

Is Transparency A Lever for Effective Democracy?

Bashir Ghanim

Abstract:

Transparency is a growing demand of the public from government authorities who responsible of the money of the public. The effectiveness of public agencies depends not only on outputs and results, but also on the level of support, trust and public satisfaction from the public sector. Only by relation to these two components together through policy and action will increase the effectiveness of the public sector.

This article will discuss public transparency and why it is essential to the mechanisms of democracy.

Keywords: Effectiveness, transparency, satisfaction, citizen, public administration, trust.

Background

What it Transparency in Public Organizations?

Administrative transparency describes the conduct of an organization in such a way that enables access to the organization's databases, such as: financial conduct, protocols, statistics, regulations and laws, memos, open meetings and methods of action. Transparency can be expressed in various strengths, for example only members / employees will have access to all or some databases; and it is possible that also people outside the organization will have access to all or part of the information. Also the duration of time in which information remains published can be changed. The use of the word transparency generally associates with openness, taking responsibility, communicativeness, self-critique, and the Freedom of Information Law (Erkkila, 2012). Transparency is measured first and foremost by the degree of disclosure, the accessibility, and the availability of information to the public. The meaning of transparency is also in providing importance that the information will be relevant and qualitative, i.e., it provides

required updated, understandable, relevant and rich information (Avidar, Sagi & Zoch, 2014).

The main rationales relating to governmental transparency focus on types of information that are connected with supervision of the actions of the government, political processes, and decision-making processes. It is common to mention these rationales mainly in the context of advancing the enactment of freedom of information laws, and their benefits are perceived as public-democratic. But in the context of open governmental information in the digital world, there is another type of information that has the potential to empower citizens and to enrich their quality of life, even if it does not contribute to governmental transparency in its narrow democratic sense. Accessibility to information in business, geographic, legal, social, transport, and meteorological fields can sometimes generate public and economic benefits even if it has no direct democratic benefit (Dekkers, Polman, Velde & Vries, 2006). For example, when the US Transportation Authority decided to make sophisticated information about car safety seats for children and infants as accessible, the information did not teach about the Authority's activities, but it had great value for the public. Therefore we will discuss below about the rationales of both types of information: Information, the accessibility of which has democratic benefits and information, the accessibility of which has socio-economic benefits.

The Connection between Transparency and Democracy

Three main arguments exist in the connection between transparency and democracy: the first is the argument of supervision and control, the second is the argument of ownership - loyalty and the last is the argument of participation.

The first: the argument of supervision and control is an instrumental argument that considers the confidentiality as a platform for corruption, power, and inefficiency. Therefore, the activity of the public authority will conduct at its best if it will be exposed to the public eye, and the public watchful eye may prevent corruption in the public administration and indicate failures, errors, unnecessary burdens and inefficient conduct of the authority. Each action will be exposed by force (also not in practice) to critique and

supervision, and this will deter corruption. In order for the supervision and control will be efficient, it is of course necessary to ensure that alongside the disclosure of information to the public, efficient mechanisms will also be found to correct the defects found in the authority's work. It is therefore important to ensure that the relevant mechanisms have a real and practical influence. These mechanisms include the internal control measures of the authority, the police, the State Audit, the Civil Service Commission and the courts. The argument of supervision and control also relates to the way in which the information is exposed. As more accessible and available the information is presented, so more effective the supervision will be. The authority therefore has to ensure that the information in its possession will be processed in a clear and accessible way, and that as much information as possible will be revealed on its own initiative, without the need for an individual's prior demand. Transparency and available information thus strengthen the legitimacy of the democratic regime and the trust in the democratic institutions, and the openness of the government is perceived as closely connected with the existence of democracy itself (Edes, 2003). The decline in public trust in the government weakens the public's desire to participate in government processes and to contribute valuable source, resources and information for it, to pay taxes and to be integrated into the work of government authorities. Since this is a vicious circle, Joseph Nye argues that "such cumulative deterioration can erode support for democracy as a system of government" (Nye, 1997, pp. 5). The public's perceptions of the existence of transparency in the society are among the initial conditions for trust in government, and quantitative studies show a correlation between the perceptions regarding levels of freedom and equality from which the public enjoys and the perceptions of the level of governmental transparency, even if such transparency does not exist in reality according to international indices (Mahoney & Webley, 2004). As closer the citizens feel to the government, so their trust in it increases. New studies regarding the open government through the Internet, which examined the accessibility of information through digital technologies (such as Websites of Government data), showed that, it creates exactly this desired closeness (Bingham, 2010).

The second: the argument of ownership - loyalty: According to this argument the authority is not the owner of the information that in its possession, and holds it loyally

only for the public, which is the real owners. According to this approach, all the information in the possession of the authority belongs to the public, and in the absence of conflicting reasons, the authority must hand over all of the information when it will be requested. The mere definition of the public's connection to the information as a public right means determining a moral position and creating a balance from the beginning in favor of providing the information, i.e., expression of the position that the authority has no right of its own to hold the information. The argument of ownership - loyalty takes an interesting turn in the digital age. The duty to document the actions of the government, which was expressed in the establishment of "government printing" offices in Western democracies at the beginning of the nineteenth century, now reaches another step of the perception of government as a "platform of information". The information systems that the government creates are the basis for extra-governmental social activity that has enormous economic and social value for society. The government's information is perceived as public property not only by itself but also because it serves as an infrastructure, a catalyst and enables social activity, and these are not less important than electromagnetic frequencies, roads, electricity or water networks. This infrastructure is raw material for entrepreneurship, which in its turn enables a wealth of business and social opportunities. One of the most problematic barriers to achieving democratic governance (and not just a democratic regime in its definition) is the inequality between citizens and the government in access to information (Dahl, 2000). The release of information which is initiated by the government copes with this state barrier, as the gatekeeper of the information, it provides to the individuals information and understanding about the state and strengthening them and their contact with it, encourages new market forces to the information processing, and enables to the individuals to give their personal interpretation for the government information. Some argue that at least some of the government information should be presented to citizens in its raw shape so that they themselves will be able to attribute interpretation and context for it and they will not receive the information with government interpretation (Boland & Coleman, 2008). The best example of this is the monitoring of what is happening in the parliament: it is appropriate that this database, which includes data that may embarrass the elected officials themselves, will not be controlled by them. Since the release of

government information reinforces the initiative and use of information by third parties, it can be said that revealing information increases the pressure to collect and present additional information, thereby effectively destroying the perceptions of government ownership of information which is prevalent among some levels of government.

The Last: the argument of participation: This argument indicates that participation in the democratic process - especially in the Knesset elections - requires a conscious and calculated decision of the citizen (Kello, 2003). A vote that is not based on all the relevant data is not an informed vote. If the election to the Knesset is based on partial considerations, the legitimacy of the government is impaired, since the government does not faithfully reflect the informed will of the people. Therefore, in order to promote informed participation in the democratic process, information must be disclosed. In order to realize the principle of participation, the public should be exposed to the all information that can be used in its decision to support the party or the candidate. This argument also highlights the need for proactive exposure of information which is initiated by the authorities. Many times the public is not aware of the types of information which are held by the authorities and may be necessary for it. For this reason, it is appropriate that the authority will publish as much information as it possible about its activities, in each field that can have an influence on the formulation of the opinion among the citizen. Connections between information and political decision-making were discussed in detail in the literature. The connection between civilian accessibility to government information and decision-making in the Internet era will also be examined. Downs' economic theory of democracy (Downs, 1957) sets a model of rational choice by citizens of the information they are interested in it. According to him, rational individuals seek to minimize as it possible their political uncertainty (for example, to vote) and seek new information only when for them the marginal product of the new information is higher than the marginal expense of obtaining the information or equal to this expense. The problem is that many times it is difficult to predict in advance the "value" of specific information, so individuals create a number of "information pipes" for themselves and turn them into their "personal system of obtaining information". Bimber (2003) explains, based on Downs' work, how a floating of public information affects civic engagement in the political life. Bimber argues that we are in the midst of a "fourth information

revolution," which means transitioning from a personal system of obtaining information which is based on limited and biased sources (the mass media and a government that is not committed to transparency) to a system with more and more extensive information channels, in which on the one hand, the information environment is comprehensive, and on the other hand it is more adapted to the needs of the individual. Bimber also believes that the information revolution will create a new type of political activity and engagement: the activity of middle – private citizens who are not "the masses" on the one hand and not the elites on the other hand. Transparency is perceived as useful for understanding public preferences, for promoting governmental accountability, fairness and justice, and for building public trust in government and the democratic process (Laurian, 2004). In addition, they have the practical advantage of reducing time-consuming processes resulting from public objections.

Summary:

In recent years, the discussion of the challenge faced by public representatives and public sector managers to act according to criteria of accountability, taking responsibility and transparency is intensifying. Open governmental information also contributes indirectly to good governance because it reduces the need for governmental regulation (Alshuler, 2012). When the public has a lot of information to evaluate the goods and the services, the economic markets function better and the need for government involvement decreases. The cost of sharing information (or even collecting information) is lower than regulation. It is now clear that transparency is one of the major levers of public policy in the twenty-first century. Promotion of the transparency may improve the efficiency and productivity of central government services by means of comparison and information-based supervision; to change social relations by empowering individuals and communities; to motivate economic growth.

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