



Using ICTs to create a culture of transparency: E-government and social media as openness and anti-corruption tools for societies

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, many governments have worked to increase openness and transparency in their actions. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are seen by many as a cost-effective and convenient means to promote openness and transparency and to reduce corruption. E-government, in particular, has been used in many prominent, comprehensive transparency efforts in a number of nations. While some of these individual efforts have received considerable attention, the issue of whether these ICT-enabled efforts have the potential to create a substantive social change in attitudes toward transparency has not been widely considered. This paper explores the potential impacts of information and ICTs – especially e-government and social media – on cultural attitudes about transparency.

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1. Transparency, Information, and Society

As an international issue, transparency came to prominence after World War I in the post-war negotiations (Braman, 2006). It took considerable time for many nations to pursue transparency. In the mid-1980s, only 11 nations had freedom of information laws, but by the end of 2004, 59 nations did (Relly & Sabharwal, 2009; Roberts, 2006). Transparency and the right to access government information are now internationally regarded as essential to democratic participation, trust in government, prevention of corruption, informed decision-making, accuracy of government information, and provision of information to the public, companies, and journalists, among other essential functions in society (Cullier & Piotrowski, 2009; Mulgan, 2007; Quinn, 2003; Reylea, 2009a; Shuler, Jaeger, & Bertot, 2010).

Government transparency generally occurs through one of four primary channels (Piotrowski, 2007):

1. proactive dissemination by the government;
2. release of requested materials by the government;
3. public meetings; and
4. leaks from whistleblowers.

A 2006 study of 14 countries found that countries with dedicated transparency laws were three times more likely to respond to requests for information, with countries lacking transparency laws acknowledged less than half of the requests (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2006).

Countries that embrace transparency tend to produce more information than other governments and are more likely to share this

information (Lord, 2006). More than 30 countries have even established a national-level, centralized anti-corruption agency (Meagher, 2005). Transparency ultimately serves to keep government honest—"Good government must be seen to be done" (Kierkegaard, 2009, p. 26). In terms of international practices in transparency, the Internet has greatly reduced the cost of collecting, distributing, and accessing government information (Roberts, 2006). As a result of these capacities, recent years have seen trends toward using e-government for greater access to information and for promotion of transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption goals (Anderson, 2009; Cullier & Piotrowski, 2009; Fuchs, 2006; Shim & Eom, 2008). However, all efforts to promote openness and reduce corruption are heavily shaped by the cultural milieu of a nation, ranging from societal attitudes toward the value of information to level of identification by citizens with the government and from viability of an independent press to information policies enacted by the government (Brown & Cloke, 2004).

Traditionally, there are three types of anti-corruption approaches (Shim & Eom, 2009):

- 1) Administrative reform. Administrative reforms are the most commonly used approaches, primarily through the enhancement of the quality of government bureaucracies to ensure that a watchdog agency or structure exists to officially monitor government behavior (Johnson, 1998; Klitgaard, 1998; Rose-Ackerman, 1999). Another common element of administrative reform is the creation of merit-based hiring and promotion for government positions, which feature formalized rules of conduct, accountability, and responsibility, sometimes learned from corporate approaches (Goodnow, 1992; Kim, Halligan, Cho, Oh, & Eikenberry, 2005; Wilson, 1992).
- 2) Law enforcement. Law enforcement approaches often complement administrative reforms to ensure that an appropriate system for

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punishing corruption is in place (Hamilton-Hart, 2001; Rose-Ackerman, 1999). While administrative reform lowers opportunities to take bribes, law enforcement greatly increases the potential costs and punishments for taking bribes. Prosecution of corruption cases makes an example to all government employees, while also helping to clarify and reinforce expected standards of behavior for government employees (Anechiarico & Jacob, 1994). The law enforcement approach has also been used without administrative reforms in some transitional nations where the persons in power have resisted transparency efforts (Hamilton-Hart, 2001; Quah, 2001).

- 3) Social change. The social change approach is based in the idea of reform through social empowerment of citizens by allowing them to participate in institutional reform movements and by cultivating a civil, law-based society as a long-term deterrent to corruption (Johnson, 1998). By changing cultural attitudes that have been accepting of corruption, citizens can ultimately protect themselves from corruption (Fukiyama, 2001; Johnson, 1998).

In each of these areas, the provision of information to citizens and the ability of citizens to monitor the activities of the government play an important role, both key areas in which e-government and other ICTs can be used to battle corruption. The influence of culture often makes social change the largest challenge in openness and anti-corruption initiatives.

However, many anti-corruption initiatives have not focused on information issues. Transparency as an anti-corruption measure instead has long been tied to economic incentives, controlling discretionary power of government officials through a system of rules of appropriate conduct (Brautigam, 1992). Many anti-corruption initiatives of the past two decades have been tied to economic development aid from sources such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Inter-American Development Bank, and USAID (Brown & Cloke, 2005). Consider the emphasis of the anti-corruption statements of two leading international organizations. The World Bank (1997) suggests “economic reform should be a main pillar of an anticorruption strategy” and that “deregulation and the expansion of markets are powerful tools for fighting corruption” (p. 35). The USAID *Handbook on Fighting Corruption* (1999) asserts that “the more activities public officials control or regulate, the more opportunities exist for corruption” (p. 13).

The focus on corruption as an economic issue has been part of an overall rise in global interest in transparency. Internationally, corruption has received great attention since 1990 due to fears of increasing opportunities for illicit activity due to globalization (Brown & Cloke, 2005). For example, anti-corruption conventions were signed by the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1996 and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1997 to limit corruption in the Americas. Issues of culture and information, however, have hampered many of these efforts. Whether these measures have been externally driven by internal organizations or tied to economic aid, or whether they have been internally driven from within a particular government, transparency as a means to reduce corruption in Central America has been negatively impacted specifically by misapprehensions about cultural norms, lack of education about transparency activities, and failures to create equal access to information (Brown & Cloke, 2005; Husted, 2002; Kolstad & Wiig, 2009).

Internal resistance to transparency initiatives is not unusual. In the United States, which was founded with openness principles being a part of the government, there was still significant initial resistance in the executive branch to the implementation of transparency laws in the 1950s and 1960s (Reylea, 2009a,b). Research has identified a number ways in which culture affects openness and anti-corruption efforts, types of leaders typically chosen, structure of government, level of political action and engagement by citizens, nature of social interactions and group formations, acceptance of legal change, and emphasis on

creating the cultural impression that corruption is unacceptable (Harrison, 2000; Husted, 1999, 2002; North, 1990; Zagaris & Ohri, 1999). Ultimately, “without a change in power and political will, externally imposed transparency codes and standards will forever be chasing an elusive target” (von Furstenberg, 2001, p. 115).

2. ICTs and Transparency Initiatives

ICTs offer countries a new approach to creating transparency and promoting anti-corruption. Many nations with transparency laws have directly tied the implementation of these laws to the implementation of ICT-based initiatives, often through e-government (Relly & Sabharwal, 2009). ICTs can reduce corruption by promoting good governance, strengthening reform-oriented initiatives, reducing potential for corrupt behaviors, enhancing relationships between government employees and citizens, allowing for citizen tracking of activities, and by monitoring and controlling behaviors of government employees (Shim & Eom, 2008). To successfully reduce corruption, however, ICT-enabled initiatives generally must move from increasing information access to ensuring rules are transparent and applied to building abilities to track the decisions and actions of government employees (Bhatnagar, 2003).

Many governments envision the use of ICTs as a means to promote efficiency and transparency at the same time (von Waldenberg, 2004). ICTs in general show promise as an effective means of reducing corruption, but social attitudes can decrease the effectiveness of ICTs as an anti-corruption tool (Shim & Eom, 2009). Case studies and statistical analyses indicate that ICTs hold a great deal of potential for – and are already demonstrating benefits in – anti-corruption, particularly by enhancing the effectiveness of internal and managerial control over corrupt behaviors and by promoting government accountability and transparency (Shim & Eom, 2008). By analyzing changes between 1996 and 2006 corruption data through ICT-enabled e-government initiatives, one study concluded that “implementing e-government significantly reduces corruption, even after controlling for any propensity for corrupt governments to be more or less aggressive in adopting e-government initiatives” (Anderson, 2009, p. 210).

Nations across the Americas, Asia, and Europe have all claimed successes in reducing corruption through e-government (Bhatnagar, 2003; Shim & Eom, 2008). Taxes and government contracts are areas where e-government has been seen as a clear and successful solution to corruption problems in many nations, including such examples as:

- In India, putting rural property records online has greatly increased the speed at which the records are accessed and updated, while simultaneously removing opportunities for local officials to accept bribes as had previously been rampant (Bhatnagar, 2003). The Bhoomi electronic land record system in Karnataka, India, was estimated to have saved 7 million farmers 1.32 million working days in waiting time and Rs. 806 million in bribes to local officials in its first several years. Before the system, the average land transfer required Rs. 100 in bribes, while the electronic system requires a fee of Rs. 2 (World Bank, 2004).
- In Pakistan, the entire tax system and department was restructured with the specific purpose of reducing direct contact between citizens and tax officials to reduce opportunities for requests for bribes (Anderson, 2009).
- The Philippines Department of Budget and Management established an e-procurement system of government agencies to use to allow public bidding on government contracts to both prevent price fixing and allow public accountability (Anderson, 2009).
- In Chile, the ChileCompra e-procurement system has been used to allow government officials and citizens to compare the costs of bids to and services purchased by the government. The prices of more than 500 outsourced services from over 6,000 providers are included in the system (Shim & Eom, 2008). The system saves approximately

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