Transparency in Journalism
Meanings, Merits, and Risks

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Journalism, as it traditionally has been practiced, is under assault on multiple fronts. Its authority is challenged by blogs, social media, and other information platforms that lay claim to the same truth-telling mission as the mainstream press. Its credibility is battered by cries of bias and “fake news” that reveal a deepening hostility toward the news media.

While beleaguered reporters and editors can take some refuge in the bedrock principles of their craft, even the core values that once distinguished their work are called into question as the news industry confronts the realities of declining public trust and rapid technological change. Consequently, media scholars and practitioners have begun to revisit what it means to be an ethical journalist in the digital age.

Transparency has emerged from these discussions as a potential new norm—an essential element of modern journalism and a method by which journalists can re-establish trust with the public. In their book *The New Ethics of Journalism: Principles for the Twenty-first Century*, McBride and Rosenstiel (2014) posited three guiding principles of journalism: truth, community, and transparency. Transparency was a new addition, replacing independence, which was no longer deemed relevant given the proliferation of news sources with strong political or economic allegiances.

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), the largest journalism organization in the United States, added the concept of transparency to its code of ethics in 2014, the first time the document had been revised since 1996. Transparency was given equal standing with accountability in the code’s fourth foundational principle: “Be accountable and transparent” (SPJ, 2014). The Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA) followed suit one year later, incorporating transparency into one of its ethics code’s three guiding principles: “truth and accuracy above all,” “independence and transparency,” and “accountability for consequences” (RTDNA, 2015).

The revised codes were the product of years of debate among journalism professionals and academics in which transparency was heralded as “the new objectivity” (Weinberger, 2009) and an “essential element of credibility” (Plaisance, 2007, p. 193) but also criticized as “overhyped” (Ward, 2013, para. 3) and “the buzziest of buzzwords” (Cunningham, 2006, p. 9). In one sense, the SPJ and RTDNA have settled the debate over transparency by formalizing the concept as a legitimate norm of the journalism field (Vos & Craft, 2017). In another sense, the debate has
only begun, as journalists grapple with what it means to be transparent and how to translate the abstract principle into everyday practice.

For all its popularity and its potential importance in addressing journalistic and public concerns, discussion of transparency has suffered from a lack of clarity in its definition. This ambiguity hinders both academic inquiry into the role transparency should play in journalistic practices and journalism’s ability to create new or better ways to respond to its critics, reconnect with its audience, and fulfill its ethical obligations.

The arguments for transparency’s importance seem to rest on basic norms of journalism practice that ultimately are grounded in a definition of journalism as having a distinct public or democratic purpose. Generally speaking, such arguments note the public’s need for a certain kind and quality of information to aid in self-governance and community sustenance and journalism’s unique qualifications for providing that information. That the public relies on this information creates an obligation for journalism to perform in ways that bolster public trust in the information. Transparency, it follows, is one tool for bolstering that trust. But does that conclusion necessarily follow? Answering that question will require much more clarity regarding what transparency is and requires. What is unclear in the many ways transparency is invoked in discussion and takes form in practice is precisely what needs to be transparent—motives? Processes? Information?—in order for transparency to fulfill its more general obligation and how it should do so. Also unclear is whether transparency of any of those things, in whatever “amount,” is actually a means to producing the desired effect. There may be reasons, in fact, to think that transparency can be counterproductive.

This chapter will attempt to sort through some of the confusion surrounding transparency in the hopes of pointing toward a conceptualization of it that is more amenable to theorizing as well as to practice. The chapter will examine transparency in journalism, its meanings, merits, and risks. First, we will identify how journalistic transparency has been defined and employed, paying particular attention to the implications of two primary ways in which it has been understood. Second, we will examine transparency’s value as well as its relationship to trust and media accountability. Third, we will consider the possible dangers of transparency, including implications of too much transparency, and suggest avenues for future research to clarify transparency and justify it as means to achieving the kind of accountability and improved media credibility people seem to want.

**WHAT IS TRANSPARENCY?**

If transparency can be summarized in a single word, that word is “openness” (Karlsson, 2010; Plaisance, 2007; Vos & Craft, 2017). Plaisance (2007) characterizes transparent behavior as “conduct that presumes an openness in communication and serves a reasonable expectation of forthright exchange” (p. 188). Journalism is not the only field that has been encouraged to pull back the curtain and be more transparent. The push for greater openness in the news media can be seen as part of a global trend toward transparency in domains as diverse as corporate financial reporting, monetary policy, international politics, and food and tobacco labelling. Nor is journalistic transparency an entirely new concept. Throughout the twentieth century, journalists engaged in some degree of transparency through practices such as editor and ombudsman columns or descriptions of interviews conducted to produce a story (McBride & Rosenstiel, 2014).

It was not until the early 2000s, however, that the notion of transparency clearly captured journalists’ attention and imagination (Vos & Craft, 2017). In 2004, two dozen top media executives, journalists, and consultants gathered at an Aspen Institute conference, where they called
for a presumption of openness in American journalism and concluded that journalists ought to be “as transparent as practical” (Ziomek, 2005, p. vi). A similar call was heard fifteen years later when the Knight Commission on Trust, Media, and Democracy urged journalists to practice “radical transparency” (Knight Commission, 2019, p. 7) as part of a broader strategy to address the American public’s loss of faith in democratic institutions.

The desire to rebuild trust in the news media may be the driving force behind these initiatives, but it is the Internet that has created the climate in which transparency can flourish. Weinberger (2009) contends that transparency is a better fit for the digital age than the traditional norm of objectivity:

> Just as objectivity mirrors the essential nature of print—one person publishes, the report is done and the rest of us read—transparency mirrors the nature of the Web: Content is linked, public, discussed and always subject to dispute and revision.

(para. 12)

In contrast to the limited capacity of print and broadcast media, the Internet affords more space for links, corrections, and other information to help audiences better understand the work journalists do. The immediacy of online news also can be said to foster transparency. As reporters post the first drafts of their news stories online, followed by updates throughout the day, some of the journalistic work that used to be performed “backstage” is made visible on the “front stage” (Karlsson, 2011).

For all of the lip service paid to journalistic transparency and the high-profile initiatives undertaken in its name, scholars have noticed a gap between the way transparency is normatively imagined and the way it is (or is not) practiced in most newsrooms (Chadha & Koliska, 2015). Interviews with journalists reveal that many of them have “an inadequate appreciation of the importance of holding the concept of transparency as an end goal in ethical deliberations” (Plaisance & Deppa, 2009, p. 376). Many reporters insist that the mundane nature of their daily work is of little interest or value to their audiences (Chadha & Koliska, 2015), and they do not perceive transparency as a high priority of management (Gade et al., 2018).

Part of the difficulty in implementing transparency may be the lack of consensus on how best to define and measure it. Transparency requires openness, but what sort of openness and in what amount? Until we better understand what transparency is and what it involves, it will be difficult if not impossible to know whether it is worth promoting and whether it is likely to actually produce greater accountability or trust.

We should start by addressing two basic questions: First, when people call for greater transparency, what do they want to be transparent? Second, what is it for a relevant thing to be transparent? When, for example, does explaining how a decision to pursue a particular news story was made count as being transparent and how is the explanation of the decision made transparent?

If we start with the second question, we can note that transparency appears in at least two distinct but related guises in the scholarly literatures of journalism and other fields—as availability of information and as disclosure of it. As “availability,” transparency is passive. It refers to a state in which documents, statistics, procedures, motives, and intentions are open to public view. Although not referring to journalism specifically, Christensen and Cheney (2015) note that “most calls for transparency are presented as demands for information, even if information itself is not the ultimate goal” (p. 74). The notion of transparency as availability of information shares common ground with the theory of information ethics advanced by Luciano Floridi, in which the “infosphere”—“the collected sum of information itself”—is central (see Hongladarom, 2004, for a brief overview).
Floridi’s information ethics is predicated on the idea that ethical norms are based on the size of the infosphere—on whether the norms do improve or impoverish the infosphere. This works well if everything in the infosphere is transparent; that is, if any and all the information contained in the infosphere is readily available to be discerned and made use of by anybody who enters it.

(Hongladarom, 2004, p. 92, emphasis in original)

Weinberger (2009) adopts a similar perspective by associating transparency with the practice of hyperlinking. When links to additional information are made available online, the reader can “see through the author’s writings to the sources and values that brought her to that position” (para. 6). In the same vein, Phillips (2010) equates journalistic transparency with the attribution of sources, which offers readers a way to trace information to its origins.

One example of transparency as availability was the decision by *Frontline* to publish “The Putin Files,” the complete, unedited interviews conducted for its 2017 documentary “Putin’s Revenge.” The two-part PBS television documentary focused on Russian President Vladimir Putin and his attempts to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Seventy hours’ worth of interviews were posted online, along with interactive features that enabled website visitors to search the videos and transcripts (Aronson-Rath, 2017). As journalist and media entrepreneur Steve Brill observed, “What *Frontline* is doing is a perfect way to take advantage of the capacity of digital technology to make more material available to consumers of news” (Warren, 2017, para. 15, emphasis added).

Like the *Frontline* project, most news organizations’ transparency efforts seem to embody the “availability” perspective. In interviews, journalists at leading U.S. news outlets reported that transparency in their newsrooms generally consists of such things as linking to original documents and publishing reporters’ email addresses and biographies (Chadha & Koliska, 2015). Making this information available to readers or viewers certainly adds context and expands the “infosphere,” but it does little to make visible how journalists operate. In the case of the “Putin Files,” for example, the interview transcripts do not indicate why particular sources were chosen to be interviewed nor do they explain why specific portions of the interviews were included or excluded from the television broadcasts.

In contrast to transparency as availability, transparency as disclosure is active and involves explanations of the ways in which news is selected and produced (Karlsson, 2010). Disclosure practices may include “sharing the basis for news decisions and editorial judgments, showing evidence and reliability of facts, [and] revealing journalist-source relationships, conflicts of interest, and how projects are funded” (Gade et al., 2018, p. 160). It is this active disclosure that most advocates of transparency appear to have in mind when issuing their demands or recommendations. The SPJ code of ethics, for example, asserts that “ethical journalism means taking responsibility for one’s work and explaining one’s decisions to the public” (SPJ (Society of Professional Journalists), 2014) while the Knight Commission (2019) urges the media to develop “industry-wide, voluntary standards on how to disclose the ways they collect, report and disseminate the news” (p. 7).

Adopting a disclosure perspective, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) maintain that journalism should be guided by a “spirit of transparency.” For each news item, journalists should ask themselves what their audience needs to know to evaluate the story, consider whether any further explanation is needed, and acknowledge any questions they cannot answer.

*The Washington Post* embodied this spirit when it reported allegations that Roy Moore, the Republican candidate in a 2017 Alabama special election for the U.S. Senate, had engaged in inappropriate contact with teenage girls (Blanding, 2018). Embedded in the story was an explanation of how a Post reporter had learned of the allegations (McCrummen, Reinhard, & Crites, 2017). Then,
when a woman associated with the right-wing group Project Veritas tried to embarrass the *Post* and trick it into publishing her false claim of having been impregnated by Moore, the newspaper wrote a story and produced a 10-minute video explaining how it discovered the woman was lying and why it broke its agreement of confidentiality with her (Boburg, Davis, & Crites, 2017).

Although availability and disclosure seem to represent the two primary forms that transparency takes, it should be noted that Karlsson (2010) identifies an additional form—“participatory transparency”—that connects transparency to interactivity by inviting citizens to join in different stages of the news production process. For example, when *The Washington Post*’s David Fahrenthold investigated U.S. President Donald Trump’s claims of charitable giving, he contacted more than 350 organizations to ask whether they had received any donations from Trump. Fahrenthold posted his handwritten list of charities on Twitter and updated it throughout the investigation, inviting input from readers on where to search next. Here is how Fahrenthold explained his actions and motivations:

> What I wanted to do with this was give people a way to see what I did. I’m not trying to conceal anything about what I’ve tried, and I’m open to people[‘s] suggestions … I just want to be transparent about why I called these groups and who I called and what I learned. I’m hoping that people who come in with that degree of distrust see that and appreciate it.

(quoted in Bilton, 2016, para. 19)

On a practical level, the distinctions among the different forms of transparency suggest different ways of making something transparent. How, for example, could a decision to pursue a news story be made transparent? Under the availability perspective, a news organization could post a list of commonly used newsworthiness criteria to its website. Readers and viewers could consult the rubric to figure out how any story matches up. Approaching the example from the disclosure perspective, we see more active options. Making the decision transparent could take the form of including an editor’s note with each story explaining its newsworthiness. Participatory transparency could include the extra step of asking readers to vote on which stories they find most newsworthy or inviting them to attend the editorial meetings where decisions about news coverage are made.

We need not consider availability, disclosure, or participation to be competing or mutually exclusive perspectives. Still, their interchangeable use in some of the scholarly literature and trade press confuses efforts to understand what transparency is and requires, both practically and ethically. Making the distinction has theoretical implications for considering when availability is appropriate or “enough” to accomplish the aims of transparency and when more active disclosure seems warranted. Either case, however, assumes we can know how to make a thing transparent. Let us consider something—motives— which seem to be especially difficult to render transparent.

Returning to our earlier example, let’s imagine that the issue is not the method by which the decision to pursue a story was made but the motives of the decision-makers employing that method. If one were to take the availability perspective, it might suffice for the decision-makers merely to respond to questions about their motives. Under the disclosure perspective, a more active offering of explanation, perhaps in the form of an editor’s note accompanying the story, might be required. Providing such an account, whether passively or actively, depends on knowing one’s motives and being able to communicate them. This is no easy hurdle to clear. Human beings are capable of both self-deception and a lack of self-awareness, so we cannot assume that the motives a person ascribes to himself are his actual motives. Moreover, we cannot assume that the reader or viewer will understand those motives, even if they are the “real” ones, in the way the journalist understands them.

This scenario and its attendant difficulties call to mind the ideal speech situation described by Jürgen Habermas. Habermas’s work on discourse ethics, as well as the idea of the public
sphere, has influenced a number of scholars interested in ways that journalism might invigorate public dialogue and its own relationship with the public. Transparency is an important component of the ideal speech situation, enabling each participant in a discourse to perfectly know and understand the motives and intentions of the other participant. As Sinekopova (2006) points out, this ideal of transparency is possible only if one considers language to be a transparent medium, capable of transmitting pure meaning. In his discussion of scholarly interpretations of Rousseau’s views regarding transparency in political life, Marks (2001) offers a definition that also suggests a difficulty in achieving genuine transparency of motives. He writes: “What exactly is transparency? Simply put, it is a state in which we experience things, ourselves and other people as they really are, in which appearance corresponds to reality” (p. 623). While such transparency is already difficult in the face-to-face encounter of the ideal speech situation, it is unclear whether it is even possible to achieve in the mediated encounters between journalists and their audiences. Flyverbom (2016) argues that transparency might at best produce “managed visibilities” rather than the complete insight and clarity that many of its advocates envision:

The transparency literature often relies on a simple and deceptive formula that equates information with transparency and considers this clarity to be a direct path to accountability and good governance. That is, if information is shared, we can see things as they really are, and if everything is visible, no bad behavior takes place.

(pp. 118–119)

It goes beyond our purposes here to settle the question of whether or how well the pictures in our heads correspond with the world outside, as Lippmann (1922) might have put it. For now, it is enough to say that, even if perfect transparency is unattainable, it is reasonable to consider circumstances or practices as affording more or less transparency relative to others. We point out the special challenges of motive transparency not because the extreme case helps us to highlight problems with transparency more generally, but because concern about motives, more than other aspects of journalistic performance, may be what is propelling calls for transparency. Given that journalists already open many aspects of their work to public view—identifying sources, correcting errors, declaring potential conflicts of interest—much of the additional information that proponents of greater transparency seem to want relates more to intentions than facts, to providing an account more than to making information available.

THE VALUE OF TRANSPARENCY

That transparency has been defined variously or vaguely should not suggest doubt about its value. Indeed, it seems to be taken for granted that transparency is good and worth promoting. Transparency is seen as an indispensable element of public accountability and a necessary condition for promoting public trust in institutions. Underlying these values is transparency’s contribution to truth seeking and truth telling. Overall, transparency’s value is seen as primarily instrumental. It is a means through which greater accountability may be achieved, credibility may be enhanced, and truth may be told.

In journalism, transparency is valued primarily for its role in creating and sustaining trust. McBride and Rosenstiel (2014) maintain that transparency is “the most persuasive way to make a case for why audiences should trust you” (p. 92). News organizations, faced with a deepening credibility crisis, are eager to improve their standing with their audiences. In one poll, 69 percent of U.S. adults said their trust in the news media had decreased in the past decade (Gallup, 2018). Bias and inaccuracy were the chief complaints. But the same poll also offered some
encouraging news: 69 percent of those whose had lost trust in the news media thought that it could be restored. Transparency emerged as a key indicator of trust, with 71 percent saying a commitment to transparency is “very important” in determining whether they trust a news organization (Gallup, 2018).

This linkage among citizens’ ability to witness, to evaluate, and, therefore, to trust, indicates the valued role transparency plays in facilitating journalistic accountability. Indeed, providing an account is seen as an affirmative moral duty of professionals (Newton, Hodges, & Keith, 2004). But to whom are journalists accountable, and for what? There are no simple answers. “Accountability” is often used interchangeably with “responsibility,” though McQuail (2003) and Hodges (Newton et al., 2004) are among the scholars who argue that it is essential to distinguish the two. Hodges offers the following definitions:

The issue of responsibility is: To what social needs should we expect journalists to respond ably?
The issue of accountability is: How might society call on journalists to explain and justify the ways they perform the responsibilities given them?

(Newton et al., 2004, p. 173)

The news media are generally averse to allowing external parties to define their responsibilities or to following formal procedures for answering criticisms of how they discharge them, as McQuail (2003) notes. Transparency, engaged in voluntarily, seems directed at overcoming this general aversion and at least signaling a willingness to give the public more information to aid in its evaluation of performance and to answer to criticism of that performance.¹

Despite the belief that transparency will enhance trust and promote accountability, the limited empirical research in this area has yielded mixed results. Curry and Stroud (2019) found that exposure to a news webpage containing transparency elements such as footnotes and an explanation of how and why the news story was written yielded higher credibility ratings than exposure to a webpage without such elements. Other experiments have been less encouraging. Tandoc and Thomas (2017) operationalized transparency as the presence of personal information about the writer of a news story or blog post and found that the transparent articles containing the additional information were rated less credible than the non-transparent articles. In another study that used multiple versions of a newspaper story containing different forms of disclosure and participatory transparency, the various elements had almost no effect on message or source credibility (Karlsson, Clerwall, & Nord, 2014).

Rather than taking a purely utilitarian view of transparency, Plaisance (2007) grounds its value in meeting journalists’ ethical obligation of respect for persons:

[T]ransparency is tightly bound up with the Kantian duty of acting in ways that respect the humanity—or, more precisely, the rational capacity and the free will to exercise that capacity—of others. We fail in this regard when we are not upfront about our intent or purpose.

(p. 203)

This link to the principle of humanity also is manifest in the trust and credibility transparency encourages, Plaisance argues.

[When the concept of transparency is properly understood, in fact it ought to limit deception and misinformation. … Even if transparency is not always a sufficient condition for more ethical behavior, its absence is a prerequisite for deception, which presents serious challenges for anyone who values ethical behavior.

(p. 193)
Proponents of transparency also argue that it fosters dialogue between journalists and their audiences. Such dialogue is valued for its own sake as well as for its contribution to promoting trust. Steven A. Smith (2005), former editor of The Spokesman-Review newspaper in Spokane, Washington, said the “transparent newsroom” treats citizens as “partners in the news conversation” rather than as passive consumers (p. 44). Smith characterized the transparent newsroom as the opposite of fortress journalism, in which a news organization walls itself off from the communities it covers. Again, however, empirical evidence provides some reasons for skepticism. A content analysis by Nemeth and Sanders (2001), for example, concluded that many practices associated with transparency—letters to the editor, correction boxes, and ombudsman columns—in fact constitute a “truncated dialogue” that includes little meaningful discussion of newspaper performance (p. 58).

THE DANGERS OF TRANSPARENCY

Advocates of transparency contend that it can help limit deception, increase trust, and encourage dialogue and mutual understanding. These are powerful reasons to promote it. What, if anything, might temper our enthusiasm for doing so? The prospect of pursuing transparency and achieving none of these positive outcomes would certainly be disappointing, as the failed pursuit would represent a waste of time, energy and other precious resources. That the hoped-for good outcomes might not occur, however, is a trivial reason not to promote transparency. Rather, we need to consider the potential for increased transparency to create new problems as troublesome as those it is intended to solve or, worse, exacerbate the very problems transparency is meant to cure.

First, let’s consider the potential for transparency to serve interests that may be antithetical to independent journalism. Taking a cue from political philosophy, we note that transparency is not necessarily neutral. Garvey (2000), contrasting Bakhtin’s views on transparency with those of Habermas, notes that while both men “recognize the theoretical connection between communicative transparency and the ethical value of sincerity,” Bakhtin “associates transparency with the power that social interests can bring to bear on a discourse” (pp. 376–377). In short, Bakhtin sees transparency as a potential threat to autonomy in that it cannot be politically neutral. While forcing government policies into the light probably does not pose a threat, the issue “gets cloudier” as one moves closer to transparency of self, Garvey argues. (We offer the mundane example that few people would agree that completely transparent interactions with one’s family over Thanksgiving dinner would be desirable.)

Others have noted that transparency must be weighed against the need to keep some information out of public reach. Wasserman (2006), for example, argues that transparency might hinder rather than help independent journalism. He points in particular to transparency of journalistic processes, suggesting that what we have been calling the disclosure perspective does not give journalists the room they need to do good work.

The problem goes to the nature of journalism, which is practiced in a state of continual tension between private and public spheres. As public as the reporter’s orientation is, journalism relies on an untidy, creative and collaborative process of debate, argumentation and muted conflict. I think that is how journalists strive to understand the realities they are then supposed to represent to the public via news. That process needs a space and needs a degree of privacy.

I would strongly agree that the news media need to be held accountable publicly for the results of that process, especially when those results are badly flawed. But that is not the same as saying that the process itself should be routinely conducted in public view.

(Wasserman, 2006)
Wasserman suggests that calls for transparency are, in fact, politically motivated, making their interference with journalism practice more troublesome. Proponents, he contends, are more concerned with an alleged “ideological pollution” in journalism than with accuracy or fairness. “The point is not to hold media accountable, but make certain media discountable, by asserting that the journalism those media organizations provide is programmatic and ideological—is little better than propaganda—and cannot be trusted” (Wasserman, 2006).

Another way in which the risk of promoting transparency might exceed the reward is what O’Neill (2002) characterizes as almost an inverse relationship between transparency and trust. She notes that “public distrust has grown in the very years in which openness and transparency have been so avidly pursued” (p. 69). O’Neill’s explanation for this counterintuitive observation: While transparency may be able to eliminate secrecy, it cannot eliminate the kind of deception or deliberate misinformation that produces distrust. The flood of available information—ever more so due to greater and more widespread technological capacity—compounds the problem.

Indeed, scholars have issued the caution that, taken to the extreme, transparency can be counterproductive, bombarding people with so much information that it becomes nearly impossible to separate the “signal” from the “noise.” As Florini (1999) explained: “In a cynical view, if you really want to hide information, the best thing to do is to bury it in a flood of data” (p. 9). The point was already made in journalism more than a decade ago, when the debate over transparency was still rather new. An American Journalism Review article titled “Too Transparent?” questioned whether the pressure for journalists to explain themselves is spiraling out of control and quoted one former newspaper editor who noted the virtue in transparency but said, “We may well have gone overboard” (Smolkin, 2006, p. 16).

O’Neill (2002) agrees, connecting trust not to the amount of available information but to what one is able to do with the information.

We place and refuse trust not because we have torrents of information (more is not always better), but because we can trace specific bits of information and specific undertakings to particular sources on whose veracity and reliability we can run some checks.

(p. 76, emphasis in original)

Given that journalism is conducted in such a way that those specifics and particulars are already—transparently—available, we are left to wonder about the value of increased transparency of less checkable information such as motives or even methods and processes. In fact, that less easily verified information might be a breeding ground for the kind of deception that O’Neill and others worry about. Motives, we have noted, are particularly difficult to make transparent. To be sure, knowing a communicator’s motives is to have some basis for critiquing what is communicated and whether those motives conflict with some general expectation about good performance. Transparency in this sense is anticipatory. It anticipates what people need to know to make sense of what is being communicated. However, if my motives are suspect, the requirement to be transparent might create an incentive for me to hide my actions and motives even more carefully.

Finally, there is the danger that transparency may be aimed at the wrong things and distract attention from what is really important. As Strathern (2000) puts it, “What does visibility conceal?” (p. 310). First, it seems reasonable to say that those things that can most easily be rendered transparent are what, in fact, will be made transparent, whether or not those things are especially relevant to the overall goals of greater transparency. Second, the “easy” things that have been made transparent are reified as the important things or even as transparency itself.
Chadha and Koliska (2015) observed that major U.S. news outlets generally engage in a type of “low-risk, managed transparency” (p. 227). Reporters interviewed by the researchers stated that their news organizations favor transparency measures that can be implemented with limited resources or personnel, enabling them to “appear open, with relatively little effort” (p. 222). More ambitious transparency efforts—namely, those that embody the disclosure perspective—may be reserved for special projects that are expected to bring the news organization favorable publicity, as illustrated by the comments of one interviewee:

One Wall Street Journal reporter said the approach to fundamental aspects of journalistic decision making remains “relatively old school, with explanations about process being more or less reserved for only a handful of stories, the kind that are entered for the Pulitzers.”

(Chadha & Koliska, 2015, p. 225)

It is far from a settled question, then, whether transparency can make the important, or merely the easy and desirable, more visible. If it were easiest or most advantageous to ask reporters to make the sources of information in their stories transparent—fully identify them and indicate why their views are considered worthy of inclusion in the story—then doing so would constitute being transparent. That practice has the added benefit of being empirically observable and measurable, so the public could assess for themselves how well the reporters were doing in meeting the expectation of transparency. Notice how much more difficult it would be to make transparent an editor’s or publisher’s decisions about how newsroom resources (human and financial) are deployed, and how the fact that news organizations do not typically reveal such information is not considered a blow to transparency. Which of these kinds of information, sources or resources, is more important? It is not difficult to make an argument for the importance of both, but notice how unlikely it is that we would get both.

GOING FORWARD

Certainly, we do not mean to present a false choice—between transparency of certain things and not others, or even between transparency and opacity more generally—only to highlight some of the practical and theoretical difficulties the push for transparency presents. As this overview of the potential advantages and disadvantages in pursuing transparency makes clear, more research is needed on at least two fronts. First, it is imperative to provide a justification for transparency, given the risks of pursuing it, that goes beyond merely acknowledging that accountability depends on a certain level of transparency. Plaisance (2007) has explored such a theoretical foundation in Kant’s principle of humanity; other perspectives are needed as well.

Second, further empirical work addressing public reactions to transparency efforts or, more specifically, to the kind of journalism featuring relatively greater transparency, would shed light on whether transparency actually achieves the goods its proponents trumpet. Several researchers have tested the relationship between transparency and credibility (e.g., Curry & Stroud, 2019; Karlsson et al., 2014; Tandoc & Thomas, 2017), but we would encourage research to explore goods other than credibility that greater transparency might produce. In some sense, to focus on credibility is to focus on the needs of the news organization, not the readers or viewers. Examining transparency from the perspective of interactivity, for example, might include addressing what methods of transparency—editor’s notes, forums, etc.—work best for the readers and viewers. What level of interactivity is necessary for something to be considered transparent enough? Whether and how the participation of the audience contributes to credibility and trust are likewise questions worthy of research.
Finally, we note that most discussion of journalistic transparency has focused on the efforts of major newspapers and broadcast networks. But as one television news producer correctly observed, “the burden (and opportunity) of trust-building doesn’t just fall on news organizations, but also on the platforms where people consume our stories” (Aronson-Rath, 2017, para. 5). Scholars might examine how social media platforms define and practice transparency, and how those definitions and practices differ from those of traditional news organizations. In particular, the lack of transparency surrounding the algorithms that determine which items appear in social media users’ news feeds, and the order in which they appear, merits investigation.

In general, future research ought to examine the best ways of being transparent, of making information available and disclosing intentions. To this last point we might add that, in our view, for transparency to mean little more than availability is a meager conceptualization indeed. If transparency does not connote a more active type of disclosure, then it does not appear to add much to how journalism currently is practiced.

NOTE

1. What we in mind here is what McQuail and others call the “answerability” model of accountability. As distinguished from the “liability” model, answerability focuses “on the quality of performance rather than on specific harm caused” (McQuail, 2003, p. 204).

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