

The 'Dark Sides' of Transparency:

Rethinking Information Disclosure as a *Social Praxis*

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Abstract

Today transparency is perceived to be fundamental to a well-functioning democracy. At the same time, empirical research shows transparency to be severely limited as an organizing principle in the social world. In this thesis I develop an argument that attempts to reconcile these two sides of the debate. I argue that the current dominant conception of transparency relies on an overly static and informational model of communication. I call this conception ‘transparency-as-information’. I show which further commitments one needs to incur on the basis of the available empirical material, and argue that these further commitments call for a new conception of transparency – *relational transparency*. In other words, in this thesis my aim is to conceptualize the ‘darker sides’ of transparency-as-information in a manner that allows for invigorating renewed practices of transparency. These new practices are characterized by both an active and practical engagement with transparency’s pernicious social effects, and turn our attention to the social conditions needed for ensuring a well-functioning democracy that the current conception of transparency tends to obscure. Attending to these ‘dark sides’ in the double sense of the word, then, will prove to be vital if we are truly committed to those fundamental democratic values that we take the current conception of transparency to be serving.

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Introduction

In the last few decades there has been growing a widely shared opinion that transparency will open up governments and organizations in a sense that benefits us all (Hood, 2006: 216). And at first sight, transparency indeed seems to be “a key to better governance”, a principle worth striving for, with some even claiming the “right to know” to be a basic human right (Birkinshaw, 2006). Its presumed virtuous effects are manifold, such as a decrease in corruption, an enhancement of trust, an increase of legitimacy, or ensuring the possibility of accountability.

Notwithstanding these perceived positive effects, many people have pointed to the limits of the ideal of transparency. There is an abundance of empirical material that continuously shows us the limits of transparency, with policies aiming to implement transparency often engendering unwanted and unexpected effects on the level of practice. On the basis of this empirical evidence many people have claimed transparency to be an illusion (A. Roberts, 2012), a myth insulated from critique (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015), or sometimes even to be socially pernicious, doing more harm than good (Tsoukas, 1997).

In general, the desire for, and emphasis on transparency as a positive concept in contemporary organizational and political culture relies on a predominantly *informational* perspective, which presumes that transparency’s virtuous effects are most importantly caused by the disclosure of purportedly valuable information. Critics of this account are quick to point out the inextricably complex and ambiguous effects transparency seems to have in the real world and thereby document the ways in which the disclosure of information has unintended consequences, such as group-specific marginalization or the perpetuation of social inequalities. In a sense, this has led to somewhat of an impasse or discrepancy in contemporary research on transparency, with its acclaimed practitioners arguing why transparency is essential to a well-functioning democratic society, and its critical opponents continuously invoking its limits by pointing to all sorts of pernicious social effects in the world. What remains relatively un(der)theorized, then, is a kind of practical imperative that could connect these two sides of the debate – an answer to the question of how to re-conceptualize these limits so that they allow for invigorating renewed practices of transparency.

In this thesis, then, my aim is to provide such a new conceptualization. Without precluding the necessity of transparency’s normative significance for a well-functioning democratic society, I will treat this normative significance not as something that emerges

despite of transparency's more problematic incarnations, but rather *because* of them. In that sense, the argument I am making is constructed in light of the normative values and social issues people themselves articulate in relation to the presumed effect of transparency. The argument hinges on the conditional claim that *if* one believes that transparency serves or should serve fundamental democratic values, *then* one would seem to be committed, at the very least, to explain the way in which these values can be squared with the available empirical evidence. Furthermore, if this explanation doesn't prove to be sufficient, one would need to start thinking about redesigning and transforming practices of transparency in geared toward those fundamental democratic values.

So, let me be perfectly clear that I am *not* interested in arguing against transparency. The central point of this thesis isn't so much to challenge the presumed value of transparency, but to show which other commitments contemporary defenders of transparency need to take on in light of the available empirical evidence (cf. Sauer, forthcoming: 2/fn4). Ultimately, I argue for a new concept of transparency as a way of dealing with these other commitments one needs to incur on the basis of the empirical material. This new concept of transparency I call *relational transparency*.

However, the relative difficulty with the issue of transparency today is that despite there being an abundance of empirical material that continuously shows us the limits at the level of practice, there remains, nevertheless, a consistent investment in the acclaimed positive features of transparency and the values that people take these to be serving. In other words, there is a significant possibility that new concepts of transparency might only be taken into consideration at the level of knowledge, while the practices themselves remain unchanged. This means that a new concept of transparency must be accompanied by an explanation concerning our continuous investment in transparency, despite the empirical evidence pointing to some of the deeply ambivalent and worrisome effects it has in the social world. The problem we confront here, hence, *both* encapsulates the kind of problematic consequences the current dominant conception of transparency seems to have, and the persistent and ubiquitous normative influence this conception keeps exerting on the level of our practices. In other words, the problem here is not so much that we don't know what is wrong with transparency or that we are unaware of its limits, but rather, that there seems to be something keeping this knowledge from translating into the appropriate transformations on the level of practice.

The significance of this thesis, then, is twofold: on the one hand it seeks to propose a conceptualization of transparency that would be an appropriate response to some of the rightful criticisms it has been receiving. On the other hand, however, I also seek to explain philosophically some of the mechanisms that inhibit the ways in which new concepts, new information, or new knowledge, can have real or practical effect. We need to take seriously the recurrent situation in which actors that are part of particular practices keep on acting *as if* something was the case, in the face of knowledge that points to the contrary. Any ‘new’ or ‘better’ concept of transparency needs to reflect on why/what it is that inhibits the translation of relevant knowledge into practical understanding, if we don’t want these conceptualizations to remain irrelevant and obsolete for the possibility of real change in the world.

So, before we can arrive at a new concept, other necessary steps must be taken. Firstly, I will outline the predominant conception of transparency today, which I will call ‘transparency-as-information’, and show which values it takes itself to be serving. I argue that this conception of transparency relies on a model of communication that tends to treat the act of disclosure in an overly static way. It conceives of both reality and the actors as existing independently of and prior to the act of disclosure.

Secondly, I will present some of the relevant empirical evidence that convincingly shows transparency to be ‘not working’ in the sense its practitioners expect it to work, and show how these practical contradictions in the social world lead to a distortion of the values transparency-as-information takes itself to be serving. I show how despite this seemingly contrary knowledge, participants within practices of transparency, nevertheless, keep on acting *as if* transparency-as-information was really serving these values. It is not, hence, that participants don’t know about the limits of transparency, but rather that the practices in which they are engaged are not in accordance with this knowledge, and seem to refrain from becoming so.

In a third step, I will argue that we need a distinctive form of critique that takes this peculiarity of transparency-as-information into account. I will propose an explanation for why it is that, in the face of the previously presented empirical evidence, transparency nevertheless sustains its popularity as an organizing principle in political culture. I will develop a form of immanent *Ideologiekritik* that points us to the ways in which deeply entrenched beliefs cause a distortion of our second-order level of reflections, leading the participants to render their practices more successful than they actually are. Transparency is not only threatened by those who oppose it, but also, and perhaps primarily so, because of the

widespread and deeply entrenched enthusiasm about the expectations and perceived success of it.

Ultimately, then, I advocate the need for ‘a relational turn’ in practices of transparency and show how the concept of ‘relational transparency’ can account for *both* the limits documented by the empirical evidence, and the distortions of our second-order reflections. In other words, relational transparency helps us to understand what it is in transparency-as-information that leads to the problematic distortions in the social world, and why it is that nevertheless its principles keep exerting a normative hold on our practices. I argue that relational transparency turns our attention to the ways in which the disclosure of information always already presupposes all sorts of relational and social processes, and that we need to take these into account if we want transparency to be serving the kind of values which we (wrongfully) claimed it had been serving all along.

In other words, in dealing with the issue of transparency today, it seems that one is confronted with two issues. On the one hand, there is a sort of obviousness or naturalness attached to transparency’s solution to all kinds of social ills. On the other hand, however, as a matter of empirical fact, this solution is not as straightforward as it seems, and engenders all sorts of practical contradictions in the social world. Therefore, by documenting the links that connect (a) the strictly informational conception of transparency (sec. 1), (b) the practical contradictions in social reality to which it gives rise (sec. 2), and (c) the disavowal of possible pernicious and unwanted social outcomes through a socially patterned second-order disorder (sec. 3), I seek to shift the rational weight of judgments towards a serious and continued consideration of the themes and traditions that constitute a form of thinking that is relational (sec.4).

I. Transparency-as-Information

In light of corporate scandals, such as Volkswagen’s manipulation of emissions tests, as well as the events surrounding whistleblower Edward Snowden and WikiLeaks, or investigations into Donald Trump’s relationship to Russia’s aristocracy, critical stakeholders and citizens alike increasingly demand openness in corporate and governmental affairs.¹ It seems that transparency’s attraction is partly due to its perceived force to “fundamentally disrupt the old balance of power politics” (Sifry, 2011: 167). By allowing citizens to keep the administrative system and politicians accountable for their actions or lack thereof, transparency contributes to avoiding or limiting the abuse of power by governments and helps to ensure that citizens and businesses are treated equally.

What is typical for the current investment in transparency as a “societal multivitamin” (Scholtes, 2012: 7), is that transparency projects are predominantly understood in terms of information sharing and are dependent on increased disclosure of information. It is not so much, then, openness, insight or clarity, per se, that automatically makes organizations more accountable to relevant stakeholders or a key to better governance (Henriques, 2007), but rather, it is the practice of information generation and provision (Florini, 2007) that allows for doing so.

We could call this perspective ‘transparency-as-information’, and in this of the chapter I outline the ways in which this perspective structures the *conceptualization* of transparency and the *conditions* that make transparency possible and the perceived *effects* it engenders (Albu & Flyverbom, 2016: 5). This means that in the next subsection I explicate further in what transparency-as-information precisely consists by (1) showing how it gets conceptualized and defined in the literature, and (2) by showing what are its conditions, i.e. when is something considered to ‘be transparent’? Then, in subsection 1.2, I will (3) show what its perceived effects are for contemporary democracies, i.e. what perceived positive outcomes does transparency give us?

1.1 An informational perspective: definitions and conditions

Transparency is often metaphorically captured as providing light that allows us to see. As one of the founders of public-interest law Louis Brandeis (1913) has put it a century ago: “[s]unshine is said to be the best disinfectant, electric light the best policeman” (cited in Fox, 2007: 664). Transparency-as-information enables observability, delivering “clarity” and

¹ See Scholtes (2012: 6), who documents more than a tripling in the use of the word ‘transparency’ in Dutch newspapers and magazines over the past ten years.

“insight” in order for us to “see through” organizations or governmental bodies (Henriques, 2007: 54). This leads Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2014: 1) to define transparency as “a salve for the many maladies that accompany distressed relationships between an organization and its stakeholders”, and the non-governmental organization ‘Transparency International’ to stress that “transparency is associated with visibility, predictability and understandability” (Gray & Kang, 2014: 459).

Studies that investigate projects of transparency relying on this informational perspective (e.g. Eijfinger & Geraats, 2006), typically measure “transparency as [the] frequency of information disclosure” (Berglund, 2014: 360), leading them to conclude that “transparency will thus require full disclosure of all relevant information in a timely manner” (Ibid.: 362). What is needed for something to be considered transparent is an open sharing of all information (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2014: 9). So, Williams defines ‘being transparent’ as “the extent to which the organization provides relevant, timely, and reliable information, in written and verbal form, to investors, regulators, and market intermediaries (2005: 361). And Rawlins, along similar lines, describes transparency as a deliberate attempt to make available “all legally releasable information – whether positive or negative in nature – in a manner that is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal, for the purpose of enhancing the reasoning ability of publics and holding organizations accountable for their actions, policies and practices” (2009: 75).

Transparency sometimes functions as a normative concept, a set of idealized standards with which the behavior of public actors can be evaluated (cf. Bovens, 2010: 949). What remains relatively obscured in this emphasis, however, is to whom the actor actually should be transparent (Meijer, 2014: 511). This is why other characterizations of transparency define it in relational terms, between an actor and a forum (cf. Bovens, 2010: 948). Transparency is here seen as an institutional relation or arrangement in which an actor is rendered transparent to another actor (Meijer, 2014: 511). Here what occupies a central place in the analysis is not the behavior of the agent per se, but the way in which institutional arrangements operate. So, Moser defines being transparent as “to open up the working procedures not immediately visible to those not directly involved, in order to demonstrate the good working of an institution” (2001: 3). This means that the focus is not so much on whether an individual has acted transparently, but rather, on whether there is the possibility to make available the information *ex post facto* (Bovens, 2010: 951). This type of definition builds upon the principal-agent theory in which a principal requires information about the agent to check whether the agent sticks to the contract (Prat, 2006: 92).

The principal-agent model is a dominant way in which the perspective of transparency-as-information has been framed. In this model the agent acts on behalf of the principal via delegation of power. There is a principal (let's say the citizen) who requires a certain service (legislation) but does not have the time or ability to take care of it directly. Therefore, the citizen enters into a contractual relation with an agent (say a government) who can potentially provide the service (Prat, 2006). In this case, the possibility of an informational asymmetry between the agent and principal can become problematic if the agent abuses this position to keep forces hidden that may leave the principal to be worse off, such as not informing him/her about the possible downsides of some legislation that will only become apparent later. Transparency is the instrument that the principal can use in order to correct for the information asymmetry between the agent and the principal that might lead the agent to promote its own interests and pursue its own goals (Hansen et al. 2015: 123). It is clear why this model is often mentioned in connection to transparency-as-information as it equates information with transparency. It assumes that the right amount of information ensures rational action on the part of the agent, and clear sight on the part of the principal.

Theorizations of transparency as a matter of information disclosure assume that successful transmission occurs when the information is proportional to the audience's needs, taking into account problems such as information overload or "data asphyxia" (Vaccaro & Madsen, 2009: 121) that effectively delimit transparency as "a flow of information available to those outside" (Bushman et al., 2004: 207). In that sense, the proportionality of information should always be measured against "the extent to which that information enables citizens to protect their vital interests" (Fung, 2013: 102), so that the flow of information remains "a matter of public concern" (Cotterell, 1999: 414) with stakeholders or citizens identifying the relevant areas or content for disclosure and evaluating whether this information actually meets the informational needs (Albu & Flyverbom, 2016: 7). In other words, according to the perspective of transparency-as-information, something can be called transparent if the appropriate information is available, or if it can be made available to the relevant stakeholders. Importantly, this perspective takes a *cognitive* approach to information, assuming that information is transmitted successfully if the *information processing* requirements of sender and receiver are taken into account (Rasmussen, 1991).²

² As I will argue in the subsequent chapters two and four, one might contend that successful transmission does not only depend on whether people can readily understand the information, but also on whether they have the skills, abilities or capacities to act in accordance with it. I am getting ahead of myself here, but ultimately it will turn out that whereas transparency-as-information does indeed contend that information needs to be proportional to audience's needs, they refrain from conceptualizing the kind of non-cognitive conditions that should be part

Transparency concerns, hence, are commonly driven by a chain of logic which holds that observation produces insights which create the knowledge required to govern and hold systems accountable. Observing can be viewed as ‘diagnostic for ethical action’ (Turilli & Floridi, 2009), in the sense that observers with access to those facts that allow insight by describing the system, are inevitably better positioned to judge whether this system is working as supposed to, and if not, what would be the best way to ameliorate its problems. So, for instance, gaining insight into the voting behavior of parliamentary parties concerning proposed policy bills brings us into a better position to make an informed choice about whether a particular party still deserves our vote. But also, knowledge of the very fact that voting behavior is being made available necessitates a more reflexive and rigorous engagement on the part of the political party itself, a kind of self-disciplining to keep one’s (voting) behavior in line with one’s promises and ideals. The more that is known about a system’s inner-working the more legitimately it can be governed and held accountable.

Transparency, hence, is closely related to accountability, a notion that suggests the ability to account for and possibly accept responsibility for one’s policies, decisions and actions. With a corporate or governmental body committed to transparency, it can be held to account and possibly responsible for whatever follows from our scrutiny, which, in turn, may lead to improvement. To the extent that transparency conditions the possibility of accountable and responsible governmental or organizational bodies, we may view it as ultimately also intrinsically connected and contributing to forms of good or improved governance.

1.2 Transparency as fundamental to a well-functioning democracy

Now that we have explicated the way in which transparency-as-information usually gets defined, and how ‘being transparent’ gets circumscribed, I want to turn to a third element of transparency-as-information: its perceived outcomes, i.e. what does it get you (cf. Anderson, 2014: 358)? I will consider one of the perceived outcomes of transparency as information with respect to contemporary democracies, and show why transparency is seen as fundamental to them.

So, we can see transparency as an essential and indispensable balance and control mechanism for creating well-functioning democratic societies. As Curtin (1998: 107) notes:

Information and the availability or accessibility of information is and remains the currency of democracy. Without an adequate flow of information even *ex post facto* accountability of the

of this proportionality, and as such, miss out on the role institutional and governmental bodies should play in providing all sorts of material and structural assistive mechanisms.

governors to the people is meaningless. It is regarded as essential to the democratic process that individuals are able to understand the decision-making process and the means by which the decision-makers have reached their conclusions in order to effectively evaluate government policies and actions and to be able to choose their representatives intelligently. An equally important objective of openness in democratic government is to enhance public confidence in the government.

Transparency should ensure that actions or decisions of governments can be monitored, which seems all the more pressing in the digital era where states can monitor their citizens more easily and extensively than before. ‘Watching the watchers’ (Brin, 1998), is a crucial precondition for ensuring truly democratic practices and empowers citizens to hold governments accountable.

According to Robert Dahl (2000: 85) it is essential that modern large scale democracies develop a wide range of institutional arrangements that can satisfy important democratic criteria, such as effective participation, inclusion, control of agenda-setting, equality, and enlightened understanding. Transparency has emerged as an important concept capable of rendering politics more democratic, not the least because “classical and contemporary theories of democracy are posited on the belief that secrecy menaces democracy, follows philosophy of a totalitarian state” (Curtin, 1998: 107). By opening up the legislative and executive procedures and by making these channels comprehensive, transparency is quintessential for satisfying democratic criteria and contributes to its legitimacy. When there are vast differences in power, and hence, the possibility of abuse, giving citizens the means to participate in governance and hold leaders accountable is essential for correcting such differences and the danger that may follow from them.³ In other words, precisely because there is the prospect of corruption of power, leadership should be observed and scrutinized since this is “essentially about preventing abuses by those we have chosen to govern us” (Verhoeven, 2000: 2). Citizens must be put in the position so that they can readily understand *what* their government is doing and *why*, “because [if] they do not understand their government, [they] cannot readily hold their leaders accountable, particularly at elections” (Dahl, 2000: 126).

Besides correcting the corrupting character of power, transparency is also important for the promotion of a vivid civil society, where “information should be open and accessible (...) to enable political participation by citizens” (Curtin, 1998: 110). Any democracy “worthy of its name” should be premised on mechanisms that oblige political elites to “create

³ So, in that sense, the above-mentioned principal-agent model also functions as a foundational element in narratives of democratic participation and accountability.

channels for the people enabling them to participate in the work of the government” (Larsson 1998: 41). Transparency, hence, makes possible the dissociation of the idea of policy-making behind closed doors, by extending forms of parliamentary control to “a wide range of mechanisms enabling participation of citizens in the policy process by means of an effective access to the process and voice within it” (Verhoeven, 2000: 5).

In other words, the importance of transparency lies precisely in its being a foundational element for democratic participation. If we would start from the premise that ignorance of citizens concerning state action *impedes* their ability to rationally participate in the democratic process, then the disclosure of information might *enable* citizens to participate collectively in deliberative and reasoned action. Visibility of state action, hence, enhances democratic practice. This narrative of transparency-meets-rationalization-meets-democratization makes the disclosure of information a necessary condition, since this will contribute to the capacities of citizens to act collectively as a polis, and therewith makes possible to call the state to account, possibly holding it responsible for its actions. Transparency, thus, is an important condition for ensuring that the state is truly representative of public’s beliefs, preferences and interests (Fenster, 2015: 151). The state that is made visible proves to be more truly democratic as well as more accountable and efficient. Transparency is perceived to “enable – and, indeed, *force* – this virtuous chain of events” (Ibid.; original emphasis).

In any case, transparency-as-information can be seen as serving values that are essential to a well-functioning democratic society. It seeks to strengthen the autonomy of citizens and stakeholders by increasing their capacity to make informed decisions. To the extent that there exists a considerable power difference within the principal-agent relation, transparency-as-information is necessary to correct for the possible distortions and corrupting effects to which such asymmetry gives a chance.

So, it seems not right (and perhaps even dangerous) to deny the necessity and essentiality of the values transparency-as-information sees itself to be serving for those committed to a well-functioning democracy. However, in the remaining chapter, I will try to show that it remains questionable whether this specific model or conceptualization of transparency is particularly well suited to do so.

1.3 A static model of communication

What becomes apparent from this short exposition dealing with those views that treat transparency from a predominantly informational perspective is their static and preconceived

view of the elements that are involved in the *act* of disclosure. Firstly, it draws upon the idea of an unmediated, authentic reality that independently pre-exists the representations produced by the mechanisms of transparency-as-information. In that sense, the desire for *more* transparency entails “a rejection of established representations”, in order to move “outside representation understood as bias and distortion”, so that observers may “uncover the true essence” (Ananny & Crawford, 2016: 974-975).⁴ In other words, transparency-as-information assumes that the information or message being disclosed was always already there, waiting to be discovered.

Secondly, the actors involved exist independently of and prior to the information that is being disclosed. That is, the communication model that is underlying any act of disclosure is here treated as separate from the communicative actions that constitute such a model. From this perspective, any perceived lack of transparency-as-information is always due to external factors and can never be attributed to the communication model itself, meaning that the solution to democratic deficits, such as a perceived lack of trustworthiness, always involves more information.

These two aspects of the model of communication on which transparency-as-information relies, betrays the fact this model is emphasizing the importance of the *availability* or *existence* of information, instead of focusing on the ways in which something is *being made available* or *comes into existence*. In the second chapter, I will show how transparency-as-information engenders problems and practical contradictions in the social world, and these two points will prove to be essential for understanding them – so, I will return to them there.

Granted, one may imagine cases where the disclosure of information would undeniably and sufficiently be serving the values transparency-as-information sees itself to be serving, such as when there is an obvious withholding of information that serves to strengthen the position of the agent and inhibits the principal’s capacity to make an informed and autonomous decision about whether to prolong the contractual relation between the two. One needs only to think of the deliberate efforts of the tobacco industry to hide the evidence of negative health effects of smoking to see a case in point.

⁴ This desire can be found already in the Enlightenment with its epistemological emphasis on the unveiling of a truth or essence lying behind what was being observed in the natural world. Lorraine Daston has described this as the attempt to escape the idiosyncrasies of perspective, as a “transcendence of individual viewpoints in deliberation and action [that] seemed a precondition for just and harmonious society” (1992: 607). To see through essentially involves gaining insight into what lies beyond appearance, without thereby causing any changes in what is being made visible.

However, it might also be the case that transparency-as-information becomes unjustifiably extrapolated to contexts that are more complex and ambiguous, in which the static view of actors and reality involved becomes increasingly problematic, up to the point that a continued adherence to model can be useless or even harmful to the values that the model says to be serving.

In the next section, I present an empirically informed account that critically interrogates the static communication model on which transparency-as-information relies, and show how a continued investment in transparency-as-information might distort a meaningful approximation of the values on the basis of which this model is justifying its importance.

II. Transparency-as-Social Process

As we have seen in the previous chapter, transparency is usually treated as a powerful means towards holding public administrators accountable or reducing the possibility of fraud and corruption. A common denominator in most of these writings is that they exemplify a belief in information as the *sine qua non* of transparency (Williams, 2005; Rawlins, 2008). In this literature, transparency is understood as a matter of simply disclosing information about products or practices in order to enhance decision-making and accountability (Schnackenberg and Tomlinson, 2014).

However, instead of treating transparency as a regulatory norm or as a means towards an already indicated end, one may also view it as a form of governance itself. Arguments like this one have been made by Fung et al. (2007) in developing what they call the need for “targeted transparency”, by Majone (1997) who shows the ways in which we are “regulated by information”, and by Florini (2003) who talks about “regulation by revelation”. They highlight the ways in which practices of transparency have more elaborate effects than mere verification of what is going on behind the scene, and as such, these studies point to the generative nature of transparency projects to shape and modify organizations and persons they seek to render visible (Albu, 2014). In other words, these authors point to the ways in which practices of transparency don’t ‘just’ disclose information, but how they rather *manage* visibilities (Flyverbom, 2016) against an inevitable background of invisibility.

In that sense, they actively question whether transparency-as-information indeed provides access to an already independent reality existing beyond appearance, and whether the disclosure of information not only empowers citizens by enabling them to make informed decisions, but also constitutes them as information-seeking subjects, and thus limiting their field of possible actions simultaneously. We could call this perspective ‘transparency-as-social process’.

2.1 The social world of disclosure: An empirical account

Before I turn to those accounts that show how the disclosure of information concretely plays out, I want to mention that it has also been noted that, besides being empirically flawed, there is a conceptual impossibility of ‘full transparency’. As C.S. Lewis has put it in *The Abolition of Man* (1943/2001: 81)

You cannot go on ‘seeing through’ things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? If you see through

everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To 'see through' all things is the same as not to see.

In other words, 'the invisible' functions as a constitutive element of transparency, whereas, simultaneously, transparency defines itself as a reaction against the threat or suspicion of invisibility. The possibility of transparency capitalizes on the existence of something that is invisible, of something that is yet to be disclosed. As Birchall (2011: 8) notes, transparency is not a thing in itself, since, in a sense, it's nothing at all, but merely the absence of concealment, meaning that instead of treating these two terms as inimical to each other, we should view them as symbiotic (Ibid.: 12).⁵

But, as said, the imperative to conceive of transparency differently is largely stirred by empirical investigations into how transparency-as-information concretely plays out. For instance, in a very insightful article, Leopold Ringel (2018) takes as his case a study on parliamentary representatives of the 'Pirate Party' in Germany, a political party that tries to be as transparent as possible and vows to live up to this ambition when elected. This party is committed to full transparency as a right for every member to express their opinions publicly without any restriction, and as a moral obligation for party officials to document decision-making processes as well as all discussions in councils or committees (Ibid.: 7). However, as he notes, such authentic self-disclosure "became performative in unexpected ways in that it triggered sensationalization by mass media, exclusion and exploitation by political rivals and alienation from the party base", with the result being the "introduction of boundaries of visibility between the organizational front- and backstage" (Ibid.: 8). In other words, "practices of secrecy are part and parcel of the process of manufacturing an idealized public presentation of the organization" (Ibid.: 16). The disclosure of information, hence, does not necessarily reduce opacity as such, or increases insight in any case, but can also trigger the emergence of other forms of secrecy; in this case, the disclosure of information doesn't grant access to a reality behind appearance, but rearranges this reality of organizations in unexpected ways.

Other empirical studies confirm these findings, all pointing to the complex ways in which an investment in transparency not only provides insight into an independent and pre-

⁵ The precarity of this symbiosis is aptly noted by Eva Horn (2011: 110) when she writes that we must take into account how this complementarity or symbiosis both constitutes an element of consolidation/stability and a threat to the democratic state: "[o]n the one hand, the state secret acts as a constituent element of power, but, on the other hand, it fuels its excess, (...) the turn into violence, corruption and chaos". In other words, an understanding of the contemporary defense of transparency must take into account this 'logic of secrecy', as something that both consolidates democracy as a tool of security, and threatens to undermine it by making possible transgressions of the rule of law.

existing reality, but actually re-arranges and transforms this reality in the very act of information disclosure itself.⁶ Alasdair Roberts (2006), for instance, shows that public servants develop an oral culture in response to the implementation of the freedom of information laws in Canada, therewith constituting new regimes of secrecy. That these rearrangements not only involve new regimes of secrecy but can also be detrimental to the functioning of organizations or governmental bodies is noted by Mark Bovens when he points to the possibility of squeezing entrepreneurship and creativity out of public administrators or managers (2010: 956), or how it may transform organizations into rule-obsessed bureaucracies that place too much emphasis on administrative integrity and corruption control, therewith hampering reflexivity and effectiveness (Ibid.: 958).⁷

Many of the problems with which transparency-as-information sees itself confronted in the social world are tied to the underlying model of communication I shortly touched upon at the end of the previous section. This model brings with it its own kind of historically contingent normative standards. I here propose a threefold classificatory scheme to analytically capture the *consequences* of transparency-as-information in the social world.⁸

The practical contradictions⁹ that emerge in the social world are connected to three aspects that are characteristic of the underlying communication model of transparency-as-information. As we have seen, when transparency-as-information becomes embedded in the social world it tends to generate practical contradictions that are not accounted for in the model outlined in chapter one. Instead of leading to unmediated access to a reality behind appearance, in many cases efforts to enhance transparency by way of information disclosure (a) cause changes in what it seeks to make visible, instead of merely transmitting or mirroring pre-established realities; (b) are taken up by subjects that are involved in politically motivated

⁶ These studies point a diverse range of unintended consequences, which the materialization of transparency-as-information into practice seems to engender. Examples include over-bureaucratization (Anechiarico & Jacobs, 1996), a decrease in efficiency (Bernstein, 2012), increase in practices of ‘ticking boxes’ (McGivern & Ferlie, 2007), working at a cynical distance (Fleming & Spicer, 2003), and selective reporting (Neyland, 2007).

⁷ So in this case, transparency-as-information is not only criticized for falsely claiming to render a pre-existing and independent reality accessible, as the cited studies in footnote 3 do, but these empirical studies actually claim that a continued adherence to its principles is harmful to the organizations involved. So, for instance, instead of creating more trust, transparency actually undermines it (Tsoukas, 1997), with more recent research documenting the effect to be still very limited (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012); since a complete visibility is a fantasy that will never prove to be completely possible it encourages deception (O’Neill, 2006); it contributes to mechanisms of blame avoidance (Hood, 2007); it transforms any organizational goal into the management of transparent performance indicators (Power, 2004); and it leads to an emphasis on getting the procedure right at the expense of substantive outcomes (Gupta, 2008)

⁸ I will return to these consequences in chapter four where I propose a new conception of transparency that I defend as working better with respect to the analytical categories I develop here.

⁹ ‘Practical’ here denotes that these contradictions are not unthinkable, i.e. they are not logical contradictions. Rather, they lead to *crises*, to experiences of deficiency or failing (cf. Jaeggi, 2009: 76).

interpretations and enactments of transparency, instead of treating sender, message, and receiver as separate entities, and (c) involve active choices about mediation and translation which produces particular configurations of visibilities and decisions about what should (not) be seen, instead of seeing good disclosure as merely an issue of optimal transmission. In other words, many of the problems that are documented by the empirically informed studies cited above are due to a model of communication that treats information disclosure in a (a) *decontextualized*, (b) *desocialized*, and (c) *depoliticized* way. I'll take each of them in turn.

2.2 Problems with the informational model of communication

What I have been trying to show up to this point is that part of why the current investment in transparency is prone to simplistic abstractions and is conceiving of reality and the actors involved in a somewhat overly static way, is the implicit communication model that is underlying the conceptualization of transparency as the disclosure of information. This model of communication views disclosure cybernetically, meaning that it fosters “the transmission of information from state to public, and assumes that transmission will banish public ignorance, magically transform public discourse and allow the true public to appear and triumph” (Fenster, 2015: 152). This particular act is often treated in terms of a classic linear model of communication reminiscent of the ‘Shannon and Weaver model’ (Shannon & Weaver, 1949/1963; cf. Shannon, 2001). This model sought to enable the evaluation of a communication technology’s ability to transmit information *efficiently* and *effectively*. In other words, by recasting communication as a problem not of meaning but “of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point” (Shannon & Weaver, 1949/1963: 31), they explicitly disavowed the semiotic process, making the transmission of information into an engineering problem.

Now, to the extent that the contemporary investment in transparency is predicated upon an idea that views government information as the key element of a nascent communication process that bureaucrats are likely to block, transparency becomes a solution to what is here foremost treated as a technical-legal problem of moving information from the state to the public. In other words, the communication model that underlies most positive conceptions of transparency, effectively displaces the political nature of the communicative act involved, and essentially views ‘disclosure’ as a technocratic and functional issue in which a neutral engineering solution comes to occupy the place between state and subject. In this case, the idea that transparency-as-information is quintessential to democracy and serves to maintain a well-functioning public sphere is premised on one specific and presumably

disputable understanding of what democracy is or what a well-functioning public sphere should involve.

This usual narrative of transparency-meets-rationalization-meets-democratization assumes the essential existence and materiality of two separate phenomena – that of a state and government information and that of a public – and therewith presumes a communicative act. It thus seems to be crucial when analyzing practices of transparency to acknowledge that ‘insight’ is *communicated* rather than ‘just’ being *made available*. Any effort that pre-empts or intercepts the essential communicability of transparency, foregoes the possibility of analyzing who is actually producing the visible, through or by what means, and seen by what (imagined) receiver. In other words, the message or the secret *produces* rather than *reveals* whatever relationship is being established between the sender-mediator-receiver. This implies that sender, mediator, or receiver are *not* fixed entities passively sending/transmitting/receiving, but rather are always already implicated in the communicative act. Different practices of transparency will constitute different entities of communication – an acknowledgment that points us to the quintessential *social* nature of any effort that stresses the value of transparency as the hallmark of good governance.

An empirically informed conception of transparency, hence, must take into account these practices of “selecting, displaying, posing, framing, hiding, and distorting, as well as observing, checking, (self)-controlling and monitoring” (Christensen & Cheney, 2015: 85) that go into the concrete and material instantiation of information disclosure. To the extent that transparency-as-information does not engage with these more ambiguous and complex consequences, its mechanisms will inevitably be tainted by simplistic abstractions and decontextualisations from the complexity of the world and the local knowledges embedded therein (Strathern, 2000). The possibility of detrimental effects and a corruption of the values the mechanisms of transparency-as-information purportedly serves, only increases with such unreflective abstractions and disavowal of these local knowledges.

Furthermore, the transformation of politics into a largely technocratic endeavor and the depoliticization of antagonistic conflicts (Mouffe, 2005) rearticulate the suppression of such conflicts using other registers and shifts roles and responsibilities in subtle yet significant ways. Most notably in the context of practices of transparency, it rearticulates the inherently conflictual nature of information disclosure as a technical issue of ‘transmission optimization’, and shifts the collective and structural problem of institutional corruption and quality towards the individual’s capabilities of both interpreting the disclosed information

correctly, and its capacities to subsequently hold these institutions accountable on the basis of that information.

It is this implicit societal view of “post-political forms of governance” (Garsten and Jacobson, 2013) that is tying into the arguments that take information disclosure to be a hallmark of good governance. In this sense, transparency projects are co-extensive with a more general emergence of ‘procedural’ forms of government. This ‘procedural turn’, which places transparency as a key government mechanism leads to an ever-increasing focus on getting the process right which often becomes a distraction “diverting time and resources from substantive outcomes that could be the focus of governance instead” (Gupta, 2008: 4). As such, what remains relatively obscured is the fact that transparency revolves around the production and management of visibilities, and that these efforts are *also* important features of power and governance. Indeed, “[t]here is *more* to transparency than information provision for the purposes of accountability” (Flyverbom, 2015: 181; own emphasis). As Otter (2008: 1) points out: “*Who* can see *what*, *whom*, *when*, *where*, and *how* (...) remains an integral dimension of the everyday operation and experience of power”. And as Brighenti reminds us (2010: 148), “the management of visibilities lies at the core of all forms of social control, whether formal or informal. More precisely (...) control consists of a purposeful and contextual assymetrisation and hierarchisation of visibilities”. In that sense, transparency’s positive features must be accompanied by a critical reflection on the ways in which the production of the visible is co-constituted by particular hierarchies and (a)symmetries of seeing and knowing.

To summarize the above-mentioned points, practices of transparency are *political*, precisely because in most cases they don’t ‘just’ disclose information, but rather manage (in)visibility. As such, to practice transparency entails decisions which form such practices must take, and the way in which these decisions concretely play out (i.e. their relative success) depends importantly on the *context* in which they become embedded. To the extent that these contexts continuously inform the actions of particular subjects, information disclosure in many respects *precedes* the possible subject positions in a given field or environment, making it a force that is constitutive of the *social* domain. It is here, then, that ‘critical transparency studies’ (e.g. Birchall, 2015; Garsten & de Montoya, 2008; Tsoukas, 1997) make their contribution: instead of treating the disclosure of information as co-extensive with the constitution of democratic citizens and rational deliberators, they urge us to analyze and theorize the ways in which this very specific mode of disclosure is itself complicit with forms of social control and domination.

2.3 How to proceed?

Of course, this leaves us with the question of how to precisely conceptualize these forms of social control or domination? Is transparency-as-information an ideological illusion that instils a false consciousness into citizens and policy-makers alike, with only a small elite benefiting from its effects?

So, for instance, in response to former US President Barack Obama's investment in transparency as the establishment of a web interface – data.gov – and the release of a directive to ensure government agencies would publish datasets and information on it, Birchall (2015) argues that such data-driven transparency is the epitome of an “info-capitalist-democracy”, in which data subjects are constituted through being called upon as ‘auditor’, ‘entrepreneur’, and ‘consumer’. According to her, such data-driven transparency fosters the monitoring of granular transactions of the state in name of accountability (auditor), makes profitable the data through apps and visualizations (entrepreneur), and creates a market for such apps and visualizations (consumer) (Ibid.: 186). In other words, transparency is here “instrumental in modifying the democratic contract and producing subjects invested in the continuance of that modified contract” (Ibid.: 189). In creating a “data public” – an imagined public able “to analyze and do things with data” (Ruppert, 2015: 135), data driven transparency “changes the rules of the game *and* the players’ engagement and expectations” (Birchall, 2015: 190). It is not, then, that transparency only *supports* market forms of exchange, as Garsten and de Montoya (2008) remind us, but rather that the rationality of the market *determines* the dominant articulation of openness in political life (Birchall, 2015: 191; my emphasis). Here, transparency is treated as a smokescreen that *intentionally* aims to occlude from view the mechanisms that perpetuate social inequality and stabilize the power of the status quo. A critique of transparency helps us to unpack how transparency works as a form of disciplinary control and governmental rationality (e.g. Flyverbom, 2015; Brighenti, 2007; Dean, 2001).

There are two problems, however, concerning these kinds of critiques, with one being of a more conceptual nature, and the other based on empirical considerations. To begin with the conceptual point, ‘exposing’ transparency as ‘actually’ being a tool sustaining the current governmental order and its neoliberal regime, implicitly endorses ‘disclosure’ as constitutive of ‘seeing things as they actually are’. By doing so, it renders obsolete a critique or conceptualization of this particular logic of disclosure itself, as it merely leads us to consider preferring *this* disclosure over *that one*. Instead of arguing for which one is the right kind of disclosure, I perceive a more promising task to be a conceptualization of transparency

without any residual reliance on exposure to guarantee the object of critique (cf. Hesse, 2007: 643, 645). The task then, is to not let ourselves being blackmailed into being ‘for’ or ‘against’ transparency (cf. Foucault, 1984: 45), and to refuse everything that presents itself in the form of a radical alternative rejection – i.e. you either accept transparency and remain within the tradition of (neo)liberalism and post-political forms of governance, or else you criticize it and imagine yourself as being outside of its hidden principles and dominating features.

Furthermore, there are a couple of interesting organizational ethnographies (J. Roberts, 2009; Strathern, 2000; Power, 2007), which effectively question such a conclusion by suggesting that there exists a strange admixture of belief and disbelief in relation to one’s own and others’ belief when it comes to the idea(1) of transparency (J. Roberts, 2009: 963). These ethnographies point to the seemingly widespread recognition of the negative consequences that arise from transparency-as-information. For instance, Marilyn Strathern (2000: 315) notes on the basis of her study that

[t]o auditor and auditee alike, the language of assessment, in purporting to be a language that makes output transparent, hides many dimensions of the output process; as we have seen, this, too, is standard (self) criticism. The rhetoric of transparency appears to conceal that very process of concealment, yet in so far as ‘everyone knows’ this, it would be hard to say it ‘really’ does so. Realities are knowingly eclipsed.

When talking about the audit cultures in organizations, Power describes this ambivalence in a similar way, when he writes that “practitioner humor, irony, and stories of absurd side effects are replaced at the world-level by earnest idealism, perfectionism and design optimism – often by the very practitioners who would privately side with the critics” (2007: 168).

In other words, what seems to be odd about our embrace of transparency is that many studies repeatedly show that as soon as situations become a little bit more complex it becomes seriously limited as an ideal, but also, that in some sense ‘everyone knows’ about these limits.¹⁰ This means that if we want to explain why people are at some level aware of the limits of transparency, but *nevertheless*, succumb to the normative hold it exerts on them, taking recourse to false consciousness isn’t going to work – after all, it is not that people

¹⁰ One may, for instance, think here about the proliferation of evaluation forms in many contemporary organizations, or the fact that today nearly everything can and must be part of some kind of ranking system. Although indeed rankings and evaluation forms might provide some kind of insights, quite often these insights are also accompanied by a cynical disidentification with the results – i.e. ‘not that it really tells us much – they are just numbers.’ Is this a partial failure of control and a site of possible resistance, or is it rather that such cynicism provides us with a reassurance of our own critical capacities, which, nevertheless, makes our practical conformity with it all the more possible? As John Roberts notes, “cynical disidentification preserves the mental illusion of autonomy, whilst my going along with, my conformity with the terms of transparency, seeks to secure my recognition” (2009: 965).

don't know, it is rather that they keep on acting *as if* they don't know, in the face of seemingly contrary knowledge. That is not to say that transparency-as-information *never* becomes a tool in the hands of the governing elite, consciously used to actually obtain another hidden end, but to the extent that not *all* cases are like that, we need to reflect on what this means for transparency-as-information and the underlying values its model says to be serving.

So, given these empirical cases, instead of treating the contemporary popularity of transparency as the latest incarnation of Capital pulling the strings behind our backs, my interest here is primarily with those cases in which the insistence on transparency persists in the contrary knowledge of its limits and distortions. Forfeiting the promise of gaining any revelatory insight into the essential core of transparency, I here shift the parameters of the question towards what I deem to be a more fruitful and grounded approach: Given transparency's complicity with, or affordance of, different forms of political rationalities, how to proceed accordingly? What would it mean to rehabilitate transparency, not despite of, but precisely *because of its more problematic incarnations*?¹¹

In other words, in what follows, I will try to develop a critique of how certain practices of transparency are functional for the maintenance of relations of domination by focusing on those cases in which *wishful thinking* rather than *intentional deceit* sustains the normative hold these practices exert on the persons or organizations involved. But, before turning to fully fleshing out this kind of critique, I will start with analytically distinguishing what precisely is at stake in these different *forms* of criticism.

¹¹ In that sense transparency is like the ancient Greek word *Pharmakon*, being both remedy and poison (Derrida, 1981: esp. 95-116) – so, to stretch the analogy one step further, we need to analyze the ways in which what at times might have been a remedy is now turned into poison, or, how to reconfigure transparency from poison into remedy (cf. Spivak, 2007: 71; Dhawan, 2013: 217).

III. Rethinking *Ideologiekritik* with/in Transparency

Until now, I have analyzed the conceptual and practical landscape in which issues of transparency are being hotly debated. What becomes increasingly clear is that there is a discrepancy between the values that the model of transparency-as-information sees itself to be serving, and the ambiguous, unexpected and contradictory outcomes it engenders in the social world.

The task, then, is to find a way of engaging the issues that is rigorously sensitive to the practical contradictions emerging in the social world – a sensitivity, however, *not at the cost of* but rather *in light of* the kind of fundamental democratic values transparency-as-information sees itself to be serving. This means that in what follows we need to (1) conceptualize an alternative explanation for the discrepancy between transparency-as-information and transparency-as-social process, and (2) argue why this alternative explanation is normatively significant for our future engagement with issues of transparency. In other words, key for my purposes here is to conceptualize the kind of critique that is necessary to deal with the social ramifications of transparency-as-information, on the basis of which we could then start developing a contextually sensitive strategy that is equipped to sort out some of the problems addressed in chapter two.

Before I begin to formulate an answer to these two tasks, I want to get clear on what precisely is at stake here, and what different perspectives can be discerned. I have analyzed two different ways in which transparency is usually approached. On the one hand, there is the perspective of ‘transparency-as-information’, which takes the disclosure of information as quintessential for good democratic or organizational practice – the more we know, the better our decisions will be. On the other hand, partly stirred by investigations into how transparency concretely plays out, there is the perspective of ‘transparency-as-social process’, which is at pains to show that the former account relies on overly simplistic conceptions of information and communication, obscuring the intricate complexities and ambivalent consequences transparency usually engenders. To my mind, this perspective has effectively showed us the limits of any unreflective belief in transparency-as-information and urges us to take into account the often conflicting and ambivalent ways in which this belief materializes into practice. This approach helps us to get a better grasp on what is actually going on at the level of the social world and forms an invaluable corrective for those who are invested in transparency-as-information as the hallmark of good governance.

Now, as I tried to show at the end of chapter two, usually transparency-as-social process is taken as a critique of transparency-as-information, leading authors to insist on the essentially unworkable nature of transparency, as something inherently flawed, or even deliberately misleading. However, what is often missing in this critical literature is a kind of conceptualization of practical imperatives that – in light of all these complexities and intricate ambivalences – could give us some idea of how to proceed. That is, if it indeed seems to be the case that the informational model produces contradictions in social reality, what does that mean for ‘transparency-as-information’? In what follows, to get a clear grasp of what precisely is at stake in these critiques, and what implications these might have, I will conceptualize possible lines of argument one could develop on the basis of the insights provided by the perspective of ‘transparency-as-social process’. Here, I first give two possible responses to this imperative (3.1), and then argue for a third possibility, which I take to be the most promising one (3.2).

3.1 Two forms of criticism: Revisionism and negation

On the one hand, one might say, the fact that practices of transparency haven’t produced the kind of outcome that its practitioners expected it to have, doesn’t necessarily have to imply that transparency-as-information is *wrong* in itself – call this the *revisionist* approach. One might simply take recourse to contingent features of the environment, historical conditions, or to lacking methods of right implementation. That is, it is one thing to say that empirically it seems to be the case that transparency’s more concrete and material instantiations seem to have often conflicting effects or unexpected consequences; it is yet another thing to conclude that therefore there is something inherently problematic to the concept itself. This kind of critique allows for a continued commitment to transparency-as-information, conceives of the practical imperative in terms of a ‘purging’ of distorting elements, affording the assumption that an uncontaminated transparency-as-information can still be reached or significantly approximated.

However, we could also imagine that one would precisely take issue with such continued investment in transparency-as-information, in light of the available evidence that points to the contrary. They would argue that the reason such investment is problematic is because it presents itself as an empirical fact (i.e. transparency enhances trust), whereas in effect it is simply an idealized normative principle. To the extent that transparency-as-information is going to be part of the social world, and is going to have real effects and consequences in that world, we need an active and continuous engagement with these

historically contingent ramifications. Transparency is always already of a socially interested nature, which means that the way it concretely plays out depends on who/what is socially and practically involved. A purging of distorting elements, as the first perspective suggested, would amount here to a disavowal of the socially interested nature of the concept, which lies at the heart of much of the problems and contradictions that transparency seems to engender in the social world. Hence, they would argue that in holding on to one's commitment or belief in transparency, one's perspective might degenerate into practically useless at best, or outright socially detrimental at worst.

As we've seen at the end of the previous section, one way to explain why there seems to remain an increasing investment in transparency-as-information, despite the practical contradictions and pernicious effects it can have in the social world, is by pointing to some hidden scheme of governmentality that is ordering the political sphere behind our backs. In this sense, one would explain the discrepancy between our belief in and adoption of transparency-as-information, and the counter-intuitive or unexpected effects it seems to have in the actual environment as *intentional*, with someone or some institution knowingly benefitting from it, and for that reason actively tries to keep things this way. Here, the socially interested nature of transparency unequivocally *disqualifies* it as an irrelevant or even pernicious concept. After all, if one would start from the assumption that transparency-as-information is a tool in the hands of the governing elite with which they cloud their own operations, or with which they attempt to gain a false sense of legitimacy, one's predisposition towards transparency is more likely to lead to a radical negation of transparency as such, urging instead for a rehabilitation of 'the secret' as freedom's *sine qua non* (e.g. Frissen, 2016).

However, as I have also argued, the problem with disqualifying transparency on the basis of its socially interested nature is that it (a) still relies on a logic that purportedly exposes what transparency really is or does, and (b) cannot but explain the reason for our investment in transparency as illusory, deceiving, or the result of false consciousness, as an act of subjects that simply do not know. If we want to take seriously the kind of values and normative commitments the model of transparency-as-information sees itself to be serving, without, however, turning a blind eye to the kind of empirically informed criticisms of chapter two, we need a critique that does not unequivocally delegitimize the reasons subjects have to relate to the values of transparency-as-information. In other words, the question here becomes whether we can develop a third way of critical practice that actively engages with the socially interested nature of transparency-as-information and the practical contradictions

it engenders in the social world, without, however, leading us astray into, as Axel Honneth has aptly put it, “a hermeneutics of suspicion that is all too certain of itself” (2007: 346). In the remainder of this chapter, then, I will develop a third way of criticizing transparency-as-information as a contextually sensitive strategy for dealing with the socially interested nature of transparency-as-information, without, however, ending up disqualifying or delegitimizing that which is socially interested about it altogether. In that sense, the guiding question will be how to think about ideology critique *contextually* – that is, as an active engagement with its embeddedness in the different social contexts and practices that make up the social world.¹²

3.2 An alternative: Immanent critique of ideology

Historically, ideology critique has always aimed to show in what particular ways people participate in their own oppression. To put it somewhat overly simplified, the early Frankfurt school conceptualized such participation epistemically, in the sense that, in this view, the reason why social domination is being perpetuated is because (the) people simply didn't know what they were doing. Against this form of ideology critique at the level of knowledge, other accounts, such as Slavoj Žižek's psycho-analytically informed concept of ideology, stress how ideology comes into play at the level of doing. That is, instead of just ‘unmasking the lie’, this form of ideology critique theorizes the way our deepest commitments inextricably bind us to *practices* of domination.

Its focus thus lies with the ways in which certain deeply entrenched beliefs materialize into technologies and institutional structures within which our everyday practices are embedded and that continuously inform our actions. To give a sustained critique of ideology doesn't just simply involve pointing out that someone has been wrong about her/his views, or to point to a contestable genealogy that was unwittingly informing them – rather, such critique should explain and clarify the ways in which this doing persists in the face of seemingly contrary knowledge (Dean, 2001: 626). In other words, it has to explain and critique in what ways our acting ‘as if’ we believe something was the case, *despite evidence to the contrary*, contributes to the perpetuation of systems of social domination.¹³

¹² This alternative critique should be conceived as ‘adding’ to the other two critiques, and *not* as a rejection. I am developing this third alternative on the plausible assumption that the possibility of the discrepancy between transparency-as-information and the practical contradictions in the social world being intended because of the interests of self-serving elites *won't* cover all cases. The critical task here is specifically not about exposing transparency's real nature, but rather about making explicit the ways in which social practices are constituted through beliefs and modes of thinking that inhibit or delimit an awareness on the part of the participants concerning the irrationality of what they are doing – something which I will develop more explicitly and concretely in the remainder of the chapter.

¹³ Note that I am intentionally keeping things on the level of theory here. In the next chapter I will more concretely elaborate on the ways in which our acting ‘as if’ transparency-as-information was the hallmark of

The non-cognitive relation¹⁴ between one's beliefs and the social world reveals the socially interested and contextually limited nature of most cognitive practices. But, an explanation of the persistence of doing in the face of contrary knowledge has to reach further than merely pointing to some defect on the level of first-order content. Ideologies, hence, can also cause "a second-order rationality deficit" (Honneth, 2007: 346), with second-order deficits denoting the "constitutive disconnects between first-order contents and second-order reflexive comprehension of those contents, where those disconnects are pervasive and socially caused" (Zurn, 2011: 345-356). In other words, "conscious reflection breeds ideology, not because it emerges from and continues to serve some practice or social identity, but rather because it tends to distort the reflected practice or identity through the process of sublimation" (Morris, 2016: 21) Sublimation here can be understood akin to Freud's conception of dreams and neurotic symptoms, as distorting some drive, while this distortion nevertheless also expresses or manifests the drive. So, from this perspective we can construe a critique of ideology as a necessary part of the process through which we obtain knowledge of concealed but fundamental realities (Ibid.: 188).

The practical contradictions give rise to social pathologies only to the extent that the current social consensus in particular contexts of the social world is of a significantly socially interested nature shaped by predominant social powers, therewith causing distortion at a second-order level of reflexivity. It is not so much that the first-order content is intrinsically irrational – it is not without reason that people willingly invest in a regulative ability that engenders modes of behavior that suit the social order – but rather, it is the reflexive grasp of the subjects concerning the origins and character of those contents that is distorted (Honneth, 2007: 342). In this way it is our second-order reflections that are in need for an analysis in terms of ideology, because it is here that we tend to generate partially distorted visions of our practices, their aims, and their environments, therewith rendering the practice more successful than it may actually be (Morris, 2016: 22). This leads subjects faced with examples and information directly contradicting their first-order beliefs, to rationalize away these contradictions "as exceptions to the rule or as biased information in order to save the first-order belief from falsification" (Zurn, 2011: 347).

good governance is predisposed to contribute to specific forms of social domination. In that sense, I am not arguing for a specific policy regarding practices of transparency, but only for the form of analysis/critique that allows for a practical transformation of current practices (instead of a radical negation).

¹⁴ Morris explains the non-cognitive relation as another dimension of thought that considers the "associative, causal, and functional relations that connect beliefs and theories with entities in their social, psychological and biological environment", and as such, is concerned with "how a range of epistemically irrelevant factors often shape the transmission and distribution of beliefs" (2016: 33).

It is here that the urgency of a theory that is both social and critical compels us to reclaim the conceptual tools of ideology as part of a more contextually sensitive and pragmatic approach. Without giving up on the task of explicating second-order disorders in order to stimulate the denaturalization of contemporary inequalities that are *socially* caused and thereby opening up possibilities for progressive transformations, we can now, in a more grounded and empirically informed way, target those forms of consciousness that distort or misrepresent the reality of social oppression, instead of “mindlessly dismiss all ideas that favor preserving elements of the prevailing social order” (Shelby, 2003: 181). The discrepancy between transparency-as-information and transparency-as-social process seems to be a fit candidate for ideology critique, for it can make explicit the kind of normatively loaded presuppositions that masquerade as empirical truths and therewith possibly correct for the self-undermining behavior that could count as pathological (Anderson, 2009: 11), insofar as this behavior is characterized by wishful ‘decisions’ not to respond to the practical contradictions in the social world and therewith systematically contributes to the preservation of dubious social structures and practices.¹⁵

This reformulation of ideology critique, then, allows us to explain the discrepancy between ‘transparency-as-information’ and ‘transparency-as-social process’ in a different way. Instead of treating this discrepancy as being the *intentional* result of a scheme of deception distorting our first-order beliefs, our reformulation allows us to conceive of this discrepancy as being the outcome of *wishful* thinking on the part of those who are invested in transparency-as-information – a kind of self-deception that is socially caused by distorting our second-order reflections about transparency-as-information. This means also that not every instance of transparency as the disclosure of information has an ideological character – the criterion of ideological forms of information disclosure here being the extent to which persons are being subjected to social powers that render them unable to understand at the second-order level of reflection that the required social conditions are lacking, leading them to “voluntarily conform their beliefs and behaviors to a set of social patterns that nevertheless materially contribute to their oppression or domination” (Zurn, 2011: 349).

Remember that the other critical approach (radical negation) I have touched upon at the end of section 4.1, also pointed us to the inherently *interested* and *social* nature of contemporary’s investment and belief in transparency. However, an important difference is

¹⁵ So, note that these practical contradictions here become a criterion for both normative considerations about whether something is doing a *good* job in the ethical sense, *and* a criterion in a more functionalist sense, i.e. whether something works. As Jaeggi notes, “the obstacles or crises that are part of these contradictions are problematic in both senses: something does not work (well), and the way it works is not good” (2009: 78).

that this other approach tends towards an overall rejection of the concept, whereas the approach I am developing here does not treat the socially interested nature of the concept as a necessary reason for disqualification. It rather asks in what ways this social interestedness articulates relevant and legitimate normative commitments towards some end or good, albeit in a subliminally distorted register. That is, our current investment in transparency-as-information, despite evidence to the contrary, betrays our normative commitment to particular stakes on which ethical and political debates hinge, in virtue of which we are ‘willing’ to subconsciously represent our practices that evolve towards and in conjunction with those norms more successfully than they actually are. In this way we do not have to throw away the baby with the bathwater – we can both acknowledge the importance of the values transparency sees itself to be serving, while nevertheless remain critical of the ways in which a practical realization of these values remains unfulfilled.

The significance of my analysis is that it allows for a re-orientation of our practices, towards those initial ends that we *wishfully* thought our previous practices were geared towards. It shifts a normative evaluation of transparency-as-information from its consequences, to an attention of what needs to be done to actually ensure that we can meet the presuppositions that went into its design. This involves making explicit the kind of ideological structures that continuously inform practices, and then point to the ways in which these ideologies distort the rationality of our reflections concerning the fact whether we are meaningfully approximating the kind of values we take our model to be serving. If you believe that transparency is quintessential to democratic practice, then this belief incurs a further commitment to the provision of the necessary conditions for the transformation or materialization of this belief into practice.

Here, then, we can keep open the possibility of recuperating the values that the model of transparency-as-information sees itself to be serving (as outlined in chapter one); a recuperation, however, that takes into account the empirically informed criticisms of transparency-as-social process (as outlined in chapter two). This taking into account, then, should be understood as an explication of the normatively laden presuppositions, which, in masquerading as empirical facts, distort the subject’s ability to rationally assess the contradictions involved in its belief in transparency as a solution for all kinds of societal ills (by way of an *Ideologiekritik* as outlined in chapter three). In other words, whereas the perspective of transparency-as-social process shows us the ways in which subscribing to or acting in accord with the first-order contents of our belief in transparency-as-information contributes to the perpetuation of forms of domination, oppression, and contingent forms of

inequality without the overt use of coercive mechanisms, what is needed to overcome these practical contradictions in the social world is a distinctive form of ideology critique, which seeks to break the second-order sense of the “naturalness and obviousness of subjects’ first-order beliefs, assessments, dispositions, behaviors, perceptions and interactions” (Zurn, 2011: 348) – i.e. a way of making explicit the constructed and perspectival character of certain assertions (Jaeggi, 2009: 72).

I take the particular merit of this approach to be that it allows me to critically reflect upon transparency as an organizing concept in contemporary political and organizational culture, without my critique degenerating into either a dismissal of the concept in general, or an attempt to recuperate a core or essence of transparency that is worthy of our adherence despite the existence of perverted instantiations. In both perspectives there is an ultimate truth claim underlying their assessment – a claim that my approach seeks to avoid. In this way the hope is that we can articulate a way of engaging the issues on which the debates actually hinge, instead of claiming to have exposed what transparency *really* is or does.

Having made explicit the ways in which socially caused distortions can inhibit a more critical engagement with the pernicious consequences of transparency-as-information, I now turn to the last section and propose a new conception of transparency that both explains why transparency-as-information leads to the practical contradictions documented in chapter two, and what it is in transparency-as-information that tends to distort our reflexive grasp of the concept.

IV. Relational Transparency

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno provokingly write: “all reification is forgetting” (1944/2002: 191). Axel Honneth sets out to think this predicament from without of his own normative framework of recognition, and develops an understanding of reification as what he calls *Anerkennungsvergessenheit* – a “forgetfulness of recognition” (2008: 56). By this he means to indicate “the process by which we lose the consciousness of the degree to which we owe our knowledge and cognition of other persons to an antecedent stance of empathetic engagement and recognition” (Ibid.). In other words, Honneth puts forward the process of reification as essentially involving a losing sight of the primal nature of recognition that constitutes any fundamental process of intersubjective interaction. It means overlooking the Heideggerian dimension of *Sorge* as constitutive of *Dasein* (i.e. the human relation to the world), or disavowing John Dewey’s contention that qualitative experiences as intimate involvement with the world always precede the possibility of taking an observing stance towards it (Jay, 2008: 8).

Honneth makes clear that ‘forgetting’ should not be understood in the stronger sense of ‘unlearning’. Instead of dispossessing our consciousness whereby recognition vanishes from view, reification causes “a kind of reduced attentiveness (...) which causes the fact of recognition to fall into the background and thus slip out of sight” (2008: 59). In other words, reification causes the goals, which our initial acts of cognition were being geared towards, to become distorted, precisely because in the process of cognizing we lose our attentiveness to the fact that this process depended on a prior act of recognition.

For my purposes here, I will bracket Honneth’s more normatively laden claims concerning recognition and focus on the notion of *Vergessenheit* in the context of contemporary practices of transparency. In particular, I will argue that the implicit communication model underlying transparency-as-information can be understood as a practice that denies or loses sight of the primacy of information disclosure as an inherently *social praxis*. In other words, to my mind, contemporary practices of transparency are also structured by a form of *Vergessenheit*: information disclosure today is constituted precisely through a mode of address that disavows its constitutive sociality (cf. Butler, 2015: 194). Here, then, I will advocate the need for a ‘relational turn’ in contemporary and future practices of transparency – a change of predicament which should bring to view the relational aspects of information disclosure, and the ways in which successful disclosure itself is always bound up with social conditions. Information disclosure, hence, or so I will argue,

presupposes skills and capacities that can (in most cases) only be acquired and exercised *socially*.

This relational turn should reorient our attention from the perceived benefit information has for individual decision-making, towards the intersubjective conditions and institutional constraints which make the disclosure of information im/possible. The reason I think such shift is necessary is because the material presented in section two has effectively showed ‘transparency-as-information’ to be ‘not working’ in many cases according to the standards and values with which it justifies itself. I have argued that if we take seriously the social and ethical issues that are being articulated within practices that call for more transparency, we need a form of critique that allows for the mechanisms of transparency to be redesigned and transformed in light of those normative commitments. The task remaining, hence, is to sketch the beginning of a new conception of transparency, which is better equipped to solve some of the problems and practical contradictions I have outlined in chapter two. In that sense, I will develop an account here, which I will call *relational transparency*, and which can be viewed as the kind of transparency that would allow for the kind of transformation necessary in reorienting our practices towards those goals that we initially thought (or wished) our practices were geared towards.

Key for my purposes in this section thus seems to be an assessment of relational transparency in light of the criticisms and problems sketched in chapter two. If I can make it plausible that this different conception of transparency solves some of these problems, then, *to the extent that we still see ourselves as being committed to the values of transparency-as-information as outlined in chapter one*, there would seem to be a viable ground to consider the desirability of a changed perspective. Before doing so, I will firstly explicate what precisely is ‘social’ about the disclosure of information.

4.1 Conceptualizing ‘the social’: Skills, accessibility, contestability

To understand what I am at getting here, it is helpful to consider Diana Meyers’ notion of “autonomy competencies” (1989). She notes that one of the features of the dominant liberal conception of autonomy has come to be characterized in opposition to socialization because it is premised on the notion of an individual free will. As such, by giving individual decision ontological priority, the integrity of the individual choice becomes secured by way of resisting the inhibiting and invasive influence of social forces on those decisions. In contrast to this liberal view, Meyers proposes a view that can be identified as being both relational and practical, in the sense that in this model autonomy is always constituted through a set of

socially acquired competencies in critical skills of self-knowledge, communication and deliberation (Atkins, 2006: 207). By pointing our attention to the ways in which socialization is not only detrimental to but also constitutive of our autonomy competencies, Meyers makes possible a philosophical analysis of the distinction between social relations that promote autonomy competencies and those that inhibit their development (Meyers, 1989: 29).

In general, then, views that claim to be ‘relational’, claim that the employment of specific cognitive and practical skills are not merely individual capacities or attributes of the individual person, but rather are *intersubjectively* acquired and exercised. In other words, it is most importantly in relations with other people, that we acquire the kind of capacities necessary to adequately cooperate and take part in the social world. This means for our purposes, that if the ability to read and process information consists in competencies that to a considerable degree are socially acquired, it seems that it is a conceptual as well as practical necessity, to critically reflect on the ways in which different forms of socialization may facilitate or obstruct the development of these capacities. Ultimately, then, relational transparency answers the question whether or not an individual can democratically participate or rationally deliberate with reference to the social context in which that person’s beliefs, values, desires, interests, and importantly, identity are formed (cf. Meyers, 1989: 91).

So, by taking the notion of “competency” in Meyers’ sense – as being necessarily constituted through different social relations, while being inhibited by others – I here discern three different levels of sociality that could either inhibit or enable participants that want to engage with the disclosed information. Firstly, to treat transparency ‘relationally’ involves an acknowledgment of the fact that the skills necessary to read information adequately and the capacities to act on this information accordingly, are not something one is born with, and as such, are structurally dependent on the extent to which one has *developed* the competencies to proficiently handle whatever is being disclosed. The ‘fruits’ of transparency, hence, don’t come with the mere fact of being human, but are accorded by meeting the supposed requirements of competencies that are deemed relevant in the practice.

Secondly, besides the development of the right kind of competencies, there is the issue of accessibility to the information that is being disclosed. One might perfectly be able to understand and act upon the information that is being disclosed, but if one doesn’t have access to the processing of this information, then one’s competencies are of little use.

Thirdly, even if one has the right kind of competencies, and access to the sites or fields where the information is being disclosed, there also needs to be a political arena in which different interpretations about what the disclosed information precisely implies can be

disputed, deliberated and possibly resolved. After all, no matter how much information one has access to, if it doesn't allow for disputes concerning who is responsible, who we can call to account, and on the basis of which principles, transparency remains in an important way contributing to a sense of elusiveness.

In other words, the way information is being disclosed is always conditioned by all sorts of social and relational assumptions about what is legitimate to expect of citizens in terms of their skills, who we imagine the addressees of the information to be, and what purpose we think the information should be serving. The 'relational turn' I am advocating here, hence, essentially involves a continuous movement of making explicit all these sorts of normative choices that are being (implicitly) made in the process of information disclosure and the mechanisms that make such disclosure possible.

4.2 Denaturalizing the link between transparency and participation

In this sub-section, to see what difference relational transparency makes, I will (re)turn to the presumed link between transparency-as-information and democratic participation. As we have seen in section 1.2, transparency is seen as fundamental to democratic practice, most notably because it allows for informed participation. To see the relevance of engaging with transparency as a social praxis, I want to consider here the possible social ramifications of transparency-as-information in contexts in which there is strong belief in self-reliance, and how disavowing the constitutive function of this belief with respect to how such information is being disclosed can have serious pernicious implications. If transparency emerges in conjunction with contexts in which the threshold of the relevant skill-set is relatively high, it might cause profound social inequalities by way of violating, for instance, "the principle of participatory parity" (Fraser, 1990: 63-68).

This principle (PPP) lies at the heart of Nancy Fraser's highly sophisticated theory of social justice, according to which any social arrangement must "permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers" (Fraser, 2003: 36). In that sense, PPP requires social arrangements to permit each citizen as a full member of society, with the elimination of systemic inequalities as one of the preconditions for such participation (1990: 65). PPP specifically re-orientes the problem of misrecognition from the psychological harm it inflicts on 'victims' (2003: 30) to the ways in which social structures impede or facilitate the ability of individuals to interact as equals in social life. Hence, Fraser conceives of misrecognition, as "a *status injury* whose locus is social relations, not individual psychology" (1996: 25). In this way, we come to appreciate that "what is really important here is not the demand for

recognition of a group's specific identity, but the demand for recognition of people standing as full partners in social interaction" (Fraser, 2004: 377).

So, the basic idea is that social structures are unjust to the extent that they deny some members of society the opportunity to participate in social life on par with others. This norm of PPP is explicated in terms of two sets of necessary conditions for justice. As Fraser writes:

"[f]or participatory to be possible, I claim, at least two conditions must be satisfied. First, the distribution of material resources must be such as to ensure participants' independence and 'voice' (...). The second condition requires that institutionalized patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem" (2003: 36).

Now, in the context of our purposes here, participatory parity is impeded by structures of transparency that disclose information of which we cannot reasonably expect normal citizens to understand or comprehend, making them increasingly dependent on experts, or leaving them with a decreased opportunity to make use of the benefits of different policies. According to the second condition, participatory parity is impeded by institutionalized cultural value patterns, that inform the ways in which and to whom information is disclosed – one may think here of the lack of bilingual service in shelters for battered women in New York City (Crenshaw, 1991: esp. 1262-1265), or a gender bias in book reviews in the Netherlands with male writers getting systematically and structurally more exposure in media than female writers (Koolen, 2018).

In any case, what becomes clear by embedding contemporary practices of transparency within Nancy Fraser's analysis of participatory parity is that the presumed link between information and participation is not naturally given – it matters how information is being disclosed, to whom, and with what purpose. This is all the more pressing, given the fact that transparency-as-information sees itself as being foundational for a well-functioning democratic society, most notably because, according to this view, information is a quintessential condition for *democratic participation*. Now, to the extent that one's investment in transparency-as-information has been (wishfully) prolonged under the presumption that participation involves *equal* participation, the naturalness or obviousness of this contention is seriously questioned.

Note that even if one is not convinced by Nancy Fraser's contention that participatory parity is what democratic participation should involve and disagrees with her overall theory, her argument remains relevant nevertheless, since it urges the defenders of transparency-as-information to go on and justify a particular usage of 'democratic participation' in terms of the reasons that favor a more individualistic or meritocratic approach, and therewith have to

make explicit the ways in which practices of transparency emerge in conjunction with those reasons. What becomes untenable is the *naturalized* relation between participation and transparency. The availability of information in no way ensures participation, because a ‘mere’ making available does not engage with all sorts of non-cognitive aspects that play an important role when it comes to the relation between citizens and the way in which they make use of different policies.¹⁶

Also, we do not have to settle the debate here about the relative merits of different policy proposals that seek to enhance democratic participation. It remains to be decided within different contexts what would be the appropriate measures to introduce. That is, the equally important discussion of how to measure what would be legitimate to expect of citizens, and when it would be justified to make trade-offs, falls outside the scope of the argument. The point here is to illustrate the ways in which information disclosure is always conditioned by certain assumptions about what can be expected of citizens in terms of skills and competencies they have, or assumptions about who is the imagined subject of address. I am concerned with denaturalizing the current predicament, by highlighting the ways in which most of these information technologies are relying on a communication model that disavows its constitutive sociality. To avoid what Veit Bader has called “the incapacitation trap”, denoting the way in which one’s diagnosis may further restrict the capacities of the actors concerned, instead of empowering or emancipating them (2007: 258-259/fn60), we must emphasize the importance of one’s embeddedness in context and in social relations, and in the actual relational opportunities that people need to have to effectively be able to live their potentially active lives (Jansen, 2015: 26).

This means that, if indeed we are convinced that transparency-as-information contributes to the empowerment of citizens (as its advocates seem to suggest), then we have to come to terms with the fact this link is not part of some intrinsic structure of transparency itself – we must recognize how the ways in which we choose to disclose information affects what *kind* of citizens are able to read the information or have access to the particular field of

¹⁶ So, indeed, this argument wouldn’t appeal that much to those that already subscribe to different normative commitments that could be more neatly squared with the ‘mere’ disclosure of information, arguing for instance that it is the responsibility of citizens themselves to gain the necessary competencies to make use of information, and that as such, the inequality that might be the result of some citizens profiting more of certain policies than others, is deserved rather than unjust. But even then, if my argument would lead one to choose to instead argue on more meritocratic or individualist grounds for the value of the disclosure of information, this is still effective for my purposes here, precisely because in current accounts that champion the value of transparency for democratic culture, such assumptions remain relatively implicit and as such contribute the kind of naturalization of transparency’s positive effects that needs to be more firmly interrogated.

disclosure and become ‘subjected’ as being empowered.¹⁷ In general, then, contemporary societal developments that rely on the importance of information disclosure need to be firmly resocialized in the sense developed above. That is, resocializing is not so much about inserting social conditions into an hitherto essentially individual domain, but rather about making explicit how particular mechanisms of information disclosure were always already (implicitly) of a social nature, and concomitantly framed by various sorts of normative commitments. The point is that, *if* we would like transparency to have the kind of positive outcome that its practitioners presume it to have as outlined in chapter one, *then* it is necessary to recognize that a lot more needs to happen than the ‘mere’ disclosure of information.¹⁸

4.3 An example: Debt and the management of personal finances

To elaborate the central idea of relational transparency more concretely, I here consider an example that should explicate the impact transparency-as-information can exert on the personal lives of citizens, while showing how the idea of relational transparency could speak to the damages and harms involved in a particular social reality.

In the Netherlands there is a substantive group of citizens that is at considerable financial risk. One out of three Dutch households does not have enough revenues to properly receive a financial setback (van der Schors et al., 2016). Furthermore, since the financial crisis of 2008 the number of people who have problematic debts has risen (Kerckhaert & de Ruij, 2013), while the purchasing power of many citizens has decreased substantially (Nibud, 2014). The average amount of debt people have, who have sought help or assistance from professional organizations, has increased from EUR 34,500 in 2003 to EUR 89,000 in 2013 (WRR, 2017: 43; cf. WRR, 2016: 118). Financial distress has a seriously disruptive effect on households and individuals, making the current development a rather precarious one.

All the relevant factors and causes that together constitute financial distress and that lead to indebtedness are manifold, and I do not want to convey the impression that I can do

¹⁷ Subjection here signifying “the process of becoming coordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject” (Butler, 1997: 2).

¹⁸ In what this ‘more’ *precisely* consists would then have to be substantiated by further empirical inquiries into the appropriate domains and contexts of disclosure. I do not mean to underplay the importance of this task – difficult decisions will have to be made concerning to what extent intervention is legitimate and appropriate and at which point it becomes a paternalistic infiltration of one’s personal sphere, infantilizing the capacities of citizens involved. However, in line with the kind of pragmatism that is informing my conceptualization of what transparency is, what is legitimate to expect will also depend on contextual considerations, and, so, will have to be decided on a case-to-case basis.

justice to them here. Rather, my purpose is to consider more concretely how the current problems with financial management in the Netherlands can be (partially) captured with/in a perspective of relational transparency. In particular, the current situation makes concretely manifest two of the central points I wish to convey: (1) it allows us to grasp what precisely ‘the social’ aspects of information provision involve; (2) why and in which ways disavowing this constitutive sociality contributes to real harms in particular social environments. To the extent, then, that current policies seeking to prevent debt have relatively little effect (Jungmann & Madern, 2016), engaging with the problems of debt from within relational transparency might help us to *think* the current predicament differently, thereby opening up future possibilities of *doing* prevention differently.

One of the reasons why policies that seek to help people with their financial management doesn’t seem to engender a substantive effect is because these policies are structured by its own kind of *Vergessenheit* – although citizens are increasingly being responsabilized¹⁹ for managing their financial risks, what is being ‘forgotten’ are all sorts of “non-cognitive aspects” (WRR, 2017: 63-69) that are a condition for successful financial management. In other words, the current beliefs concerning how to prevent and solve debts are predominantly geared towards making sure that enough information is available about how to regulate your personal finances, or are predicated on the conviction that people need to be taught on how to conduct proper financial management (i.e. knowledge transmission). And although these certainly seem necessary strategies, what falls outside the scope of analysis is a critical engagement with the fact that today we are living in urban landscapes that are increasingly “*debtogenic*” (Jones et al., 2013: 65). That is, with a casino on every corner, consumer-products one mouse-click away, and a generally more complex and expanded ‘choice-environment’, today it is not easy to actually *do* one’s financial management responsibly. It is because these aspects do not make it into the analysis, that contemporary practices of financial management keep being emphasized on knowledge transmission and training of cognitive skills. Whereas, *as a matter of empirical fact* (e.g. Jungmann & Madern, 2016), we know that financial literacy doesn’t necessarily lead to better financial behavior.²⁰

¹⁹ Responsibilization denotes “the process whereby subjects are rendered individually responsible for a task which previously would have been the duty of another – usually a state agency – or would not have been recognized a responsibility at all” (O’Malley, 2009: 276).

²⁰ Please note that I do not deny that a lot of contemporary financial products, such as mortgages, investment products or insurances, are of an unnecessary complex nature, and as such, play a role in the causes of debt (see also WRR, 2016: esp. 121-131). In these cases, a better kind of information provision might indeed help, and

In that sense, what is needed is not more information, but the *ability* to keep one's administration; not better explanations, but the *persistence* to withstand all kinds of financial temptations; not an increase in readily understandable investment options, but the *capacity* to decide and keep with one's decision (cf. van der Schors et al., 2016: 32). In other words, what is needed are all sorts of skills that aren't necessarily connected to having 'insight' in one's financial behavior, or to 'understand' how to build up a responsible safety net – and it are precisely these necessary aspects, that are part of the structural form of *Vergessenheit* I have elaborated upon above. Hence, what the contemporary approach to financial debt 'forgets' is the *non-cognitive* nature of many social ills – what is needed is not an expansion of choice, knowledge, or insight, but rather mechanisms, policies or institutional structures that make choices, knowledge or insight (more) *doable*. We are dealing with a *Vergessenheit* of the (empirical) fact that *knowing* does not always necessarily lead to an appropriate kind of *doing*.²¹

So, not only is the analysis 'wrong' in the sense that it doesn't capture adequately the causes of personal debt, it is also 'wrong' in the sense that the very nature of the analysis contributes to the perpetuation and perhaps worsening of the process of marginalization and societal alienation to which personal debts can lead. In other words, the emphasis on information provision in the context of financial debts leads to a kind of forgetfulness that cuts on two sides: forgotten are both the non-cognitive factors that go into a responsible management of one's personal finances, *and* the provision of material and institutional prerequisites that could effectively enable people to more adequately deal with their financial situation.²²

4.4 Remembering 'the social': From denaturalization to transformation

By reading "Anerkennungsvergessenheit" (Honneth) together with "autonomy competency" (Meyers), and transposing these concepts to the context of contemporary practices of transparency, I have made the claim that the implicit communication model underlying transparency-as-information can be understood as a practice that denies or loses sight of the

here transparency-as-information has a role to fulfill. Persistence, or the ability to withstand temptations, is not going to help you much with respect to financial products that are specifically designed to mislead you.

²¹ See in this respect also the recent WRR report (2017: esp. 41-49) that sketches the discrepancy between 'knowing' and 'doing' in different social spheres, such as health, personal finances and the labor market.

²² Of course, these two sides are related, in the sense that the right provision of material and institutional prerequisites cannot even make it into the process of consideration, if non-cognitive factors aren't allowed to become an explanatory variable with respect to debt. What remains are continuous efforts 'to explain things better', or the provision of knowledge concerning how to manage your finances, and one can imagine the tremendous amount of frustration and alienation that accompanies this constant realization of the fact that one isn't able to keep up with the (contingent) standards society has set itself.

primacy of information disclosure as an inherently *social praxis*. In that sense relational transparency helps us to understand why transparency-as-information – when extrapolated to complex and ambivalent contexts – tends to engender distorting effects. Recall, however, that I have described at the end of section 2.3, how participants already seem to know about these effects, but nevertheless succumbed to the normative hold transparency-as-information exerted on them on the level of practice.²³ By claiming that relational transparency helps us to *understand* the contradictions of transparency-as-information, I take this concept, hence, to also contain “a second-order normativity” (Jaeggi, 2009: 72), a way of gaining access to the relevant societal factors influencing the reflections on one’s first-order content. Let me explain.

By conceptualizing the constitutive feature of social praxis in terms of *Vergessenheit*, the question arises as to how to engage in the process of ‘remembering’ again (Jay, 2008: 7) – and it is here that the urgency of *Ideologiekritik* resurfaces again. After all, this remembering essentially involves the denaturalization of the context-insensitivity and individualist assumptions of transparency-as-information, i.e. a realization of the fact that these conditions are precisely *not* naturally given to us, opening up the dawning possibility of doing things differently. It is this predisposition of transparency-as-information to ‘forget’ that the disclosure of information socially presupposes a lot more than a ‘mere’ making available seems to suggest, that explains how it becomes ideological. That is, an important reason for why the ways in which we think about our contemporary practices of transparency – our second-order reflections – render the practices more successfully than they actually are, is because of their relative blindness for relations. In that sense, these practices are ideological precisely because they inhibit an awareness of the fact that what has been regarded as the simple transmission or ‘mere’ disclosure of information, actually presupposes a complex set of socially acquired cognitive, communicative, and practical skills (cf. Meyers, 1989: 210).

In other words, the proposed shift to relational transparency enables us to recognize how much information disclosure already presupposes in terms of relational or social practices, a recognition of which makes us aware of the irrationality of our continued investment in transparency-as-information, given its reliance on a communication model that is precisely *not* designed to engage with these aspects. Note that the point has been all along

²³ This needs to be further substantiated by empirical inquiry, but it would surprise me if current approaches to debt relief in the Netherlands are not also precisely structured by this kind of dynamic: although we know that to a certain extent the current policies do not have real significant effect (the amount of debt and people that are indebted keep increasing), we nevertheless, in the face of this knowledge, keep on acting *as if* ‘explaining things better’ is eventually going to turn things around.

to conceptualize those cases in which the upholding of socially unjust structures is not specifically *intended* by self-serving elites, but rather persists on the level of practice in the face of seemingly contrary knowledge – i.e. a continued investment in transparency-as-information can be viewed as ideological because it renders this relational aspect unthinkable, not because it is the product of a false sense of consciousness.

By interfering with processes of second-order reflections, ideologies cause irrationalities that impede the ability to realize a genuine vision of appropriate practices of transparency. This ability is impeded precisely because the distortions make unrecognizable the socially pernicious consequences (such as the creation and perpetuation of social inequalities or group-specific marginalization) that *would call the legitimacy and desirability of the current practice to account*.²⁴ Here, then, we have a clear case of ideologically infused social practices that inhibit an awareness of the structural irrationality that mark the actions and thoughts of the participants in what they are doing. After all, *if* one is committed to transparency as a fundamental condition for democratic societies, *then* one has to incur a commitment to realizing the necessary institutional prerequisites that would yield a material fulfillment. If it turns out that we are dealing with institutional patterns that lack any prospect of yielding this kind of material change that would be appropriate in light of the available empirical evidence, a continued investment in transparency as quintessential to democratic practice can then be rightly called *ideological* (cf. Honneth, 2007: 346-347).

Hence, relational transparency brings to the surface how a non-recognition of transparency's constitutive sociality has distorted much of the descriptive mapping of and prescriptive recommendations for the kind of policy proposals that are underpinned by a normative vision of transparency. The implication of this shift in perspective would be a thorough reconstruction and transformation of the political organization of contemporary societies and the forms of socialization those societies entail before the kind of democratic resilience on which the importance of information disclosure is usually predicated can become a widespread *practical* reality. In that sense, the relevance of this approach must be specifically cast in terms of opening up new possibilities for public policy by identifying processes that facilitate genuine and appropriate information disclosure and addressing those forces that obstruct it.

Ultimately, then, *relational transparency*, allows for a form of analysis that both helps to understand *what* it is in transparency-as-information that is causing a lot of the practical

²⁴ What becomes unrecognizable is not the social pernicious effect itself, but rather its being an *effect* or *consequence* of the model we rely on.

contradictions and problems in the social world, and *why* it is, in the face of knowledge of these practical contradictions, that we keep on acting *as if* transparency-as-information is not causing these problems at all. By making explicit the ways in which our second-order reflections are predisposed to disavow the inherently social and contextual nature of the disclosure of information, it compels us to overhaul the ways in which we can meaningfully approximate the values and normative commitments we wishfully thought our practices were geared towards.

Conclusion

When writing about transparency today – at least, in most societies that describe themselves as being ‘Western’ – one is confronted with two separate but interconnected issues. On the one hand, there seems to exist a widespread consensus concerning the necessity of transparency as a cure for all sorts of societal ills. This belief seems to be so deeply entrenched that one would have a hard time even gaining legitimate access to the political arena if not under the banner of transparency. It is expected of politicians and organizations alike, that they at least pay tribute to the value of transparency as an organizing principle in contemporary society – a tribute that is essential for their legitimacy and credibility.

At the same time, however, this widespread consensus is being unsettled by a variety of empirical investigations that effectively expose the limits of transparency and the often socially pernicious practical contradictions they engender in the social world. These limits are not only encountered within academia or scholarly journals, but are the result of careful investigations into the lifeworld of actors for whom these often contradictory experiences with transparency-as-information are a practical reality. They experience first-hand what it is like being scrutinized on the basis of abstract performance indicators, or how the work pressure increases with the demands for tracing meticulously every step made in the process of, for instance, provision of care. I suspect that among those who see transparency as quintessential for democratic or organizational practice, few would ultimately consent to the statement that ‘full transparency’ is possible, or, for that matter, desirable.

And yet, it looks like our (practical) knowledge of some of the more concrete and problematic incarnations of transparency-as-information often does not lead to the kind of practical transformations that would be appropriate. It seems that at the level of practices, most organizations and political arenas, in the face of knowledge that questions some of their beliefs, keep on acting *as if* transparency-as-information always enhances democratic practice, or ensures accountability. In other words, the question about transparency today must include a conceptualization of the kind of irrationality involved, in adopting public policies that do not very often engender the kind of effects its practitioners expect them to have.

Hence, the challenge I have been trying to meet here consisted in formulating a critique of contemporary practices of transparency that remained relatively formal enough to avoid a degradation of the views and values participants themselves articulate in the practices of transparency, but which nevertheless took seriously critical theory’s traditionally

progressive and emancipatory aims, i.e. as providing us with the means for a significant and substantive transformation of some aspects of our practices that make up the social world.

In this thesis, then, I have (a) developed a conceptualization of the above-mentioned irrationality of many practices of transparency on the basis of a distinctive form of *Ideologiekritik*, and (b) proposed a new conception of transparency that hopefully *does* lead to the kind of necessary practical transformations in the social world. In that sense, my arguments both try to capture *what* it is in transparency-as-information that engenders the practical contradictions in the social world leading to the distortion of values the model says to be serving, while it also is an attempt to explain *why* it is in the face of seemingly contrary knowledge that our practices still keep on contributing to systems of social domination that perpetuate inequalities and sustain significant asymmetries in the distribution of power. Without an answer to this latter question, it seems that any answer to the former one will not yield the kind of practical amendments that would constitute concrete and lasting change.

With respect to the first question, I have argued that transparency today is predominantly understood from an informational perspective and relies on a model of communication that cannot be neatly squared with the intricate ambivalences and complexities of the social world. Although this model might indeed be sufficient for some relatively straightforward cases, the abundant empirical material seems to suggest that the unwarranted extrapolation to contexts that are more complex is causing practical contradictions in the social world with all sorts of socially pernicious ramifications that distort the values transparency-as-information sees itself to be serving. One of the reasons why transparency-as-information does not contribute significantly to the values with which it justifies its importance, is because it relies on a view of communication that treats reality and the actors involved in an overly static, and unrealistically context-insensitive way. Transparency in most cases, always already presupposes a lot more than a ‘mere’ making available of pre-existing information to pre-existing individual actors.

Concerning the second question, I have been explaining the continued investment in transparency-as-information by focusing on the ideological dimensions (in Axel Honneth’s pejorative sense) of actor’s wishful thinking about the relative success of the practices they are engaged in – a kind of self-deception causing further unsatisfiable demands for more transparency. By pointing to a socially caused second-order deficit, we can avoid a necessary reference to substantive normative conceptions of what constitutes a ‘good’ life. Instead we diagnose some of the contemporary social ills related to the disclosure of information as part of a normative evaluation of the structural restrictions of actors’ capacities to reflect on the

social practices in which they are embedded. Concretely, for our purposes, this way of framing the issue allowed me to resolve the predicament of why participants keep acting *as if* transparency contributed to all sorts of democratic values, whereas, as a matter of empirical fact, the opposite effect was actually the case.

In other words, although analytically distinct, these two questions must be tackled together: by arguing that transparency-as-information relies on a model of communication that disavows the fact that the ‘mere’ disclosure of information is preceded by all sorts of social and relational processes, transparency-as-information is ideological precisely insofar as I take this disavowal as contributing to the restriction on actors’ reflective capacities. It is this restriction that is causing a systematic distortion of the social process in which these reflective self-understandings are formulated and reformulated. Showing that our investment in transparency-as-information becomes ideological because it is predicated upon a model of communication that is implicitly designed to disavow the inherently social and relational processes that precede the disclosure of information, explains our continued investment in transparency as a predominantly positive feature of the political and organizational culture in contemporary societies, despite the abundant evidence that effectively questions precisely these presumed ‘positive’ effects.

The proposed concept of relational transparency, hence, plays a double role. On the one hand, it makes explicit the normative and perspectival character of certain assumptions that go into the construction of mechanisms that disclose information. It brings to light the fact that information disclosure very often presupposes all sorts of expectations concerning citizen’s competencies, which can make the participants involved realize that it matters *how*, to *whom*, and *why* we disclose information. In this sense, it gives an “indication of changeability”, an awareness of the fact that things *can* be different.

At the same time, I take my account also to put forward a somewhat stronger normative claim, in that changing our conception of transparency from ‘transparency-as-information’ to ‘relational transparency’ is not only a *different* possibility, but also actually a *better* one. If it turns out that relational transparency ameliorates and solves some of the practical contradictions that now structure the practices of our social world, then this change can also be viewed as being *better* with respect to the current situation we are facing, and in that sense can be viewed as constituting *progress*, however open-ended and fallible this will most likely turn out to be. In other words, by pointing to the necessary contradictions in particular social practices to which the ideologically infused belief in transparency-as-information gives rise, we create the ground to overcome this situation and turn it into

something new. The standards to overcome a particular reality, hence, arise from the given norms and the given reality – allowing our re-description and re-evaluation to happen from the standpoints of the participants themselves.

This last point is important, because it makes clear the structure of my argument and how far it reaches. This is no conclusive argument against transparency-as-information, nor is my proposed conception of relational transparency a definite prefabricated ideal with which we can now start to confront reality. Rather, the importance of the argument lies in the fact that many accounts already frame the values of transparency in terms that come close to critical theory’s traditionally emancipatory and progressive social aims. By making explicit, however, the implicit presuppositions of the model of communication underlying transparency-as-information, it becomes untenable to both subscribe to the kind of democratic values you thought the model was serving, and remain invested on the level of practice to a model which disavows precisely those features of information disclosure that are key to the realization or meaningful approximation of those democratic values. So, in that sense, the importance of my account lies in its attempt to theoretically reformulate and re-describe transparency’s fundamental characteristics thereby making reality unacceptable, or showing that it should be unacceptable from the viewpoint of the participants themselves (cf. Celikates, 2012: 168). If one thinks that transparency is quintessential to democratic culture and contributes to some of its essential characteristics, such as political agency or democratic participation, then my argument would seem to make unacceptable the real effects of the kind of communication model that transparency-as-information implicitly presumes, and compels us to conceive of the desirability of transparency *differently* (or, in terms of my own proposal here, *relationally*).

So, the ‘darker sides’ of transparency need a different kind of engagement, a kind of illumination that could give transparency a transformed impetus in the contemporary world. Confronted with a rapidly changing society, Theodore Adorno saw a “society of glass houses where every hiding place has been smoked out” (1963/1998: 78). Hence, he also noted those dark sides and pointed to the “separation and division brought about through transparency as a mechanism of control” (Jarosinski, 2010: 161). As Adorno puts it:

Progress keeps people literally apart. The little counter at the railroad station or the bank allowed the clerks to whisper to their colleagues and share their meager secrets; the glass partitions of modern offices, the huge rooms in which countless employees sitting together can be easily supervised both by the public and by their managers, no longer countenance private conversations (1944/2002: 183).

I share Adorno's initial suspicion, and agree that transparency's darker sides are in need for illumination. An urgent task for critical thought today remains the continuous questioning of whatever appears to be self-evident and natural. However, as I have hopefully made clear, to *think differently* about transparency does not have to lead us into an (anti-modern) pessimism about the im/possibility of *doing things differently* with transparency. As Foucault notes, "our critique should not deduce from the form of what we are what is impossible for us to do and know" (1984: 46). In a similar vein, I tried to separate out, from the contingency that has made transparency what it is today, the possibility of no longer 'being' and 'doing' what it 'is' or 'does'.

Ultimately, then, the 'darker sides' of transparency help us to indicate the ways in which transparency *can* be part of that same potential future environment in which Adorno sought a temporary shelter for a more humane form of dwelling (1951/2005) – this thesis has hopefully formulated another beginning with respect to continuing that search.

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