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human relations**The Dialogic Performativity of Secrecy and Transparency**

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The Dialogic Performativity of Secrecy and Transparency**The Dialogic Performativity of Secrecy and Transparency****Ziyun Fan¹****University of York, UK****Lars Thøger Christensen****Copenhagen Business School, Denmark**

The dialogic principle allows us to maintain duality at the heart of unity. It associates two terms that are at the same time complementary and antagonistic (Morin, 2008, p.49).

Knowing and not knowing, transparency and the lack of it are not rigid and mutually incompatible opposites. Rather they appear as “symbiotic” moments that depend on each other and complement one another. Transparency and secrecy can have similar and even the same functions and consequences, and they can overlap and merge with one another (Owetschkin & Berger, 2019, p.6).

Abstract

How does the pursuit of transparency and insight have a tendency to produce secrecy? And vice versa? In popular and political discourse, secrecy and transparency are usually depicted as mutually exclusive practices. At the same time, we know from extant research that the two are closely related, that they each have performative effects, and tend to encroach on each other. The inseparability and performative dynamics between the two, however, remains to be unfolded. This critical essay revisits the secrecy-transparency relationship through the lens of Edgar Morin’s dialogical principle. From this perspective, we argue that secrecy-transparency dialogics perform as a complex whole, involving both complementary and

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3 antagonistic forces. As an illustration of dialogic performativity, we draw on the phenomenon
4 and practice of ‘open meetings’ in public sector organizations. Specifically, we argue that the
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6 and practice of ‘open meetings’ in public sector organizations. Specifically, we argue that the
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8 ambiguous fascination with knowing and not knowing create conditions for simulated insight
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10 and self-imposed conformity in ways that recalibrate the relationship between transparency
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12 and secrecy. On this background, we call for renewed critical and reflexive engagement with
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14 the transparency ideal and its presumed antipode, secrecy.
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16
17 Keywords: Secrecy, Transparency, Secrecy-transparency dynamics, Dialogics,
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19 Performativity
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21 Introduction

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23 Although the academic literature has recognized that transparency goes hand in hand with
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25 secrecy (e.g., Albu & Flyverbom, 2019; Birchall, 2021; Cronin, 2020; Fenster, 2017;
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27 Owetschkin & Berger, 2019; Ringel, 2019; see also Simmel, 1906/1950), popular and political
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29 rhetoric continues to depict the two as opposing and antagonistic forces (Lord, 2006; Oliver,
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31 2004; Rawlins, 2009; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016; Tapscott & Ticoll, 2003). Fuelled
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33 by still more frequent disclosures of corporate and political misconduct, the notion that secrecy
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35 and transparency are mutually exclusive is gaining further ground. Critical attention attracted
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37 by secrecy has been intensified in contemporary society directing, for example, the focus of
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39 inquisitive journalists and NGOs towards the hidden and invisible, sharpening the anti-secrecy
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41 rhetoric of politicians, and engaging regulators in setting and managing new standards for
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43 openness and accountability. The assumption seems to be, as Ringel (2019, p.707) critically
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45 observes, that “[t]he more thorough disclosure practices are implemented, the less secrecy
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47 prevails” (see also Fan & Liu, 2022).
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54 Yet, while such efforts may be driven by genuine intentions to increase public insight,
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56 they often fail to recognize how secrecy is embedded in all transparency efforts and vice versa.
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58 When, for example, meetings in public sector organizations are *public by decree* and – in the
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3 name of transparency – recorded or otherwise documented for public consumption, new
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5 secrecy practices tend to emerge (Ringel, 2019; see also Piotrowski & Borry, 2010). In order
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7 to, for example, discuss confidential or person-sensitive material that cannot be aired in
8
9 conventional meetings, decision makers in public organizations may convene informally
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11 outside workplace premises or under the banners of “non-meetings”. Such secrecy practices,
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13 engendered by the transparency rule itself, can only work organizationally if it is itself
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15 transparent to (at least some) organizational members. At the same time, the potential for such
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17 practices to become known to outsiders can result in both intensified transparency demands
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19 and new circles of secrecy practices. The phenomenon of open meetings in public sector
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21 organizations, where transparency is officially mandated and celebrated but nonetheless
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23 intimately related to secrecy, will be used to illustrate our points throughout the paper.
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29 That said, such secrecy-transparency relationship is not necessarily confined to public
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31 sector organizations, although it is likely to attain a specific intensity in that particular context.
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33 Transparency and secrecy are related in all types of organizations not only because full
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35 transparency can be counterproductive and prevent important information from being aired or
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37 considered (e.g., Bok, 1982) or because organizations necessarily have something to hide (cf.
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39 Eisenberg, 1982), but also because transparency is inherently selective, illuminating certain
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41 practices while leaving others in the dark (Christensen & Cheney, 2015). Increasing
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43 transparency may not simply decrease secrecy or the other way around. Rather, as we shall
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45 argue, they depend on each other to achieve their respective goals. Understanding such
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47 interdependency is critical in today's world where the increased social premium on
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49 transparency continuously reshapes and redefines what are considered illegitimate forms of
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51 secrecy and, accordingly, determines what is relevant or necessary to know.
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57 Attempts to understand the complexities of the secrecy-transparency relationship
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59 ought to consider both its epistemological and social dimensions – epistemological, because
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3 the searchlight of transparency endeavors inevitably is limited; and social, because any
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5 ambition to expose simultaneously stimulates a desire to pretend, pose, and idealize. Because
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7 of these tendencies, many transparency practices produce secrecy in new shapes (Baudrillard
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9 1988). In this paper, we draw on the phenomenon of open meetings to argue that secrecy and
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11 transparency are performative practices that not simply oppose each other, but also – and
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13 simultaneously – produce their presumed antipodes. By *performativity* we refer to the view
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15 that organizational and social realities are continuously enacted and constituted through
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17 discourse, rituals, and other social practices. Describing such practices as performative, in other
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19 words, means to acknowledge that they are *doing* and accomplishing something with potential
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21 consequences for social life (Butler, 1997, 1999; Gond et al., 2016; Taylor & van Every, 2000).
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27 The performativity of secrecy and transparency has been noted in previous works,
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29 describing how transparency measures and rituals produce new types of opacity (Albu &
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31 Flyverbom, 2019; Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015; Fenster, 2006; Ringel, 2019), how secrecy
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33 involves revelation (Fan & Grey, 2021; Fan & Liu, 2022) and keeps reappearing in new guises
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35 (Owetschkin & Berger, 2019), and how both secrecy and transparency are needed to
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37 compensate for each other's deficiencies (Bok, 1982). Yet, the performative dynamics of the
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39 secrecy-transparency relationship remains unspecified. In this paper, we set out to expand on
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41 the observation that secrecy and transparency not simply impinge on each other but perform
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43 with and through each other in several different ways.
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48 To this purpose, we draw on Morin's (1992) discussion of *dialogic* and his observation
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50 that complex systems are constituted by an interplay between logics that are at once
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52 antagonistic and complementary. By bringing attention to such dynamics, our contribution to
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54 the existing literature is twofold. First, we extend existing understandings of the secrecy-
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56 transparency relationship by discussing and illustrating how secrecy and transparency perform
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58 with and through each other. 'Secrecy-transparency performativity', we argue, is a system that
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3 performs as a complex whole, rather than through its constitutive parts. Second, by
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5 investigating the secrecy-transparency relationship through the lens of dialogic, the paper
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7 draws attention to Morin's insightful work that, while powerfully explaining how
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9 contradictions contribute to systemic dynamism (see also Morin, 1984), remains to be explored
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11 in organization studies.
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15 By engaging with the dialogic performativity of secrecy and transparency and
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17 developing the paper in an essay style, we hope to inspire renewed critical engagement among
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19 politicians, regulators, journalists, and public audiences with the revered ideal of transparency
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21 and its presumed antipode, secrecy. In doing so, our focus is not organizations deliberately
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23 designed to operate in the dark (see Scott, 2013). Rather, given the growing social and political
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25 significance of the topic, we find it important to focus on organizations and social actors that
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27 come across in everyday life as being most open and candid about their practices. Such focus
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29 is particularly pertinent when we recognize that transparency practices inevitably cultivate
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31 opacity (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015; Fenster, 2006; Ringel, 2019) and tend to offer more
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33 power to social actors who are able to operate opaquely within current transparency regimes
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35 (e.g., Birchall, 2021; Cronin, 2020).
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Secrecy, Transparency, and the Nexus Between Them

Secrecy: A process of informational and social (re)organization

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47 The growing, yet limited, scholarship on secrecy has differentiated secrecy from 'secrets',
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49 defining the latter as information that is unknown to others. As there are things secret that are
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51 not deliberately concealed (Derrida & Ferraris, 2011), what is unknown is not necessarily
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53 equivalent to what is *kept* secret. Secrecy usually refers to processes of *intentionally* blocking
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55 information about something from reaching particular parties (Bok, 1982; Simmel, 1906/1950).
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57 Secrecy, thus, might be considered "a method for handling concealed information" (Bellman,
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3 1981, p.8) that sets apart keepers of particular knowledge from those who are excluded from it
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5 (Simmel, 1906/1950). When something is intentionally kept secret, it becomes clear that there
6
7 is more to it than its informational content.
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10 Through the structuring of concealment, secrecy infuses and shapes informational and
11
12 social interactions. As a case in point, Gusterson's (1998) ethnographic study of the Lawrence
13
14 Livermore nuclear weapons laboratory shows how such structuring is employed strategically
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16 in intelligence and military policies. Specifically, Gusterson illustrates how secrecy was
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18 organized on a 'need to know' basis that categorized individuals at work: "without a green
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20 badge, a scientist is not a full adult member of the laboratory...Scientists without green badges
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22 cannot visit their green-badged colleagues in their offices, unless chaperoned" (1998, p.71).
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24 Being certified as 'needing to know' involves access to otherwise concealed knowledge. This
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26 example, which equally applies to participants in unofficial meetings or "non-meetings"
27
28 mentioned previously, illustrates an inherent paradox at the core of secrecy: while insiders
29
30 might be told that the secret is not to be revealed and are trusted to keep the secret, they are
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32 themselves being told the hidden information (Bellman, 1981; Fan, Costas & Grey, 2017; Fan
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34 & Dawson, 2022). Such a double frame is embedded in the practices of secrecy as it is
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36 communicatively organized and yet protected from communication. What makes secrecy
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38 vulnerable or 'impure' (Birchall, 2021; Fan & Liu, 2022) is therefore secrecy itself.
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45 Consequently, serving as a boundary-drawing mechanism for secrecy, the organizing
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47 character of the 'need to know' basis indicates a profound ambivalence of the boundary itself:
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49 how do we know if we need to know something? And, if we do not know what we need to
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51 know, how do we get to know it; yet, once we know something that we do not need to know,
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53 we cannot 'unknow' it (Costas & Grey, 2016, p.81). Secrecy organizes relational and possibly
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55 ambiguous maps, only known to insiders, that constitute "pathways through which information
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57 is exchanged and interaction occur every day" (Courpasson & Younes, 2018, p.284; see also
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3 Liu & Fan, 2022). The organization of secrecy, in other words, marks an affirmational identity
4 and membership that essentially involves insight for members. As such, secrecy in this way is
5 inherently performative (Herzfeld, 2009), even though the transparency it produces is only for
6 the few.
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The idea and promise of transparency

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17 In contemporary society, transparency is presented as a necessary antidote to illegitimate forms
18 of secrecy (Henriques, 2007; Lord, 2006; Oliver, 2004; Rawlins, 2009; Schnackenberg &
19 Tomlinson, 2016). Associated with practices such as information accessibility, labeling,
20 auditing, and open meetings (Fung, et al., 2007; Garsten & de Montoya, 2008; Heald, 2006a;
21 Power, 1997), transparency has become one of the most powerful and seductive concepts in
22 contemporary public discourse (Owetschkin & Berger, 2019). In the context of organization,
23 transparency is celebrated for its ability to facilitate knowledge sharing, accountability, and
24 due diligence. As such, it is expected to lead to better and more acceptable organizational
25 practices (Strathern, 2000; see also Tapscott & Ticoll, 2003).
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38 Transparency's modernist promise is to illuminate and reveal what used to be hidden.
39 As such, it is regarded as an indispensable source of insight, knowledge, and eventually,
40 emancipation (Vattimo, 1992). While this promise has ancient roots (Hood, 2006), modernity
41 explicitly celebrates transparency as a critical dimension of reason, rationality, and good
42 governance, especially in public organizations (e.g., Florini, 2007; Garsten & de Montoya,
43 2008; Piotrowski, 2010). The ideal of modern thought is to enhance the capacity to understand
44 what goes on behind the façade in order to liberate the individual from the superstitions and
45 repressions of authoritative regimes. Weber's (1968) idealized description of modern society
46 as 'disenchanted', for example, depicted a secularized society in which insight, achieved via
47 rational practices and scientific principles, replaces faith and superstition (Nisbet, 1966).
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3 While transparency has become an undisputed value in and of itself, a value that is
4 “more often preached than practiced, more often invoked than defined” (Hood, 2006, p.1; see
5 also Tsoukas, 1997), recurrent critique of transparency has revealed it as an equivocal and
6 perhaps even misguided ideal (e.g., Birchall, 2021; Han, 2012; Lessig, 2009). Still, the
7 confidence in transparency as a mechanism for insight and knowledge continues to be on the
8 rise (Owetschkin & Berger, 2019). The same discrepancy is at play in the context of
9 organization. Critical organization scholars, thus, have problematized the organizational
10 transparency pursuit, pointing out its questionable ontological and epistemological
11 assumptions, its tensions with other organizational practices, and its inadvertent consequences
12 for organizations and the larger society (e.g., Albu & Flyverbom, 2019; Albu & Ringel, 2018;
13 Christensen & Cheney, 2015; Fenster, 2006; Garsten & Montoya, 2008). Nonetheless,
14 transparency is continually employed as an ethical practice and path necessary to cure the
15 mistrust faced by many contemporary organizations. As we shall argue below, this elevated
16 status of transparency is performative in several different ways that link its pursuit to secrecy.
17 While secrecy and transparency seem to point in opposite directions – one unethical, the other
18 ethical – they are mutually constituted and more closely related than generally considered. It
19 is, in other words, theoretically and practically meaningless to address one without considering
20 the other.

The nexus between secrecy and transparency

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49 More than a century ago, Simmel (1906/1950) outlined the social significance of secrecy and
50 its potential relationship to publicity, which was the term he used for transparency. Arguing
51 that secrecy is a “universal sociological form” (p.463) that channels and facilitates human
52 interaction, Simmel (1906) pointed out that knowing inevitably involves a mixture of insight
53 and ignorance, revelation and concealment. Human associations, he emphasized, “require a
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definite ratio of secrecy which merely changes its objects” (1906, p.467). Thus, while increased transparency may reduce certain types of concealment, secrecy is likely to reappear elsewhere or in a different shape such that the space between the two is constantly “recalibrated”, as Owetschkin and Berger (2019, p.6) put it. Secrecy, in other words, cannot be eliminated by increasing transparency as the borders between the two are constantly shifting. Simmel not only depicted secrecy as inevitable, but also considered it indispensable in enriching our social reality, arguing that it “produces an immense enlargement of life: numerous content of life cannot even emerge in the presence of full publicity” (Simmel, 1906/1950, p.330). Several recent writings have applied this understanding of secrecy to organizational life.

In her book *Secrets: On the ethics of concealment and revelation*, Bok (1982) explains how secrecy and transparency are necessary to counterbalance each other in democratic societies. Although each can be harmful in their side effects, they are both likely to be more manipulative without some influence from the other. Thus, while secrecy without transparency allows those in power to uphold unfair practices and limit popular participation, transparency without some secrecy tends to reduce the quality of policy-making in administrative practices (see also Dufresne & Offstein, 2008; Eisenberg, 1984). If, for example, public policymakers, advisors, and contributors are required to do everything in the open, they might display more established and less controversial views aligned with dominant political and public rhetoric (see also Heald, 2006b). This, Bok argues, could result in the premature closure of creative but tentative ideas, and thereby reduce the potential for learning and innovation.

- While Bok’s (1982) discussion focuses on administrative and governmental secrecy, Costas and Grey (2014; 2016) argue more generally that complex organizational structures as well as new forms of organizing might promote secrecy to the same extent as they promote knowledge sharing. Specifically, they emphasize the political and social nature of information (Costas & Grey,

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2014) that makes the relationship between transparency and secrecy “more intricate than commonly assumed” (Costas & Grey, 2016, p.54). They, however, do not address further what such intricate relationships might be. Along the same lines, Fan and Liu (2022) draw on archival stories to discuss how information concealment as the site and process that sustains secrecy can simultaneously become the site where secrecy is *revealed*. While they emphasize that concealment and revelation are mutually constitutive through their ongoing oppositions, they draw no explicit link to the issue of transparency.

A number of writings have explicitly addressed the mutual constitution of secrecy and transparency. Albu and Flyverbom (2019), for example, argue that transparency measures and practices are simultaneously practices of opacity because they affect what can be seen and known (see also Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015; Fenster, 2006). While they mention that secrecy and transparency can co-exist and have paradoxical relations (2019, p.279), the intricacies of that particular relationship are left unspecified. Ringel (2019) provides a more specific analysis of the transparency-secrecy relationship with his study of the German Pirate Party, a political party that celebrated and practiced open meetings in the early phases of its election. Specifically, Ringel discusses the transparency-secrecy interplay as a frontstage-backstage dynamic. This vocabulary, borrowed from Goffman (1959), suggests that social actors engage in impression management when operating frontstage, that is, whenever they are exposed to the gaze of others. Backstage, by contrast, is where they can relax and drop their fronts. This implies, as Goffman (1959) pointed out, that backstage is an arena where the frontstage performance is “knowingly contradicted” (p.114). Ringel (2019) uses this insight to discuss the performative nature of secrecy and transparency and to suggest that new forms of secrecy emerge in reaction to transparency measures.

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3 Cronin (2020) approaches the relationship between secrecy and transparency in the
4 domain of public relations. Describing secrecy and transparency as a “composite entity” (p.226)
5 or as “conjoined twins” (p.230), Cronin (2020) centrally argues that the shifting dynamics
6 between the two are not merely situated in *existing* social relations, but actively contribute to
7 their constitution. Suggesting that public relations play an active role in mediating the secrecy-
8 transparency dynamics and that this role may protect the rules of the capitalist game, she
9 emphasizes that neither secrecy nor transparency should be presumed as positive or negative
10 in their social and political impact. While acknowledging that the mutual constitution between
11 secrecy and transparency is significant and under-investigated, Cronin’s specific focus on the
12 public relations domain reveals only a singular dimension of the complexity.
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26 Elaborating on the image of secrecy and transparency as “conjoined twins” (p.3),
27 Birchall (2021) describes each of them as “singular and unique, but essentially connected,
28 sharing vital functions, and only severable by extreme measures and at some considerable risk”
29 (p.4). Both “fail to stay pure”, as Birchall (2021, p.9) puts it, and might even encroach on each
30 other in ways that confuse the observer to think that one is the other. Acknowledging in line
31 with Simmel’s work that secrecy is unavoidable, Birchall is critical especially of transparency
32 practices that promote types of knowledge creation useful to the preservation of the status quo.
33 A radical approach, she argues, involves questioning whether “the opposition between secrecy
34 and transparency is sustainable” (2021, p.54; see also Birchall, 2011a, 2011b).
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47 These insights are all highly significant as they disrupt the one-dimensional thinking
48 that dominates public and political discourse on secrecy and transparency. Acknowledging the
49 mutual impingement and constitution of secrecy and transparency, however, is only a first
50 important step toward a reconceptualization of these significant dimensions of social life. The
51 next step is to elaborate on the performative dynamics involved when secrecy and transparency
52 not only co-exist and encroach on each other but perform with and through each other.
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The Dialogic Performativity of Secrecy and Transparency

Dialogic Performativity

Claiming that the secrecy-transparency relationship is performative means to adopt a “non-representational view of discourse”, that is, to acknowledge that the use of these terms and their interconnections not simply describe, but accomplish or constitute social reality (Gond et al., 2016, p.441; see also Ashcraft, et al., 2009; Taylor & van Every, 2000). As Gond et al. (2016) point out, understandings of performativity in the context of organization and management theory often take their point of departure in Austin’s (1962) Speech Act Theory and its notion of doing things with words. As Austin and later Searle (1969) made clear, utterances have potential to accomplish things, provided the circumstances or ‘felicity conditions’ such as procedures, participants, and intentions are right. In contemporary society where transparency is considered a necessary antidote to illegitimate forms of secrecy, the call for transparency is a significant speech act that is very difficult to ignore or resist (Vogelmann, 2019).

To fully capture its organizational and social dynamics, however, this view on performativity needs to be expanded. With its primary focus on speech acts in conventional settings where felicity conditions are clear-cut and participants have fairly well-defined roles (e.g., McKinlay, 2011), Austin’s version tends to neglect performativity’s temporal, social, and systemic complexities (e.g., Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen, 2021). Moreover, it reduces performativity to explicit and singular speech acts realized by speaking subjects. Yet, the productive force (or “social magic”) of performativity, as Butler (1999, p.124) formulates it, is “extra-linguistic”. Performativity, Butler argues, must be rethought as ambiguous social rituals that are repeatedly re-enacted: “There need be no subject who initiates or enunciates the performative process, only a reiteration of a set of social relations within which theory emerges with limited performative agency” (Butler, 2010, p.152). Specifically, she draws on Derrida to suggest that communicative constitution (of gender) is unstable and takes place only gradually

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3 through numerous reiterations. Emphasizing the provisional nature of performativity, the
4 significance of Butler's insights extends beyond gender studies to social dynamics more
5 broadly. Although communication often "misfires" (Austin, 1979, p.238), that is, fail to
6 perform as intended, the repeated iteration of particular values or ideals has "socially binding
7 consequences" (Butler, 2011, p.147). While such consequences may involve reinforcing
8 existing practices and understandings, others become 'counterperformatives' (MacKenzie,
9 2004) that contradict or undermine the presumed intentions of the performative.

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12 In this critical essay, we build upon this notion of performativity as a ritualized, yet
13 ambiguously re-enacted, practice with potential to add unexpected dynamics to social systems.
14 Such understanding allows us to unpack the inherent ambiguity of the secrecy-transparency
15 relationship and challenge the one-dimensional juxtaposition of secrecy and transparency as
16 antagonistic forces. To extend this view, we draw on the French sociologist and philosopher
17 Edgar Morin's writings on dialogics to analyze how secrecy and transparency simultaneously
18 constitute, challenge, and contradict each other as a form of 'dialogic performativity'.

The Dialogic Principle

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Morin (1992) uses his notion of *dialogic* to describe the nature of complex systems, including
societies and organizations. Such systems, Morin argues, are characterized by multiple logics
that are at once complementary and antagonistic with respect to one another. The terms
'dialogic' or 'dialogism' are often associated with the work of Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and his
description of the dynamic, interactive, and essentially polyphonic relationship between
authors, characters, and texts. Problematizing understandings of language use as unified
(*'monoglotic'*), Bakhtin emphasized the open-ended and diverse (*'heteroglot'*) nature of
utterances and their meaning (see also Holquist, 2002). While Morin's notion of dialogic holds

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3 the potential to encompass such characteristics of language use, he developed his particular
4 understanding of dialogic without focusing specifically on linguistics (Kofman, 1996).
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8 What Morin seeks to understand is how two or more logics that seem to rule out each
9 other can contribute to systemic unity without losing their distinct qualities. His complexity
10 theory characterizes dialogic as “the complete (complementary/concurrent/antagonistic)
11 association of logics which are collectively needed for the existence, functioning, and
12 development of an organized phenomenon” (Morin, 1986, p.98; translated in Kofman, 1996,
13 p.60). His examples of dialogics in living systems include unity/diversity, wisdom/madness,
14 openness/closure, order/disorder, chance/necessity, and individuality/collectivity (Morin,
15 2008). While these logics seemingly contradict and preclude each other, they serve the system
16 as a whole (Morin, 1986). In his book *Penser l'Europe*, Morin explains how the European
17 culture is influenced and shaped by complementary and antagonistic dynamics derived from
18 its Jewish, Christian, Greek, Roman (etc.) elements, each of which operates according to its
19 own logic (Morin, 1987). Organizations too are shaped by multiple, coexisting logics that are
20 at once antagonistic and complementary to organizational functioning. Examples of such
21 dialogics are integration/differentiation (e.g., Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), control/flexibility
22 (e.g., Achrol, 1991), and centralization/decentralization (e.g., Weick, 1987). Importantly, such
23 dialogics cannot be eliminated by imposing control and order.
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45 Morin’s point of departure and primary reference is the Hegelian and Marxian notion
46 of dialectics, which he finds too deterministic and rationalistic and therefore unable to account
47 for the performative complementarities of seemingly antagonistic logics (Kofman, 1996).
48 Whereas dialectics implies that opposing forces are dissolved (at least temporarily) in synthesis,
49 Morin’s notion of dialogics suggests that different and opposing logics *continue* to co-exist as
50 they neither alternate, replace, or annul each other (Morin, 2008), and that such co-existence
51 in turn serves and sustains the system as a whole (Morin, 1992). The unity of complex
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The Dialogic Performativity of Secrecy and Transparency

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3 phenomena, in other words, does not require an amalgamation of its constitutive elements and
4 their particular logics. The mutual interdependence of such involved logics, shaped by
5 complementary and opposing forces, ritualizes their persistence over time and gradually
6 (re)defines the system. Even though conflicting logics subject a system to multiple tensions,
7 crises, and sometimes, setbacks, they simultaneously serve the performativity of the system by
8 allowing it to stay vibrant and adaptive to different situations.

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10 Specifically, Morin argues that systemic dynamism is generated by organizational
11 recursion. Recursion or recursivity, he points out, “is a process where the products and the
12 effects are at the same time causes and producers of what produces them” (Morin, 2008, p. 49).
13 Morin illustrates such effects with the image of a whirlpool in which opposite forces meet and
14 generate a self-organizing entity. We briefly illustrated such recursivity up front when talking
15 about how open meetings tend to create new secrecies that produce new transparency initiatives,
16 new secrecy efforts and so forth. In the remainder of the paper, we unfold this point further by
17 adopting Morin’s dialogical perspective.

The Performativity of Secrecy-Transparency Dialogics: The Case of Open Meetings

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19 If secrecy and transparency are inseparable and mutually constituted, as extant research has
20 pointed out, how can we further characterize their antagonistic complementarity? While the
21 dialogic performativity between secrecy and transparency is carefully manufactured and
22 exploited in some cases, in others it emerges unwittingly behind the backs of social actors in
23 their efforts to reveal or conceal. In the following, we use the example of open meetings to
24 discuss and illustrate how the secrecy-transparency dialogic performs in organizational practice.

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56 *Knowing and not knowing in open meetings*
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The Dialogic Performativity of Secrecy and Transparency

Open meetings were initiated as part of the transparency ambition of democratic societies and became a legal practice in the United States under the label of ‘sunshine laws’ (Crowder, 2006; Piotrowski, 2010). As a mechanism for ‘transparency inwards’ (Heald, 2006a) that allows the general public to look inside from the outside, the notion of open meetings has become a widespread ethical principle for public organizations in democratic societies and, as such, a proxy for general participation in the decision-making of public organizations. Emphasizing that ‘we’ open up because ‘we’ have nothing to hide from ‘you’ reinforces the anti-secrecy mindset. At the same time, however, the ethical and even legal obligations of open meetings cultivate different formats of secrecy acts, such as ‘non-meetings’, as ‘legitimate reasons’ for certain not-to-disclose agendas, until the next revelation of a public organization scandal.

To understand how transparency and secrecy practices perform through each other in the context of open meetings, it is important first to acknowledge that demands for (more) transparency depend on secrecy, or at least on the supposition that some sort of illegitimate secrecy is at play. Such suspicion may be enough to justify new transparency initiatives and measures. Legitimizing the meaning and practices of transparency, secrecy may therefore be considered transparency’s “condition of possibility” (Birchall, 2011b, p.143; Phillips, 2011, p.160). At the same time, the type of transparency made possible by open meetings as well as the growing calls for information accessibility may themselves cultivate suspicions that something problematic remains to be unearthed (e.g., Christensen & Cheney, 2015). The assumed antagonism between secrecy and transparency, thus, defines and reinforces their complementarity. What stimulates such complementarity is a seductive, yet ambiguous, fascination with knowing and not knowing (see Baudrillard, 1990; Brown, 2001; Han, 2015; Schmitt, 1996). Such fascination is recursively performative, especially in the context of open meetings where knowing and not knowing continuously produce and justify each other.

The Dialogic Performativity of Secrecy and Transparency

Another ambiguous aspect of such fascination concerns the value and importance ascribed to, respectively, concealed and revealed information. Intentionally concealed information has a particular social status as it is perceived as more valuable and more true than other types of information: If the concealed information were not particularly interesting or attractive, then why would it be intentionally hidden? Having exclusive access to such information can increase one's status and power and strengthen one's belongingness to a social group, thereby contributing to a grammar of 'us'. As Simmel (1906/1950, p.332) pointed out, "For many individuals, property does not fully gain its significance with mere ownership, but only with the consciousness that others must do without it". Possession, in other words, provides a sense of privilege and status upheld by the recognition that one has access to a hidden realm that others do not. As such, it can generate an aristocratic sensation that one is more relevant and important to a social network than the 'knowing less' others (e.g., Courpasson & Younes, 2018; Fan & Grey, 2021).

When such information becomes generally accessible – for example, through open meetings – it may lose its particular allure. Openness without an air of secrecy is likely to produce indifference and apathy (Baudrillard, 1990; Han, 2015). The aristocratic sensation of ownership, however, can be (re)established if the topics addressed in open meetings are highly complex and difficult to fathom for laypersons (Henriques, 2007; see also Fung et al., 2007). Being in the know in such contexts can generate in-groups and associated feelings of superiority. The antagonistic complementarity of the secrecy-transparency dialogic, thus, performs and stimulates processes of social and informational differentiation.

Strategic information use in open meetings

The increased social premium on transparency force decision makers, especially in public organizations, to produce and display convincing signs of insight. Open meetings may serve

The Dialogic Performativity of Secrecy and Transparency

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3 such purpose. Yet, the ambiguous fascination with secrecy and transparency and their intricate
4 relationship can be exploited by organizations, politicians, and other actors to merely create an
5
6 relationship can be exploited by organizations, politicians, and other actors to merely create an
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8 *impression* of insight. Such practices may include, for example, careful selection and
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10 scheduling of released information, as well as strategic uses of informational comparisons,
11
12 ambiguity, and complexity.
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15 It has been demonstrated that organizations selectively disclose or leak information
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17 through ‘competitive signalling’ (e.g., Heil & Robertsen, 1991) and shrewdly manage the
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19 timing of such disclosures, sometimes with the intention of deflecting critique or handling
20
21 potential issues (see also O’Neill, 2006). In addition, many organizations deliberately use
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23 ambiguity to simultaneously reveal *and* conceal (Eisenberg, 1984; see also Etzioni, 2010). In
24
25 the context of open meetings, public officials often make long, time-wasting speeches with
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27 jargons and self-evident statistics for the purpose of ‘saying and revealing’, instead of
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29 facilitating sensemaking (e.g., Piotrowski & Borry, 2010). Such practices employed to simulate
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31 transparency without providing real insight are sometimes called “pseudo transparency”
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33 (Vujnovic & Kruckeberg, 2016, p.122), “zombie transparency” (Birchall, 2021, p.2), or “false
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35 clarity” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1987/2002, p.xvii), as their promise to offer insight “fails to
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37 deliver anything more than ready-made enlightenment” (Jarosinski, 2009, p.160).
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43 Even when complexity and ambiguity are avoided, the *volume* of information flow
44
45 can itself be a source of secrecy. While information access and availability are often considered
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47 proxies for transparency, information overload – sometimes described as “data bombing” or
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49 “snowing” (Cronin, 2020, p.223) – may hide the object of inquiry in plain sight (Stohl, et al.,
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51 2016). As Lacan argued in his seminar on Poe’s ‘Purloined Letter’, “the best way to hide
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53 something was to display it ostentatiously” (Phillips, 2011, p.161). As an extreme case of
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55 publishing documents of open meetings such as minutes, comments, and records, the US
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57 Security and Exchange Commission’s publicly documented database lists 200 gigabytes of
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The Dialogic Performativity of Secrecy and Transparency

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3 filings each year between 1996 and 2005 – amounting to roughly 15 million pages of text – a
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5 number that went up from 35 gigabytes a decade earlier (Roth, 2009, cited in Birchall, 2011b,
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7 p.145). Even with a generally accessible language, it is not likely for the public to digest such
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9 an amount of information. In such cases, transparency measures can be regarded as strategies
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11 for opacity through which secrecy reemerges in new shapes.
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15 This observation is radicalized in the writings of Baudrillard (1988; 1990). With his
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17 notion of communication ecstasy, he depicts a society in which the availability of information
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19 is ‘obscene’, because it illuminates objects in ways that resemble close-up photos in
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21 pornography. As he explains, “It is no longer the obscenity of the hidden, the repressed, the
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23 obscure, but that of the visible, the all-too-visible, the more visible-than-visible; it is the
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25 obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret and is entirely soluble in information and
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27 communication” (1988, p.22). The obscenity of information availability, Baudrillard argues,
28
29 does not mean that secrecy is disappearing. What disappears are the objects we seek to
30
31 understand. By illuminating them through rituals of transparency they “plunge back into the
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33 secret” (1988, p.35). This observation, which we shall further unfold below, illustrates the
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35 antagonistic complementarity between secrecy and transparency as a complex and recursive
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37 rhythm of emergence and disappearance.
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Self-imposed conformity in open meetings

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46 Meetings may be regarded as transparent as long as important discussions and decisions are
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48 made accessible to outside publics. In principle, this can be done retrospectively, that is, after
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50 the event. Yet, the notion of open meetings suggests that meetings are accessible in *real time*,
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52 for example through the use of videotaping or other types of recordings (cf. Heald, 2006a). The
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54 attraction of open meetings may, in fact, lie exactly in the possibility of observing processes of
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The Dialogic Performativity of Secrecy and Transparency

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3 deliberations and decision makings in the very moments they unfold. From a transparency
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5 perspective, however, this possibility is simultaneously the Achilles heel of open meetings.
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8 When decision makers know that everything they say and do – including not only
9
10 their accounts of prior decisions and their lines of argumentation but also their bodily gestures
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12 and their facial expressions – is observable to the public, they may be inclined to put on a show
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14 or “massage the truth”, as O’Neill (2002) puts it (cited in Heald, 2006b, p. 62). Such propensity
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16 is likely to be pronounced especially in open meetings involving “preliminary” discussions
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18 where meeting participants may be unwilling to share too much information about their
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20 preferences. Since open meetings, like other types of real time transparency, cannot be edited
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22 before they are publicized, they tend to encourage conformity to norms and expectations
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24 (Christensen & Cheney, 2015). Increasing transparency in such settings, for example by
25
26 installing more cameras and microphones and otherwise increasing the technical quality of
27
28 recordings, is likely to formalize meetings and normalize behaviors in ways that recreate
29
30 secrecy in new shapes. Drawing on Foucault (1977) who explained how the condition of being
31
32 closely watched instills self-discipline among those observed, Butler (2005) points out that
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34 official performances hide more than they reveal. Specifically, she argues that individuals when
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36 officially called upon to account for their choices and behaviors tend to submit to a narrative
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38 modus that can be recognized and accepted by others. Because such modus is not of the
39
40 person’s own making, but a reflection of prevailing norms, it will tend to obscure the very
41
42 subject that provides the account. Even with the best intentions to be open and honest,
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44 participants in open meetings are social actors to the extent of generating layers of secrecy that
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46 overshadow the initial transparency pursuit (see also Baudrillard, 1983).
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54 Open meetings, then, shift the emphasis from information provision to social
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56 performance and reproduction. As a specific type of synopticon (Mathiesen, 1997) – a notion
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58 describing ‘the many watching the few’ as opposed to Bentham’s panopticon where the few
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The Dialogic Performativity of Secrecy and Transparency

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3 are watching the many – open meetings create a system of self-control cloaked as audience
4 control. One result may be, as Piotrowski and Borry (2010) argue, that agendas discussed in
5 open meetings tend to remain more or less the same. Consequently, and more problematically,
6 the public who is granted access to the meetings will have to figure out themselves what is
7 going on under the veil of openness. As Birchall (2021) points out, any forms of open access
8 transfers the responsibility to make sense of and use the revealed information to the now
9 involved citizens. Citizens who gain access, she points out, are expected to be auditors, analysts,
10 and translators without having any real power and real insight.
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22 There are several reasons why transparency practices such as open meetings are
23 upheld despite their limitations. Firstly, openness signals that power is being transferred from
24 the inside to the outside and that the boundary between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ is being
25 rearranged. This allows the public to perceive itself as part of the ‘in-group’ for knowledge
26 possession, even if such perception is mistaken. Secondly, acts of revelation – sometimes used
27 strategically by politicians and other public figures to admit missteps and personal
28 shortcomings – can generate a sense of authenticity necessary to generate trust in cases where
29 real insight is difficult to achieve (Power, 1997). In between the giving away and the giving
30 off, the antagonistic complementarity of secrecy and transparency suggests that the more open
31 and candid one seems to be, the more murkiness might be embedded within. The secrecy
32 dimensions of transparency practices, however, may be difficult to detect in practice.
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The Dialogic Performativity of Secrecy and Transparency**Concluding Discussion**

Secrecy and transparency are usually presented as antipodes, that is, as forces and practices that counteract and abolish each other. Even though several studies have noted that the relations between the two are more intricate than commonly assumed, the presumption that secrecy and transparency are mutually exclusive continues to dominate public and political discourse. This paper is derived from the concern about such one-dimensional understanding of the transparency-secrecy nexus and its associated practices.

The predominance of such one-dimensional understanding is harmful to many societal processes, including the functioning of democracy, participation, and education, because it ignores how secrecy and transparency are enveloped within and produced through each other. While a growing number of academic writings are recognizing this, pointing out that secrecy and transparency are performative forces that encroach on each other, the intricacies of *how* they do so have been left unspecified. In this paper, we expand existing research of the secrecy-transparency relationship by discussing and illustrating how secrecy and transparency operate with and through each other. To that purpose, we draw on Morin's dialogic principle that describes how complex systems are constituted and shaped by logics that are simultaneously complementary and antagonistic to each other. This perspective makes it possible to center stage and theorize the performative interactions between tendencies that are usually regarded as incompatible (Morin, 1984). By discussing the performativity of the secrecy-transparency dialogic, we foreground questions of what secrecy reveals and transparency conceals.

With this paper, we hope to contribute to an integrated view on the secrecy-transparency nexus that acknowledges its multidimensional performativity. This, we believe, is a meaningful engagement with the concept and practical impact of 'performativity', as it does not simply ask what transparency and secrecy expose or hide, but what their intricate

The Dialogic Performativity of Secrecy and Transparency

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3 dialogics ‘do’ together in terms of organizing and knowing. Only through an integrated view
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5 that acknowledges how one can be produced through the other, can we understand their
6
7 complex and conflicting outcomes. With this perspective, we suggest moving beyond Ringel’s
8
9 (2019) otherwise interesting discussion of how the German Pirate Party came to reorganize its
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11 open meetings as a balance between frontstage and backstage practices. Associating
12
13 transparency with frontstage and secrecy with backstage tends to reproduce the common-sense
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15 distinction between the two and overlook their intricate and performative complementarity (cf.
16
17 Meyrowitz, 1985). Organizations may, for example, deliberately reveal certain dimensions of
18
19 otherwise backstage behavior, thereby giving off the impression that nothing is hidden. Since
20
21 norms for “proper” frontstage behavior (including disclosures and other transparency measures)
22
23 are open-ended and sometimes ambiguous, they can be co-created by social actors (e.g.,
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25 organizations) engaging in selective frontstaging (cf. Oliver, 1992). This possibility is in line
26
27 with Simmel’s observation that secrecy, if reduced in some areas, tends to reappear elsewhere.
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29 Frontstage behavior, in other words, is not only managed and performed as Goffman suggested,
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31 but may eventually define or constitute the situation and the performer.
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38 Practically speaking, where do we go from here? Bok’s (1982) solution to the
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40 inevitable tension between secrecy and transparency is to ensure openness about the moral
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42 choices that lead to secrecy. While some level of secrecy is inevitable in deliberative processes
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44 and may be necessary to protect individuals against centralized powers and intrusive media
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46 (see also Birchall, 2021; Heald, 2006), Bok argues that principles for secrecy, at least in public
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48 administration, need to be subject to open debate and critique. This, of course, presupposes a
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50 high level of public (self)-reflection as to how secrecy and transparency are produced and
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52 performed through each other. Specifically, it requires an ability to make the unwitting
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54 production of secrets that inevitably accompanies transparency efforts apparent to all relevant
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56 parties. The same is true when it comes to the moral choices that lead to transparency. In both
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3 public and private sectors, transparency measures include questions about what transparency
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5 rules should be followed, how to follow such rules, what specific activities should be
6
7 considered, and what controls are needed to exercise those activities within the set rules. The
8
9 question of *how* transparency is incorporated into regulatory regimes, for example, involves
10
11 pressing issues of its own accountability (Power, 1997). As Lodge (2004, p.125) puts it, the
12
13 dimensions *within* transparency implementations “differ greatly in terms of who holds whom
14
15 accountable for what type of activities and type of consequences”. Any ambiguity about
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17 transparency rules enables an unwitting concealment within its implementation.
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21 For further research, we suggest looking beyond open meetings in public sector
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23 organizations. The boundary conditions under which transparency practices produce secrecy
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25 and vice versa are not limited to this particular phenomenon but are likely to be similar in all
26
27 cases where strict transparency practices or standards are mandated. One such example is the
28
29 dialogic performativity of transparency requirements for publicly traded companies that
30
31 publish financial and, increasingly so, ESG reports. A relevant question here might be how the
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33 detailed criteria or metrics for reporting on environmental, social, and governance topics tend
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35 to hide specific organizational practices and how the new/renewed secretcies emerged
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37 recursively shape what is being published and disclosed.
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42 Moreover, the dialogic performativity discussed in this paper is not confined to cases
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44 where transparency is legally or regulatorily mandated. Secrecy may arise out of transparency
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46 efforts also in situations where the transparency ideal is zealously pursued without proper
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48 attention to its limitations. Morin’s complexity theory expounds how *a dogmatic engagement*
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50 *with any ideal or a principle* tends to produce its assumed antipode. He describes, for example,
51
52 how a rigid pursuit of rationality – a pursuit that remains ignorant and impervious to its own
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54 limitations – tends to produce blind knowledge. Such knowledge, he argues, is akin to the
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56 mythical thinking that rationality claims to eradicate (Morin, 1986). This insight is relevant
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3 also to our specific purpose. Thus, while secrecy and transparency, as we have seen, are
4 essentially and inevitably co-dependent as “conjoined twins” (Birchall, 2021; Cronin, 2020),
5 their tendency to overpower the other is likely to be pronounced especially in contexts where
6 each is pursued single-mindedly and credulously, assuming that the other will disappear or be
7 significantly reduced.
8

9
10 Such contexts are multiple these days where transparency is celebrated as a panacea
11 to many evils of contemporary society without openly considering its limitations and
12 unintended consequences (Owetschkin & Berger, 2019). While public sector organizations –
13 facing many different stakeholder demands – are especially prone to be confronted with such
14 naïve transparency ideal, private organizations and NGOs may equally find it difficult to fully
15 recognize and admit how their own transparency ideals and endeavors may themselves be
16 sources of secrecy. Thus, in our efforts to depict the antagonistic complementarity of the
17 secrecy/transparency dialogic we should be sensitive especially to contexts where either are
18 pursued most ardently.
19

20
21 Recognizing the antagonistic complementarity of secrecy and transparency, thus, does
22 not imply that the whole idea of transparency is itself a failure and should be scratched out.
23 Even though many transparency practices, as we have argued, are problematic and seem to
24 counteract the ideal, the foundational promise of modernity to move behind the ‘curtain’ by
25 raising awareness and deepening insight is still highly relevant today. Because of its democratic
26 significance, we ought to sharpen our awareness of transparency to critically see through and
27 beyond its current practices and manifestations. Following Christensen and Cheney’s (2015)
28 call to apply transparency to itself, we therefore suggest updating the transparency ideal by
29 intensifying it through reflexive measures. While remaining ultrasensitive to the social,
30 political, and epistemological limitations and absurdities associated with transparency
31 practices (e.g., Baudrillard, 1988; Han, 2015; Wilensky, 2015), such intensification implies a
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growing awareness of what we know and, especially, *how* we know it (Morin, 1986). As Morin has pointed out on multiple occasions (e.g., Palais des beaux-arts de Bruxelles, 2020), such awareness needs to be developed in research, education, journalism, and public debate. In the classroom, for instance, it is possible to raise a dialogic awareness of secrecy and transparency by having students – at any academic level – identify and discuss examples recognized as good transparency practices, focusing firstly on the insights that such practices provide and facilitate and then, secondly, on what is hidden as a consequence of the practices. A similar technique could be used – in fact, *ought* to be used – in journalism and political and public debates whenever new transparency measures and metrics are being considered.

The goal in each case is not to undermine the foundational ideal of insight, but to foster a sharpened understanding of the antagonistic complementarity between secrecy and transparency and see any knowledge pursuit as a source of both “clarity *and* opacity, light *and* darkness” (Christensen & Cheney, 2015, p.76). Such reinvesting in the transparency ideal has implications also for NGOs and social critics explicitly devoted to the fight for more transparency in social and organizational life. The noblest effort of such groups and critics, we believe, is to show in each case how secrecy might creep in as transparency is increased. Rather than regarding such efforts as threatening to the overall transparency pursuit, the notion and practice of *applying transparency to itself* should be seen as transparency’s *sine qua non*, necessary to revive our democratic obligation and endeavour.

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