

## **Transparency in Public Administration**

Grant R. Donovan

College of Community Education & Innovation, University of Central Florida

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Dr. Dan Stephens

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### **Abstract**

Transparency is often considered a requirement for effective administration. The American public certainly thinks so, as more and more transparency is demanded of government agencies and administrators every year. In response, scholars have finally come to focus on transparency as an object of academic inquiry. While recent findings do validate many of the benefits increased transparency is purported to bring with it – such as more public participation in governance and greater administrative accountability – the overall picture that has emerged is much more complex than originally imagined. For example, transparency is now considered to be a multifaceted concept. There are many different kinds of transparency, which must be considered together in order to understand the concept as a whole. Transparency has also come to be considered an inherently subjective and political concept that can only be understood in relation to other political values. Furthermore, studies have identified significant tradeoffs that accompany the pursuit of transparency, such as decreased administrative efficiency and even reduced public trust in government. Finally, scholars have identified many faulty assumptions that often underlie calls for more transparent administrative practices. This paper analyzes the growing body of transparency literature as well as synthesizes it to create practical recommendations for administrative best practices. These lessons should aid administrators in both crafting and implementing transparency policies within their agencies. This will allow them to use such policies to satisfy the growing public demand for transparency while also enhancing – rather than impeding – administrative effectiveness.

## **Transparency in Public Administration**

Transparency in public administration has long been considered essential for the effective functioning of a democratic government (Lyrio et al., 2018). If citizens cannot discern what their government is doing, the argument goes, then they cannot participate in public decision-making. Proposals for more transparency in public administration first arose in Europe during the Enlightenment period and eventually manifested in the open-government clauses of the U.S. Constitution (Meijer, 2015). These clauses required administrators to publish their budgets and enshrined the freedom of the press to report on any and all government activities. Yet, it seems as though Americans have never quite been satisfied with the level of transparency they receive. In the 1950s, the Freedom of Information movement sought to make more government records available to the public. These activists argued that since state sovereignty is derived from the people, the people therefore have a right to demand access to any information the government produces. This “right to know” argument was highly persuasive, and by the 1970s most U.S. governments had passed Freedom of Information Acts (Wagner, 2021). These acts allowed Americans to request and obtain almost any government document they would like.

But Americans still weren’t satisfied. The standard of openness governments in the U.S. are held to only continues to grow more demanding each year (Fenster, 2015). For instance, in 2008 Barack Obama’s open government reform plan – which sought to make federal agencies’ performance data more transparent – helped him win the presidency (Kettl, 2021). In 2013, documents leaked by NSA contractor Edward Snowden led to demands for more transparency from government intelligence agencies on the amount and kinds of citizens’ information they collect (Kettl, 2021). And currently, special districts for managing utilities like water and electricity have come under fire for their lack of transparency in issuing regulations and spending

citizens' tax dollars (Kettl, 2021). Given the growing importance the public places on administrative transparency, public administration scholars are increasingly focusing their research on better understanding it. The number of academic papers exploring the concept has gone from two to three per year in the early 2000s to over twenty per year since 2011 (Cucciniello et al., 2016). Given these developments, it is worth diving into this new literature to determine how administrators should seek to foster transparency in their agencies. Doing so will allow administrators to better meet stakeholders' growing demands for transparency while at the same time using it to pursue administrative effectiveness.

## **Main Body**

### **Defining Transparency**

The first step must be to define what is meant by administrative transparency, but this has proven to be exceedingly difficult. It is generally understood to mean allowing external stakeholders to access agency information (Lyrio et al., 2018). But depending on who you ask or what circumstances are being considered, the details of what it means to be transparent vary wildly (Schnell et al., 2023). This is also true of public administration scholars themselves, who all tend to approach the topic with their own slightly unique definitions (Bauhr & Grimes, 2017). These difficulties point to the idea that transparency is not a monolith; there is no one definition that can incorporate all that is expected of it. Instead, many distinct kinds of transparency exist. Much of the scholarship of the last eight years has focused on correctly delineating these various kinds of transparency, but this too has been difficult. Many methods have been proposed, but none of them have achieved academic consensus (Schnell et al., 2023). It is likely that many of them are valid and can each help to better illuminate transparency as a whole. Comprehensively

defining transparency, then, requires considering each of them and how they might all fit together.

Before the modern boom in transparency literature, administrative transparency was almost solely defined as the public's access to information. This was the same definition that motivated the Freedom of Information movement (Schnell, 2020). Activists presumed that if the public had access to agencies' raw data and unedited documents, they would be eager to interpret them themselves and use them to judge administrative effectiveness. These activists emphasized the importance of such information being both complete and unfiltered (Albu & Flyverbom, 2016). If it was not complete, then the citizenry would not have all the information it needed to make rational judgments. And if it was filtered, then administrators would be able to "spin" information to make themselves look better rather than giving the public an unbiased view of their performance. Those who subscribed to this definition distinguished between different types of transparency based on the content of the information that was to be released to the public (Park & Blenkinsopp, 2016). Process transparency was used to refer to documents, like meeting minutes, which revealed the reasoning that had led administrators to their decisions. Policy transparency was used to refer to the content of policies themselves. Finally, outcome transparency was used to refer to data that detailed how well an agency was achieving desired outcomes. To those who held this definition, all three kinds of transparency were necessary for an agency to be considered administratively transparent (Park & Blenkinsopp, 2016).

However, it did not take long for scholars to begin questioning whether this definition of administrative transparency was complete. In the wake of the Freedom of Information Act, many activists assumed that their job was finished. They imagined that giving the public access to any document they liked would be enough to ensure the transparent disclosure of information.

However, the public quickly became unsatisfied with government transparency once again, and the act seemingly failed to establish a truer democracy, more accountable administrators, or better government performance (Fenster, 2015). The first problem that scholars identified was that the Freedom of Information Act gave citizens access to records – but only upon request. It was often the case that people did not know what documents they should request, nor did many people have the time to battle with agencies over these requests. For these reasons, scholars began to alter their definition of transparency to include the proactive disclosure of information as well (Schnell et al., 2023).

Yet, this did not completely solve the problems with transparency's definition. Even with proactive disclosure included, the concept of transparency still revolved around large transfers of raw, unfiltered information. Attaching any sort of explanation or interpretation was considered a way of obscuring information or making it unobjective (Schnell et al., 2023). And while this is often what citizens claim to want – information free of bias or “spin” – they hardly utilize it in practice. Datasets are typically too big and detailed for the average citizen to draw clear observations from them. Meeting minutes are typically written in dry, difficult language and take hours to read. Citizens just do not have the cognitive capacity to translate unfiltered information from agency documents into a better understanding of administrative effectiveness (Porumbescu et al., 2017). Scholars began to realize that information has to be both accessible and useful to the average citizen if it is to actually increase transparency, and making information useful means decreasing the mental effort that is required for understanding it (Porumbescu et al., 2017). Making information more understandable most often requires filtering out unimportant data and attaching interpretation to what remains (Piotrowski et al., 2017).

But how should administrators attempt to foster transparency if it sometimes means releasing more information and sometimes means releasing less? How do they know what filters and interpretations will aid stakeholder understanding and which will distort the truth? Unfortunately, administrators cannot answer these questions while sitting alone in their offices. Instead, they must directly engage stakeholders to determine their informational needs and then tailor the information they release to satisfy those needs (Albu & Flyverbom, 2016). Scholars therefore began to promote an additional conception of transparency: the two-way relationship in which the public communicates its desire for information to administrators and administrators communicate information to the public in a way that assists its understanding (Schnell, 2022). Through this process, administrators can directly foster transparency rather than hope it manifests independently. Transparency as access to information and transparency as a communicative relationship have become the two most common conceptions of transparency in today's literature. They are often utilized together, as they allow researchers to consider both the public's general access to and specific understanding of the information administrators release (Schnell et al., 2023).

However, there are two more additional conceptions of transparency that might be less popular but nonetheless offer further insight into the diffuse nature of transparency. The first of these is Porembescu et al.'s partition of transparency along macro-, meso-, and micro-level dimensions (2022). According to these authors, transparency functions differently at each of these levels; yet studies consistently conflate them as if they do not. For instance, one study might focus on the behavior of individual administrators in fostering transparency while another will focus on the culture of transparency present in an agency. These two studies' findings are certainly related – the behavior of individuals is couched within the culture of their agencies –

but these connections are rarely explicitly considered. Instead, it is more common for the studies to directly compare their results to one another and perhaps reach contradictory conclusions as a result. One group of scholars that effectively applied this layered approach to transparency was ben-Aaron et al. (2016). These scholars found the probability that an administrator fulfills a Freedom of Information request is highly dependent upon whether other agencies have already fulfilled similar requests. In this case, the distinction between the government's macro-level transparency environment and administrators' micro-level decision-making was explicitly considered, and a useful connection was identified.

The last important distinction in transparency literature is between transparency as understood by the public and by public administrators themselves. Most administrators simply assume the two are the same, but Park & Blenkinsopp found that these two groups actually approach the concept very differently (2016). Based on surveys of district-level administrators and citizens in Seoul, South Korea, these authors found that administrators most often conceive of transparency as the efficient, reliable, and accessible sharing of information with the public (Park & Blenkinsopp, 2016). Administrators' view of transparency was largely technical and revolved around the process by which transparency is accomplished. Meanwhile, the public instead conceived of transparency as the accessible and useful sharing of information (Park & Blenkinsopp, 2016). Unlike administrators, their view of transparency was practical and revolved around the utility of the information once released. This study reveals that – not only is the concept of transparency multifaceted – but it is also subjective. Whether transparency has been achieved is therefore dependent on who is evaluating it.

In summation, the concept of transparency encompasses many different definitions and subtypes. It can be considered public access to government information, the proactive disclosure



of government information, or a communicative relationship between administrators and the public. The meaning of transparency can also vary depending on the dimension along which it is being evaluated or the group that is doing the evaluation. But despite this wide-ranging characterization, it is just as important to clarify what transparency is not. First, transparency is not the same as accountability. Accountability requires a principal to have the ability to monitor the actions of an agent along with the ability to sanction that agent if they behave in undesired ways (Bauhr & Grimes, 2017). Transparency only refers to the ability to monitor, and thus where there is transparency there is not necessarily accountability as well. Similarly, transparency is not the same as public participation. Just because the public is made aware of government information does not mean that they will be invited to comment on it or participate in the decision-making process (Bauhr & Grimes, 2017). Finally, transparency does not inherently prevent corruption. While transparency certainly makes corruption more difficult, what information is released is still within the control of administrators. In fact, increased transparency has at times been used as a tactic to create the illusion of an honest government while in fact serving to obscure the corruption taking place just below the surface (Schnell, 2018).

### **Transparency's Beneficial Effects on the Public**

These distinctions become important when considering the benefits that added transparency is said to bring with it. As mentioned previously, transparency has long been considered a requirement for public participation in a democracy (Lyrio et al., 2018). And while transparency is not the same as participation, scholarly literature does find a connection between the two. A review of transparency studies conducted between 1990 and 2015 found that 60% of papers identified a significant, positive relationship between administrative transparency and public participation (Cucciniello et al., 2016). This connection becomes clear when considering

the concept of transparency as a communicative relationship. By providing policy information that is easy to understand, the transparency relationship helps the public clarify their thoughts on issues and develop opinions on what they would like to see change (Porumbescu et al., 2017). With more policy knowledge, people face fewer barriers to getting involved with public decision-making. And with more opinions, the reward of getting involved and having their desires reflected in policy grows tremendously. In a study of Caribbean public utility companies, Douglas and Meijer found that transparency practices were most helpful in fostering collaboration with stakeholders; this then led to greater public value creation (2016).

Another benefit commonly associated with transparency is greater public trust in the government. Administrators care deeply about maintaining trust as it increases the public's compliance with agency regulations (Porumbescu et al., 2017). Greater public trust is theoretically accomplished through three mechanisms. First, transparency is said to increase the perceived legitimacy of government agencies and thereby the public's trust in them (Schnell, 2022). This theory rests on the process conceptualization of transparency. If the public has access to the reasoning that led to an administrative decision – and can verify that the costs and benefits were weighed fairly as well as due process undertaken – then they will be more likely to accept the decisions as legitimate (Fine de Licht, 2012). Second, transparency gives citizens opportunities to verify an agency's state of affairs. Rather than rely on an administrator or politician's characterization of an agency's work, access to information allows the public to assess those claims themselves (Albu & Flyverbom, 2016). Even if they never do this, the fact that the opportunity exists is said to be enough to encourage trust (Kettl, 2021).

Furthermore, most citizens pay little attention to the government's work. It is typically only administrative failures – like the Flint water crisis or the messy Hurricane Katrina recovery

effort – that grab attention (Kettl, 2021). This can lead citizens to have a negatively biased perception of the work government agencies perform (Kettl, 2021). Through transparency, however, government agencies are able to publicize both their failures and their successes (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015). This increases the public's positive perception of agencies and, thereby, their trust in them. This is a tactic often utilized by law enforcement agencies, which will eagerly share the news of dangerous drug and weapons busts with their followers on social media to improve their reputations. In a study of Dutch law enforcement agencies, these tactics were indeed found to have small, positive impacts on perceived legitimacy and public trust (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015).

### **The Political Nature of Transparency**

It is important to note that both of the benefits mentioned thus far – greater public participation and increased trust in government – are predicated on the political value the public attributes to transparency. This value, though, is ultimately subjective. And not only between the public and administrators, but between members of the public themselves. Scholars often refer to transparency as an itinerant value – a value that everyone claims is important but has conditional interpretations depending on the other political values prioritized by whoever is describing it (Nabatchi, 2017). For example, some people prioritize the value of administrative efficiency. Such people highly value outcome transparency but might see additional process transparency as illegitimate “red tape” (Schnell et al., 2023). Meanwhile, other people prioritize the political value of due process and would conversely see decisions made with little process transparency as illegitimate (Schnell et al., 2023). The effectiveness of transparency policies in achieving public trust and participation is therefore highly dependent on how a given policy interacts with other political values that stakeholders prioritize.

Given the political nature of transparency, administrators must exercise great care in pursuing it should they wish to increase public participation and trust in their agency. The communicative conception of transparency is most helpful here. Through communication, administrators can discover what political values their stakeholders prioritize. This allows them to craft interpretations around the information they release that appeal to the public's political values, assist its understanding, and increase perceived transparency (Schnell et al., 2023). Additionally, administrators must be sure they are not pursuing transparency at the expense of other important political values. Scholars have identified somewhere between 72 and 538 values that the public wishes to see pursued by administrators (Nabatchi, 2017). While these studies consistently identify transparency as important, it is almost never considered to be among the most important values (Schnell et al., 2023). Especially given the myriad of interpretations assigned to it, administrators risk decreasing public trust and participation by prioritizing transparency above other, more important political values (Schnell, 2022).

### **Transparency's Beneficial Effects on Administrators**

The final two benefits associated with administrative transparency revolve around its impact on administrators rather than the public at large. These hypotheses are grounded in principal-agent game theory, which holds that agents are often incentivized to act in ways that undermine the objectives of the principals they serve (Albu & Flyverbom, 2016). In the case of public administration, this refers to administrators – the agents – using public resources to serve their own ends rather than pursuing the objectives of the people – their principal. Unfortunately, this is a widespread problem. For example, nearly half of all purchases put onto government credit cards end up being classified as improper, fraudulent, or embezzled (Kettl, 2021). The first step in curbing these instances of abuse is through transparency. Psychologists have found that

people behave better when their actions are being watched – even if those watching them are powerless to stop them (Porumbescu et al., 2017). This means that greater transparency, even on its own, can pressure administrators into more effectively pursuing the public interest.

While this claim comes across as highly theoretical, there is much research available that validates it empirically. For instance, the positive relationship between increased transparency and improved fiscal responsibility is one of the strongest and most consistently identified across all of the transparency literature (Cucciniello et al., 2016). Administrators who know their budgeting data will be released to the public are simply less willing to run budget deficits in the pursuit of opportunistic goals. Transparency – specifically along its micro-dimension – may have positive impacts on street-level bureaucrats as well. One study found that outcome transparency enhanced both bureaucrats' accordance with their legal responsibilities as well as the accommodation they afforded to the citizens they interacted with (de Boer & Eshuis, 2018). Finally, Michener argues that current research actually undervalues the positive impact transparency has on agency performance (2018). Most studies focus exclusively on user-centered benefits at the expense of other potential benefits like increased state capacity, improved agency coordination, and greater government professionalization (Michener, 2018).

Most important, though, is transparency's connection to accountability. Accountability is a relationship in which administrators must answer to the public regarding their pursuit of the public's objectives (Kettl, 2021). Crucially, the public must then have the power to sanction or reward the administrator based on their performance. This often takes the form of legislators – the public's representatives – giving administrators more or less resources and administrative freedom based on how well they pursue agency objectives (Kettl, 2021). Accountability is essential for good governance and is often called the foundation of public administration (Kettl,

2021). It ensures that administrators internalize the consequences – both good and bad – of the actions they take and the outcomes they create. Without accountability, administrators would be free to act however they would like with no regard for the public good (Kettl, 2021). In fact, this is exactly what happens. Countries with weak accountability mechanisms are consistently found to have higher levels of corruption and more frequent abuses of public resources (Lyrio et al., 2018). While it is important to remember that transparency is not the same as accountability, it is a prerequisite for accountability to be in place. By giving the public access to information, transparency enables the scrutiny and monitoring of administrators' actions. Without this, it would be impossible to detect and sanction abuses of public power (Bauhr & Grimes, 2017).

### **The Tradeoffs of Pursuing Transparency**

Yet, while the benefits of administrative transparency are highly promising, there is another strain of literature that urges caution. Like any administrative decision, pursuing more transparency comes with tradeoffs and unintended consequences. The most obvious of these is that increased transparency comes at the cost of state secrecy. And while secrecy is often assigned a negative connotation, there are many circumstances in which it is necessary and useful. The most common instance of this is in cases of national security, where the release of information might endanger individuals' safety (Fenster, 2017). For example, while the documents Edward Snowden leaked in 2013 might have greatly increased the transparency of intelligence agencies, Congressional reports also claim that they revealed vital secrets that “protect American troops overseas” (Dozier, 2014). Secrecy is also important for administrative risk management. Documenting risks that may exist is a vital step in managing them effectively, but being transparent with this information would open up administrators to political attacks. If something goes wrong, which is almost guaranteed when administering complex public

programs, a paper trail detailing risks in advance is sure to draw criticism from legislators and reporters (Kettl, 2021). This can disincentivize administrators from accurately assessing risks in the first place and thus prevent effective administration.

Secrecy is also helpful in promoting effective decision-making. Administrative decisions are always political and always come with tradeoffs (Kettl, 2021). As such, administrators must routinely make difficult judgments while balancing the political pressures they face. Behind closed doors, administrators can approach these decisions rationally; they can make the choice that generates the most net benefits and widespread political support. But when making decisions publicly, administrators face much more direct and intense political pressure from their core constituencies (Schnell, 2022). Balancing political pressures can come to be seen as conspiring with an enemy, while pursuing rational policies can be seen as ignoring the will of the public. The result is that administrators who are watched harden their ideological positions, refrain from democratic negotiation, and ultimately become less effective deliberators (Pozen, 2018). That is, if administrators are even willing to make decisions. Studies consistently show that the more an individual's decisions are scrutinized, the more that individual engages in decision-avoidance strategies (Hall et al., 2015). In public administration, this often manifests in administrators delegating decisions up the chain of command, only making decisions that can be easily defended, and taking fewer innovative risks. In other words, they avoid striving to do their job effectively.

There is also a growing body of evidence that more administrative transparency can actually decrease government legitimacy and trust among the public rather than increase it (Albu & Flyverbom, 2016). It is no secret that the American public is growing more ideologically partisan (Schnell, 2022). That partisanship not only affects the way that people vote but also the

way they interact with government information. People generally reason their way to conclusions they favor (Epley & Gilovich, 2016). In a polarized political climate, this leads to people filtering the information they receive through pre-existing ideological biases and worldviews (Schnell, 2022). Most of these worldviews – particularly the ever-popular neoliberal, conservative, and libertarian worldviews – begin from the assumption that government does not work well (Kettl, 2021). This means that, when the government releases some unfiltered piece of information, most people will interpret it with the sole goal of identifying administrative faults. This can only serve to decrease the trust they have in government agencies, regardless of what the objective interpretation of the information might be. This explains why the relationship between transparency and trust in government is the only one that the plurality of transparency studies find to be negative (Cucciniello et al., 2016). Lower trust can then incentivize corruption and ineffective administration by allowing for blame externalization (Schnell, 2022).

Finally, it is widely recognized that administrative transparency necessitates a tradeoff with administrative efficiency (Michener, 2018). Being transparent does not happen automatically, but instead requires expending resources and the capacity of agency staff. Resources and capacity that, given the tight budgets that constrain most federal agencies, would likely be put to more efficient use elsewhere (Kettl, 2021). Take, for example, the impact of the Freedom of Information Act. The number of FOIA requests has grown rapidly in recent years (Porumbescu et al., 2022). This means that administrators have needed to consistently dedicate more and more of their attention to fulfilling these requests. This burden has become so great that many scholars blame the act for paralyzing the U.S. government (Prozen, 2018). And the Freedom of Information Act is only one of the many transparency requirements that most administrators must abide by. The cumulative effect of these requirements is excessive red tape,



lengthy delays in agency action, and little money or time being left over for administrators to actually accomplish their jobs (Kettl, 2021).

### **The Futility of Achieving Optimal Transparency**

These tradeoffs are enough to dispel any argument that pursuing increased administrative transparency is always beneficial. But there is another argument that should also be given consideration: achieving transparency is ultimately an unattainable goal. Fenster argues that all efforts to achieve some optimal level of transparency rely on three suspect assumptions (2015). First, that the government constitutes a single producer and repositor of information. This assumption relies on the image of the government as one organization, united vertically by a straightforward chain of command. Yet, in actuality, the government functions nothing like this. Most of the work the federal government does is instead contracted out to private providers or implemented through partnerships with state and local governments (Kettl, 2021). Administration today is more about managing horizontal partnerships than managing vertical hierarchies. Organizational boundaries, rivalries, and disputes often result in ambiguous, partial, and dispersed record-keeping (Fenster, 2015). Even the administrator responsible for a program can have a difficult time assembling all the information they need to accurately evaluate their program. This explains why Freedom of Information requests can become such headaches: administrators themselves may need to spend considerable energy tracking down the information citizens request.

The second assumption that transparency advocates make is believing that government information constitutes a clear message that can be isolated and disclosed (Fenster, 2015). It is important to remember that government records are always assembled by people. Records

therefore end up reflecting the biases people hold as well as the information they lack. No government records are completely comprehensive or unfiltered. At best, these records can only serve as vague clues as to what is really happening within government agencies (Fenster, 2015). And that is assuming that the information was recorded in the first place. Bureaucrats routinely transmit information orally, use personal emails or text messages to communicate, have secret meetings that are not recorded, and destroy or lose outdated documents. Furthermore, there is just some information that is not reducible to a medium of communication (Fenster, 2015). None of this information is recorded, and therefore it cannot be disclosed to the public.

The final assumption is that there is a public which eagerly awaits the disclosure of government information. In reality, most people do not give much thought to the government or the information which it releases (Kettl, 2021). For this reason, many scholars argue that “the public” exists more as a theoretical construct than as a real group with which transparency as a relationship can be maintained (Fenster, 2015).

### **The Situational Consideration of Transparency**

Considering the political nature, inherent tradeoffs, and common faulty assumptions of transparency together, it becomes clear that transparency is not the unequivocal good that many make it out to be. There are many administrative circumstances in which increased transparency is a foolish or unrealistic goal. That being said, there still exists all the evidence that access to government information comes with many needed benefits. Scholars argue that these insights do not have to exist in contradiction. In other words, the discussion should not be on whether transparency is entirely good or entirely bad (Cucciniello et al., 2016). Instead, administrators and citizens should use the available knowledge on transparency to gauge its utility in specific

situations. No two circumstances are the same, and good administration requires adapting general lessons to meet special needs (Kettl, 2021).

But before going into best practices for administrators – which largely elude broad recommendations – there are certain situations that have presented scholars with straightforward answers. The first of these conditions involves the policy domain under consideration. Research consistently shows that citizens almost never respond to information on “taboo” policy domains positively (Porumbescu et al., 2017). These are policy domains that revolve around “sacred” values such as human life. In practice, administrators must make difficult decisions like evaluating the worth of saving an additional life (Kettl, 2021). But despite the necessity of these decisions for implementing policy, most citizens refuse to engage with them theoretically. Such tradeoffs make people uncomfortable, and more information as to how administrators dealt with them tends to only accentuate that discomfort and decrease public trust (Porumbescu et al., 2017). It is for this reason that administrators in these policy areas – such as national security or health policy – should generally err on the side of secrecy rather than transparency.

The other condition is whether the intended recipients of government information are engaged or unengaged citizens. Piotrowski et al. find convincing evidence that these two groups respond to different kinds of transparency in different ways (2017). Unengaged citizens typically require communicative transparency as they lack the capacity to interpret government information. Conversely, engaged citizens typically prefer unfiltered access to information as they see administrators’ interpretations as attempts to obscure and “spin” (Piotrowski et al., 2017). Administrators should keep these differences in mind when determining what method of transparency is best for fostering understanding and trust with their stakeholders.

## Conclusion

Administrators should use this body of knowledge to advocate for and implement smarter transparency policies. Three general lessons can be taken from it that administrators should keep in mind when approaching transparency in their agencies. The first is that transparency does indeed come with many benefits and is absolutely necessary for the proper functioning of a democratic government. Any agency that attempts to significantly do away with transparency is doomed to suffer from ineffective administration. Second, transparency encompasses a myriad of distinct conceptualizations, though communicative transparency is typically the most effective in practice. This is because communicative transparency best allows administrators to understand and respond to the needs and political values of their stakeholders, and also because most members of the public are unengaged. Third, the unconstrained pursuit of transparency eventually produces more harm than benefit. Because of this, administrators should consider the unique tradeoffs, assumptions, and circumstances surrounding any proposed transparency policy to determine whether its benefits outweigh its costs.

Administrators should ask themselves six questions to better understand the specific circumstances they face. First, is there a group of stakeholders that need more information, and what information do they need? Answering this allows administrators to avoid the often faulty “awaiting public” assumption while also ensuring that they don’t release so much information that it overloads stakeholders’ cognitive capacities. Second, what are the political values of these stakeholders? Answering this tells administrators how their stakeholders value transparency as well as how they should weigh pursuing transparency against other political values. Third, where is the information that would satisfy stakeholders’ needs recorded, and is it readily available? Answering this helps administrators avoid the faulty assumption that the information must exist;

it also tells them how much agency capacity would be required to obtain it. Fifth, how can the information be presented in a way that maximizes stakeholder understanding and trust?

Answering this tells administrators how they might need to filter and interpret information before releasing it. Finally, does the policy area under consideration deal with “taboo” subjects the public may not positively engage with? Answering this tells administrators whether they should bias their judgement towards secrecy or transparency. With the answers to these questions, administrators should have enough knowledge of their circumstances to predict the outcomes of a given transparency policy. It is only with these informed outcome predictions that administrators can determine whether the policy is beneficial and should be pursued.

This is not to say that the administration community now knows everything it needs to know about transparency. As the recent boom in literature has shown, there is still much left to discover. The main need in the field moving forward is a transition to studies that rely on observational or experimental data; most of the papers on transparency instead rely on theories or survey data. While such studies are still useful, they ultimately keep the knowledge of transparency trapped in the world of abstractions rather than in the real world of implementation and outcomes. It is no surprise, then, that studies relying on observational and empirical data often find transparency to be slightly more harmful and less effective than studies that rely on theory or survey data. More observational and experimental studies will be necessary to determine transparency’s precise relationship to variables like public trust, public participation, administrative effectiveness, and more.

Additionally, a large problem with current studies is that authors are often talking past one another due to transparency’s wide range of definitions. One scholar might be discussing communicative transparency at the micro-level, while another scholar is discussing informational

transparency at the macro-level. This leads to findings that are ambiguous both in terms of interpretation and their connection to the broader literature. To avoid this, scholars need to more narrowly define the kind of transparency their papers are studying as well as clarify the level at which they are studying it. This can propel the field by easing knowledge sharing and producing more exact findings.

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