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Public Administration Review

Accountability and Transparency: A Nuanced Response to Etzioni

Transparency and accountability are key issues of our times, especially in the way that they relate to good governance and anticorruption. However, in the November/December 2014 issue of this journal, Amitai Etzioni, in “The Limits of Transparency,” criticized the U.S. government’s reliance on transparency as a substitute for regulation. He argued that most citizens do not have the skills, time, or energy to evaluate data pertaining to public institutions, with the result “that transparency provides users with the illusion of openness while actually serving to obfuscate.”

We concur with Etzioni in our own analysis of how the U.K. government’s transparency agenda has affected the accountability of English local authorities. As part of this agenda, ministers have replaced formal performance audits with the requirement that councils publish various data sets (including details of all transactions worth £500 or more), ostensibly so that “armchair auditors” can analyze public spending and hold officials to account. Yet, as Etzioni suggests, it is very difficult for most citizens to analyze these data because they are presented in a raw format with very little contextual information. As Member of Parliament Margaret Hodge, chair of the influential House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, has pointed out, this has weakened accountability for local public services (see Thatcher 2014).

However, as the following examples illustrate, transparency initiatives are helping to reduce corruption in non-Western jurisdictions because they represent an important mechanism through which citizens can access information that has not been edited or shaped by powerful political actors.

The first example shows how demands for formal transparency in rural India led to greater public accountability. In 2012, the lead author discussed the shortcomings of the U.K. government’s transparency agenda with the political and social activist Aruna Roy. This revealed that making public data freely available to Indian citizens has enabled them to bypass questionable audit processes and actually increase the accountability of public bodies. After grassroots organizations demanded that the details of financial transactions be published outside public buildings in the spirit of transparency, they taught groups of young people (many of whom had little education) to interpret the data and to telephone colleagues in outlying areas to determine whether the promised goods and services had actually been delivered and used. In this way, they were able to challenge the results and formal audits as a means of combatting corruption, leading to significant amounts of rupees being returned to the area.

The second example illustrates how informal transparency processes enabled Chinese citizens to call time on corrupt officials. The issue of governance underpinned with accountability and transparency is often discussed as important to China’s ongoing economic success and social cohesion. However, although corruption has led to the downfall of senior figures such as Bo Xilai, the Communist Party’s attempts to tackle the issue have been largely unsuccessful (Saich 2011). In response to this, members of the public have sought to take the matter into their own hands and posted images and videos on Weibo, China’s equivalent of Twitter, to highlight these abuses of position and try to set the news agenda (Jiang 2014). One memorable example of this concerns Yang Dacai, a government official who was pictured at

the scene of a fatal bus crash wearing an expensive watch and grinning widely. Weibo users subsequently found and posted numerous other pictures of the individual online, in which he sported a range of different expensive designer watches, and questioned how such a lavish lifestyle could be afforded on a government “iron rice bowl” salary. Yang was subsequently removed from his position and imprisoned for 14 years after admitting to charges of corruption and “possessing a huge amount of property of unclear origin” (BBC News 2013). Therefore, informal transparency and data publication processes can enable members of the public to hold public figures to account—even in a relatively authoritarian state such as China.

The moral of these tales is that transparency can lead to increased accountability if it takes account of context, is adaptive to ongoing changes, and ensures that citizens can access and understand the relevant data. Of course, establishing these conditions would require some kind of state regulation at the outset—and in this sense, we have come full circle to arrive at Etzioni’s conclusion. However, these examples show that once the infrastructure is in place to increase transparency, this can help improve public accountability, particularly in those jurisdictions where governance structures and more traditional audit processes are less effective in combating abuses of power.

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