

University of Innsbruck

Department of Organisation and Learning



PROJECT DESCRIPTION

**Organizing and being organized by the Visible – The Performativity of
Transparency as for the Management of Visibilities in Media Outlets**

Author Details:

Alwin Baumhöver

Email:

Alwin.Baumhoever@uibk.ac.at

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Extended Abstract

Transparency is the most recently (re)discovered guiding principle in media outlets for organizing visibilities (Koliska, 2022) that aims to provide more information about hidden processes, rationales, and influences that impact news production (Allen, 2008, Koliska & Assmann, 2021). The proliferation of social media platforms as information exchange environments enables media outlets to make content visible to mass audiences, but at the same time produces new frontiers in the thinking on what accounts as favourable visibilities. Their technology-driven pursuit for verification and authenticity keeps pushing media outlets towards ideas about transparency as media outlets must adapt to the requirements of social media governance (Eichler, 2022).

Contradictory as it may sound, in social media platforms that are some sort of “visibility devices”, media outlets face the “threat of invisibility” (Bucher, 2012) and risk losing their relevance. Calls for more transparency under the label of authenticity have gained increasing popularity in media outlets to win the competition for the audiences’ attention and to re-establish trust by “allowing the audiences to look behind the curtain” (Allen, 2008). Here, an increasingly adopted strategy are new forms of self-presentation, aiming at informality, intimacy, and community building (Ryfe, 2019; Usher, 2017). For example, journalists use presenter reports to authentically show they are part of the story. These formats result in a higher visibility of the journalist as a person, potentially endangering for example the individual’s right on privacy.

Thus, ideas about transparency shape organizational affairs as they produce certain codes of conduct on how and which information to (dis)close. It remains yet undiscovered how actors manage requests for individual transparency in detail. Accordingly, this research project addresses the following research question: *“how does the organizational pursuit of transparency affect how actors manage their own visibilities?”* By answering this question, this study aims to elucidate the ambivalent modalities of transparency that individuals experience through the organizational quest for verification. With a case study approach, this ethnographic research uses the setting of the media outlet “Y-Kollektiv”, to attend to the reciprocal dynamics between the organizational endeavour of pursuing transparency and how actors’ translate this pursuit into managing their personal visibilities. Instead of simply stating that individuals are becoming “hyper visible” (Kolb, 2008), this research assumes that actors continuously balance transparency and opacity in their need to “bound” openness (Lingo, 2023). A focus lies on new coping strategies to allow the individual invisibility for professional or ethical purposes.

Theoretically, this project builds upon an understanding of transparency as a guiding principle that constitutes through communicative and organizational social processes (Albu & Flyverbom, 2019) that are quintessential concerned with the management of visibilities (Christensen & Cheney, 2015). Transparency is not a precise end state in which everything is clear or a unified project of established guidelines. Instead, it is rather a matter of interpretation, editing, and association ideas of what open and honest communication means in concrete settings. It misses to give instructions and thus resembles an ambiguous “script” (Sahlin-Anderssib, 1996) that is not a stable order but is (re)produced by actors which constantly need to make sense of it, negotiate, and translate its meaning into their management of visibilities. Therefore, transparency must be continuously performed in and through communication by organizational actors (Flyverbom, 2019). Communication is never only a passive reflection of reality, but an active process that constitutes social systems, such as organizations, as well as inherent ideas about transparency (Flyverbom, 2016; Ashcraft et al., 2009). Regarding transparency constantly (re)produced in communication stresses the role of negotiations, conflicts, contextual dynamics, and foremost the reciprocity of assumptions and decisions about what should or should not be seen. It supports the comprehension of transparency as being of performative nature because it far exceeds the passive image of making something visible (Robert, 2009). Performativity refers to the view that organizational and social realities are continuously enacted and constituted through social practices, specifically communication (Taylor & van Every, 2000). Ideas of and calls for transparency influence and induce social behaviour, as they produce guiding principles or codes of conduct that favour certain practices of information disclosure. These codes of conduct have “ordering effects” (Albu & Flyverbom, 2019) themselves with often unintended and potentially negative consequences, as they shape how actors manage their (personal) visibilities (Flyverbom & Hanse, 2015).

Methodologically, this research project wants to scrutinize how the organizational pursuit of transparency affects how actors manage their personal visibilities. Through a joint approach of a netnography (Kozinet, 2019), and of what Yin (2013) calls an “extreme case”, this research emphasises with an already identified example on a critical perspective on transparency when taken as a directive for (radical) disclosure. For data collection, archival data such as reports, social media posts, and conversation in the comment sections are being collected. Overall, the methodological approaches explore the communicative constitution of transparency and how actors of media outlets organize and are organized by the organizing principle that has progressively become popular but “en vogue, but yet vague” (Splitter et al., 2023).