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Occult(ing) Transparency: An Epilogue

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This epilogue seeks to discover hidden as well as perceptible patterns in the special issue. It senses four ghosts haunting transparency

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What would the Enlightenment era be without a will to transparency? And how would modern communication persist without a similar desire—for openness, for clear channels, for a world without obscurity? Transparency runs the gamut from the macrological demands on political institutions to make their operations public (à la the emergence of the public sphere against the dark recesses of monarchical power) to the micrological exhortations for individuals to speak their desires in amorous relationships. Transparency has been the foundation for a modern subject of knowledge, where seeing (better) equals knowing (better). More communication = more transparency = more good life (namely democracy, healthy relationships, informed health choices, better functioning organizations).

In this Special Section on the Organization of Visibility in the Digital Age, the tight bond between communication and the good life via "making transparent" is loosened in a number of ways. The contributors each question the presumed unvarnished value of transparency and/or the denigration of secrecy in communicative acts. Collectively, they get to a core tendency in communication studies: transmuting the hidden to the visible, bringing the submerged to the surface, and turning the private into the public.

In an age where disclosers-in-hiding like Edward Snowden reveal the extent to which state/corporate entities seek to render the totality of the world visible, quantifiable, and thus manageable, it is not surprising that transparency as such is met with skepticism. Who seeks it? With what tools? To what ends? The contributors ask us to rethink transparency in at least four ways: They remind us that transparency does not emerge sui generis—it is *managed*; they turn our attention to the variety of *metaphors* and *mechanisms* through which we enact transparency; they nudge us to incorporate *other senses* into our communicative research; and they put transparency in a context of *power relations* and asymmetrical capacities.

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A number of contributors, including Mikkel Flyverbom, Cynthia Stohl, Michael Stohl, and Paul Leonardi, begin by delinking transparency from visibility, even challenging the commonsense belief that more visibility results in higher levels of transparency. They point to the actions that undergird visibility (inscription, storage, and access), as well as those that can obfuscate via strategic opacity (data dumps). From another angle, Clare Birchall asks us to do something with secrecy besides immediately trying to banish it. She suggests we "sit with the secret," slowing down our urge to send it away in favor of listening what it has to say. She points to its temporality, a notion explored as well in terms of the different stages of availability, allowance, and accessibility by Stohl, Stohl, and Leonardi. We need to attend to the different steps and moments through which transparency is produced. Transparency does not simply occur—it has conditions of existence and entails "visibility management." Revelations are strategic, leaks are deliberate, declassification is intentionally timed.

The articles draw our attention to the rich set of metaphors that surround transparency, as well as the material mechanisms that allow it to emerge as a value and result. They disconnect transparency from notions of illumination, openness, insight, and clarity. The light has come to imbue the will to know, whether the philosophical heliocentrism of the Platonic post-cave daylight of knowledge (still carried by terms like "sunshine laws"), the illumination of camera flashbulbs that rendered early 20th-century U.S. urban centers intelligible to law enforcement and moral reformers, or the noirish detectives groping in the dark with flashlights for hidden truths (see the recurring X-Files franchise).

Transparency's allure rests on a metaphor of a pane of glass, a *window* on the world. The will to transparency encounters what it thinks is a pane that has become so clouded that easy access to a world has been obstructed. This of course presumes that the only mediation between subject and world is a window, and that the only interference is that which touches or alters that filter.

Mikkel Flyverbom reminds us that series of agents, human and nonhuman, generate transparency. These sociomaterial mechanisms of visibility or, as Flyverbom calls them, "disclosure devices," mediate and reconfigure the subjects and objects rendered transparent. Cameras, inscription techniques, algorithms, recording devices: These don't clean cloudy windows; they select and enhance elements of the world in order to enable action upon the resulting representations. The sociotechnical mediations of disclosure demonstrate the degrees of voluntariness or coercion in making transparent (e.g., radical disclosure via shaming and doxxing).

With the rise of what Mark Andrejevic (2015) elsewhere calls "drone theory," these mechanisms become both more visible and less accessible at the same time. We can talk all we want about how we *know* surveillance and data analytics are part of the media ecology, but the ability to *act on* that knowledge via managing the infrastructure seems increasingly out of reach. Examining these material devices leads us to question transparency, even within our own research practices. How do we proceed methodologically with observation as a technique, once we situate it among apparatuses of surveillance, mediation, and power (Bratich, in press)?

In addition, the way transparency gets opposed to a variety of terms is of interest here. Is making something *public* the same as making it transparent? What are transparency's foils? Invisibility,

opacity, privacy, secrecy, obscurity? A whole host of nuanced relationships across these terms shape our value systems. But these complexities are concealed by the keyword *transparency*. The contributors here collectively direct us to the matrix from which "transparency" arises, but which is then *occulted by it*. It's as if, in the broad daylight of truth, we have forgotten that the sun is but one star in a solar system.

After disarticulating transparency from visibility, the Special Section contributors remind us that vision itself is only one sense used in communication. The ocularcentrism of the will to transparency is resituated in a body with multiple senses. Birchall's notion of secrecy, for instance, is founded on its (in)audibility (see her other writings on the secret, especially 2007). A secret is passed on via whispers. Attending to the secret means listening, rather than looking, and often takes place *in the dark*. Moreover, secrets have a physical density to them, as when we talk about them leaking (Heemsbergen, Birchall) or *secreting*. They are transmitted below the visual threshold, microbial contagions that take hold of bodies before being clearly seen. By doing justice to secrecy, this Special Section lets us hear and feel what else is possible.

Finally, the pieces importantly point us to political context in which *asymmetrical relations* thwart any universal valorization of transparency. Transparency relies on visibility practices that make some phenomena knowable as objects of intervention and governance (Flyverbom). Luke Heemsbergen's focus on digital shaming exposes a *politics* of disclosure enacted via degrees of coercions. The struggle over the right to make transparent comes out most clearly in Shiv Ganesh's contribution on surveillance as a social dynamic, even an atmosphere. Ganesh shows that the gaze can also be returned via countersurveillance and sousveillance.

This strategy among asymmetrical agents also finds expression in Birchall's essay, when she makes the case for a "right to opacity"—the right not to be made transparent. Here, we see a complement to the strategic opacity that Stohl, Stohl, and Leonardi discuss, this time from a resistance-based perspective. Some populations need to retain a sphere of non-observability in order to evade policing, such as activists who need protection. Some time ago, Catherine Squires called this the "enclave public sphere," which emerges when oppressed groups need secure passage and pathways for resistance (e.g., the Underground Railroad for escaping slaves). Together, these practices of subordinate groups comprise a *popular secrecy*, one tied to the inverse of state sovereignty—what Paolo Virno (2004) reminds us is the "right to resistance" encoded as custom in the origin of the modern state. Popular secrecy is a bottom-up response to the "public secrecy" that characterizes the mediated political landscape of leaks, distractions, and strategic revelations (Bratich, 2006; Taussig, 2002). Drawing clear lines around the rights to resistance as the context for a right to secrecy counters that miasma of uncertainty that the prescient, though now antiquated, psywar literature once called "grey" propaganda. In other words, this is a battle of secrecies, not just a power that seeks to banish one of them.

Mapping the different agents with asymmetrical sociopolitical positions is key for understanding transparency as instrument, rather than as normative ideal. It reminds us to think *strategically* about these values. The legacy of public sphere-based demands for transparency conveniently ignores Jürgen Habermas' own acknowledgment that the early public was born out of secret conditions (like Freemasonic lodges). Ultimately, the issue asks, who is the subject who sees, and who is the one who is seen? Secrecy

and transparency are not treated here as values in and of themselves, but as instruments in struggles—they have *polemological* dimensions.

The articles here go a long way to complicate and situate transparency in a field of linguistic metaphors, of technical mediation devices, of other senses, and of power relations. They do the careful work of finding transparency's places and its limits, while also being attuned to the variety of communicational forms and contexts that don't presume transparency as a regulative ideal. The authors remind us that our attachments are deep and might not serve us in the ways we hope, opening the way for new thoughts and actions.

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