction. Onora O'Neill has pointed out that increased openness in the United Kingdom has not increased trust in government (O'Neill 2006, 75). Lawrence Lessig makes a similar point regarding the US, suggesting that improperly contextualised or interpreted information risks generating a distorted and pessimistic public understanding of US politics (Lessig 2009).

The problem is partly the illusory promise of immediacy which accompanies transparency. Although transparency promises the removal of barriers concealing the secret workings of world politics, as suggested above, the information revealed has been created by and for experts pursuing technical goals in a specific sphere. It is always already socially mediated, reflecting specific socially defined goals, identities, and relationships. Where transparency is extended to the public, most citizens receive information which has been interpreted, reinterpreted and repackaged by journalists, campaigners, or experts (O'Neill 2006). This is as true of radical transparency as of recent developments in 'open government'. For example, in the case of US State Department cables leaked to Wikileaks, the latter did not initially 'data dump' but worked with several news organisations and itself took on an editorial function (Leigh and Harding 2011). 'Naked' international transparency – non-targeted availability of information concerning the interactions of governments and the work of international organisations – would not in itself prove empowering, but rather baffling or

overwhelming.

Concerns about the limited use of naked transparency motivated Fung to formulate the notion of targeted transparency described above. He argues that there is a close link between targeted transparency and democratic politics (Fung 2013). Only targeted transparency could prove politically empowering. On this view, the issue for a global public would not be the availability of information in general, but the provision of understandable information about practices and institutions which impact the lives of ordinary citizens (Ibid.). Individuals would have access to clear and relevant information about political and economic institutions and practices which might have an impact on them. The cumulative effect of such access would then be one of political empowerment.

Whilst the idea of targeted transparency captures something of the unavoidably mediated and contextual nature of the knowledge gained through transparency, it retains the focus on transparency as information and with it a problematic set of epistemological and political assumptions. As was argued above, it would be a mistake simply to dismiss this image of transparency and the ideals and assumptions accompanying it, since they are at least partly constitutive of global political reality. However, in epistemological terms the account of knowledge implicit in this position is misleading, promoting the mistaken idea that information is detachable from social interaction and that knowledge is a process of 'transferring content' (O'Neill 2006, 81). In fact, information is created and becomes significant only with the emergence of particular kinds of institution. Its transmission requires that a specific set of identities, roles and forms of interaction must be developed and maintained. Thus, information, transmission, and consumption are not fundamental to knowledge as such but are (and could only be) elements within a historically and socially specific kind of knowledge.

The philosophical shortcomings of such a position are not without political implications. Ironically, the emphasis on access to information serves to depoliticise knowledge. Firstly, elevation of the ideal of access to information places those pursuing emancipation and empowerment on the home turf of technical interests, which are given free rein to define the sort of knowledge which shapes the public sphere. Moreover, where the goal of knowledge is technical success rather than political insight and empowerment, no amount of the information produced is on its own sufficient to reveal the political and social struggle which created and sustains this ground – it is qualitatively unsuited to the task. To this extent, following Judith Butler, we might ask what transparency keeps 'obscure' (Butler 1999, Preface).

The emphasis on information not only serves to conceal existing global power structures; it also helps to maintain them. The circulation of information is presented as the solution to disempowerment which it is at least partly responsible for producing. The previous section suggests that the political problem is not only, or even primarily, that systems of global governance are opaque but rather that the forms of epistemic practice they involve – the creation of systems through which information can circulate between rational actors in a controlled manner – reduce political interaction to a form of formalistic management. As is apparent in Bentham's Panopticon proposals and the IMF's transparency statement, the public sphere risks being reduced to an element in the processes of surveillance required by such management. The sense of disempowerment and alienation from structures and

institutions which transparency promises to address is a product of this form of activity as much as of restricted access to information. The promise of empowerment associated with access to information belies the real compulsion which such systems can present. The hope that a global devolution of information might provide the basis for a new form of world politics is therefore misplaced and its pursuit risks not strengthening but undermining or weakening any embryonic transnational public sphere.

One response to such difficulties is to abandon the concept of transparency altogether, replacing it with alternatives such as 'accountability' (Sasaki 2013). Such an approach might be of some benefit, but it risks obscuring the extent to which existing structures and institutions are constituted partly through the epistemic practices and ideals described here. It also gives the impression that epistemic stances are simply a matter of theoretical choice. Whatever its shortcomings, the term 'transparency' stands in a web of ideals and practices which help to constitute international politics as it currently occurs and the fact is that people do find the ideal appealing. It is better to avoid the assumption that a simple change of terminology can extract us from this web. The advantage of the concept of transparency, and the promise that it represents, lies in its recognition of the relationship between knowledge, practice, and power. This recognition is prior to the pursuit of any particular form of knowledge. The task facing transparency activists is that of redefining the politics of knowledge by reconfiguring this relationship, thereby freeing citizens from the current constraints. What is needed is a qualitative shift in epistemic practice.

In fact, the promise of transparency has never been simply that of more extensive access to information; accompanying this specific ideal has been the broader promise of a new form of knowledge and space for interpretation which might provide the foundation for a critical public. Insofar as it represented a qualitative shift in political interaction, a politics based on information once looked to be the means to make good on this more fundamental promise. At the time Bentham was writing, and for long afterwards, the politics of knowledge governed by an 'esoteric rationale' according to which knowledge was the possession of the sovereign, who was the sole manifestation of 'publicity' (Bok 1982, 172). Francis Bacon, for example, claimed that some government secrets were so because they were 'not fit to utter' (Ibid.) Habermas cites Frederick II of Prussia's declaration that 'a private person has no right to pass public and even disapproving judgment... on sovereigns and courts... or to publish in print pertinent reports that he manages to obtain'. A 'private person' was forbidden from doing so since he or she would, as a result of their social station, inevitably lack 'complete knowledge of the circumstances and motives' (Habermas 1989, 25). Under these circumstances, the increasing availability of information was genuinely emancipatory and represented a qualitative political shift to a new form of critical publicity.

Such esoteric justifications for secrets of state might appear to be prevalent in international politics today but they have been increasingly combined with a different politics of knowledge according to which information is, at least in principle, available to all relevant actors. In this new world, the latter can in principle be any citizen of the state in question. Thus, even previously top secret documents are eventually released to the public, albeit after several decades.<sup>3</sup> Even where secrecy is ruthlessly defended, secret information

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<sup>3</sup> Recent examples include documents relating to British colonial forces torture of civilians in Kenya and the

circulates to vast numbers of relevant actors. For example, approximately 5 million individuals – government employees and private contractors – have access to secret or top secret documents in the United States (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2012). As the previous section demonstrates, the ideal of the controlled circulation of information contained the seeds of a new form of power and has long been appropriated by forces in international politics which, if not regressive, reflect little interest in empowering ordinary citizens.

Whilst it is the circulation of information which has dominated international theory and practice, there is another image of transparency and its connection to publicity, involving a different set of ideals, through which it might be possible to salvage transparency's promise of a new way of knowing. Such a vision can be found in the work of Bentham's contemporary, Immanuel Kant, whose 'transcendental formula of public right' states that 'All actions affecting the rights of other human beings are wrong if their maxim is incompatible with their being made public' (Kant 1970, 126). This points to a form of 'transparency as publicity' rather than 'transparency as information' in which the rules according to which society is governed and the ends in pursuit of which action takes place are subjected to 'the critical judgement of a public making use of its reason' (Habermas 1989, 24). Such a view reflects recognition of the importance of interpretation and promotes an alternative form of mediation involving all citizens. On this view, transparency is not simply a matter of the availability of pre-existing information to rational actors, but also of the openness about motivations, interests and goals necessary for the assessment of the purposes which knowledge and action serve.

Such an account of transparency's promise gives us a fuller picture of the goals of transparency movements. Such movements are not simply engaged in the pursuit of data, but in challenging accounts of events, triggering public debates, and promoting new norms (Sikkink 1993). Certainly access to information or the revelation of practices which had previously been denied or concealed is vital. In many cases, this will make it hard or impossible to continue with the practices in question, particularly those which are corrupt or illegal. However, for reasons outlined above, the broader goals of empowering individuals in relation to international political or economic systems require more than this. The wider goal is that governments and other institutions no longer shape the world according to pre-existing templates which, whatever the level of 'transparency as information' they can accommodate, are protected from critical scrutiny. Rather, citizens should be able to arrive at their own evaluation. Although not adequate on its own, this would open the way to a more responsive politics by removing the air of necessity which accompanies the prevailing structures of global governance. This creative, interpretive aspect of the promise of transparency is appealing in the international context of the highly restricted control of knowledge and remote and unresponsive institutions, and seems increasingly realistic with the apparent emergence of the space within which to build new forms of political interaction. The resources available for those wishing to engage in the sort of rational communication in question appear to be increasingly available. After all, the internet does not simply provide a means of receiving information, but for sharing and collectively interpreting it.

This is an important vision, but it would be a mistake to assume that 'transparency as publicity' is currently much more than a *promise*. Reflection on the promise of transparency gives us an idea of what it might involve, but this is only a suggestion. There is good reason for such caution. No attempt to definitively outline the basis upon which publicity can be pursued could entirely extract itself from the prevailing epistemic-political configuration, which is increasingly defined by ideals and practices associated with 'transparency as information'. The danger is that action based on the belief in readily available means with which to pursue the promise of transparency strengthens rather than challenges the structures which threaten to undermine it. This process has already occurred in the case of transparency as information – the challenge to the esoteric rationale is now an element in the management of global finance. However the danger is also apparent in attempts to ground publicity on an alternative form of knowledge. For example, in Habermas's account of the ideals involved in communicative interaction, the formalistic tendencies which characterise the modern 'system' he seeks to defend against – a form of instrumental activity akin to that outlined in the first part of this chapter – re-emerge under the guise of rational, unhindered public argumentation (Bernstein 1995, 106). More specifically, Habermas's suggestion such that interaction might involve nothing but the 'unforced force of the better argument' can be traced to the same attitude which would strip life of all that would interfere with the reduction of individuals and objects to 'information' (Ibid.).

As Habermas himself pointed out in his early work on the subject, Western public spheres have been penetrated by the goals of the market and the state, the pursuit of which are closely linked to the politics of knowledge outlined in the first part of this chapter (Habermas, 1989). Indeed, this process partly accounts for the ambiguous character of transparency outlined here; the promise of critical knowledge and the space for new interpretations and practices it requires is appropriated by technical interests. Under these conditions, institutional declarations of transparency generate a veneer of empowerment whilst the practical pursuit of transparency all too often furthers the penetration of technical practice into as yet unconquered areas. Certainly, communication via the internet promises interaction rather than mass cultural consumption. However, it remains prey to the same formalising market tendencies which Habermas identifies in older forms of mass media.

Transnational publicity is not, then, simply a pre-existing resource which can be chosen over technical forms of interaction. Indeed, if anything, the embryonic transnational public is all the more vulnerable, since it lacks both a well-established citizenry and clearly defined target for public critique of the kind historically represented by national governments (Fraser 2007, 7). In the absence of such foundations, and if seen as a readymade model for action rather than as a promise of something the nature of which is not yet fully apparent, transparency as publicity risks being all the more reliant on practices and identities better suited to the pursuit of technical transparency. It is, therefore, at the global level that it is necessary to hold most tightly to the *promise* of transparency rather than seeking to achieve it by turning to the technical practices through which it is routinely pursued and through which it has attained the status of a modern article of faith.

## **Conclusion**

For all its promise, it is necessary to approach transparency with caution. Whilst we should be sensitive to the hopes associated with the concept, we should also be conscious of its practical function, which has been in part to smooth the operation of the very structures in response to which it has been seized upon. Access to information is extremely important in undermining the abuse and corruption which thrives on secrecy, but it is no longer a route to the fundamentally new form of politics required if citizens are to be genuinely empowered in relation to current forms of global governance. It only seems to provide one if we accept as exhaustive the implicit model according to which knowledge is equated with the circulation of information. As we have seen, acceptance of this model is not only a theoretical matter, but also a practical step which helps to maintain and extend current structures of governance. In this technical form, transparency obscures the extent to which knowledge is socially mediated and helps to reduce politics to the exchange of information necessary for effective and efficient management. To this extent, the pursuit of transparency can reflect resignation or capitulation to the sources of disempowerment.

Identification of the extent of the challenge faced by those hoping to redeem the emancipatory promise of transparency should not be mistaken for pessimism, however. None of the above suggests that the pursuit of transparency is futile or that it has not led to genuine achievements in overcoming corruption, human rights abuses, or political domination. Rather, it reveals that the promise of transparency lies not in freeing-up preexisting information or in any readymade global public sphere but in the widespread, albeit implicit, recognition that new ways of knowing, in which interpretation and creativity would not be squeezed out by the pursuit of technical control, might be possible. The pursuit of transparency reflects the belief that knowledge is not a gift bestowed upon citizens by the institutions which govern them, but might involve the pursuit of genuinely new forms of global interaction and organisation.



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