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The Instrumental Use of Openness: Lessons from Robert Moses

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Open Strategy is frequently presented in the strategic management literature as an approach emphasizing transparency and broad participation, aiming to generate better decisions and foster creativity (Whittington et al., 2011; Langenmayr et al., 2024). Underpinning this concept is the normative assumption that more openness is inherently desirable. While some studies do acknowledge practical hurdles—such as conflicting interests, risks linked to extensive information disclosure, or competing demands for attention (Hautz et al., 2017; Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017; Brielmaier & Friesl, 2023; Splitter et al., 2024)—these challenges are typically framed as manageable. Overall, the main argument remains that if openness is properly managed, it leads to superior, collective strategies.

In this essay, I suggest instead that openness can be used instrumentally to secure and maintain power. By “instrumental openness,” I refer to the deliberate, tactical use of transparency or participation primarily to advance the goals of a powerful individual or group. This perspective focuses on politics and power: openness may be employed to legitimize predetermined decisions, co-opt potential opponents, or influence public opinion without actually sharing decision-making authority. These practices echo co-optation (Selznick, 1949) and institutional “decoupling” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), underscoring the connection between openness and the motives of those wielding it. Methodologically, this essay adopts a historical case study approach, drawing on Robert Caro’s landmark biography *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (1974) to illustrate how openness can be wielded as a manipulative tactic.

Robert Moses (1888–1981), one of the 20th century’s most influential urban planners, offers a historical example of this kind of instrumental openness. Over several decades, Moses shaped the infrastructure of New York City and State. Caro’s biography portrays him both as a visionary orchestrator of monumental public works and as a master manipulator who often bypassed or merely performed democratic processes. Moses believed the ends justified the means, using quasi-autonomous “public authorities” to operate with minimal oversight. Simultaneously, he excelled at publicly showcasing openness, harnessing it to generate broad support for his projects.

Public Relations as a Tool for Legitimacy

Early in his career, Moses recognized the power of shaping public discourse to implement his plans. An illustrative example is his campaign for Long Island parks and parkways in the 1920s (Caro, 1974). Moses presented appealing designs and reports to the public, making the debate a moral one: the public’s need for recreation opposed the alleged selfishness of wealthy landowners. Stoking media outrage pressured politicians and led to favorable referendums. Yet this “openness” was heavily skewed: Moses disclosed only information that supported his vision while sidelining critical details such as tolls or making it accessible only by car (and thus exclusive to the car-owning upper classes). In this way, transparency served primarily to discredit opposition and legitimize pre-existing decisions.

Selective Inclusion as Co-optation

Moses also skillfully co-opted powerful constituencies by offering them nominal participation and selective benefits in exchange for their support. He placed leading business and political figures on the boards of his public authorities, thus conveying an impression of thorough oversight (Caro, 1974). In practice, Moses ensured he retained control through carefully tailored bylaws, though the presence of such high-profile board members created the illusion of broad backing. He also enlisted labor unions by promising jobs, thereby securing a loyal base. When resistance arose from local elites (resistance from non-elites was always crushed right away), Moses often gave them limited concessions to neutralize their opposition, avoiding extensive public scrutiny. These tactics provided a veneer of democratic inclusion while preserving his central authority.

Managed Transparency: The Spectacle of Public Hearings

As time went on, Moses had to comply with formal participation processes like public hearings. Rather than truly seeking diverse input, he orchestrated these events so they posed minimal threat. Hearings were scheduled on short notice, technical details were overwhelming for non-experts, and critics were often sidelined. In some instances, these sessions were held only after major project decisions were irreversible, fulfilling procedural “openness” requirements without changing outcomes. Ultimately, Moses’s approach faltered when confronted by activists such as Jane Jacobs, who generated a form of public debate that he could not control (Caro, 1974). When Moses lost his grip on how openness was staged, his power began to erode.

Implications for Open Strategy

Robert Moses’s example underscores that openness does not necessarily produce more democratic or equitable outcomes. In fact, it can obscure authoritarian tactics or facilitate power consolidation. Much of the Open Strategy literature relies on the optimistic assumption that transparency leads to better strategies, yet the underlying political dimension often remains underexplored (Pettigrew, 1977). Therefore, any assessment of openness must account for power structures. Researchers should distinguish between meaningful participation and purely symbolic or manipulative practices, as the latter can undermine trust and damage reputations if stakeholders feel they have been manipulated.

Conclusion

Robert Moses’s career illustrates that openness in strategy making can function as a weapon that may either bolster democratic principles or suppress them. Whether it genuinely enables participation or serves as a mere façade depends on the intent of its advocates. Future discussions on Open Strategy must critically question existing normative beliefs: under what conditions does openness truly offer benefits, and when is it simply a maneuver by those in power? A greater emphasis on the political foundations of openness could help identify institutional checks and balances to ensure genuine participation. Recognizing this tension is vital if we are to foster an openness that contributes to shared value creation rather than serving as a tool for manipulation.

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