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Abstract

This article offers a sociological account of how we might analyse the relationship between contemporary practices and discourses of secrecy on the one hand and those of transparency on the other. While secrecy is often framed in popular and political discourses as the antithesis of transparency, in reality their relationship is more complex and co-constitutive than may initially appear. The article argues that understanding the interface between secrecy and transparency as a socially embedded *dynamic* can offer public relations scholarship productive avenues for both theoretically-oriented research and empirical studies. In its role in the management of the secrecy–transparency dynamic, PR plays a significant role in actively creating social relations. This article aims to provide resources for assessing the strength of this dynamic in acting to structure social, political and economic relations, and offers new perspectives on how techniques employed to manage the secrecy–transparency dynamic – including public relations – are both embedded in such relations and act to shape them.

Keywords

Public relations research; secrecy; secrecy–transparency dynamic; transparency; capitalism

Introduction

This article offers a sociological account of how we might analyse the relationship between contemporary practices and discourses of secrecy on the one hand and those of transparency on the other. While secrecy is often framed in popular and political discourses as the antithesis of transparency, in reality their relationship is more complex and co-constitutive than may initially appear. The aim of this article is not to provide a normative definition of transparency or indeed secrecy, but to explore the shifting ways that they manifest in society, specifically in public relations,

and to offer sociological perspectives on how we might analyse their significance. Accordingly, my framing of the concept of 'secrecy' is drawn from Simmel's (1906) important work in which secrecy is understood in parallel to 'publicity' (a contemporary manifestation of which is transparency). I argue that understanding the interface between secrecy and transparency as a socially embedded *dynamic* can offer public relations scholarship productive avenues for both theoretically-oriented research and empirical studies.

Issues relating to secrecy have recently gained more public and political prominence. The widespread use of Non-disclosure Agreements (NDAs), practices of data capture and exploitation that are obscured from the public and regulatory authorities, and the extent of 'behind the scenes' political lobbying such as the practices of Lynton Crosby's company, CTF Partners, all figure strongly in the media. Transparency is often considered the solution to practices of secrecy which, in turn, tend to be framed as instances of undemocratic power abuse by economic, social or political elites. Yet studies of today's manifestations of transparency in social, political and economic spheres have found them, in practice, to be specific forms of neoliberal governance which promise openness but deliver only justifications of the status quo or further obfuscation (for instance, in open government initiatives which release vast quantities of data, yet those data are unintelligible due to either their technicality or their overwhelming scale).

This article assesses the potential for public relations scholarship of analysing the secrecy-transparency dynamic based on sociological work, drawing additionally on insights from other disciplines such as anthropology, philosophy, media and cultural studies, and organisation studies. PR scholars may be most familiar with media sociology, for instance, accounts which draw on Habermas' (1989) work. More broadly, the discipline of sociology attends to the institutions, practices, social relations, identities, and ideologies that orient society and has a particular concern with analysing that which influences social stasis (or social reproduction) and social change. The article draws on Euro-American sources and examples, as did both Simmel and Weber. Yet Simmel argued that secrecy is a universal in social relations while its specific manifestations will vary according to place and time. I would invite researchers to draw on my analysis of the dynamic relationship between secrecy and transparency and adapt or challenge its insights in relation to a wide range of contexts.

Georg Simmel's (1906) work provides a foundation for this analysis. He argues that 'secrecy is a universal sociological form' that can be contrasted with 'publicity' or the making public of information or interests (Simmel, 1906: 423).¹ Secrecy, he maintains, is actively constitutive of social

¹ The issue of public and private spheres is a very broad and contested field which has generated intense critical debate. It is beyond the scope of this article to do justice to these debates, so I restrict myself to noting

relations: it structures relationships between individuals and groups, coordinates social reciprocity, and is implicated in the operations of power. An analysis of secrecy and its pairing with 'publicity', Simmel suggests, will reveal the deeper structures and principles at work in any one society at any one time. A dominant manifestation of publicity today is 'transparency' and this iteration of publicity forms the focus of the article. Transparency today operates both as a discursive framing of the principle of democratic openness (of data, of decision-making practices, of vested interests etc) and as a practice embedded in neoliberal policies and codes of practice across a range of institutions and organisations. For instance, the 2004 EU Transparency Directive (amended in 2013) mandates disclosure of Corporate Social Responsibility issues such as environmental impact, human rights, and anti-corruption issues. Such principles of transparency aim to enhance the accountability of organisations and foster dialogue between organisations and informed stakeholders. As Birchall (2014) argues, while many understandings of transparency frame it as a practice of information disclosure,

.... corporate and state transparency is perhaps better described as an attitude: a commitment to operating in the open, under the scrutiny of customers, stakeholders, citizens, and other interested parties through the publication of any or all of the following: datasets, minutes, transcripts, or live feeds of meetings; accounts; policies; decision-making procedures as well as the decisions themselves; and records of actions taken.

(Birchall, 2014: 78)

It has been widely noted that organisations of all types are today under pressure to embed transparency practices in their operations (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2015), and there appears to be no sign that the drive for transparency is diminishing. At the time of writing, the UK government is preparing legislation proposed in the *Online Harms White Paper* (2019) which places principles of organisational transparency at its core, calling for a regulator of organisations such as social media companies and proposing a range of measures including online fact-checking services and the enhancement of the transparency of political advertising.² Alongside legislative measures there exist a wide range of organisations and pressure groups which aim to promote practices of transparency

that practices of secrecy and transparency are necessarily nested within those spheres and the relationship between those spheres.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper/online-harms-white-paper>
Accessed 11/10/19.

such as Transparency International,³ organisations supporting investigative journalism such as Bellingcat⁴ and The Bureau of Investigative Journalism⁵, and NGOs such as Amnesty International.

There is a recognition that transparency policies and practices are part of a wider neoliberal project. Within public relations scholarship there has been interest in analysing PR's relationship to neoliberalism (e.g. Bourne, 2019; Cronin, 2018; Demetrious and Surma, 2019; Surma and Demetrious, 2018), and its place in the core institutions of neoliberal capitalism such as the financial industry (Bourne, 2017). As Demetrious and Surma argue,

....it is important to understand public relations as both a discursive mode (in terms of its characteristic and now-normalised promotional structures, vocabularies and styles) and as an institutional site (of occupational networks, peak bodies, professional associations, think tanks and educational sites) from which the discourse gains its authority, status and legitimacy.

(Demetrious and Surma, 2019: 105)

Sociology can add a further dimension to this work by offering a socially-embedded framework for analysing the current iteration of the secrecy–transparency dynamic. Public relations work, in its forms as discursive mode and as institutional site, clearly has to negotiate and manage the secrecy–transparency dynamic. More precisely, it has to manage the social relations that the dynamic maintains, creates or challenges, thus impacting on the decisions practitioners must make about favouring secrecy or transparency in particular instances of PR work. In its role in managing the secrecy–transparency dynamic, PR also plays a highly significant role in actively creating social relations. This article aims to provide resources for assessing the strength of this dynamic in acting to structure social, political and economic relations, and can offer new perspectives on how techniques employed to manage the secrecy–transparency dynamic – including public relations – are both embedded in such relations and act to shape them. Secrecy and transparency are most obviously related to corporate communications, public affairs, political communications and lobbying, although they are embedded in a range of others PR sectors. To elaborate on each sector would be beyond the scope of this article but such a task offers considerable potential for future research. Therefore, my focus is not an exploration of how the secrecy–transparency dynamic manifests in all the diverse forms of PR from media relations to events organisation. Rather, I am offering sociological conceptual resources which may be adapted to analyse the range of PR practices and principles as they occur across the field of promotional culture.

³ <https://www.transparency.org/>, accessed 16/10/19.

⁴ <https://www.bellingcat.com/>, accessed 16/10/19.

⁵ <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/>, accessed 16/10/19.

My argument also acts as a prompt to sociology to consider more fully the analyses of disciplines such as public relations. In sociological thinking, public relations, alongside advertising and marketing, are often used as cyphers for capitalism and its modes of operation, and are drawn upon in sociological work as simplistic metaphors (for manipulation, for profit orientation, for the concealment of vested interests) without any real depth of analysis or empirical basis. Public relations scholarship can provide detailed, empirically-grounded accounts of PR and its relationship to both secrecy and transparency which could offer sociology and other disciplines new insights into the current manifestations of capitalism.

Transparency

Public relations scholarship has a well-established interest in issues relating to transparency, even if 'transparency' is not always the specific term used to frame such analyses. My aim in this section is not to comprehensively review the considerable field of PR literature in this area, but rather to highlight examples of significant trends and offer insights on transparency from other disciplines. Public relations scholarship has extensively explored issues of engagement and deliberation in which institutions reach out to the public with information and possibilities for informed dialogue and influence on decision-making (Edwards, 2018; Ihlen and Levenshus, 2017; Lee, 2015). There is an interest in politics and the lack of transparency in political practices (Cave and Rowell, 2014; Davis, 2002; Lloyd and Toogood, 2015); analysis of PR ethics including truth-telling (Jackson and Moloney, 2019); interest in (a lack of) transparency in corporations (Miller and Dinan, 2008) and in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reporting (Coombs and Holladay, 2013). There have been attempts to measure stakeholder perceptions of organisational transparency (Rawlins, 2009), analyses of stakeholder-driven transparency measures (Albu and Wehmeier, 2014), and accounts of the PR industry's own transparency in terms of employment, for example in relation to diversity (Edwards, 2015) or the ways in which feminism may be co-opted and reformed in PR firms to bolster neoliberal principles of individualised competition and entrepreneurialism in ways that obscure and distract from persistent inequalities (Yeomans, 2019). There are also studies of specific practices relating to non-transparent information management, whether historical (L'Etang, 2004), or contemporary, such as 'off the record' briefing (Dimitrov, 2017).

Some PR scholarship addresses the question of transparency more directly. Lee and Boynton (2017), for instance, argue that in analysing transparency in public relations practice it is important to expand our understanding of transparency beyond the disclosure of information, to reframe

transparency as a *process* rather than an end point, and to be sensitive to different situational factors that may influence transparency practices, such as the type of organization and stakeholders. Raaz and Wehmeier (2016) query the extent to which dialogue between stakeholders and corporations is facilitated by the transparency that is apparently offered by digital media. In a similar vein, Vujnovic and Kruckeberg (2016: 122) warn us to be critical of what they call organisations' practices of 'pseudo-transparency' which are designed to foster the appearance that an organisation is following principles of transparency without delivering genuine openness. They argue that narrow definitions can problematically frame transparency 'as a tool, rather than as a value' and call for more attention to the ethics involved in conceiving and practicing transparency (Vujnovic and Kruckeberg, 2016: 128).

In general terms, public relations scholarship has highlighted important issues relating to the detail of transparency practices in the industry, but has placed less emphasis on socially-embedded understandings of transparency's relationship to wider social, political and economic discourses and practices. Other disciplines can offer insights that may help develop richer understandings of transparency. For instance, analyses from organisation studies, cultural studies, communication studies, and philosophy offer useful perspectives on transparency as a multifaceted phenomenon, the effects of which are not wholly positive. Flyverbom, for instance, argues that when analysing organisations 'we should conceptualize transparency projects as a form of visibility management with extensive and often paradoxical implications for the organizations and actors involved' (2016: 111-2). Such practices can result in what Stohl, Stohl and Leonardi (2016: 123) call 'the transparency paradox' in which high levels of visibility actively decrease transparency as the volume of information released produces confusion rather than clarity. While this can be an unintended outcome of transparency principles, they suggest that some organisations practice 'strategic opacity' to hide important information within a blizzard of insignificant data (Stohl, Stohl and Leonardi, 2016: 133). Discussions of this practice as 'snowing' or 'data-bombing' have circulated in the mainstream media and media trade press.

Further, the model of communication that underpins most principles of organisational and data transparency does not bear close scrutiny. In many practices, and indeed analyses of, transparency 'the transparency ideal unintentionally reproduces a simplistic communication model according to which senders are compliant information providers, messages are clear and self-evident, and receivers are consistently interested and involved' (Christensen and Cheney, 2015: 73). Although such transparency practices may be inadequate, and are internally recognised as such, many organisations mobilise transparency as a 'myth' in the anthropological sense of a founding story and principle that orients the everyday running of that organisation and binds the organisation

together as an entity (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2015). Organisations have tended to respond to the current political and policy drive for transparency by focusing their efforts on the coherence and consistency of organisational disclosures and thus ‘the transparency myth is co-opted and re-engineered into a consistency paradigm and, subsequently, “sold” back to society as transparency and credibility’ (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2015: 144). One key player in organising the consistency and coherence of organisations’ disclosures is, of course, the public relations industry. The current social and political climate’s emphasis on transparency – and one of its manifestations as consistency in corporate communications – therefore offers significant opportunities to the public relations industry and places it at the forefront of a key element of neoliberal capitalism’s operations.

In other disciplines such as sociology and cultural studies, analyses of transparency have focused on its place in the contemporary configuration of the relationship between neoliberal capitalism and democracy. Birchall, for instance, considers that transparency has gained such currency today because, ‘transparency is [seen as] a virtue, the secular version of a born-again cleanliness that few can fail to praise’ (2011: 8). In the current climate, both organisations and initiatives based on the principle of revealing data, such as open government practices, can accumulate the added value of ‘transparency capital’ (Birchall, 2011: 8), or the political or social benefits of appearing to adhere to the contemporary virtue of transparency. Such a model of transparency extends beyond the parameters of Freedom of Information (FOI) laws which are based on a reactive model requiring journalists, the public or pressure groups to request specific information, whereas the principles of transparency as manifested in today’s discourses are more proactive in their orientation (Moore, 2018). Organisations are encouraged to embed the principles of transparency in everything they do. But such principles of transparency do not ensure that there is genuine communication or engagement between parties. In the practices of open government, which are in part aimed at securing the public’s trust of the state, transparency tends to be an end in itself and ‘open government, in turn, now tends to be conceived of as a condition achieved by the state, rather than a two-way relationship between the state and its citizens’ (Moore, 2018: 420).

Further, the ideal of organisational transparency can be drawn into anti-regulatory initiatives: ‘ideological advocates of transparency maintain that it can obviate the need for most – if not all – government controls. That is, transparency becomes a tool to fight off the regulations opposed by various business groups and politicians from conservative parties’ (Etzioni, 2010: 390). In this context, transparency measures can be reactionary moves on the part of organisations wishing to escape the reach of various controls, which paradoxically jar with the spirit of openness and accountability that underpin the principles of transparency. In crisis communications, for instance,

the use of transparency measures can be strategically directed at repairing an organisation's or individual's image, thus ameliorating immediate reputational damage but also, in the longer term, may be oriented towards suppressing drives for regulation. Such transparency initiatives feed into a broader 'audit culture' in which a range of metrics are constantly monitored and taken as proxies for certain goals, such as democratic openness, although the audit practices also generate a range of unintended outcomes (Power, 1997; Strathern, 2000).

These analyses of transparency throw into question popular assumptions about the necessarily positive outcomes of increased visibility of information. As the sociologist Brighenti argues,

...the relationship between power and visibility is complex: power does not rest univocally either with visibility or with invisibility..... visibility is not correlated in any straightforward way to recognition and control, or to any specific moral value. As such, it does not constitute anything inherently liberating, nor, conversely, does it necessarily imply oppression.

(Brighenti, 2007: 340)

Although visibility of information is only one form of transparency it draws considerable attention from policy makers, regulators and academic research. The principles and practices of transparency as a form of visibility of information tend to be lauded as progressive and democratic, while the existence of secrecy (in organisations, in government etc.) tends to be viewed in negative terms (as freighted with exploitative power relations). But just as the visibility of information is not inherently positive, we should not assume that secrecy is essentially negative.

Secrecy

The topic of secrecy has attracted interest from a range of disciplines, although there are fewer studies of secrecy than of transparency. Bok's (1989) philosophical account considers the issue of secrecy to reside at the core of the human condition: 'In thus exploring secrecy and openness, I have come up against what human beings care most to protect and to probe: the exalted, the dangerous, the shameful; the sources of power and creation; the fragile and the intimate' (Bok, 1989: xvii-xviii). There is certainly evidence of the range and depth of the manifestations of secrecy in human societies. Work in organisation studies shows how secrecy is endemic in organisations and is active in both constituting individual organisations and enabling them to cohere as entities across time

(Costas and Grey, 2016). In politics, we can track the existence of different logics of political secrecy across historical periods (Horn, 2011). In today's model, society has an uneasy and ambivalent relationship to secrecy, both denigrating it while recognising its necessity:

As a result of modern democracy's ideal of transparency and of the moralization of politics, secrecy has become precarious and problematic, something seen as both necessary and noxious, something constantly in need of legitimization yet never really legitimate.

(Horn, 2011: 105)

In security studies, secrecy has an obvious appeal as a topic and the declassification of intelligence documents – classification itself being a practice of secrecy – has provided abundant historical material for academic analysis. Luscombe's (2018) account of the intelligence service's practices of 'cover storying' as an element of institutional secrecy and deception is particularly interesting due to its parallels with some aspects of public relations work, although this is not discussed by Luscombe. The narrative conditions of successful cover storying, Luscombe (2018) notes, are correspondence, plausibility, accountability, constraint, and durability. This resonates with PR practices of shaping information for public release and today's emphasis on consistency of messaging as a way of managing the demands of transparency requirements.

In PR scholarship there has been less direct interest in secrecy as a concept although there has been considerable attention to practices of obscuring information, limiting information release and shaping the form and tone of such information and how this relates, for instance, to shaping the public(s) (Pieczka, 2019) or the potentially blurred boundaries between propaganda and PR (Lock and Ludolph, 2019). There have been analyses of how PR is implicated in 'denying voice' (Bourne, 2019), and in the use of 'strategic silence' (Dimitrov, 2017). Where secrecy is addressed directly (e.g. Curry Jansen, 2016), it tends to be understood as wholly negative and as an operating mechanism of powerful elites who may wish to obscure questionable behaviour. In such cases, transparency is proposed as the cure. Yet secrecy is not in itself necessarily negative; consider the examples of secret ballots in voting practice, individual medical histories, copyright and trade secrets. We require a more subtle analysis of secrecy and its relationship to other phenomena such as transparency.

I argue that there is considerable value for PR scholarship in, firstly, drawing on the work of other disciplines such as sociology to interrogate both transparency and secrecy as socially-embedded concepts that have associated practices and discourses. Secondly, there is value in understanding secrecy and transparency not as antithetical elements but as a composite entity, that is, a shifting dynamic of secrecy-transparency. Thirdly, it is important to recognise that the

secrecy–transparency dynamic is not merely situated within the social world and embedded in social relations, but is active in constituting them – and it has gained increasing prominence in today’s neoliberal configuration of capitalism. If public relations plays a more significant social role today due to its centrality in mediating the secrecy–transparency dynamic, both public relations scholarship and work in other disciplines must devote more analytic attention to it. The following sections offer insights from sociology and other disciplines which aim to help create such an analytic perspective.

The secrecy–transparency dynamic

Georg Simmel’s (1906) sociological account of secrecy and its relationship to publicity offers useful perspectives on the roots and socially-embedded character of today’s interface between secrecy and transparency. Simmel (1906: 463) maintains that secrecy and the unknown are core characteristics of social relations and constitute a ‘universal sociological form’:

....the relationships of men are differentiated by the question of knowledge with reference to each other: what is not concealed may be known, and what is not revealed may yet not be known.

(Simmel, 1906: 453)

All relationships, whether between individuals or between groups, are defined by the ratio of secrecy involved. This highlights the important point that secrets and secrecy are not founded on *nobody knowing*, but rather on some individual or individuals knowing and *withholding* that knowledge from others. It should not be presumed, however, that secrecy is essentially negative. In fact, secrecy is,

...one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity. In contrast with the juvenile condition in which every mental picture is at once revealed, every undertaking is open to everyone’s view, secrecy procures enormous extension of life, because with publicity many sorts of purposes could never arrive at realization.

(Simmel, 1906: 462)

Publicity, or the making public of information or interests, is paired with secrecy in a shifting reciprocal relationship. In effect, the secret derives its power from the ever-present threat that it may be exploited or revealed and this creates a tension which 'at the moment of revelation, finds its release' (Simmel, 1906: 466). This tension between secrecy and publicity, Simmel argues, can hold a strong popular attraction as secrets create a closed circuit of individuals who are 'in the know', amplifying a sense of personal possession and being part of an elite group of secret-holders. The secret – that which is withheld from publicity – can develop an aura and appear to accord the subject of the secret special value.

Secrecy is engaged in a dynamic tension with publicity. This creates social relationships and reciprocity, but also social divisions and power relations.

Secrecy sets barriers between men, but at the same time offers the seductive temptation to break through the barriers by gossip or confession. This temptation accompanies the psychical life of the secret like an overtone.... From the play of these two interests, in concealment and in revelation, spring shadings and fortunes of human reciprocities throughout their whole range.

(Simmel, 1906: 466)

Simmel's account shows how secrecy creates forms of social reciprocity through the revelation of information just as much as the concealment of information. This both forms social relationships between individuals and between groups who are either party to the secret or are excluded from the secret, and shapes possible actions. Simmel is at pains to point out that secrecy is in itself morally neutral – it is not fundamentally negative but can be drawn into 'the fortunes of human reciprocities throughout their whole range' including the power-laden and the exploitative.

As it creates social relations, an analysis of the relationship between secrecy and publicity will reveal much about a particular society, including the specific forms and practices of capitalism as they mutate across time. Written in the early twentieth century, Max Weber's (1997) analyses of the relationship between capitalism and bureaucracy offer insights into secrecy in organisations which have inspired later analyses (e.g. Costas and Grey, 2016). Weber argued that secrecy is at the very core of how organisations operate:

Every bureaucracy seeks to increase the superiority of the professionally informed by keeping their knowledge and intentions secret. Bureaucratic administration always tends to be an administration of 'secret sessions': in so far as it can, it hides its knowledge and action from

criticism.... The tendency toward secrecy in certain administrative fields follows their material nature: everywhere that the power interests of the domination structure toward *the outside* are at stake, whether it is an economic competitor of a private enterprise, or a foreign, potentially hostile polity, we find secrecy.

(Weber, 1997: 233)

Secrecy sits at the heart of organisations and stitches them together, defining that which is outside their boundaries and therefore excluded from their secrets. Weber also offers intriguing perspectives on secrecy's implication in bureaucracy and its relationship to parliaments which has particular resonance when considering political lobbying, public affairs and the various parliamentary and political upheavals in the UK's Brexit crisis:

The pure interest of the bureaucracy in power, however, is efficacious far beyond those areas where purely functional interests make for secrecy. The concept of the 'official secret' is the specific invention of bureaucracy, and nothing is so fanatically defended by the bureaucracy as this attitude, which cannot be substantially justified beyond these specifically qualified areas. In facing a parliament, the bureaucracy, out of a sure power instinct, fights every attempt of the parliament to gain knowledge by means of its own experts or from interest groups.... Bureaucracy naturally welcomes a poorly informed and hence powerless parliament – at least in so far as ignorance somehow agrees with the bureaucracy's interests.

(Weber, 1997: 233-4)

One of today's most powerful manifestations of publicity – transparency – has gained hold variously as a principle, legal obligation, code of practice and moral good. Following Simmel, we should not consider transparency the opposite of secrecy, nor the 'answer' to the 'problem' of secrecy. Instead, we must analyse it as a specific version of a socially-embedded dynamic that has co-evolved with neoliberal capitalism. One specificity is that transparency requirements relating to the disclosure of information, decision-making practices or vested interests are particularly powerfully embedded in public service institutions⁶ and Weber reminds us that commercial organisations are more able to conceal their means to power: 'The "secret", as a means of power, is, after all, more safely hidden in the books of an enterpriser than it is in the files of public authorities' (Weber, 1997: 235). It is

⁶ The UK government's interface with the public, the website <https://www.gov.uk/>, is based on principles of transparency. Its parallel site, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/>, offers transparency in parliamentary affairs (such as debates in parliament, drafts legislation etc).

perhaps no surprise that such commercial organisations invest heavily in various forms of public relations to help manage their relationship to secrecy and transparency.

Later accounts of capitalism have picked up the theme of secrecy and its shifting play with publicity and visibility. Guy Debord (1998: 12) argues that 'generalised secrecy' is a constitutive element of the 'society of the spectacle' - including advertising and marketing - which both conceals and acts as a distraction. The secrecy of consumer capitalism acts to hide its realities of domination and exploitation through 'the ponderous stage-management of diversionary thought' (Debord, 1998: 54). Capitalism, and its manifestation as spectacle, relies on 'front' organisations and specialists in obfuscation (Debord, 1998: 52), among whom Debord would surely include public relations practitioners. Following a similar logic, Jodi Dean's (2002) influential account places the relationship between secrecy and publicity at the core of 'communicative capitalism'. She argues that the expansion of communications and entertainment networks deliver not democracy but more entrenched capitalism, while 'the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world's peoples' (Dean, 2002: 3). Communication becomes a fetish that transfixes us: it appears to offer the solution to many ills, including a lack of information, but the expansion of communication under a capitalist system merely extends the freedoms of the market and thus bolsters capitalism. The expansion of communications technologies and networks creates a particular culture of publicity and secrecy: 'just at that moment when everything seems fully public, the media pulses with invocations of the secret' (Dean, 2002: 1). The mass media, in being oriented to uncovering 'the truth', amplify a sense among the public that there is something 'out there' to be uncovered. Dean argues that the demand for more information feeds and supports the extension of the capitalist media system, encourages more intense public engagement with the media, and thus binds the public more tightly to the capitalist system (as well as fostering conspiracy theories). In her account, the play of secrecy and publicity actively constitutes 'a public' that then seeks to uncover secrets as defined by the culture of publicity. For Dean, it is clear which aspects of capitalist media culture deserve most opprobrium:

The public relations industry has mastered the art of eliminating opportunities for action. It dumps tons of complicated information onto investigators, critics, and consumers. It arranges for apologies and explanations of problems. Why organize against corporations when they are working to serve us better? How resist in the face of admissions of guilt and injunctions to move on and put it all behind us? In short, excesses of information and communication work in the ideological mode of truth that functions as a lie.

(Dean, 2002: 163)

Both Debord's and Dean's arguments are provocative and intriguing. Yet both analyses operate at a high level of generality with little engagement with empirical material. Dean has taken Simmel's point that the relationship between secrecy and publicity acts to constitute social relations but her account is rather disembodied from the social, economic and political context within which such social relations exist. While offering some sharp insights, her account may offer only limited assistance to public relations researchers seeking to understand the nuances, dissonances, and empirically complex realities that are evident in the everyday work of public relations practitioners in managing and altering the relationship between secrecy and transparency.

Analysing the secrecy–transparency dynamic in public relations

There is clearly a need for analyses of the public relations industry's implication in today's secrecy–transparency dynamic which can reveal how practices of both secrecy and transparency are involved in concealment and revelation and how this process actively creates social relations. Writing in another context, Galison (2004) calls for an 'antiepistemology': 'Epistemology asks how knowledge can be uncovered and secured. Antiepistemology asks how knowledge can be covered and obscured' (2004: 237). Public relations is well known for its powers of obfuscation and for its skills in diverting attention, which many studies highlight (e.g. Cronin, 2016; Davis, 2002; Miller and Dinan, 2008; Curry Jansen, 2017). Equally, there have been many analyses of PR's potential for enhancing genuine public engagement and working in the public interest (Brunner and Smallwood, 2019; Edwards, 2016; Johnston, 2016; Johnston and Pieczka, 2018). But a more specific analysis of the secrecy–transparency dynamic – focusing on the *relationship* between the uncovering and securing of information and its covering and obfuscation – offers new perspectives and invites us to ask questions with rather different valences.

Taking a broad perspective, an analysis of public relations' implication in the secrecy–transparency dynamic can reveal much about the specific manifestations that neoliberal capitalism can take today. For commercial organisations, secrecy offers competitive advantage (Weber, 1997), it protects reputation, it manages public image, and it acts as a glue that holds an organisation together (Costas and Grey, 2016). These manifestations of secrecy are core principles of a capitalist market system and indeed many are protected in law.⁷ In socio-legal terms, some aspects

⁷ For instance, there are many exemptions to the types of information that may be legitimately requested through the UK's Freedom of Information law, such as those relating to commercially sensitive information.

of secrecy such as trade secrets are not sanctioned as negative phenomena, but rather are framed as unavoidable and indeed positive elements of a well-functioning market system. In tandem, transparency in neoliberal capitalist societies is not secrecy's converse but its conjoined twin. In the specific terms in which transparency is mobilised today – the release of information to the public, the provision of clear accounts of decision-making processes etc – transparency principles and practices are designed to create an even playing field *in market terms* for the public and for competitor firms (and a similar point can be made about transparency in politics). Both secrecy and transparency embed and protect the rules of the (capitalist) game. We can then ask what role the public relations industry plays in mediating, extending, justifying or challenging this game and we can analyse specific instances of the secrecy–transparency dynamic in public relations work. There are many criticisms of the limitations of transparency practices, but in reframing our questions we should ask if some of those criticisms could instead be more usefully directed at capitalism itself rather than at transparency measures which, after all, are only one set of policies that emerges from capitalist infrastructures.

This rearticulates narrow questions about public relations' mediation of transparency and opens up avenues to explore the ways in which public relations is foundationally embedded – through secrecy–transparency but also many other nexuses – in the operating systems of capitalism. Historically, we can ask how the secrecy–transparency dynamic came to be articulated with and embedded within capitalism and how this process interfaced with the growth of the public relations industry. We can also analyse how secrecy–transparency operates in instances where established capitalist market relations are under pressure. For instance, we could assess PR's implication in managing secrecy–transparency (as a composite entity) in relation to the oil industry as it faces renewed critique in the context of environmental crisis, or in the corporate affairs of many commercial organisations in the UK which are facing radical shifts in their established market relations in the face of Brexit and its ramifications. Although Simmel (1906) argues that secrecy (and publicity) are sociological universals, we should not assume that their shifting manifestations in capitalist societies today are either natural or inevitable. We can denaturalise such phenomena and an analysis of public relations could offer a grounded empirical and conceptually nuanced entry point for such an intellectual project.

Thinking on a more micro-scale, we can also ask about public relations' connections to particular characteristics of secrecy–transparency practices today. For example, Taussig's (1999) anthropological work on 'public secrecy' provides some interesting insights into the relationship between what individuals, the public or organisations may know and that which is publicly expressed. A public secret, Taussig argues, is 'that which is generally known, but cannot be

articulated' (1999: 5). This is a form of secret which is a protected form of knowledge that is technically withheld from wider view but is also completely transparent – everyone knows. Shifting the perspective a little, Jones suggests that 'the public secret might be alternatively termed the concealment of revelation – dissimulating that something has been disclosed' (2014: 55). We can imagine a range of public secrets, such as the 'don't ask, don't tell' informal policy relating to the existence of homosexual members of the UK armed forces in previous decades. The public relations industry clearly has a central role in managing public secrets and we can ask useful questions about how public secrecy shapes some key elements of social, political and economic life. In a related vein, we can ask about PR's relationship to what McGoey (2012) calls 'strategic ignorance' in organisations. Ignorance does not necessarily hamper the functioning of organisations and may instead be encouraged within organisations with the specific purpose of obscuring or dismissing knowledge and enabling deniability (McGoey, 2012). This again emphasises that there is no simple zero-sum game between secrecy (withheld knowledge) and publicity (the making public of knowledge, including in neoliberal transparency policies). Public relations practices operate both internally in organisations to mediate 'strategic ignorance' and externally to manage the visibilities of what is actually known and what can be publicly admitted as knowledge.

More generally, if we recognise that the secrecy–transparency dynamic is not merely situated *within* social relations but is an active force in *making* social relations, we can ask some foundational questions about public relations' role in that process. As Plummer (2019) argues, humans are narrative beings who order understandings of ourselves and our societies through narratives. The public relations industry is, among other things, skilled in created (interest-driven) narratives (Elmer, 2011). Secrets, and their relationship with transparency, have enormous narrative appeal for, as Simmel (1906) notes, the revelation always haunts the secret. It drives the narrative forward and encourages us to believe that the revelation of the hitherto unknown is the resolution of the story. There are useful questions to be asked about the specificities of narrative forms used by public relations practitioners that take as their driving force the dynamism of the secrecy–transparency relationship. PR practitioners may organise the release of certain information with the express intention of protecting other information from public view. Creating specific narrative forms for this release of information that play on the dynamics of secrecy–transparency may convince the public through techniques of narrative closure that the story is completed and there is nothing else to be revealed. The inverse may occur, of course, in which the public is drawn into the narrative drama and expects further and more revealing disclosures. This relates to the broader point about the appeal and generative quality of secrecy. As Fenster argues in relation to the state, 'secrecy engenders public speculation about what is being withheld, while the process of

keeping secrets, once made public, itself communicates important information about the state and its governance strategy' (2014: 315). Secrets made public can thus reveal something about the practices of secrecy in any one field and can further public speculation about secrecy. PR's own very negative public reputation – centring on misinformation, inflated claims and secrecy – itself engenders public speculation about the nature of PR and the forms of governance PR is attempting on behalf of its clients.

Many of these public relations narratives are public-facing and oriented to directing and shaping public opinion but, as Davis (2002) argues, a significant proportion of PR work centres on mediating between elites, such as organisations lobbying government, and such narratives will be shaped accordingly. Analysing the secrecy–transparency dynamic in political lobbying could reveal not only some 'deep secrets' about parliaments, democracy and political practice, but how PR negotiates the forms of political secrecy that will necessarily shift in tandem with changes in principles and practices of transparency. For instance, the current push for increased state secrecy in the face of threats from terrorism (see Jones, 2014) is paired with demands for the public to be subjected to enhanced transparency to the state via various forms of surveillance. Public relations play a key role in managing how such demands are presented and in securing media attention. Such issues raise profound questions about the degree of secrecy any one society should accept and how diverse versions of publicity should be managed and mediated.

Conclusion

Secrecy and transparency are centrally important ideologies and practices in today's capitalist societies and are intimately linked to the work of various sectors of the PR industry. If practices of secrecy actively *create* and *reshape* social relations, then PR's implication in those practices requires depth analysis. I have argued that although transparency has received considerable attention in the PR literature – and secrecy much less so – more focus needs to be directed at the shifting *relationship* between secrecy and transparency which is a key motor that drives change in social relations. Focusing on secrecy–transparency as a composite entity that is socially embedded and inherently dynamic can offer new perspectives for public relations research and can reframe existing questions within PR debates. Secrecy has a strong social appeal: it acts to form groups (excluding others who are not party to that group's secrets); it centres on power and power relations (including the power to share or withhold the secret, or to mobilise it for gain); it taps into the narrative drive that orients human societies (creating dynamics of withheld information and revelations); it seals off

an object, individual or idea from the world - protecting that which is deemed important - and can form an aura around the subject of the secret. Secrecy only functions when paired with publicity or the making public of information or interests (Simmel, 1906), and the relations between the pair take on different forms through history and across cultures. In contemporary neoliberal capitalism one of the dominant forms that publicity takes is transparency, a subject in which public relations scholarship has a well-established interest. Understanding secrecy–transparency as a compound rather than as two singular entities allows public relations scholarship to ask new questions about PR practice and its social, political and economic impact. Equally, framing both secrecy and transparency as neither inherently positive nor negative encourages a more nuanced approach. Public relations practice could be more active in shifting organisations away from a narrow view of transparency as a simple disclosure of information towards more proactive and progressive forms of engagement, while also understanding public relations’ important role in managing the current iteration of the secrecy–transparency dynamic in capitalist societies today. Researching issues that are shrouded in secrecy is complex as there are often bureaucracies or power hierarchies that wish to obscure or block the flow of information. On a practical level, the UK’s Freedom of Information Act offers a powerful tool for researchers, although there are tensions between FOI and the Data Protection Act which enshrines a right to privacy (Sheaff, 2019). Considering the broader social and media context, fake news, deepfake videos, fact-checking web sites, leaks and whistle-blowing practices are all reshaping public perceptions of the trustworthiness of publicly circulating information, and are highlighting both the limitations of transparency measures and the widespread existence of secrets in their many varieties. Subtle analyses of the secrecy–transparency dynamic and its interface with public relations work are urgently required and will offer important advances not only to PR research but to a range of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.

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