

The Governance of Transparency

When we choose it, how it works, why it fails

The challenge:

Insecurity in modern societies

- **Transparency is a strategy designed to tackle feelings of insecurity.** It does so by implementing distrust.
- **Feelings of insecurity are characteristic for modern societies** as they deal with a high level of contingency and complexity.
- If contingency is interpreted as dangerous or risky, transparency provides an attractive strategy for organizations and societies.

Two case studies

At the beginning of modernity: utilitarianism (1790-)

Transparency was invented after people experienced contingency in religious wars, industrialization, and political revolutions. As the old social order crumbled, Jeremy Bentham was the first to design a democratic order based on transparency. He wanted to provide "security against misrule".

In the crisis of modernity: new public management (1980-)

Current calls for transparency rose after the 1970s, when experiences of economic and political crisis gave way for 'postmodernity' or 'reflexive modernity'. Transparency again provided a strategy to cope with the feelings of insecurity. The neoliberal new public management (NPM) is the most prominent approach that recycled transparency.

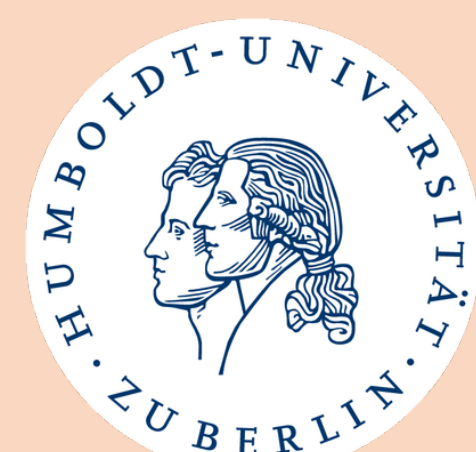
Toward a theory of transparency

Understanding transparency is an ongoing research project of mine since 2013. I started out with an investigation in the history of the idea, researching the invention and ascent of transparency. Since then, I expanded my own research in case studies and counseled research projects on transparency. I am also co-editing a large volume that pools transparency research from all areas of the social sciences. In a systematic comparison of the research results, I am currently developing a general theory of transparency.

Do you want to know more? Get in touch or have a look at my publications:

Vincent August

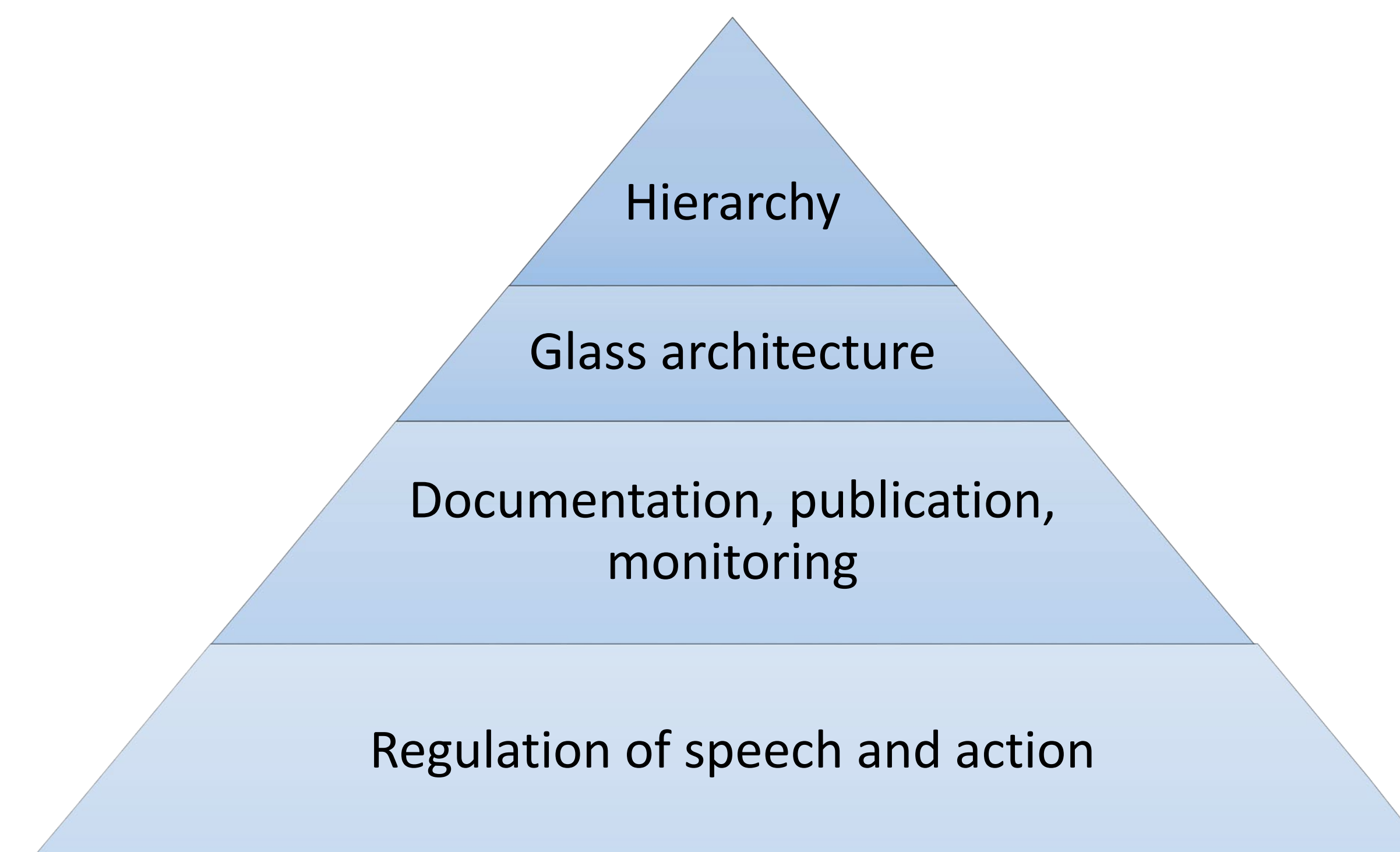
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The mechanism:

Practices of distrust formalize and rationalize behavior to reduce insecurity.

- **Transparency implements distrust.** Its metaphorical power helps to design diverse techniques of inspection that reduce the abundant possibilities of action to an approved and safe procedure.
- **Transparency steers behavior** by incentives and punishments. The basic idea is that people who are exposed to inspection behave aptly to avoid sanctions. Interestingly, the general set of practices is pretty consistent over time. Examples are: benchmarking, monitoring, rules of procedures.
- **Those practices enable and enforce control of officials by formalizing** political language and action (*control dimension*). When the meta-principles of transparency regulate what is said and done, purified information are the result. A discourse based on pure information would automatically effect a neutral, rational judgement (*content dimension*). This reasoning is exemplary for modernist governance.



Origins of a political idea: moral mechanics



Photo: Colourbox.de / Kiyoshi Takahase Segundo

In the beginning, transparency was not a political term. Bentham transferred it to governance.

One of his major sources were optics and mechanics: Newton had just used transparency to discover the laws of optics and his work suggested that the natural world can be governed by the laws of mechanics.

Bentham applied those ideas. He developed a moral mechanics that is implemented by transparent architecture and management. Today, transparency still promises to combine *perfect knowledge* and *mechanistic steering*.

Unintended consequences:

Experts, exclusion, distrust

- **Transparency fosters expert participation:** Transparency produces more and more information, which, in turn, hides relevant information like a needle in the haystack. Only experts and specialized organizations can deal with the information overload. However, those actors are not transparent for citizens either. In free trade negotiations, for instance, companies (not citizens) are the first to use free information.
- **Transparency suggests neutrality but it excludes deviant approaches:** Formalizing the ways to act and speak always privileges certain groups, while excluding a vast range of other approaches. NPM and Bentham, for instance, both reject most forms of protest. Bentham even thought that only the middle class was fit to participate. Transparency is not neutral but a rhetorical strategy.
- **Distrust reinforces itself, reproducing the original feelings of insecurity:** As there are no final criteria to guarantee that an information is reliable, 'distrusters' are always in search for betrayal. Transparency does not generate trust. Without a trusted basis, however, the capacity to act stumbles. In security research, for instance, this is a well known problem.

Is there an alternative? The republican idea of creative action

- interprets contingency as an opportunity to change and renewal (rather than a threat to life and property).
- tackles corruption by pluralizing publics (rather than formalizing and hierarchizing them).
- uses face-to-face-encounters to generate trust (rather than to maximize distrust).

Conclusion

Transparency provides a powerful institutional setting to control officials. It does so by canalizing their behavior into formal procedures. However, transparency does not generate security nor citizen participation, because it undermines its own goals in the very way it tries to achieve them. Therefore, transparency must be tamed by another governance rationality.