



## Introduction to the special issue on government transparency

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Government transparency has become ‘hot’ since President Barack Obama put transparency high on his agenda for change in government. He emphasized that openness is needed to restore the trust of citizens in government. President Obama is certainly not the only nor the first political leader to highlight the importance of transparency and open government. Political leaders all around the world pay tribute to the idea of open government and they have launched initiatives to make their government more open and transparent.

Transparency gained even more momentum since Wikileaks obtained worldwide media attention for opening up government to external scrutiny. Classified government cables were passed on to Wikileaks by a whistleblower and the information was published on the Internet and newspapers. The traditional logic of government transparency – government granting citizens access to information if there were no restrictions such as privacy or national security – seemed to be replaced by the logic of radical transparency: leak, publish and wait for public outrage (Roberts, this issue). The Wikileaks affair also turned transparency from something rather ‘dull’ into something ‘sexy’. Suddenly, everybody became interested in government transparency.

There has been much political and media attention for government transparency but academic attention seems to be lagging behind. This special issue presents the best papers from a workshop on government transparency at the Utrecht School of Governance in November 2010. The workshop was organized within the context of the conference ‘Public Matters’, and selected researchers were invited to present their work. The objective of the workshop was to enhance our understanding of key conceptual and empirical issues in the study of government transparency. The workshop brought together some of the key transparency researchers in Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States. The workshop was videotaped and the results are available online (see [www.albert-meijer.nl](http://www.albert-meijer.nl)). The authors of the papers were invited to turn their work into journal articles to bring this state-of-the-art overview of transparency researcher to a broader audience.

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This special issue is an attempt to advance the academic debate on government transparency. The debate about transparency in government is fragmented and strong conceptualizations are lacking; their absence leads to much confusion in academic debates about transparency. A normative debate about government transparency has been going on for some time and interesting empirical work has been conducted in the (recent) past. This empirical work, however, has been rather fragmented and it has not yet led to a common body of knowledge. More convergence has been created lately and transparency research is slowly turning into a full-fledged field of research. An important milestone was the First International Conference on Transparency Research (Newark, May 2010) and regional conferences on transparency research will be organized in the coming years in Utrecht (Netherlands) in June 2012 and on Barbados in 2013. Additionally, a strong symposium on transparency research has been created at the International Research Symposium on Public Management since 2010. In sum, while previously transparency was often regarded as an aspect of accountability, it is now turning into an independent field of research.

At present, research into government transparency is being concentrated in a few research groups while at the same time individual researchers make substantial contributions to the field. Important groups are:

- *Rutgers University*. Suzanne Piotrowski is one of the founders of international research into transparency and has developed a strong research programme into government transparency. Rutgers University has organized the First International Conference on Transparency Research. The research focuses mostly on local government transparency but also important conceptual and methodological work is done at Rutgers University. An important publication is a reader on transparency which brings together some of the classical texts on transparency (Piotrowski, 2010).
- *Swiss Graduate School of Public Administration (IDHEAP)*. Jean-Patrick Villeneuve and Martial Pasquier lead the empirical research programme of the Lausanne-based research institute. IDHEAP plays a leading role in the organization of the transparency symposium at IRSPM. Their research focuses on transparency in the European Union but also on more conceptual issues (see e.g. Pasquier and Villeneuve, 2007).
- *University of Zaragoza*. Lourdes Torres Prada and Vicente Pina lead a research group that analyzes transparency in the European Union mostly from the perspective of e-government and also from an accountancy perspective. They have published important papers in journals such as *Public Administration* but also in journals focusing on e-government. A key publication is Pina et al. (2007).
- *Utrecht University*. Deirdre Curtin and Albert Meijer lead a research group that focuses on two (different but also related) issues: transparency in the European Union and computer-mediated transparency (see for example, Curtin and Meijer, 2006). They have published on these issues on journals focusing respectively on the European Union and E-government. Utrecht University organizes a transatlantic conference on transparency research in 2012.

Previously, Harvard University also had a group of researchers focusing on research of disclosure (Archon Fung, Mary Graham and David Weil, 2007). Their research focused on transparency as a policy instrument rather than on government transparency but their theoretical work has been quite important for the development of the field.

Additionally, individual researchers in various parts of the world have played a significant role in developing a further understanding of government transparency. Some of the important contributions can be mentioned here. Heungsik Park (2001; 2011) of Chung-Ang University in Korea has done important work on the relationship between government transparency and corruption. Adrienne Heritier (2003) of the European University Institute and Daniel Naurin (2007) of Gothenburg University have advanced our understanding the role of transparency in the European Union. Sharon Dawes (2010) of the State University of New York at Albany has done important work on digital transparency. At the University College London, Robert Hazell, Ben Worthy and Mark Glover (2010) have advanced our empirical understanding of the freedom of information.

The field is fragmented, but two books and one article have played a key role in the development of the field and are often referred to in other publications. The first book is *Transparency. The Key to Better Governance?* by Christopher Hood and David Heald (2006). This edited volume contains a collection of strong papers on various aspects of transparency. The historical and conceptual introduction written by Christopher Hood and David Heald are also important and they are quoted by most researchers in the field. The second book is *Blacked Out. Government Secrecy in the Information Age* by Alasdair Roberts (2006). A key aspect of this book is that it put the focus on the other side of the coin: secrecy rather than transparency is the key concept. The crucial article is 'Global Information Technology Pressure and Government Accountability' by Eric Welch and Wilson Wong (2001; see also: Welch et al., 2005). This article has been crucial because of its systematic operationalization of transparency. The operationalization has been carried out within the framework of the Cyberspace Policy Research Group and it enabled a systematic comparison of the (digital) transparency of different government organizations.

Although important work has been done, there is still much ground to be covered. The fragmentation of the field calls for an effort to bundle some of the most important findings. This special issue covers some ground by tackling some of the key issues involved in transparency research.

*The conceptual relation between government transparency and citizen participation.* Much of the discussion about government transparency focuses on the relationship between the availability of information (government transparency) and the use of this information by citizens and stakeholders (participation). Government transparency and participation are the two building blocks of open government. Albert Meijer, Deirdre Curtin and Maarten Hillebrandt of Utrecht University and the

University of Amsterdam have analyzed 103 publications on transparency and participation and highlighted that a synergetic relation between transparency and participation cannot be assumed. Transparency and participation can also be independent from one another – i.e. a complementary relation – when access to information is not used to improve participation and neither is participation used to push for more access to information. Transparency and participation can even undermine each other when, for example, participants in consultations are reluctant to be open about their position if the results of the consultation will be made transparent. This paper enhances our understanding of the various components of government transparency and participation and their relations.

*The nature and effects of fiscal transparency mechanisms.* Fiscal transparency is a crucial aspect of government transparency since it focuses our attention on a key prerequisite for governance: financial resources. David Heald of the University of Aberdeen Business School argues that the specific meaning of fiscal transparency can be defined in four terms: inwards, outwards, upwards and downwards. The article shows that there are intrinsic barriers for transparency about public expenditure such as technical complexities and the ‘language’ of measurement but also constructed barriers that are created to protect specific interests. He concludes that transparency about public expenditure cannot provide answers to ideological questions but it can improve the evidence base for public debate.

*The effect of transparency on trust in government.* A positive effect of transparency on trust is often assumed by proponents but empirical underpinnings for this assumption are lacking. Stephan Grimmelikhuijsen of Utrecht University presents the results of experimental research that tests the effect of performance outcome transparency on trust in a government organization. The results provide limited support for the assumption of transparency advocates: transparency has little effect on trust. Fundamental convictions about government are much more important. Still, transparency only has a limited effect on trust in government performance in the sense that citizens acquire more knowledge which enhances their trust and, at the same time, by an affective direct effect of transparency on perceived competence.

*The effect of interinstitutional transparency on parliamentary oversight.* While public transparency refers to the availability of information to the general public, interinstitutional transparency is about the transparency between government institutions. An important form of interinstitutional transparency – transparency of the executive towards parliament – has been analyzed by Gijs Jan Brandsma of Utrecht University in the context of the European Union. Does more transparency enable better oversight of the European Parliament on the complex workings of European executive bodies? His analysis shows that additional availability of information only has little effect. The availability of information only affects the parliament with specific as opposed to general political rights. Information is used when parliament has a concrete reason for using it.

*The nature of so-called radical transparency.* The Wikileaks affair fuelled ideas about radical transparency: the idea that all government information should be made available to the public. No restrictions, not even for reasons of privacy or national security. Certain advocates argue that governments will no longer be able to create these restrictions and leaking will develop into normal practice. Alasdair Roberts of Suffolk University argues that the claims about the breakdown of old-style secrecy are ‘overwrought’. His analysis shows that there are many reasons why it will be much harder than it is claimed by advocates to achieve radical transparency, especially in the security sector of government.

*The empirical relation between government transparency and citizen participation.* Our understanding of the relation between transparency and participation is further enhanced on the basis of empirical research conducted by Eric Welch of the University of Illinois at Chicago. This paper follows the same idea as Meijer, Curtin and Hillebrandt’s contribution and investigates whether transparency and participation are positively associated with one another, focusing on websites of local governments. He argues that transparency and participation represent two different approaches to government accountability, and hence two different mechanisms by which the governing and the governed should interact. His research highlights that pressure from external stakeholders triggers higher levels of participation but in some cases higher levels of external influence dampen transparency.

Although this issue tackles important issues, many key questions still need to be answered. In the workshop in Utrecht, the participants discussed what these key issues are.

*Is transparency created by push or pull factors?* Government may create transparency in response to pull factors from citizens, stakeholders and courts but also in response to push factors from inside the government system. A push factor could be that certain information would boost government’s image and enhance government legitimacy. Do citizens get the data they want in response to pressure on government? Or is there a practice of ‘data dumping’ meant to improve government’s image?

*Which sectors are becoming more transparent?* It is generally assumed that the growth in transparency is a general trend that influences all policy domains. As far as we know, little research has been done to identify differences between domains. Nevertheless, there may be good reasons why certain domains are becoming more transparent. Research in the domain of national security seems to indicate that transparency is being reduced whereas transparency in public services such as healthcare and education seems to increase. Do we really see these differences? How can we understand this?

*How do citizens, stakeholders and mass media use transparency?* Most of the research has focused on the availability of information but we still know little about the use of

this information. The use of government data is still largely a black box. We know that a limited group of people (scientists, lawyers) do most Freedom of Information Act requests. What patterns of use can be identified? Do external institutions such as the Ombudsman use transparency? Investigative journalism seems to be on the decline and, although people may read online papers, (young) people show less interest in in-depth articles. Does this mean that reliable intermediaries that could use government data are lacking?

*Does transparency change the behavior of civil servants and public organizations?* In the end, transparency is to achieve changes in behaviour of government officials to create more efficient, effective and legitimate government. At the moment we have little knowledge about these behavioural changes. Optimists expect better quality of work whereas pessimists expect goal displacement. Empirical knowledge about these effects is limited.

A special issue should enhance our understanding of a phenomenon but, at the same time, raise new research questions. This special issue hopes to contribute to the further development of empirical research into government transparency. We hope to inspire many (young) researchers in various parts of the world to conduct empirical research and to enhance our understanding of the causes, nature and effects of government transparency.

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