BOOK REVIEW

TRANSPARENCY: THE KEY TO BETTER
GOVERNANCE?
edited by Christopher Hood and David Heald
For the British Academy by Oxford University Press, Oxford,
UK, 2006, 246 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-19-726383-9, £35.00
(hardback) (Series: Proceedings of the British Academy num-
ber Vol. 135).

Since 1980s transparency has been taken as a goal to be
achieved by the institutional redesign or governance reform
internationally. However, its meaning, history and so its
effects have attracted less attention. This book fills this gap
by examining the theory and practice of the transparency in
the following sections.

Part one reviews the history of the doctrine of transparency
and explores different directions and varieties of transparency.
The concept of transparency applied in governance domain
can be traced back to the period prior to the twentieth century,
and has been applied to different policy domains with conflict-
ing governance doctrines. When transparency was treated as a
cure-all for governance reform, the rival or contradictory
values, privacy, commercial confidentiality, were also
entrenched, resulting from the booming privatisation, PPP
forms and the anti-terrorism policy. Furthermore, this part also
sets up the conceptual framework regarding the direction and
variety of transparency which can help measure transparency.

Part two presents two contradictory opinions on the nature
of transparency. It is debatable whether transparency should
be seen as an intrinsic value which is an end in itself as
chapter 3 argues, or an instrumental value which is the means
of achieving other more fundamental values claimed by
chapter 4. My criticism here would be that when chapter 3
which argues for the intrinsic value recognises the conflict
with other basic values, it does not go further to identify the
extent to which the transparency trades off against other
values as it claims, which weaken the power of its argument.

Leaving the debate aside, transparency measures may
achieve the opposite of the expected goal in two situations,
firstly when information is published without adequate com-
munication with the public, and when, from the perspective of
principal agent theory, the principal knows the complete
information about the agent which may also have a negative
influence on the agent's work.

Part three covers the empirical issues concerning the insti-
tutional behaviour regarding transparency requirement, parti-
cularly the practice of Freedom of Information (FOI) laws.
Although FOI laws claims to increase trust and nurture the
culture of openness, experiences in various countries shows
the opposite outcome. Three case studies are analysed sepa-
rately in this part: the history and the future of FOI in UK;
the member-state budgetary transparency in the Economic

and Monetary Union; and the examples from the European
Council of Ministers.

The relationship between transparency and the information
age technology is the focus of part four. It explores the com-
plex relationship between the openness of code and the
democracy of government, which is one aspect of transpar-
ency. It argues that open code rather than closed code offers
the access to transparency and the open code should be the
choice for developing the appropriate mechanism of code
governance. Furthermore, this part reviews the double-edge
effect of digital age on the transparency: when digitalisation
formalises the government process and make it become
more stable and transparent, the uncertainty of the electronic
processes also makes the process of presenting digital govern-
ment more complex.

Part five comes to the excellent discussion through
reviewing the chapters systematically in order to explore the
following issues: what is transparency? What affect the rise of
transparency and what transparency affects? What normative
view should we take of transparency?

This part outlines three explanations for the rise of trans-
parency: the interest of outsiders for the information; the shift
to the egalitarian culture; and the adaptation to the technolo-
gical age. It also points out that, although transparency has
risen as the principle of policy reform, to some extent, it might
be the re-labelling of certain used terms, or it is only the nom-
inal but not the effective rise of transparency. Furthermore, the
chapters show a range of views that reflect the perception of
futility, jeopardy and perversity effects that transparency
makes. Reviewing the chapters above, this part discusses the
blame-conscious bureaucratic culture which underlies the
perverse effect of transparency.

This part is excellent in that it concludes and comments on
the various and even conflicting views from the chapters
above. Although it does not give complete answers to the
questions above or the question about the impact of transpar-
ency on better governance as the title claims, this part leaves
clues for further exploration.

On the whole, this is a valuable research as it traces the
trajectory, explores the nature and the use of transparency in
practice. It provides significant insights into researches
concerning transparency and governance and therefore is
useful to scholars and practitioners in this area.

CHENG CHEN (PhD CANDIDATE)
International Development Department
School of Public Policy
University of Birmingham, UK