

## **The transparency issue**

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## Abstract:

Besides giving an overview on the individual contributions, this introduction to the special issue on transparency delineates a conceptual context for a critical analysis of the contemporary discourse on transparency and the media mechanisms related to it. It focuses on three ambivalences inherent to transparency: (1) Transparency is a promise characteristic for enlightenment and modernity that themselves produce a structural complexity undermining all simple endeavors to make things visible. (2) Transparency, therefore, is never given but is based on artificial representational and mediatic strategies; the processes of mediation, however, applied to produce and display transparency, attract suspicion for being selective and manipulative. (3) Transparency is often equated with the possibility of a critical public while the practice of critique (according to scholars as different as Latour, Serres, Rancière, and Boltanski) has become toothless in its redundant claim to disclose what other people don't see. Instead of just ridiculing the notion of transparency, we argue in conclusion that any call for transparency should always be accompanied with a careful examination and possible contention of why to disclose *this* (and not something else) and why with *these* tools (and not others).

## "Opération Transparence" – the politics of full disclosure

Early summer 2012, the French foundation *France Libertés* launched the second part of "*Opération Transparence*". The first part consisted of a national survey of the local prices of tap water, this second part focused on the water's quality. Consumers were invited to upload whatever information on the quality of local tap water they could find, and they committed themselves to check whether the local administration made the results of tests public, especially if the water quality did not meet the hygienic norms and local companies were still licensed to distribute the water. The aim of *France Libertés*, the accompanying press release said, was to draw attention to these licenses and to the exceptions and loopholes present in existing regulation, thus pressuring the local distributors into delivering higher quality tap water.

The example is banal, and the name of the operation can hardly be called original, but it nicely condenses a set of issues that are raised in this special issue of Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies. Before delving into these we would like to make some preliminary remarks on the *Opération Transparence* initiative. First to be noted is that the meaning of the word transparency oscillates between something that *is* and something that needs to be *created*. On the one hand transparency is a property of things – in this case of water – but it could in principle be applied to anything, such as pricing mechanisms, bureaucratic measures, or publication decisions. At the same time the mere existence of *Opération Transparence* points to the fact that transparency is not a given but the result of a complex set of measures.

If we would want to make French tap water truly transparent, a whole set of measures have to be taken: definitions and monitoring mechanisms capable of measuring them (as opposed to other possible aspects of water) have to be developed, websites have to be set up, policy has to be scrutinized, local politicians have to be pressurized, and so on. This way, the issue at hand becomes well-defined and will attract attention, whereas other issues are left in the dark. In short, transparency is not a given but needs to be created, and this act of creation involves a certain degree of contingency and thus also, whether implicitly or explicitly, politics. More dramatic recent examples of the political relevance of transparency – e.g. the making transparent of people's online communication through the U.S. PRISM program and the, in turn, making transparent of this program through whistleblower Snowden – pose similar questions.

The value of transparency is paradoxical: There are some cases in which transparency is very clearly defined as a danger – most people want to keep their private data private. In many more cases, however, the positive value of transparency is simply assumed – transparency even becomes an imperative. It looks as if, depending on different kinds of entities and issues, transparency has to either be complete or completely rejected. There seems to be no in-between. As one of the contributors to this special issue has argued elsewhere, it is almost

impossible to challenge transparency as a value; it simply *is* something worthy striving for, as it is supposed to cure a whole range of perceived problems (Birchall, 2011a, pp. 61-62). *Opération Transparence* clearly illustrates this 'unquestionability'. Not only do the newspaper article and website never argue why transparency of local water quality is good (its beneficial effects on health are simply assumed); the initiative also assumes that by making the water test results public the authorities will take appropriate measures. Transparency here figures as a *tool of government*, one that will have beneficial effects for the governed. In practice, however, we often see struggles over which practices and procedures have to be made transparent, and to whom. The practices and procedures used to guarantee this transparency are even less unambiguous: The processes of mediation, applied to produce and display transparency, attract suspicion for being selective and manipulative.

The aim of this introduction is to create a conceptual map through which to understand and connect the individual articles gathered in this special issue. Most of the contributions focus on contemporary phenomena, from Wikileaks to the War on Terror, but we felt it was necessary to provide a broader sketch of where the urge for transparency comes from and what its implications are. As both Werron and Domingo stress in their respective contributions, the roots of transparency lie in Enlightenment thinking; it is not a recent phenomenon. In this sense, transparency has been around for a long time but without it necessarily being called as such. If there is a widespread feeling that the attention to transparency is a recent phenomenon, this is because the term has only recently come into fashion, not because the concept was suddenly invented. However, technologies and practices have developed alongside the term, equipping it with political power. Transparency in this sense is not just an empty 'dream' or a purely ideological concept; rather it is a constant endeavor that – even if it may be failing – structures our culture.

## **Transparency and Modernity**

Modern democratic and capitalist societies are haunted by an ever-increasing tension between their structural complexity and the desire to disclose the hidden machinery. The Enlightenment that promoted and in a sense produced these societies is accompanied by the double imperative to make the mysteries of the world visible and comprehensible through scientific insights, and to overcome traditional forms of authority by giving citizens insights in, and decision-making power over, the procedures of governing and decision making. Both projects are only seemingly unrelated. In actuality, both enterprises were built on what Latour (1993) calls 'The Modern Constitution', the structure rigidly separating the world of nature from the world of politics. Much ink has been spilt on the difference between both but what is often neglected is the extent to which both projects are interrelated through a common focus on transparency.

However, many developments – all in one way or the other connected to Enlightenment – constantly seem to endanger the possibility of attaining a 'clear picture' of how the world works: the multiplication of organizations and institutions through the process of bureaucratization, the fragmentation of

knowledge resulting from the increasing division of labor, and the growing heterogeneity of transnational networks and infrastructures are only three of many more developments that seem to make society more and more opaque as they relate the most variegated things to each other and pile one complicated layer on another. This even affects individual and intimate relationships, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau most famously bemoaned. While to himself his heart “has been as transparent as a crystal”, he learned “that his own feelings, his own certainty [...] could not be transmitted, expressed, or told” (Bienczyk, 2012, p. 32).

As a result of this complexity, transparency as a cultural ideal of modernity is necessarily failing. Driven by the same Enlightenment values that produce its undoing, transparency becomes an impossible ideal that haunts modern society. This is because transparency is not only impossible at the conceptual level (see Birchall, 2011b), but also at the practical level, due to the proliferation of agencies that monitor and influence the world. The organizations analyzed by Werron in this issue are good examples of such monitoring agencies, namely organizations that rank the competitiveness of nation states. Institutions like these not merely reflect reality but also act on it by surveilling and disciplining. The most poignant example of this tension is the modern liberal economy. On the one hand it is based on the conviction that it functions because of a hidden, non-transparent mechanism – Adam Smith’s invisible hand (cf. Foucault, 2008, pp. 278-81); on the other hand its driving force – competition – is dependent on the charts, diagrams, and statistics that make the flow of commodities and money visible (Buck-Morss, 1995). The reflexivity that characterizes modernity simultaneously disrupts the ideal of transparency that gave rise to the monitoring agency in the first place.

In the following, we will discuss two theoretical concerns that still seem to be at the core of transparency’s political ambiguity and that are of major importance for the contributions in this issue: the necessarily mediated character of transparency and the relation between the transparency imperative and critical practice.

### **Transparency, mediation and modes of representation**

As already said, the mediating agencies that make the world more transparent play a crucial role, which foregrounds the question of mediality. The explicit link between a medium and the kind of transparency it enacts (or fails to enact) was made explicit by Bertolt Brecht when in 1931 he argued that any effort at a simple representation of society’s ‘mysteries’ is doomed to fail:

The situation [in capitalist society as a whole] is now becoming so complex that a simple ‘reproduction of reality’ says less than ever about reality itself. A photograph of a Krupp or AEG [a German enterprise producing electric appliances] factory reveals practically nothing about these institutions. Reality itself has shifted into the realm of the functional. The reification of human relations, such as the factory, no longer betrays anything about these relationships. And so what we actually need is to

‘construct something’, something ‘artificial’, ‘posed’. (Brecht, 1931, p. 469, *our translation*)

As a new technology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, photography contributed to quite a number of new insights – not only on the way horses run and celestial bodies move across the sky, but also on how wars are fought and how worker’s families live (e.g. Wells, 2009). At the same time, the medium did produce its own secret archives (Sekula, 1986) and only deepened the suspicion that something is hidden under the visible surfaces displayed in the photographic image.

Transparency is not an act of showing something, or of producing and distributing a picture of something: Reality (as any more than banal notion of ideology concedes) is not disclosed by lifting the veil. ‘Reality itself’ necessarily consists of invisibility, hidden areas, and unequally structured access, and any kind of mediating entity will only add to the impossibility of full transparency.

Brecht reacted to this situation by calling for artificial means of disclosing reality. Instead of showing reality (by taking a photograph or lifting the veil), a new, not yet existing representational form has to be created to enable any knowledge of (but surely not *transparency of*) ‘the realm of the functional’. Here transparency and knowledge are sometimes juxtaposed, contrary to the liberal take on these matters, which would equate the two. Following a classic insight of post-Frankfurter School critique of ideology, it is the act of making transparent that obfuscates. The contributions by Jack Bratich on Police Sovereign Networks and Matthew Thiessen's on econo-blogs further develop this theme and analyze how the mechanism works in the contemporary conjunction.

Brecht's observation moreover draws our attention to the important fact that transparency is not the same as *visibility*. All too often the visible is equated with an unmediated access to reality, but of course each medium that visualizes is a mode of representation. And the emancipatory effects of a mode of representation are often only unlocked at the moment when the artificiality of the mode of representation itself is brought to the foreground, as in Brecht's epic theatre. Techniques that make the audience aware of the artificiality of a mode of representation (and thus do not make reality transparent but instead render the mode of representation through which reality is accessed more transparent) are thus more helpful than a mere focus on visibility. The discourse of (aesthetic) modernism, with its emphasis on the self-reflexive gesture, comes into play, focusing more on the tools of representation than on the entities represented (Rodowick, 1994).

The equation of transparency with the visual is problematic for other reasons as well. Drawing on Debord’s notion of the society of the spectacle, Charles Garoian and Yvonne Gaudelius argue that our world has been overtaken by a spectacle culture that forms a “pedagogical model for how life is to be experienced and understood” (2008, electronic version). As the resulting *spectacle pedagogy* is inherently visual in orientation, Garoian and Gaudelius use it interchangeably with the term “scopic regime”. For them, the only way to eradicate the pernicious effects of spectacle culture and its intrinsic link with global capitalism is to develop a “spectacle pedagogy” that cracks open the visual through

*anamorphosis*, a form of looking awry that shows the inconsistencies of spectacle culture and its pretensions to represent a visually coherent world.

Some 60 years after Brecht, Fredric Jameson (1990) took up the same issue when he called for an aesthetics and a didactics of “cognitive mapping” – that is, a mode of representation that might bridge the gap between the highly complex and spatially dispersed interconnections of postmodern society on the one side and the specific individual experience on the other. Even more recently Thomas Elsaesser (2008) argued, with explicit reference to the afore-quoted Brecht, that the cultural scripts and programs of narrative forms filter out the contingency and complexity that define a computerized and networked society. In his view, only a new kind of post-narrative data processing would allow one to comprehend the contemporary situation. Both thus argue, in line with Brecht, that the complexity of (post-)modernity demands special means to make understanding complexity possible, thereby also questioning any straightforward concept of transparency. The ever more important role of networks even provokes the question whether any analysis focusing on the visible and on visualization is not necessarily doomed to fail (cf. Galloway, 2011; Franklin, 2011).

This insistence that the ever-changing complexity of modern society constantly demands new modes of representation, however, has to be complemented by a closer analysis of all the tools, procedures, claims that actually produce (or at least promise) different forms of transparency. In the end, there is no shortage of artificial forms tackling the complexity that renders modern society invisible: statistics and graphs, archives and museums, public hearings and media scandals – they all, even in very different ways, answer to the imperative of a more transparent, more accessible world. At the very least they are based on the semantics of visibility, openness, evidence, access, and so on.

The tension between the imperative of transparency and the multiplying layers and interrelations of global modern society, then, is doubled by the tension between on the one hand the growing availability of tools and procedures promising greater insight into the complexities and hidden areas, and on the other hand the growing suspicion that exactly these tools are used to mislead our perception or that they only add to the spectacle of signifiers resulting in the ever more opaque texture of contemporary culture.

The world of modern media sports might be a telling (and by no means banal) example here. Sport has become a spectacle in the sense of an event that is presented for its visual qualities; the mediation of physical performances and intensified emotions results in a torrent of images that compete with each other over the viewer’s attention. At the same time, the processes of mediation applied in the context of media sports are very much structured by the imperative of transparency: Slow motion, the multiplication of cameras, graphics and statistics do in fact render ever-more detailed aspects of the performances visible – the proof of this is that these technologies, if in slightly modified forms, are actually used to improve the performances, which in turn results in the fact that competitors have to look for new ‘secret’ measures to get ahead of their

contenders. As a result, the reality that was supposed to be made transparent through mediation is changed, stuck in a vortex of feedback loops between reality and its representation. The interplay between spectacle and transparency, disclosure and secrecy can be found in many fields of contemporary society other than media sports, and their respective interweavings are quite heterogeneous across different fields.

The invisibility of modern society is reproduced and intensified not (only) by covering up and hiding things, but by the constant effort to make certain aspects transparent. Things are made transparent by making connections, by making other connections than the most visible ones, by doubting the available mode of representation in favor of an alternative one, or by claiming that the available data is structured by hidden interests (tellingly, Jameson conceived of conspiracy theory as the "poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age" (1990, p. 356)). As transparency does not result from lifting one curtain and unveiling reality completely, each act of making transparent necessarily covers some things in order to lend clear visibility to others. Disclosure and secrecy can thus be considered as 'symmetrical' strategic acts.

The promise and urgency of transparency accompanying these tools dominates any reflection on this 'darker side' of the entire transparency endeavor: Each tool that renders one thing visible also contributes to the invisibilization of something else, either by systematically (and necessarily) leaving certain matters out or just by distracting the attention from other facts and interrelations. Besides, and perhaps even more importantly, the multiplicity and the 'naturalization' of transparency tools also circumvent a more in-depth reflection on the unavoidability of certain invisibilities and the appropriate strategies to deal with that. Referring back to Brecht's argument, we might not only need artificial means to represent the realm of the functional, we might also need forms that *deal with* – instead of disclose – the invisibilities (Horn, 2011).

## **Transparency and critique**

Perhaps paradoxically, the tendency towards an increasing number of transparency dispositifs in society is accompanied by the delegitimization of critique as an intellectual practice. The paradox is that the critical project rested on an often implicit notion of transparency, a game of revelation and disclosure. Authors as different as Latour, Rancière, Serres, and Boltanski have taken issue with this concept and have questioned what critique is, if not the authoritative disclosure of things that were previously hidden (or allegedly not seen by the ignorant, duped, or passive people). Of this group, Latour and Serres take the most radical position, aiming to abolish critique altogether. In the 2004 essay *Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?*, Latour contends the critical gaze consists of two types of debunking moves. The first debunking happens when what a gullible agent perceives to be a powerful force acting upon him is shown up to be really an idol created by the gullible agent him- or herself; hence all the powers attributed to the idol are in fact of the social agent's own making. Critical move number two is in many ways its opposite: Here social agents believe they are acting autonomously but the critic shows this sense of mastery to be illusory,



pointing instead to hidden determinants explaining the agent's behavior. The critic finds himself in a comfortable position in that he or she is always right, whereas the social agent is always wrong and gullible. The kind of transparency that critique relies on thus always delegitimizes the experiences of the social agent, and the latter is inevitably relegated to a game of catch up.

Serres, too, is critical of critique, but he casts his analysis in somewhat different terms. He places critique within Ricoeur's *philosophies of suspicion* and compares it to a police state

every police force requires another police force to police it. When a policing body is looking over a person's shoulder, assessing his hearts and innermost workings, are we to suppose that this policing body has neither a shoulder of its own, nor heart, nor innermost workings? This launches us into a 'detective' logic. And the best detective is the one who is never interrogated, who places himself in a position beyond suspicion. The critic's ultimate goal is to escape all possible criticism, to be beyond criticism. He looks over everyone else's shoulder and persuades everyone that he has no shoulder. That he has no heart. He asks all the questions so that none can be asked of him. (1995, p. 133):

The critical gesture in a rather radical way distinguishes the critic from the social subjects, with the critic in the comfortable position of being able to interrogate others while not being interrogated him- or herself. This is a remarkable feature, given that the very form of critique tends towards loops of reflexivity in which every critical gesture itself is susceptible to critique. Somehow the effective critic is able to subtract him- or herself from this self-reflexive loop; critics, in short, have the upper hand in their dealings with society.

It is the reflexivity loop that is problematic for Rancière as well. He takes issue with those postmodern theories that claim reality no longer exists, that the real illusion of today is a belief in a sound reality, etc. Rancière points out that these theories "invite [...] us to liberate ourselves from the forms and contents of the critical tradition. But it only does so at the price of reproducing its logic" (2009, p. 31). Just repeating the critical gesture (falling into Serres' reflexive loop) will not lead anywhere:

Forty years ago, critical science made us laugh at the imbeciles who took images for realities and let themselves be seduced by their hidden messages. In the interim, the 'imbeciles' have been educated in the art of recognizing the reality behind appearances and the messages concealed in images. And now, naturally enough, recycled critical science makes us smile at the imbeciles who still think such things as concealed messages in images and a reality distinct from appearances exist. The machine can work in this way until the end of time, capitalizing on the impotence of the critique that unveils the impotence of the imbeciles. (Rancière, 2009, p. 48)

Rancière, of course, seeks to salvage the emancipatory potential of democratic man/woman from the critical project. He does so by breaking the reflexive loop and by focusing on the dissensus that exists in any given situation. It is this

dissensus that allows us to crack open our situation from the inside, reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible. Here the role of the social scientist or philosopher is not to unveil a hidden reality, but to cultivate the uncounted capacities not recognized in and by an established order. The gesture of 'making transparent' is thus replaced by a reorganization of the field of perception and its implied hierarchizations.

It is ironic that in this Rancière comes fairly close to the position advanced by Luc Boltanski in *De la critique: Précis de sociologie de l'émancipation* (2009); ironic because Boltanski, and more specifically his earlier book co-authored with Eve Chiapello (1995), figures in *The Emancipated Spectator* as an example of the left's melancholy that Rancière so vehemently criticizes. The latter position advances the idea that those that think they are fighting capitalism are in fact mistaken and are feeding the beast instead – in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, this is the artistic critique which rejuvenated capitalism and gave it a counter-cultural gloss through the semantics of flexibility, autonomy, and self-realization. In other words, Boltanski and Chiapello are for Rancière prime exponents of the critical loop of self-reflexivity that lead us only to a further denouncing of 'the imbeciles'. In *De la critique*, however, Boltanski distinguishes his own position, which he calls *la sociologie pragmatique de la critique*, from critical sociology à la Bourdieu precisely because of the asymmetry the latter presupposes between enlightened sociologists and naive social agents who are mired in illusions. For Boltanski's pragmatic critical sociology, the starting point of analysis needs to be the everyday lived experience of social agents, and specifically those instances in which they are critical of the existing order – when *disputes* arise. These disputes differ from critique in that they are local and specific, whereas critique tends towards the systemic and the abstract. For Boltanski these disputes, or contradictions in a given situation, are nevertheless tools that allow for cracking open the status quo. As a result, the critical project is constructed bottom-up rather than imposed on unwilling subjects, one that avoids the dichotomy of appearance/reality that is so important in traditional modes of critique. To critique the notion (and the many instruments) of transparency should therefore not be equated with the paternalistic or just arrogant move to show other people that what they consider to be transparency is nothing but another mystification.

It is not hard to see how Boltanski's project of pragmatic critique starting from disputes resembles the Rancièrian notion of dissensus. Though these authors write from different disciplines, they both reject the idea that social agents, or ordinary people, are inevitably caught in a game of catch-up with the all-seeing and all-knowing critical theorist. Instead they both plea for what might be called an immanent approach, one that takes the existing situation as a starting point and examines the actual conflicts that arise in them.

Concerning transparency, it is clear that the four authors mentioned here – Latour, Serres, Rancière, Boltanski – share a suspicion of critique as the intellectual act of making things transparent. For them, the entire critical edifice built on disguise and revelation has lost its political potential, not just because of its misanthropy towards people, but also because of its overt glorification of the critical intellectual. What they propose instead differs from author to author, but can be summarized as 'producing alternative connections'. For Latour this

implies the creation of a 'gathering' where 'matters of fact' are replaced by 'matters of concern'; for Serres it means embracing an ethics of discovery and invention; and for Rancière and Boltanski it entails taking the existing moments of dissensus/dispute and start a "redistribution of the sensible" from them. Each of these alternative connections explicitly rejects the transparency metaphor as a model for intellectual and political activity.

### **The contributions**

The themes above are some of the core terms that connect the contributions to this special issue on transparency: modernity, governmentality, mediation, mode of representation, and critique. Not each essay focuses on these aspects in equal measures and some essays exclusively stress just one of the terms, but even in the latter case the other terms linger in the background.

Jack Bratich's contribution rethinks the notion of the public sphere in relation to transparency. With respect to the historical origins of the public sphere, but also its contemporary development, he pleads for calling it a 'public secret sphere' as it is first and foremost the multilayered tension between making public and keeping secret that defines the practices and statements which are conceived of as being public. In the simplest sense, some things can be openly stated and nevertheless (or, rather, *necessarily*) not become part of a proper discussion. More systematically, the modern public sphere is inseparably linked to the strategies of communication warfare, which are considered necessary for the creation of a public fitting and supporting representative democracy. By giving a detailed account of examples from the Arab revolution and US police work, Bratich shows how allegedly decentralized networks are equipped with sovereign power through a careful manufacturing of the (in-)visibility of characters and issues structuring the networks. Each call for transparency, that is, has to be carefully analyzed not only for the secrets it produces, but also the sovereignty it grants.

The next two essays focus on the War on Terror and torture. Anjali Nath interrogates the relationship between transparency and the systems of representation in which it is imbedded. Nath takes a particular case, namely the redacted Guantanamo documents released under the Freedom of Information Act known as the Torture Memos. Whereas the idea behind redaction is that information should *not* be made public, or the negation of communication and transparency, Nath argues that redaction *does* communicate something. Through a close reading of different versions of redacted documents she argues that redaction does visualize the necropolitical governmentality that in the War on Terror increasingly supplements the logic of liberal transparency. Her analysis shows how reading *with* redaction creates a subject position that stimulates rather than represses our imagination, leaving the reader to ponder the horrible fate of the detainees, the facts of which could not be allowed to circulate freely. Considered as a system of representation redacted documents thus stimulate an aggregate of meaning and imagination that can exceed the meanings contained in the unredacted archive, thus more accurately mediating the unspeakable acts of horror than the dispassionate bureaucratic language used in the latter.

Rebecca Adelman's essay tackles transparency and the visualization of torture from the other side, not by investigating how hiding is inevitably also a way of showing, but rather by studying how the act of showing might have to include restraint. She starts from the pedagogical question: How to teach about Abu Ghraib? Showing these pictures in class, she argues, makes one complicit in the very act of torture itself, since these pictures are not only records of torture but also tools of torture intended to humiliate the detainees. Showing these pictures in class is thus complicit with the strategies of the military apparatus it aims to critique. These pictures present us with ethical and visual aporiae, or problems that have no solution but nevertheless ask for a reaction. The notion of aporia allows Adelman to overcome apparently stable binaries like those between transparency and opacity, oppositions that structure liberal governmentality in general and, closer to home, academic programs like the media literacy movement. She concludes with an examination of different pedagogic strategies that recognize the aporetic nature of the Abu Ghraib pictures without being able to solve the constitutive paradox.

With Juan Domingo Sánchez Estop's analysis of Julian Assange's writings we move into the terrain of liberal governmentality. The media storm surrounding some of the more spectacular Wikileaks projects stressed their novelty, but Sánchez Estop argues that Wikileaks stays firmly rooted in liberal assumptions about the state. Indeed, the firm belief in the capacity of transparency to lay bare conspiracies amongst those governing matches the classic liberal preoccupation with checks and balances. Through a historical analysis of conspiracy theories, and their relationship to theories of the state and political economy, Sánchez Estop concludes that the Wikileaks project has as its ultimate horizon 'the utopia of the rule of law', misrecognizing the actual relations of domination that take place under the latter – we are reminded here of Anatole France's famous dictum that "the law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich and the poor alike to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread" (France, 2006, unpaginated). Sánchez Estop argues that Wikileaks' 'spectacular failure' – though quite a spectacle, it hardly disrupted the functioning of the politico-military apparatus – can be explained by these erroneous assumptions about conspiracies and/in the state, and that in actuality secrecy and transparency are not so much each other's opposites but often each other's complement, working in tandem to reinforce the dialectics of modern power.

In his close analysis of the public discussions on the economic crisis, Matthew Tiessen shows how the pressure on financial institutions to make themselves transparent produces a torrent of visualizations and models that also problematize the notion of transparency. Ironically, it is the interplay between the Federal Reserve on the one hand and critical bloggers and analysts on the other that establishes a field of transparency tactics; while all involved parties claim to aim at increased transparency, both are deeply involved in a race to control the message and the central terms defining the debate. This, Tiessen argues, is ultimately the reason why the institutions can quite easily take up the demand to be more transparent – transparency is not the opposite of message management, but rather a particular contemporary *form* of message management.

Tobias Werron analyzes from a historical perspective the different ranking institutions that aim to make competition transparent – the multitude of organizations that rank states, universities, companies, etc. Whereas their apparent goal is to make competition visible, these ranking organizations are actually in the business of discursively creating competition by creating what Werron calls artificial zero-sum games. Whereas many of these institutions are relatively new, the political logic underpinning them has its roots in the 19th century. He proposes a model to analyze such institutions based on the difference between pure and indirect forms of competition in the work of Simmel. In the second part of the paper he then applies that model to competition between nation states, and the development of so-called ‘universalized third parties’ ranking modernity or cultural prestige of nation states. In doing so, his paper brings together a number of observations that are scattered across disciplines and approaches, and integrates them into a single framework centered on the notion of competition. He concludes that these forms of competition are inevitably linked to a transparency discourse, since public forms of competition depend on "the transparency of the communication process that make such forms of competition possible".

With Claire Birchall's article we return to the Wikileaks case. Like Sánchez Estop she acknowledges that e-transparency is intimately related to neoliberal thought (though it cannot be reduced to it), but Birchall asks whether a radical form of transparency is possible. She proceeds by comparing e-transparency to other cultural forms of disclosure, like gossip, scandal, and conspiracy theories, which she calls narrative-interpretative forms of disclosure. The latter are often considered to be culturally suspect, because of their subjective and speculative nature; a deficiency that e-transparency promises to circumvent. Yet Birchall persuasively argues that the equation of e-transparency with raw, self-evident, and neutral data is problematic and laden with all kinds of ideological assumptions. She then analyzes Wikileaks and argues that, despite its similarity to liberal doctrines on transparency (framed in the language of democratic rights and the public's right to know), Wikileaks holds the promise of a new and radical form of transparency precisely because it mixes the data approach of e-transparency with narrative-interpretative forms. The leaked diplomatic cables are a good example of this mixed approach: The audience got access to a database of diplomatic cables, but Assange also employed mainstream news outlets to make stories with them, thus re-adding narrative-interpretative forms into the transparency mix. In doing so, Birchall argues, Wikileaks disrupted the technocratic logic of transparency and forced us to think what we *expect* from transparency. Perhaps Wikileaks' political fall-out has been rather limited, but we should look at the way it questions and rethinks the transparency dispositif to determine its true political effects.

A common thread running through all the contributions is that they complicate the notion of transparency. However, they do not complicate the term just to prove that things are more complicated than they seemed at first sight – which, of course, is always true. Instead, the chapters focus on particular cases to show how transparency always is embedded in multi-layered strategies of disclosing and hiding. There is thus no reason to ridicule transparency out of principle – and it is easy to imagine constellations in which the demand for more

transparency (of government, of academic procedures, of infrastructural bias, etc.) makes a lot of sense. The selection of essays gathered here illustrates transparency's necessary situatedness. What this issue hopefully has to offer, then, is a thorough reflection on the mixed character of transparency (which might divert attention or perpetuate the atrocities it discloses) as well as on the necessarily mediated and manufactured character of transparency. The call for transparency at least should always be accompanied with a careful examination and possible contention of why to disclose *this* (and not something else) and why with *these* tools (and not others). If there still is a role to play for critique it is not by 'blaming the imbeciles', but by the careful examination of transparency arrangements, one that moreover does justice to its *immanence*. The point is not to categorically reject transparency; the point is to understand and possibly contest its manner of cognitive mapping and its governmental effects.

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