BOOK REVIEW

TRANSPARENCY: THE KEY TO BETTER GOVERNANCE?
edited by Christopher Hood and David Heald

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 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 conflicting 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 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 communication 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 institutional behaviour regarding transparency requirement, particularly 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 separately 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 complex relationship between the openness of code and the democracy of government, which is one aspect of transparency. 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 government 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 transparency: the interest of outsiders for the information; the shift to the egalitarian culture; and the adaptation to the technological 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 nominal 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 transparency 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

Published online in Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com) DOI: 10.1002/pad.477