Ivan Krastev

The transparency delusion

Disillusionment with democracy founded on mistrust of business and political elites has prompted a popular obsession with transparency. But the management of mistrust cannot remedy voters' loss of power and may spell the end for democratic reform.

There is strong shadow where there is much light.

Goethe

A well-known French engraving of 1848, the year French citizens received the universal right to vote, epitomizes the dilemmas of European democracies at their birth. The engraving pictures a worker with a rifle in one hand and a ballot in the other. The message is clear: bullets for the nation's enemies and ballots for the class enemies. Elections were meant to be the instrument for inclusion and nation building. They integrated workers into the nation by sharing power with them. The man with a rifle in one hand and the ballot in the other symbolized the arrival of democracy in France because he was, at once, both a Frenchman and a worker, a representative of a nation and a social position absorbed in class struggle. He understood that the person who would stand beside him on the barricades would also be a worker and a Frenchman with a clear idea who the enemy was. His rifle was not only a symbol of his constitutional rights, it was evidence that the new democratic citizen was prepared to defend both his fatherland and his class interest. He knew that the power of his vote was dependent on the firepower of his gun. The ballot was an additional weapon because elections were a civilized form of civil war. They were not simply mechanisms for changing governments. They were tools for remaking the world.

The ubiquitous smartphone of today may not be a rifle, but it has the capacity to perform its own kind of shooting. It can document abuses of power and make them public. It can connect and empower people. And it can spread truth. It is hardly accidental that the recent wave of popular protests around the world coincided with the spread of smartphones. Innocent photos posted on social networks triggered many of our current political scandals. In China, Brother Wristwatch and Uncle House are some of the latest victims of the citizen with the smartphone. Both of them are low-ranking officials who were exposed for suspected corruption this year by Internet mobbing. Brother Watch was captured in several photos wearing very expensive watches, some of which cost more than his annual salary. Uncle House, who was in charge of a district urban management bureau in the southern city of Guangzhou, was exposed for collecting real estate — 22 properties in all. The smartphone-equipped citizens ousted both of them. In Russia, the legitimacy of the Russian Orthodox Church was undermined when a blogger posted a photo on Facebook showing the patriarch donning an expensive watch, and it declined further when...
Russians learned that the patriarch's public relations team doctored videos to conceal this fact from the public. In Syria, citizens armed with smartphones documented the massively heinous crimes of the regime. And in the United States, a smartphone recorded Governor Mitt Romney's infamous "47 per cent comment" that outraged the other half of America (and, one would hope, some of that original 47 per cent, too).

The smartphone can also function as a citizen's personal lie detector. A voter, in real time, can fact-check the various claims and assertions politicians make, from the most vital political issues to the more mundane personal anecdotes. When Republican vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan "misremembered" his first marathon time — he claimed he ran it in under three hours when it really took him more than four hours — his "mistake" inspired immediate questions about the candidate's credibility. It is not that politicians can't fool people anymore, but they do it at the risk of looking like fools themselves. The outsized influence of fact-checking websites during the last US presidential campaign is a classic illustration of the power of the smartphone to unearth the truth — or at least to pretend to present factual truth to the public.

Further information
Ivan Krastev's book In Mistrust We Trust is based on his June 2012 TED talk "Can democracy exist without trust?" For further information on the book, please visit the TED Books Library.

The smartphone also empowers citizens to speak and express their views and opinions. They can call, email, and tweet their judgments and thus contribute to a broader political conversation in real time. Each of the three debates between the two candidates in the recent American presidential election generated, just for the duration of the debate, more than seven million tweets. Life may not be more enlightened, but it is far more entertaining in the age of Twitter.
But perhaps most critically, the new citizens can use their smartphones to mobilize public action, to ask other citizens to come to the streets and to collectively defend their interests. The Arab Spring was the ultimate manifestation of the power of citizens armed with smartphone power to overthrow tyrants and to make history. Smartphones can't maim or kill, but they do make it more costly for the governments to do so themselves. At the same time, the Arab Spring represented significant limits to the power of the smartphone. The person with the smartphone never knows who might respond to his appeal for political action. He may have his Facebook friends, but he lacks a genuine political community and political leaders. You can tweet a revolution, but you can't tweet a transition. It turned out, of course, that Islamist political parties that relied on traditional party structures and clear ideologies were the winners of the post-revolutionary elections in the Middle East.

Today, it is the person with the smartphone in one hand and the blank ballot in the other that symbolizes our democratic condition. Yet he or she is not a recognizable member of any particular class or ethnic group, and the ballot is no longer a weapon at his or her disposal. We don't think in terms of barricades, and we have vague ideas of who are "comrades" and who are enemies. Both the ballot and the smartphone are instruments of control, not instruments of choice. The actual fear of the smartphone voter is that the people he or she votes for will serve only their selfish interests. The citizen with the smartphone doesn't confront the tough ideological choices his predecessors faced. While the expansion of choices has radically increased in recent decades, in politics it has been the reverse. For the politically committed citizen of yesterday, changing one's party or political camp was as unthinkable as swapping one's religion. To move from the Left to the Right today, or the other way around, is as simple as traversing the border between France and Germany --- it's a high-speed highway with no passport control.

So does the citizen with the smartphone represent the power we have accrued or the power we have lost? Should we be nostalgic for the decline of ideological politics or liberated by its burden? And can we trust the smartphone to be an effective new instrument to defend our rights?

**Transparency is the new religion**

Is the citizen with the smartphone the one who can restore our trust in democracy and democratic institutions? I am sceptical. Smartphones may make it easier for us to control our politicians, but trust refers to the confidence in the operation of institutions that people cannot directly monitor and control. We don't trust our families and friends because we are able to control them. The increased capacity of people to control their representatives doesn't translate easily into trust in democracy. Lenin used to believe that "trust is good, control is better," but the Bolshevik titan is not widely known for his model of democratic governance. And while it is likely that today's crisis of trust is probably less dramatic than the surveys tell us (and the current public debate suggests), sociologist Niklas Luhmann has argued that trust is "a basic fact of social life," without which one could not get out of the bed in the morning. It is also clear that the increased ability of citizens to control their governments has not led to more trust in democracy. Unfortunately, most of the initiatives that claim to rebuild civic trust are in reality helping arouse a democracy of mistrust. This trend is nowhere more evident than in today's popular obsession with transparency.
Transparency is the new political religion shared by a majority of civic activists and an increasing number of democratic governments. The transparency movement embodies the hope that a combination of new technologies, publicly accessible data, and fresh civic activism can more effectively assist people control their representatives. What makes transparency so attractive for different civic groups is the exciting premise that when people "know," they will take action and demand their rights. And it is fair to admit that the advancement of the transparency movement in many areas has demonstrated impressive results. Governmental legislation that demanded companies to disclose the risks related to their products empowered customers and made life safer (we have today's often reviled Ralph Nader as one early person to thank here). Demand for disclosure has also transformed the relations between doctors and patients, teachers and students. Now patients have a greater capacity to keep doctors accountable, and parents can more effectively decide which school to select for their children. The new transparency movement has empowered the customers.

Thus it is logical to assume that, stripped of the privilege of secrecy, governments will be irreversibly changed. They will become more honest. Where the government maintains too many secrets, democracy becomes brittle, even when competitive elections produce, ex ante, uncertain outcomes. Only informed citizens can keep governments accountable. In short, it is unsurprising that democracy activists have invested so much hope that transparency itself can restore trust in democratic institutions. As American legal scholar and activist Lawrence Lessig stated in his essay "Against Transparency": "How could anyone be against transparency? Its virtues and its utilities seem so crushingly obvious." But while the virtues of transparency are obvious, the risks should not be ignored, as Lessig powerfully argues.

The notion that transparency will restore public trust in democracy rests on several problematic assumptions, primarily the presupposition that "if only people knew" everything would be different. It is not so simple. The end of government secrecy does not mean the birth of the informed citizen, nor does more control necessarily suggest more trust in public institutions. For instance, when American voters learned that the US had started a war with Iraq without proof of weapons of mass destruction, they still re-elected the president who led the way. And when Italians kept Silvio Berlusconi in power for more than a decade, they had long been saturated with news of all the wrongdoings that anti-Berlusconi activists hoped would be enough to get rid of the guy. But in politics, "knowing everything" still means knowing different things. And the very fact that governments are compelled to disclose information does not necessarily translate to people knowing more or understanding better. Inundating people with information is a time-tested way to keep people uninformed. If you don't trust me, ask your accountant. He will tell you that the best way to discourage any tax inspector to look into the workings of your company is to give him all available information instead the needed and the useful items. When it comes to the relations between trust and control, the issue is even more complex. Does control create trust, or is it simply a substitute for it? Do authoritarian governments increase their capacity to control society in order to trust them more?

Contrary to the claim of transparency advocates who insist that it is possible to reconcile the demand for the opening of government with the protection of citizens' privacy, I contend that wholly transparent government denotes a wholly transparent citizen. We can't make the government fully transparent without sacrificing our privacy. In contrast to those advocates who believe that
a politics of full disclosure improves the quality of public debate, I think that injections of huge flows of information make public conversation more complicated, shifting the focus away from the moral competence of the citizen to his expertise in one or another area. Contrary to the expectations of the transparency movement that full disclosure of government information will make public discourse more rational and less paranoid, my argument is that a focus on transparency will only fuel conspiracy theories. There is nothing more suspicious than the claim of absolute transparency. And nobody can honestly say that when our governments have become more transparent our debates have become less paranoid. The rise of the transparency movement has the potential to remake democratic politics, but we should be sure we are in agreement as to the direction of the change. Is the transparency movement capable of restoring trust in democratic institutions, or is it, alternatively, going to make "mistrust" the official idiom of democracy?

**A society of spies**

Crucially, our extreme focus on transparency influences the very way democracy works. It may even contribute to a process of replacing representative democracy with political regimes that limit themselves only to citizen control of the executive. Contrary to its stated ambition to restore trust in democratic institutions, the transparency movement may accelerate the process of transforming democratic politics into the management of mistrust. The politics of transparency is not an alternative to a democracy without choices; it is its justification and blurs the distinction between democracy and the new generation of market−friendly authoritarian regimes. It is not surprising that Chinese leaders enthusiastically endorse the idea of transparency. What they oppose is the competition of parties and ideas and the search for political alternatives to the Communist rule.

In the late eighteenth century, British philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham designed an institutional form he dubbed the panopticon. The concept of the design was to allow a watchman to observe all inmates in an institution — whether a prison, school, or hospital — without them being able to recognize whether or not they were being watched. The panopticon soon
became the symbol of our modern understanding of power as the control over
dangerous individuals or groups. The twentieth century's famous anti-utopias
— portrayed in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*,
George Orwell's *1984* — are, by and large, stories of transparent societies in
which the government has the capacity of total control. Knowing everything is
the government's utopia of absolute power.

If the idea of the "naked" society is the dream of governments, the idea of a
naked government and denuded corporations represent the wish fulfilment of
many democracy activists. Initiatives such as Publish What You Pay, Open
Government Initiative, or radical political efforts such as WikiLeaks are the
best studies making the case that when armed with the "right" information,
people can keep governments accountable. Louis Brandeis' oft-quoted line that
"sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants" succinctly summarizes the
philosophy of the transparency movement. The movement aims to build a
reverse panopticon whereby it is not government that will monitor society but
society that will monitor those in power. The totalitarian utopia of people
spying for the government is now replaced by the progressive utopia of people
spying on the government.

The problem, however, is that spying is spying, regardless of who is spying on
whom (just as the winner of a rat race is, alas, still a rat). Should we concede
our right to privacy in order to get better public services? Is it fundamentally
different from the demand of totalitarian regimes to proscribe individual choice
in order to achieve national greatness and a more equal society? The debate
over WikiLeaks' published cables brought into full view the moral dimension
of the war against secrecy. As a rule, governments monitor people. When you
make such efforts transparent, you also open up to the world those citizens
who spoke with or were monitored by the government. It is impossible to
publish authentic documents without putting at risk government sources. And
it is impossible to open state files without reading the information they have
collected about its citizens. The opening of secret police files in
post-communist societies is the classical example of the dilemmas behind any
politics of disclosure. Should everyone know what others have been doing
during the communist period? Should only the files of public figures be
opened? How reliable is the information collected by the secret police? Will
the knowledge about others produce moral catharsis in society, or will it be
used simply as "kompromat" (compromise) in sordid power games? These are
not easy questions.

Modern society was built on the hope that one day we will trust strangers and
institutions as if they were members of our families. Recent experience shows,
however, that the reverse is true. We have begun treating our families with the
mistrust earlier reserved for criminals. What we are witnessing is how the
combination of mistrust and new technologies is remaking our private lives.
Mistrust is now the default option even in family relations. Indeed, lawyers
now say that technology is turning divorce into an arms race. Kitchens and
bedrooms are now bugged like the American embassy in Moscow was in the
days of the Cold War. Thus, while the promise of transparency was to restore
trust in public institutions, in reality it spread mistrust into the sphere of private
life.

**The age of spin**

The late US Senator and public intellectual Daniel Patrick Moynihan was one
of the first to analyze the impact of government secrecy on the way society
trusts its institutions. He argued convincingly that secrecy should be understood as any other form of regulation. In his view, the performance of the US government was negatively affected during the Cold War by those in power deploying considerable forms of secrecy. Secrecy was responsible, he suggested, for the paranoid turn in American politics during the McCarthy era and badly hurt the readiness of citizens to trust their government. Moynihan's contention that in order to trust the government, citizens should see its full profile is therefore hard to dispute. But while the argument for transparency is a powerful one, the notion of full disclosure is not unproblematic. Is every unveiling not, at the same time, a veiling of another sort? Is the information that governments collect with the understanding that it will become immediately public as reliable as the information collected when they knew it would be kept secret? Would, say, the Pentagon Papers have been the blockbuster that it was if the government released it on its own?

Further, the availability of information is no guarantee that people will have more trust in the decision-making process, because information never comes without interpretation. Reading the same raw data, Republicans and Democrats in the US or secularists and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt will spin it differently, because policy making cannot be divorced from the interests and values of the decision makers. "Ours, it appears, is an Age of Obsessions," write the anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff in the Afterword to the collection Transparency and Conspiracy. "It is an age in which people almost everywhere seem preoccupied, simultaneously, with transparency and conspiracy."

The ambiguity of the politics of trust is best observed in the case of Russia's recent presidential elections. In December 2011, the country's parliamentary elections ended in civic explosion. Hundreds of thousands of people went onto the streets of Moscow and other big cities asking for fair elections and real choices. The escalating crisis of legitimacy of the regime forced the government to invent imaginative ideas to justify its power. The central proposal was ingenious. In order to guarantee the fairness of the vote, the Kremlin proposed that webcams be installed at all polling stations; every citizen could personally monitor the fairness of the process. As China's Xinhua wire service enthusiastically reported, "From Kamchatka to Kaliningrad and from Chechnya to Chukotka, more than 2.5 million net surfers registered to view live streaming from at least 188,000 webcams installed in more than 94,000 polling stations on Russian territory." In the words of one Finnish observer, what happened was a lesson in transparency: "a landmark in the history of democracy and democratic elections."

It is hardly difficult to argue that in the context of Vladimir Putin's regime, where the government decides who will run and who will not, the installation of webcams was little more than a farce. Far more important is the ambiguity of the presence of the webcams. Viewed from Moscow and the West, the webcams are perceived as an instrument to keep the government under control — to allow people knowledge about what the government is doing. But from the point of view of a post-communist Russian voter living in the deep countryside, the webcam sent a different message: government knows how you vote. In a way, then, Putin succeeded twice. He succeeded to look transparent in the eyes of the West and threatening to most of his own citizens. In short, the webcams during Russia's elections were simultaneous acts of transparency and conspiracy.
In Bulgaria in the summer of 2009, a new government came into office. The promise of openness was high on its agenda. In his first days, the new prime minister decreed that all the discussions at the Council of Ministers would be made available on the government's website within 48 hours. Civic organizations were euphoric. But the consequence was wholly unexpected. Armed now with the understanding that government information will be almost immediately put online, ministers were unduly careful what they said and how their words could be construed. Soon, the government began to use the openness policy as a kind of public relations instrument. The prime minister spent government meetings attacking his opponents or making speeches. Further, most decisions were taken with hardly any discussion. This perverse consequence of transparency was that the "real" decisions were taken outside of the Council of Ministers and that openness worked to strengthen the personal power of the prime minister.

The transparency–conspiracy axis is perhaps best revealed in the character and mindset of today's great soldiers in the war against government secrecy. Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, described his organization as an "open source democratic intelligence agency." In many ways Assange resembles someone straight out of a Joseph Conrad conspiracy novel. Of the dozens of recently published books about Assange, not to mention his own autobiography, the radical transparency activist comes off as a secretive, paranoid, authoritarian figure. He is someone you might admire but not someone you can trust. Assange has made deception his passion and his profession. His preferred strategy is to avoid distinguishing between democratic and authoritarian governments; in his conception, all governments are authoritarian. Is it possible that Assange's worldview could be a starting point for restoring trust in democracy?

At the moment when government information is designed to be immediately open to everybody, its value as information stands in decline and its value as an instrument of manipulating the public increases. Just remember how gangsters in crime movies talk when they know that their rooms are bugged. They speak clearly and offer banalities while at the same time exchange secret notes under the table. This is how governments work in the age of transparency. The obvious question begged here is why the influx of information fails to change the quality of democracy. In his study of truth telling in ancient Greece, Michel Foucault points out that the act of truth telling can't be reduced to citizens learning something they didn't know before. Paradoxically, truth in politics is something that everybody knows but nobody dares to express or pay attention to. People hardly need additional data to realize that inequality is rising or that immigrants are mistreated. The WikiLeaks cables didn't help us learn something about America's policies we hadn't known. Rather, it is the decision of someone to take personal risks and confront the authorities or his or her community and not some "unknown" truth that makes a speech politically powerful. Living in truth can't be reduced to having access to full information. It is the person daring to say the truth and not the truth itself that will ultimately bring change.

**Transparency and anti–politics**

"You can be sure that in the nearest future, someone will create software that will make it almost impossible for politicians to lie," my old friend Scott Carpenter, a deputy director of Google Ideas, told me only half–jokingly. Recently, Google established Google Ideas, a think tank that works to put
technology into the service of citizens. For years, politics was the art of telling people what they want to hear. Carpenter's suggestion was that in the age of transparency, this should no longer be possible. What my friend had in mind was that the new software would track all the statements and positions taken by a politician on a certain issue so that when he changes his position and starts to flip-flop, the voter can punish him for his opportunism. Not only that, we would know whom the politician meets, who contributes to his campaign, and whether his spouse or kids serve on the boards of the government's favoured companies.

Transparency then stands less in opposition to secrecy but to deception and lies. The promise of the transparent society is no different from the promise of the science-fictional Truth Machine. It is the promise of a society without lies. You can never eliminate the liars, but you can eliminate the lie and its attendant power to subvert society. What is disturbing in the growing hope that transparency will improve our societies is something T.S. Eliot observed almost a century ago: how the advocates of transparency are "dreaming of systems so perfect so no one will need to be good." In this imagining, trust comes not from shared goals or experience or from certain ethics but from the mastery of the institutional design. Rather than believe in the self-correcting nature of democratic society, they hold out faith for the establishment of societies that make no mistakes.

If the Enlightenment philosophers once tried to understand man — his heart, his mind, his fears — the new generation of democratic reformers have lost interest in people. In their world of institutions and incentives, changing your mind is only a sign of political opportunism. But isn't changing one's mind the very essence of democratic politics? Is consistency more important for democratic politics than the readiness to change your point of view when presented with new information or new circumstances? Imagine how the world would look if Woodrow Wilson or FDR hadn't revisited their early pledges that America would remain on the sidelines. The original sin of the transparency movement is just this neglect for the psychological complexity of democratic politics.

The trap of the current transparency-centred reform movement is the assumption that it is enough to know who is giving money to politicians or whom they meet for dinner to arrive at a clear picture of the nature of the decision-making process. The fact that a congressman has received, say, $50,000 from a defence contractor simply can't guarantee that it was this donation that determined the legislator's support for the increase of the military budget. But in our Age of Transparency people are tempted to take shortcuts. "Tell me his donors, and I will tell you his politics" is the regrettable shorthand for today's political environment. But politics cannot be reduced in this way. All this new information and state-of-the-art digital technologies don't help fashion a better understanding of democratic politics. Rather, this approach risks that the public will start treating its own representatives as dangerous criminals who should be monitored round the clock. The problem with the assumption that trust depends mostly on our ability to control our politicians has the disastrous consequence that most of our gifted and civic-minded citizens are appalled at the very thought of ever running for office. Is it possible to restore trust in democracy by treating politicians not as national leaders but as persons to be distrusted by definition?

"When we really wish to know how the world is going," once wrote the philosopher and mystery writer G.K. Chesterton, "it is not a bad test to take
some tag or current phrase of the press and reverse it, substituting the precise contrary, and see whether it makes more sense that way." In our case, does it make more sense that transparency will restore trust in democratic institutions or that it will reduce politics to simply the management of mistrust? The transparency-centred reform of democracy is not ultimately an alternative to the democracy of mistrust — a way out, so to speak — but is instead its major justification. It is the outcome of the incapacity of the average voter to bring change and to have a meaningful choice in democratic politics in the age of "no alternatives." It tacitly accepts that democratic politics is no longer about clashing visions of the "good society" or conflicting interests and values. It is simply the process of controlling those in power. But transparent decision making is not the same as good policy. Transparency is not a simulacrum for the public interest. Transparency can be one of the instruments of social reform, but it cannot be the goal and content of democratic reform. How we take decisions won't replace the fundamental question of what is best for society.

Exit and voice

"It is happier to be cheated sometimes," observed the proverb-happy Samuel Johnson, "than not to trust." And he was right, because a society of mistrust is a society of powerless citizens. In his classic study "Exit, Voice and Loyalty," the great economist and social thinker Albert Hirschman argues that there are two kinds of responses to the deterioration of services or the performance of institutions: exit and voice. To paraphrase Hirschman, "exit" is the act of leaving because a better good or service is provided by another firm or organization. Indirectly and unintentionally "exit" can cause a deteriorating organization to improve its performance. "Voice" is the act of complaining, petitioning or protesting, with the intention of achieving a restoration of the quality that has been impaired. Easy availability to exit is inimical to voice, for by comparison with exit voice is costly in terms of effort and time. Moreover, to be effective, voice often requires group action and is thus subject to all the well-known difficulties of organization — namely, representation and free riding.

Voice and exit thus distinguish the world of politics from the world of the market. The politics of voice is what we call political reform. But in order for political reform to succeed, there are several important preconditions. People must feel committed to invest themselves in changing their societies by feeling a part of that society. And for the voice option to function properly, people should strategically interact with others and work to make change together. Commitment to one's group is critically important for the messy and methodical politics of change to work properly. What worries me most at present is that citizens react to the failures of democracy in a way similar to how they react when disappointed with the market. They simply exit. They exit by leaving the country or stopping voting or, indeed, voting with blank ballots. The citizen with the smartphone acts in the world of politics the same way he acts in the sphere of the market. He tries to change society simply by monitoring and leaving. But it is the readiness to stay and change reality that is at the heart of democratic politics. It is this basic trust that allows society to advance. This is why democracy cannot exist without trust and why politics as the management of mistrust will stand as the bitter end of democratic reform.

This is a slightly edited excerpt from Ivan Krastev's book In Mistrust We Trust: Can Democracy Survive When We Don't Trust Our Leaders?