Digital transparency and political communication

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Recommended citation:

Campos-Domínguez, Eva; **Díez-Garrido, María** (2023). "Digital transparency and political communication". *Profesional de la información*, v. 32, n. 1, e320104.

https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2023.ene.04

Invited manuscript received on 09th December 2022

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Abstract

The academic debate on transparency has experienced a boom in recent decades. A review of the scientific literature allows us to identify two key moments in the discussion on digital transparency: the declaration of Barack Obama's *Memorandum on transparency and open government* in 2009 and the *Cambridge Analytica* scandal in 2018. The first was linked to a groundswell of enthusiasm for the concept of government transparency, with the promise that it would boost accountability, eliminate corruption, and promote political efficiency in a crisis of institutional legitimacy. The second altered the digital transparency agenda and catalysed a discussion about the need for technology and social media companies (*Facebook*, *Twitter*, or *Google*) to make transparency commitments because of their role in generating a public conversation and the democratic implications. This paper reviews the idea of digital transparency in the scientific literature framed in the field of political communication and tries to reflect the need for more research on its political, social, and cultural implications.

Keywords

Transparency; Digital transparency; Political communication; Open government; Access to information; Media transparency; Transparency and social networks; Media; Social media.

Funding

This article is part of the "Flujos de desinformación, polarización y crisis de la intermediación mediática (Disflows) (PID2020-113574RB-I00)" project, funded by the *Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation* (PID2020-113574RB-I00), and the *Chair of Transparency and Open Government* of the *University of Valladolid*.

1. Introduction

The idea of transparency in the public space has evolved from its origins to widespread adoption in the 20th and 21st centuries (**Gorwa**; **Garton-Ash**, 2020). It is often approached as a complex, deeply political, controversial, problematic, and even ambivalent concept (**Etzioni**, 2016). Although the multiple interrelated currents emerging prior to the 20th century substantially inspired contemporary approaches (**Christensen**; **Cheney**, 2015; **Flyverbom**, 2015), studies on digital or computerised transparency (**Meijer**, 2009) have recovered the current political debate on freedom of expression and democracy within the context of a changing, fragmented and crisis-ridden public space (**Palau-Sampio**; **López-García**, 2022).

From a review of the scientific literature, two key moments emerge that have catalysed the discussion on transparency in the field of political communication over the last twenty years: Barack Obama's (2009) *Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government*: *https://www.archives.gov/files/cui/documents/2009-WH-memo-on-transparency-and-open-government.pdf*

> "The scientific literature shows insufficient research on digital transparency originating from a citizen's perspective"

and the *Cambridge Analytica* scandal following the 2016 United States Presidential Election. Although there have been experiences of political transparency in the Netherlands (**Meijer**, 2015) and Scandinavia, it is assumed that modern political transparency arose in the United States (**Gorwa**; **Garton-Ash**, 2020) when, at the beginning of the 20th century, various politicians publicly stated that transparency was a moral good and an essential requirement for a healthy democratic society (**Hood**; **Heald**, 2006).

Since these two moments (2009 and 2018), less than a decade apart, studies on digital transparency have been shaped by different trends that currently define it as one of the main accountability mechanisms which governments, institutions, the media, and digital platform companies have used to regain public trust.

2. Open government and the rise of digital transparency

When Barack Obama issued the cited *Memorandum* on his first full day in office (2009) –emphasising messages such as "In the face of doubt, openness prevails"– he said he wanted to foster a change of attitude towards government institutions and referred to "a new way of governing" based on openness towards citizens through the use of digital technology and thereby recovering an old idea for a new concept (**Ramírez-Alujas**, 2010).

In this context, transparency was thought of in a restricted sense, and that the disclosure of certain information was not possible (**Albu**; **Flyverbom**, 2016), but it was also associated with the relevance of helping citizens and political leaders in decision-making (**Fun**, 2013). In general, digital transparency is perceived to be a mechanism to restore citizen trust in democratic institutions and governments.

Former President Obama's declaration –which recovered the liberal discourse of transparency as an accountability mechanism to oversee public and governmental functions– was the first milestone to what some authors have called "modern transparency" (**Meijer**, 2009**)** and inspired a flurry of research related to Open Government (**Wirtz**; **Birmeyer**, 2015) focused mainly on the study of government transparency (**Meijer**, 2012; **Meijer**, 2015). The increase in scientific production on digital transparency coincided with an increase in access to information regulations in the European Union, prompting the approval of transparency laws in different countries (**Meijer**, 2015), and serving as a catalyst to the founding of the *Open Government Partnership* (**Cuccinello**; **Porumbescu**; **Grimmelikhuijsen**, 2017).

Most of these studies reflected a phase of enthusiasm for the potential of digital transparency to improve representative democracy, better communication between representatives-citizens and to increase trust in institutions and governments (**Matheus**; **Janssen**, 2020). A large part of these studies analysed the pillars of open government (**Lathrop**; **Ruma**, 2010; **Nam**, 2012; **Grimmelikhuijsen**; **Feeney**, 2017), and explored how the application of digital technology could strengthen the principles of access to information (transparency), increase citizen participation in decision-making and further collaboration with the population (**Criado**; **Rojas-Martín**, 2013).

Years later, the limitations to digital transparency began to emerge, and it was seen that academic interest had been more focused on conceptualising and describing open government than addressing its possible effects and consequences (**Cuccinello**; **Porumbescu**; **Grimmelikhuijsen**, 2017). But, in general, the interpretation deduced from these studies was that transparency improves Western democracies (**Etzioni**, 2018). Another conclusion reached was that with the information gained through access to political information, citizens could better evaluate political measures and decide what party to vote for. This gave rise to **Keane**'s (2009) concept of monitored democracy as a contemporary, alternative, and participatory system based on citizen mechanisms for scrutiny of political representatives and control of information. In this system, transparency and accountability would become the essence of democracy (**Feenstra**, 2016).

In summary, the beginning of the academic debate on digital transparency emerged under the umbrella of initiatives that sought to reduce corruption, increase government efficiency through accountability and, ultimately, promote the legitimacy of government and institutions (**Grimmelikhuijsen** *et al.*, 2013; **Cuccinello**; **Porumbescu**; **Grimmelikhuijsen**, 2017). This occurred simultaneously to when the political class –with Obama as its advocate– made various promises regarding the development of transparency to recover its credibility and the trust of citizens and fostered the public-private partnership of open data. All of this motivated certain authors, who were enthusiastic about the potentials digital transparency promised, to argue that technologies would contribute to a "culture of transparency" in countries without a long history of democratic governance (**Heemsbergen**, 2016), with the aim of legitimising democratic institutions and their representatives

> "Journalistic transparency and open journalism have been put forward as a key issue when addressing the lack of credibility some media companies are accused of having"

in a politically decisive moment and context. Information transparency has thus become an instrument used by political communication to improve the reviled image of the political class.

3. Digital transparency and the new political communication

Following the enthusiasm that the drive for open government generated in academia, the *Cambridge Analytica* scandal in the 2018 United States Presidential Election reframed the debate on digital transparency; it was agreed that there was a need to refocus transparency to mitigate citizen mistrust in the management of the large technological companies, corporations and social media (**Brown**, 2020). In the digital public space, *Facebook*, *Google* and *Twitter* had proven to be key spaces where political discourse and deliberation could be catalysed on a global scale. Their growing role as a global channel for political communication meant that they were clearly institutions that had democratic implications. From that moment on, studies on digital transparency were developed based on one of three trends.

> Digital transparency has been studied fundamentally as an instrumental concept, ignoring its cultural, political and social dimension

The first was developed by authors who continued to analyse government transparency; they had initially been inspired by the ideology of open government, but now broadened their focus to include different tools for its development (such as social networks, data portals, etc.) (**Ruijer** *et al.*, 2020; **Villodre**; **Reynaers**; **Criado**, 2021; **Simonofski** *et al.*, 2022), and other political actors beyond institutional transparency itself (civil organisations, political parties, lobbies, etc.) (**Díez-Garrido**, 2022; **Dinan**, 2021).

The second was associated with a stream of studies that reopened the debate on mistrust towards "transparent domination", recovering Foucault's panopticon (**Asher-Barnstone**, 2005; **Catlaw**; **Sandberg**, 2014; **Lemke**, 2015) and highlighted the hypocrisy of digital transparency (**Shohl**; **Leonardi**, 2016), under an "imperative of transparency" (**Shudson**, 2015) that has turned transparency into an ideology of the "transparency society" (**Han**, 2015), where information has been positivised and operationalised but in reality "transparency itself is not transparent" (**Han**, 2022).

The third included those studies that suggest there is a need to increase the transparency of large digital corporations (**Rieder**, 2020), because of the relevance they have acquired since the 2016 electoral campaign in the United States, in increasingly sophisticated socio-political and technical systems (**Van-Dijck**; **Poell**; **De-Waal**, 2018). With this, the focus is now on the demand for transparency not only from the public sector, but also from the private sector. As a result, the accountability of these corporations is one of the responses demanded by both institutions and citizen organisations for "contaminating the public sphere with toxic content" (**Tumber**; **Waisbord**, 2021, p. 23). The possible impact of its use has fostered algorithmic transparency, which comprises greater visibility and exposure on how these corporations use algorithms and data to make decisions (**Watson**; **Nations**, 2019). In this sense, **Suzor** *et al.* (2019) note that there has been progress in terms of the transparency of social networks, but that, for it to make sense, it must reach users in a more efficient way and users must have better access to it.

Although the debate on the transparency of organisations was not new and had already been associated with the Corporate Social Responsibility movement that emerged in the 1980s (**Albu**; **Flyverbom**, 2019), it was recovered at this time, and greater transparency was demanded from digital platform corporations in their actions and, especially, in the treatment of users' personal data, ensuring that citizens' information was available to them so that they could protect their interests (**Fung**, 2013; **Gorwa**; **Garton-Ash**, 2020).

Since then, following the multiple scandals plaguing *Facebook* since 2016, academics, policy makers and civil society groups have advocated in public discourse for measures to scrutinise these companies' business activities, casting them as an important potential governance mechanism. Certain authors have pointed out how companies have made efforts to create alliances and partner with academia in an attempt to regain user trust (**King**; **Persily**, 2019), publicly declaring its commitment to transparency as one of the main mechanisms of corporate and socio-political responsibility. But it was found that some of these platforms made increasingly important political decisions in secret (**Gillespie**, 2018).

4. Media and digital transparency

The media are also present in the academic literature and part of the academic debate on digital transparency and political communication. In this area, there are four types of studies on transparency that can be distinguished according to their content.

There are studies that have analysed how the media have made information available to the public, either through editorial processes or though the journalistic actors involved (for example, media ownership, journalist profiles, blogs, and links to sources) (**Karlsson**; **Clerwall**, 2018; **Vu**; **Saldaña**, 2021). In general, media accountability is an area that has not drawn much interest from communication scholars (**Eberwein**; **Fengler**; **Karmasin**, 2019), but journalistic transparency and open journalism (**Sampedro-Blanco**, 2014; **Renedo-Farpón**, 2019) has been put

> Transparency has thus become an instrument used by political communication to improve the reviled image of the political class

forward as a key issue when addressing the lack of credibility some media companies –in Spain (**Jurado**, 2020) and other countries– are accused of having.

Another group of studies has focused on analysing the role of the media in disseminating government transparency (associated with open government) and have been able to contribute to making it more popular and emphasising its benefits (**Roberts**, 2006; **Gorwa**; **Garton-Ash**, 2020). The publication of data in an open format has also led to the proliferation of new narratives based on those publications (**Brolcháin** *et al.*, 2017). In this sense, data journalists usually use transparency portals and open data as sources of information (**Appelgren**; **Salaverría**, 2018). Data journalism also plays a key role in promoting a culture of transparency by making data more understandable (**Rogers**, 2014) as the data in these portals are unprocessed (**Cushion**; **Lewis**; **Callaghan**, 2017).

Other approaches on the possibilities of digital transparency have simultaneously emerged; they have contributed to the belief that transparency takes root with potentially significant social impacts (**Owen**, 2015), advocating an inevitable horizontal and collaborative transparency (**Heemsbergen**, 2016; **Gorwa**; **Garton-Ash**, 2020).

In recent years, and associated with the measures implemented to combat disinformation after the 2018 *Cambridge Analytica* scandals, a new group of studies into transparency and the media has appeared whose guiding principle is to strengthen public control over private companies, mainly social media platforms –translated to a large extent into obligations of transparency– and their intellectual property, production and financing, but which, in countries like Spain or Italy, are conditioned by a growing political parallelism and concentration of the media market. The political actors and the technologies involved are a starting point for thinking about governance objectives within a new network of accountability. National responses in EU countries are mixed, and the *European Commission* has intensified its efforts to combat disinformation and put more pressure on platforms to take action and provide some level of transparency (**Saurwein**; **Spencer-Smith**, 2020).

5. Final thoughts

In summary, digital transparency has been studied fundamentally as an instrumental concept, ignoring its cultural, political and social dimension. In the Window Theory, **Matheus** & **Janssen** (2020) explain that transparency is a glass through which the activity of government organisations can be observed: the interior of the building is visible during the day, but the window does not allow us to see what happens at night unless an artificial light is used at night and may be blurred by weather conditions. The authors use this metaphor to define the complexity and ambiguity of this concept.

Studies on digital transparency matched the academic trends on recent political communication, which initially shifted from technological enthusiasm, almost fetishism, to scepticism, provoked by large technology corporations involvement in the US presidential campaign in 2016 (**Chadwick**, 2019). It could be said that the development of research on digital transparency in the context of political communication has been characterised by phases of euphoria, disappointment, and continuous transformation.

From the initial enthusiasm for digital transparency, with an eminently governmental approach in the early years, transparency passed from having its limits explored to being described as unidirectional, decontextualised and indiscriminate, which generated much confusion about its meaning and purpose (**Meijer**, 2009).

The scientific literature has focused on its analysis from the perspective of political, institutional, technological and media elites, but there is little research originating from the citizen perspective, despite the fact that it is often said that one use of digital transparency could be to restore confidence in institutions. In parallel, these studies show that digital transparency –whether through technological, administrative, or organisational solutions– will not by itself provide an easy solution to the challenges posed by the growing role of platforms in political and social life (**Gorwa**; **Garton-Ash**, 2020). Therefore, more research is needed to explore how platform companies enact and carry out transparency and how this can work in an increasingly controversial landscape.

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