

Transparency ideals in online PR: between dialogue, control and authenticity

Transparency
ideals in
online PR

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to systematically unpack the ideal of organizational transparency by tracing the concept's origins in the era of Enlightenment. Based on a genealogical reconstruction, the article explores different transparency understandings in key areas of online public relations (PR) and discusses the opportunities and challenges they present for the field.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a conceptual paper that unfolds a genealogical reconstruction to uncover different transparency ideals of modernity. These perspectives are then transferred to the field of online PR to discuss their ethical and practical implications in the context of digitalization.

Findings – Claims for transparency manifest in three distinct ideals, namely normative, instrumental and expressive transparency, which are also pursued in online PR. These ideals are related to associated concepts, like dialogue, control and authenticity, which serve as transparency proxies. Moreover, each transparency ideal inherits an ambivalence that presents unique opportunities and challenges for PR practitioners.

Practical implications – Instead of an unquestioned belief in the ideal of organizational transparency, the paper urges communication practitioners to critically reflect on the ambivalent nature of different transparency regimes in the context of digitalization and provides initial recommendations on how to manage digital transparency in online PR responsibly.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to the vivid debate surrounding organizational transparency in the context of digitalization by offering a novel and systematic analysis of the multifaced concept of transparency while opening new research avenues for further conceptual and empirical research.

Keywords Organizational transparency, Public relations, Strategic communication, Digitalization, Visibility, Genealogy

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

In light of the uncertainty and increasing complexity of late modernity (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991), organizational transparency has emerged as a highly valued norm in corporate governance and communication (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2015; Hood and Heald, 2006). More fundamentally, transparency represents a social megatrend that influences numerous areas of society, such as politics, business and science (August and Osrecki, 2019, p. 2). Consequently, organizational transparency also presents a key ethical principle in public relations (PR) and strategic communication. Thereby, transparency is usually considered to establish trust and understanding between organizations and stakeholders (Jahansoozi, 2006; Rawlins, 2009; Schnackenberg *et al.*, 2021).

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However, despite this general endorsement of organizational transparency, there is also growing skepticism regarding the unquestioned belief in the ideal. Critical scholars note that the relationship between transparency, understanding, trust and accountability is not as straightforward as often assumed (Naurin, 2006; O'Neill, 2002, pp. 68–73; Roberts, 2009; Tsoukas, 1997). Challenging the temptations of the information society, Tsoukas (1997, p. 827) notes: “More information may lead to less understanding; more information may undermine trust; and more information may make society less rationally governable.” Some empirical studies support these assumptions and point to possible adverse side effects of transparency initiatives (e.g. de Fine Licht, 2011; Finel and Lord, 1999; Grimmelikhuijsen *et al.*, 2013; Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer, 2014).

The critical discourse surrounding (organizational) transparency has gained further momentum under the influence of digitalization and datafication. Critical scholars argue that the increasing amount of content and platforms, as well as the overall speed and complexity of digital communication, may lead to information overload (Stohl *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, transparency practices in organizational contexts are increasingly associated with issues of power, discipline and surveillance (Ganesh, 2016; Leonardi and Treem, 2020; Weiskopf, 2023). Lastly, the new possibilities of digital identity construction combined with the economic competition for trust and attention promote the creation of false transparency accounts dedicated to the persuasion of organizational stakeholders (Vujnovic and Kruckeberg, 2016). Thus, transparency is no longer viewed as an objective medium of verification but more as a socially constructed *performative* phenomenon for *managing visibility* in the context of digitalization (Albu and Flyverbom, 2019; Fan and Christensen, 2023).

Against this backdrop, a growing number of PR scholars are raising concerns about the idealization of organizational transparency as an ethical principle of responsible communication management (e.g. Christensen and Cheney, 2015; Christensen and Langer, 2009; Raaz and Wehmeier, 2016; Winkler and Thummes, 2020). While previous research has extensively discussed different understandings and effects of organizational transparency, the range of perspectives has not been systematically translated to the domain of online PR. Moreover, there is also little awareness in PR research regarding the ambivalences of different transparency ideals in the context of digitalization as well as their historical origins. In PR and strategic communication, the term transparency is often merely used as a synonym for openness or information provision without engaging in the different dimensions of the multifaced concept (Wehmeier and Raaz, 2012). Thus, the field benefits from a more nuanced and systematic analysis of different transparency ideals. Therefore, the paper aims to contribute to the existing literature by identifying central transparency ideals of modernity and showing how they are pursued in the field of online PR. Thereby, the article also outlines how transparency is related to associated concepts such as dialogue, control and authenticity. The article follows this aim in three steps: Firstly, the paper provides a brief genealogical reconstruction that illustrates the sociological and philosophical roots of modern understandings of transparency. Thereby, it unveils three central transparency ideals, namely *normative*, *instrumental* and *expressive transparency*. Secondly, based on this typology, the article translates these perspectives to online PR and discusses the ambivalences they present for the field. Thirdly, the article outlines practical implications regarding the responsible management of transparency in online PR.

2. Transparency as metaphor

As Hood states transparency is a term with “quasi-religious significance” yet ironically is “more often preached than practiced” and “more often invoked than defined” (Hood, 2006, p. 3). Given this mystical status, it is useful to first define transparency in a broad sense before discussing its historical roots: On an abstract level, transparency can be defined as a

metaphorical concept that promotes various forms of open communication and information exchange between organizations and the public. Specifically, transparency as a metaphorical concept primarily draws on the abstract relationship between light, vision and knowledge established in the era of Enlightenment (Alloa, 2018). Although this definition is rather ambiguous, this is indeed a central characteristic of transparency since due to its metaphorical nature the term can take on multiple meanings: “Transparency lies in the capacity to absorb numerous virtues or aspirations, such as sincerity, clarity, consistency, truthiness, pureness, and efficiency.” (Baume, 2018, p. 221).

Transparency is also closely tied to the concept of visibility. However, the two terms are not synonyms. Broadly speaking, visibility is a sociological category linked to perception and power (Brighenti, 2007). From a communication perspective, visibility describes the degree to which information is complete and easily findable, according to Michener and Bersch (2013, p. 237). As the authors argue, transparency, on the other hand, goes beyond visibility as it requires *inferability*: The degree to which information can be used to draw accurate conclusions. Accordingly, Schnackenberg *et al.* (2021) suggest that proper transparency entails three features: perceived information disclosure, clarity and accuracy.

3. Transparency ideals of modernity

Transparency represents primarily a modern social value or even megatrend (August and Osrecki, 2019, p. 2). While there has been a certain degree of institutional openness and public deliberation in premodern societies, such as ancient Greece or Rome (Bentele and Nothhaft, 2010), the historical origins of modern transparency ideals are most evident in the Enlightenment (Alloa, 2018; Christensen and Cornelissen, 2015; Rzepka, 2013). According to Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, p. 1) the Enlightenment was famously dedicated to the “disenchantment of the world.” Therefore, forward-thinking intellectuals and pioneers of the era were determined to overcome the dominant religious worldview through social and scientific progress while shedding light on the secrecy of authoritarian regimes (Hölscher, 1979; Horn, 2011). Thus, the Enlightenment marks the birth of the modern transparency ideal. The at that time influential metaphorical relation between light, reason and emancipation was closely associated with the concept of a *public sphere*, which soon established itself as a sovereign and legitimate instance advocating for more transparency and political participation (Bentele and Nothhaft, 2010; Habermas, 1989; Hölscher, 1979). According to Foucault (1980, p. 153–154), darkness, on the other hand, was regarded as one of the greatest fears of 18th century Europe as it metaphorically represented sinister and arcane powers, which should be scrutinized by the gaze and opinion of the public.

Rzepka (2013) extensively analysed that these developments toward social and political transparency were primarily influenced by three seminal philosophers of the Enlightenment, namely *Immanuel Kant*, *Jeremy Bentham* and *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. These thinkers developed a distinct theoretical approach towards transparency based on their ontological and ethical worldviews. The following section illustrates how these perspectives form the basis of three distinct modern transparency ideals, which can be defined as *normative*, *instrumental* and *expressive transparency*. After a brief genealogical reconstruction and summary of the core values and aims of these ideals, the article transfers these perspectives to the field of online PR and discusses their inherent ambivalences as well as practical implications for the responsible management of digital transparency.

3.1 Normative transparency

The ideal of *normative transparency* harkens back to the philosophy of *Immanuel Kant*, one of the most prominent figures of the Enlightenment and a fierce advocate for transparency

(Plaisance, 2007). However, he opted for the word *publicity* (in German *Publizität*), which was more popular at the time. Publicity differs from transparency in that it is not a metaphorical concept and therefore holds fewer meanings (Baume, 2018). Specifically, publicity refers to a *political obligation to publish relevant information and the right to freedom of expression and discussion*, according to Kant (Rzepka, 2013, p. 61). By fulfilling these two functions, publicity served as an instrument to bridge politics and morality (Habermas, 1989, p. 102). Historically speaking, this notion of publicity and the resulting accountability became increasingly relevant during the emergence of representative governments in the 18th century (Baume, 2018, p. 214). After Second World War, several countries started implementing freedom of information laws that enabled citizens free access to government documents (Berliner, 2014). Thus, transparency established itself as a guiding principle of liberal democracies while political secrecy evolved into a concept with a rather negative connotation (Horn, 2011). In the same vein, Karl Popper's (2013) famous book *The Open Society and Its Enemies* reinforced the need for political transparency and the related free exchange of ideas as an antidote to the repression of totalitarian systems present in the 20th century.

In the context of digitalization, these transparency initiatives by governments are often discussed within the framework of *Open Government*. Thereby, openness refers to the open access to government information and decision-making arenas (Meijer *et al.*, 2012). Thus, *normative transparency* relies strongly on the idea of open public discourse. The concept of a *public sphere*, as famously developed by Jürgen Habermas, is closely related. It argues that social progress depends on a free and rational discourse that provides consensual solutions for the common good (Habermas, 1984). Thereby, every citizen must have equal access to this public debate as Habermas (1989, p. 85) states: "A public sphere from which specific groups would be eo ipso excluded was less than merely incomplete; it was not a public sphere at all." This principle is also referred to as the *transparency function* of the public sphere (Neidhardt, 1994, p. 8). Therefore, from a normative perspective, it can be argued that transparency represents a pro-ethical condition that enables more robust ethical principles like accountability, safety, welfare and informed consent (Turilli and Floridi, 2009, p. 107).

Conclusively, the ideal of *normative transparency* understands transparency as an ethical value that strives for open dialogue and opinion-forming in the public sphere.

3.2 Instrumental transparency

While the ideal of *normative transparency* is primarily based on ethical arguments in the spirit of Kant's philosophy, *instrumental transparency*, in turn, takes on a more utilitarian perspective. This ideal was strongly influenced by the writings of *Jeremy Bentham*, who is considered the founder of utilitarian ethics. Inspired by the work of Isaac Newton, Bentham aimed to apply the methods of empiricism and natural science to the social realm. Since transparent objects like prisms, lenses and liquids yielded insight into the laws of physics, he thought public and organizational transparency would similarly provide an effective solution to gain control over the unstable social conditions in the aftermath of the French Revolution (August and Osrecki, 2019, p. 4–5). This belief was underpinned by his famous concept of the *Panopticon*. The Panopticon is a circular prison architecture with an observation tower in the middle and illuminated cells on its periphery. This construction enables personnel to observe inmates at any time without them noticing. Bentham believed that this potential of inspection created an environment in which people would automatically behave as desired by authorities (Bentham, 1995). Thus, the panopticon leads to self-disciplining through the internalization of a feeling of potential surveillance (Foucault, 1995). Bentham applied this principle to the management of organizations and politics as a mechanism to control people and to cope with the uncertainties of the social world (August and Osrecki, 2019, p. 4–7).

Today, this instrumental perspective forms the basis of modern transparency efforts in corporate governance and public management (Hood, 2006). Meanwhile, surveillance has developed into a global phenomenon and a structural property of modern digital societies that goes beyond the original function of the Panopticon. Hence, we now live in a post-panoptical society, in which surveillance and continuous inspection have become an omnipresent part of everyday life (Lyon, 2001). Following the work of Zygmunt Bauman (2000), this form of fluid and unnoticed surveillance is also often referred to as liquid surveillance (Lyon, 2010). Moreover, digital surveillance and the prediction of people's behaviour via algorithms form a central component of the business models in big tech companies (Zuboff, 2019).

In conclusion, the ideal of *instrumental transparency* understands transparency as a mechanism for social control and management.

3.3 Expressive transparency

In contrast to normative and instrumental approaches, the ideal of *expressive transparency* is rooted in a more romantic perspective of modernity. This transparency ideal is related to the philosophy of *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, who famously proclaimed that scientific and cultural progress had distanced humanity from its nature-given morality (Rousseau, 2002). As extensively analysed by Jean Starobinski (1988), the writings of Rousseau reflect a deep longing for a transparent society in which people interact in a direct, authentic and honest manner without any deception. Metaphorically speaking, people should be able to look into the heart and consciousness of each other. Thus, transparency should bridge the gap between sign and reality in social interactions or as Goffman (1959) puts it between front and backstage. This type of perceived transparency is also referred to as "speechless transparency" (Sandel, 1996 p. 320) since Rousseau regarded even the use of language as a form of obfuscation. Moreover, Rousseau saw transparency as an ideal that strengthens social bonds and creates a strong community with shared values. Therefore, it can be argued that he was more concerned with a subjective feeling of transparency rather than actual transparency in the spirit of the Enlightenment (Marks, 2001).

Today, authenticity has emerged as a neo-romantic value of late modernity that permeates many areas of society (Reckwitz, 2020, pp. 98–99). From a communication perspective, authenticity can be defined as the "attributes of a social actor that are truthfully presented" to the public based on his self-knowledge and values (Vujanovic and Kruckeberg, 2016, S. 124). As analysed by Reckwitz (2020), the striving for authenticity is closely linked to the affective orientation of late modern societies which increasingly celebrate individuality. Thereby, he notices a shift from the Foucauldian *disciplinary surveillance* towards a visibility regime of *competing singularities* (Reckwitz, 2016, pp. 271–283). Thus, in contemporary Western culture, visibility is considered not just a threat but also a desired form of attention that grants individuals various forms of self-representation and expression. This development is particularly evident in digital culture where authenticity is regarded as a central value among members of online communities. Therefore, individuals should present their true selves in order to be seen as credible and trustworthy (Stalder, 2018, pp. 87–88).

In sum, the ideal of *expressive transparency* understands transparency as an affective value aimed at authenticity and trust.

4. Transparency in public relations

The previous section has outlined the sociological and philosophical roots of modern transparency ideals via a genealogical reconstruction. Thereby, we uncovered three main transparency ideals: *normative, instrumental and expressive transparency*. Each ideal presents a

distinct approach regarding the conceptualization and function of transparency, which can be generally defined as a metaphorical concept aimed at open communication and information exchange. Thereby, it is important to note that none of these approaches is capable of fully achieving transparency, as it is not an end state but rather an ideal that is “always in the making” (Hansen *et al.*, 2015, S. 121). Moreover, transparency can only be created by proxy with the help of mediating technologies as suggested by Hansen *et al.* (2015, p. 122). The presented ideals serve as such proxies that fill the void by replacing transparency with related concepts, such as dialogue, control and authenticity. Before examining how these ideals manifest in online PR, this section briefly discusses the academic discourse regarding transparency in PR.

Generally speaking, PR scholarship is primarily dominated by managerial approaches, like symmetrical communication and excellence theory (Grunig, 1992). Following these perspectives, PR has shifted its intentions and disciplinary focus from practices of propaganda to responsible communication and relationship management with a diverse set of stakeholders. In this context, organizational transparency is mainly associated with a wide range of positive outcomes, such as stakeholder trust, engagement and credibility, as well as an improved corporate reputation and image (Parris *et al.*, 2016). Although these approaches endorse organizational transparency, they mostly do not engage in a thorough analysis of the concept (Albu and Wehmeier, 2014, p. 118). Thus, transparency is often used as a buzzword to promote open communication and accountability in PR (Wehmeier and Raaz, 2012).

In recent years, several scholars have drawn attention to the limitations and adverse side effects of the transparency paradigm dominating the literature in PR and strategic communication. For instance, Christensen and Langer (2009) argue that the trend toward organizational transparency in PR conflicts with the profession’s emphasis on aligned and consistent messaging found in management approaches like integrated communication (Zerfass, 2008). Thus, instead of providing more openness, organizations tend to regulate internal communication flows more strongly to control which information surfaces in the outside world. Accordingly, Szyszka (2008) sees the primary function of PR operations as creating what he refers to as functional transparency. He suggests that instead of pursuing full transparency PR, practitioners should carefully select the information they want to disclose to create a type of transparency that contributes to organizational goals and the overall public reputation. This goes to show that transparency and secrecy are two closely interrelated concepts. Even though the latter tends to be viewed more negatively, both concepts play an essential role in shaping stakeholder relations and public discourse (Cronin, 2020; Fan and Christensen, 2023). Therefore, practitioners must carefully examine the positive and negative effects of the transparency-secrecy-nexus. In line with this argument, Winkler and Thummes (2020) call for a right of opacity instead of an unquestioned belief in the modern transparency ideal. According to this view, PR practitioners should be encouraged to decide in each case which information is relevant to engage in mutual dialogue with stakeholders and withhold facts not intended for public disclosure.

As these critical approaches show, there is a high need to investigate the ambivalent nature of organizational transparency. Thus, the following sections discuss how the different transparency ideals derived from the genealogical reconstruction – *normative, instrumental and expressive transparency* – manifest in online PR and the tensions they produce.

5. Transparency ideals in online PR

In recent years, the academic debate surrounding organizational transparency has been heavily shaped by the influence of digitalization. Specifically, contemporary critical approaches draw attention to the nexus between power and transparency in the digital realm (Flyverbom *et al.*, 2015). As Flyverbom *et al.* (2016) argue, the new possibilities in digital communication and reputation management combined with automated analysis and collection of data have turned

the creation of organizational transparency into a form of *visibility management*. This shift has substantial implications for the PR profession, as they are responsible for crafting the public image of organizations and managing relationships with key stakeholders. Although digital transparency presents a new phenomenon, many of the current issues discussed in the literature can be related to one of the three transparency ideals introduced in this article. Hence, we will explore how the ideals of *normative, instrumental and expressive transparency* manifest in online PR and which ambivalences they produce.

5.1 Normative transparency: *participation vs overload*

As previously elaborated, the ideal of *normative transparency* portrays transparency as an ethical value that strives for open dialogue and opinion-forming in the public sphere. As Raaz and Wehmeier (2016, p. 175) note: “dialogue and transparency appear as two deeply connected, intertwined normative concepts.” This understanding of transparency is strongly reflected in the self-perception of the PR profession. Accordingly, dialogue and mutual understanding represent foundational principles in PR scholarship and practice. Dialogue in PR is conceptualized in a variety of ways, for instance, as a negotiation (Grunig and Hunt, 1984), a consensus-orientated process (Burkart, 2018) or mutual recognition (Kent and Taylor, 2002). However, at its core, all these dialogical approaches rely on some kind of stakeholder *participation*.

In this context, the Internet and its networking properties have long been regarded as a transformative technology that transcends conventional means of dialogue and public opinion-forming (Benkler, 2006). To enable this kind of digital participation, contemporary online PR relies on a wide range of communication channels ranging from conventional websites to social media, forums and blogs. While the potential of a *networked public sphere* gave the PR profession a newfound self-confidence regarding its role as a mediator of public discourse, recent theoretical and empirical contributions draw attention to the limits and risks of dialogue-centred approaches in online PR (for a discussion see: Winkler and Pleil, 2019, pp. 456–460). In this regard, Raupp (2011, p. 85) explicitly mentions the increased demands for transparency as one of the main challenges for organizations in managing stakeholder relations. As Christensen and Cheney (2015, p. 74–75) point out, problems with transparency specifically arise when it is narrowly defined as the provision or disclosure of information. This perspective implies a linear and simplistic communication model in which information travels smoothly from a sender to a receiver, capable of encoding and interpreting the message as intended. However, as Rawlins (2009, p. 74) states: “Just giving information does not constitute transparency. This is more accurately called disclosure. But disclosure, alone, can defeat the purpose of transparency. It can obfuscate, rather than enlighten.” This effect can be described by the so-called *transparency paradox*, which states that high levels of information visibility might even decrease transparency and create strategic opacity. Hence, the more content gets published, the harder it becomes for stakeholders to identify and decipher relevant information. Following this approach, organizations can comply with transparency standards and expectations while at the same time inhibiting a meaningful and open dialogue with their stakeholders (Stohl et al., 2016, p. 113–114). As a result, stakeholders are either overwhelmed with the abundance of information or they do not know where to find relevant facts.

Thus, the ideal of normative transparency confronts a fundamental ambivalence of *participation* and *overload* in various contexts of digital engagement in online PR. Thereby, information and communication technology (ICT) represents a tool for *networking* in digital environments.

5.2 Instrumental transparency: *efficiency vs surveillance*

The ideal of *instrumental transparency* aims at social control and management. This understanding of transparency is associated with one of the primary goals of digitalization to

make the various patterns that structure society visible (Nassehi, 2019). Big Data analytics plays a central role in this context as they make it possible to generate relevant insights about individuals and society. This trend toward datafication has also entered the PR profession in recent years (Holtzhausen, 2016). As a result, organizational communication relies increasingly on various monitoring tools across all stages of the strategic communication process (Wiencierz and Röttger, 2017). Thereby, audience segmentation, targeting and strategic sense-making are done by algorithms, leaving many tasks that PR professionals previously performed to non-human-agency (Collister, 2016). Hence, the use of Big Data is closely tied to the automation of communication professions since many processes and work steps that previously took several hours to complete can now be automated to a large extent resulting in more *efficiency* in communication management. However, trust in Big Data and automation can also lead to moral blindness as practitioners outsource parts of their communicative tasks and responsibilities to algorithmic selection (Bachmann, 2019).

The resulting digital transparency of this development is twofold: On the one side, datafication makes organizations more transparent to their employees and stakeholders as companies continuously collect and share data about internal work processes and business performance (Hansen and Flyverbom, 2015). At the same time, these transparency regimes are also operating at a societal level since especially the business models of big tech companies rely on the collection, analysis and interpretation of data about individual user behaviour (Zuboff, 2019).

Against this background, numerous scholars and philosophers are raising concerns about the implications of a transparent society (Han, 2015; Lyon, 2001). Under these circumstances, transparency regimes run the risk of turning into practices of *surveillance* as organizations and individuals are faced with increasing digital observation and pressure to disclose information publicly (Heemsbergen, 2016; Weiskopf, 2023). The revelations of WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden as well as the emergence of digital vigilantism (Trottier, 2017) serve as primary examples to illustrate the spirit of a new *radical transparency* (Birchall, 2014) led by the surveillance capabilities of digital technology and devices.

Thus, the ideal of instrumental transparency confronts a fundamental ambivalence of *efficiency* and *surveillance* in various processes of digital organizing in online PR. Thereby, ICT serves as a tool of *control* in digital environments.

5.3 Expressive transparency: authenticity vs fake

Lastly, *expressive transparency* assumes that transparency is not just a matter of open dialogue and social control but also based on an affective dimension that champions authenticity and trust. Reckwitz (2017) has extensively analysed the importance of affectivity in late modernity and shown its relation to the aesthetic practices that shape creative sectors like the media, advertising and PR industry. These professions are specialized in the use of language, signs and symbols to craft a public image and deliver credible messages. From this perspective, organizational transparency can be conceptualized as a socially constructed phenomenon that draws on different aesthetic practices (Meijer, 2009, p. 265). The audio-visual properties of digital communication channels are especially effective in creating this type of messaging. Organizations can, for instance, engage in various forms of compelling storytelling through pictures, videos and texts on their websites or social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, YouTube and TikTok). Another popular strategy is cooperation with influencers on social media. These digital opinion leaders usually have a big and loyal audience that pays close attention to their opinions and recommendations. Influencers have gained this social status based on their appealing personality and the transparent self-disclosing way they present themselves. Therefore, *authenticity* plays an essential role in creating a sense of transparency (Vujnovic and Kruckeberg, 2016, p. 124) that promotes trust

among members of digital communities (Stalder, 2018, pp. 87–90). In the same vein, community is also considered an influential concept within PR theory, which is gaining increasing importance in the context of digitalization (Valentini *et al.*, 2012). Although it could be argued that authenticity does not actually create transparency from an information standpoint (e.g. Schnackenberg *et al.*, 2021), it serves at least as an important proxy that evokes a subjective feeling of truthfulness and trust.

However, if transparency can be crafted artificially by the strategic use of language, signs and symbols in digital environments, it runs the risk of turning into a mere illusion. Interestingly, this argument was already raised against Rousseau’s romantic understanding of transparency (Marks, 2001). In this context, Vujnovic and Kruckeberg (2016) introduce the concept of *pseudo-transparency*, referring to communication strategies that aim to create a sense of transparency in order to profit from the reputational benefits that come with a public commitment to more openness and accountability. Similarly, Zalnieriute (2021) speaks of *transparency washing* when big-tech companies engage in corporate transparency initiatives to distract from other ethical issues. Given that transparency can be interpreted and enacted in various ways, Raaz and Wehmeier (2016) argue that the concept needs to be understood as an *empty signifier* with flexible and fluent meaning. In view of this ambiguity, transparency does not yield the desired insights but remains an intangible concept that stabilizes existing organizational power structures.

Thus, the ideal of expressive transparency confronts a fundamental ambivalence of *authenticity* and *fake* in various areas of digital information and identity presentation. Thereby, ICT serves as a tool for *representation* in digital environments. The following Table 1 summarizes and compares the main characteristics of the three transparency ideals discussed in this article.

6. Discussion and implications

The article has defined transparency as a metaphorical concept that promotes open forms of communication and information exchange. Thereby, it was argued that transparency presents a multifaced concept that covers different meanings and concepts. Following this argument, a genealogical reconstruction unveiled three central transparency ideals: *normative*, *instrumental* and *expressive transparency*. As shown throughout the article, these ideals correspond with associated concepts such as dialogue, control and authenticity that serve as proxies to achieve the impression of transparency. Although transparency is a concept with old historical roots – especially in the Enlightenment – it has gained noticeable importance in recent years, particularly in the context of digitalization. As a result, ideals of normative, instrumental and expressive transparency are reflected in different areas of online

	Normative transparency	Instrumental transparency	Expressive transparency
Philosophical roots	Publicity (e.g. Baume, 2018)	Panopticism (e.g. Bentham, 1995)	Honesty (e.g. Starobinski, 1988)
Aim	Dialogue	Control	Trust
Ambivalence	Participation vs Overload	Efficiency vs Surveillance	Authenticity vs Fake
Perspective on modernity	Enlightened Society (e.g. Habermas, 1984)	Disciplinary Society (e.g. Foucault, 1995)	Aesthetic Society (e.g. Reckwitz, 2017)
Manifestations in online PR	Online Dialogue, Community Management, Open Government/Access	Data-driven PR, Algorithmic PR, Social Listening	Influencer PR, Visual Communication, Online Storytelling

Source: Created by author

Table 1.
Normative,
instrumental and
expressive
transparency in
comparison

PR. While each of these ideals holds certain promises, they also create substantial tensions regarding their practical implementation in online PR. Thus, each ideal manifest in a fundamental ambivalence: participation vs overload (normative transparency), efficiency vs surveillance (instrumental transparency) and authenticity vs fake (expressive transparency). Building on this argument this concluding section discusses key practical implications regarding the responsible management of transparency in online PR while unveiling promising research paths for future theoretical and empirical studies. Looking at all three transparency ideals shows that in the context of digitalization, they are increasingly *intertwined*, *intensified* and *decoupled* from organizational reality. We will briefly discuss what this implies for PR practice.

First, the presented transparency ideals become increasingly *intertwined* in the context of digitalization. The boundaries between the ideals of normative, instrumental and expressive transparency have always been blurry to some extent. For instance, thinkers like Kant, Bentham and Rousseau have shared similar arguments and beliefs regarding the need for transparency (for a discussion see: [Gaonkar and McCarthy, 1994](#)). However, in the context of digitalization, different types of transparency are not only simultaneously demanded by diverse stakeholder groups but also increasingly functionally linked. As [Reckwitz \(2020, p. 59\)](#) argues, processes of rationalization and culturalization overlap in late modernity. As a result, different orders of visibility emerge that mix normative, instrumental and affective orientations. Looking at the field of online PR, this means, for example, that instrumental transparency in the form of Big Data analytics is used to manage online dialogues and produce content that fulfils audience desires regarding authenticity. Thus, ideals of public participation and authenticity become increasingly instrumentalised and optimized with the help of data. Likewise, expectations regarding authenticity are more and more linked to normative and instrumental transparency demands. For example, organizations appear more credible and trustworthy in the digital realm if they display responsible behaviour and intentions substantiated by transparent facts and figures. Thus, no single transparency approach is solely capable of fully meeting stakeholder expectations. Instead, PR managers are encouraged to combine diverse types of digital transparency to create synergies between various forms of open communication and information exchange (see also: [Meijer, 2009, p. 265](#)).

Secondly, the effects of the presented transparency ideals *intensify* in the context of digitalization. While premodern forms of transparency were directed to a comparatively limited audience ([Meijer, 2009, p. 261](#)). Today digital transparency represents an ever-present global phenomenon ([Holzner and Holzner, 2006](#)) with far-reaching consequences as digitalization enables the creation of transparency as well as the dissemination of information to large audiences in real-time. For example, large-scale transparency initiatives such as those by Edward Snowden and WikiLeaks have shown how single actors can disrupt long-established power structures. From a normative perspective, never before have citizens and the media been able to gain such direct insight into public and corporate organizations. At the same time, post-panoptical surveillance opens a wide range of possibilities for social control by corporate and public actors. Looking at expressive transparency, the potential for public persuasion via authentic content is also largely enhanced due to the capabilities of digital self-presentation and identity construction, as showcased by influential digital opinion leaders. Thus, PR practitioners need to critically reflect on the effects and consequences that different forms of digital transparency can produce in a connected and globalized society. Therefore, PR practitioners need to re-evaluate the limits of transparency and consider how they can use digital information and data responsibly. Moreover, it is vital to explore the effects of new digital technologies, especially artificial intelligence, on the production of transparency and the consequences for the field of online PR.

Lastly, the presented transparency ideals lead to a continuous *decoupling* from organizational reality. As Meijer (2009, p. 262–263) argues, computer-mediated transparency creates a hyperreality based on different digital representations. In the same vein, Nassehi (2019, p. 140–141) poses that digitalization leads to a “doubling of the world” as the structures of society are recreated and rearranged in the form of data. Therefore, PR practitioners need to be aware that digital transparency can never adequately represent (organizational) reality. Instead, it produces a new hyperreality that draws on different digital representations that subtly reconfigure power relations (Flyverbom *et al.*, 2015). While the Enlightenment portrayed transparency as a neutral medium of insight and verification, PR practitioners should reject this simplistic understanding of transparency and re-evaluate the relationship between truth and different transparency ideals in the context of digitalization. After all, none of the three transparency ideals can actually represent the truth. However, they do provide important clues regarding the intentions and behaviours of organizations – whether normative, instrumental, or expressive – that are relevant to stakeholder perceptions and evaluations.

In conclusion, navigating the ambivalence of normative, instrumental and expressive transparency can only be achieved through a conscious and responsible engagement with these critical tendencies.

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