
Smart Transparency

Prescribing the Right Dose of Openness

Albert Meijer (www.albert-meijer.nl, @albertmeijer)
Utrecht University

*Presentation at 7th Quality Conference EUPAN
Vilnius, October 3rd 2013*



Universiteit Utrecht

The Holy Grail of Transparency



Transparency is expanding ...

- Access to information legislation
- Websites with government information
- Open data in various domains



Optimists versus pessimists



Post-idealist phase

- Not every form of transparency benefits policy effectiveness, citizen empowerment and trust
- We need to find conditions and forms of transparency that balances pros and cons
- Producing transparency requires a trade-off between values: it is a balancing act!



From poison or panacea to pharmacon!



What is transparency?

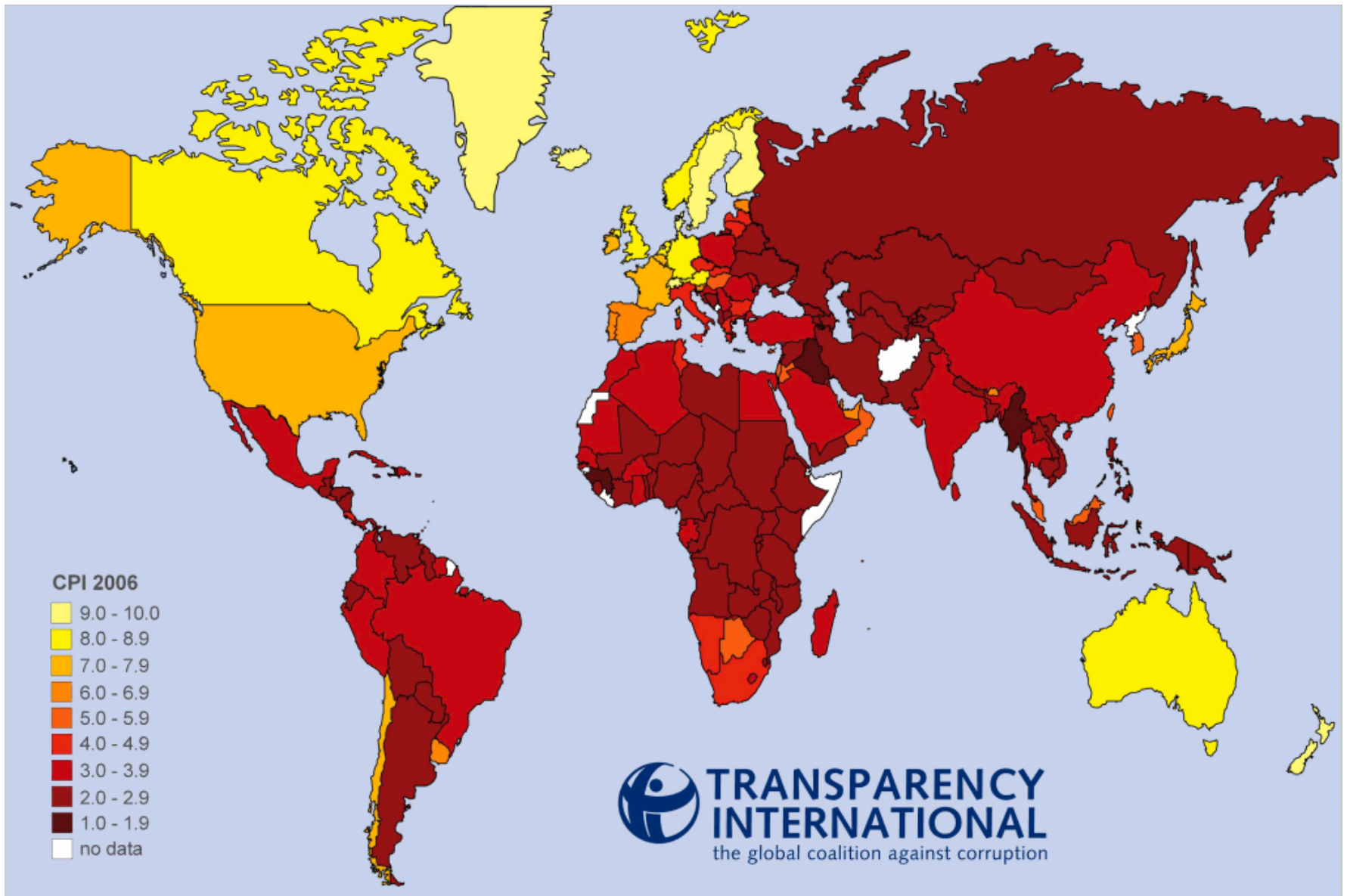


Micro-level transparency

- Lord Nolan: ‘Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all decisions and actions they take’.
- Example: Elizabeth May (Canada, Greens)



System-level transparency



Meso-level transparency

- Transparency is defined as the availability of information about an actor allowing other actors to monitor the workings or performance of this actor.
 - Institutional relation
 - One actor: transparent
 - Object: transparent about workings/performance
 - Other actors: use this information



Three forms of transparency

- Active transparency
- Passive transparency
- Forced transparency



Three forms of transparency

- **Active transparency**
- Passive transparency
- Forced transparency



How to construct active transparency?

- Standard considerations:
 - National security
 - Privacy
 - Economic interests
- Question:
 - What other considerations matter?
 - How can governments deal with these?

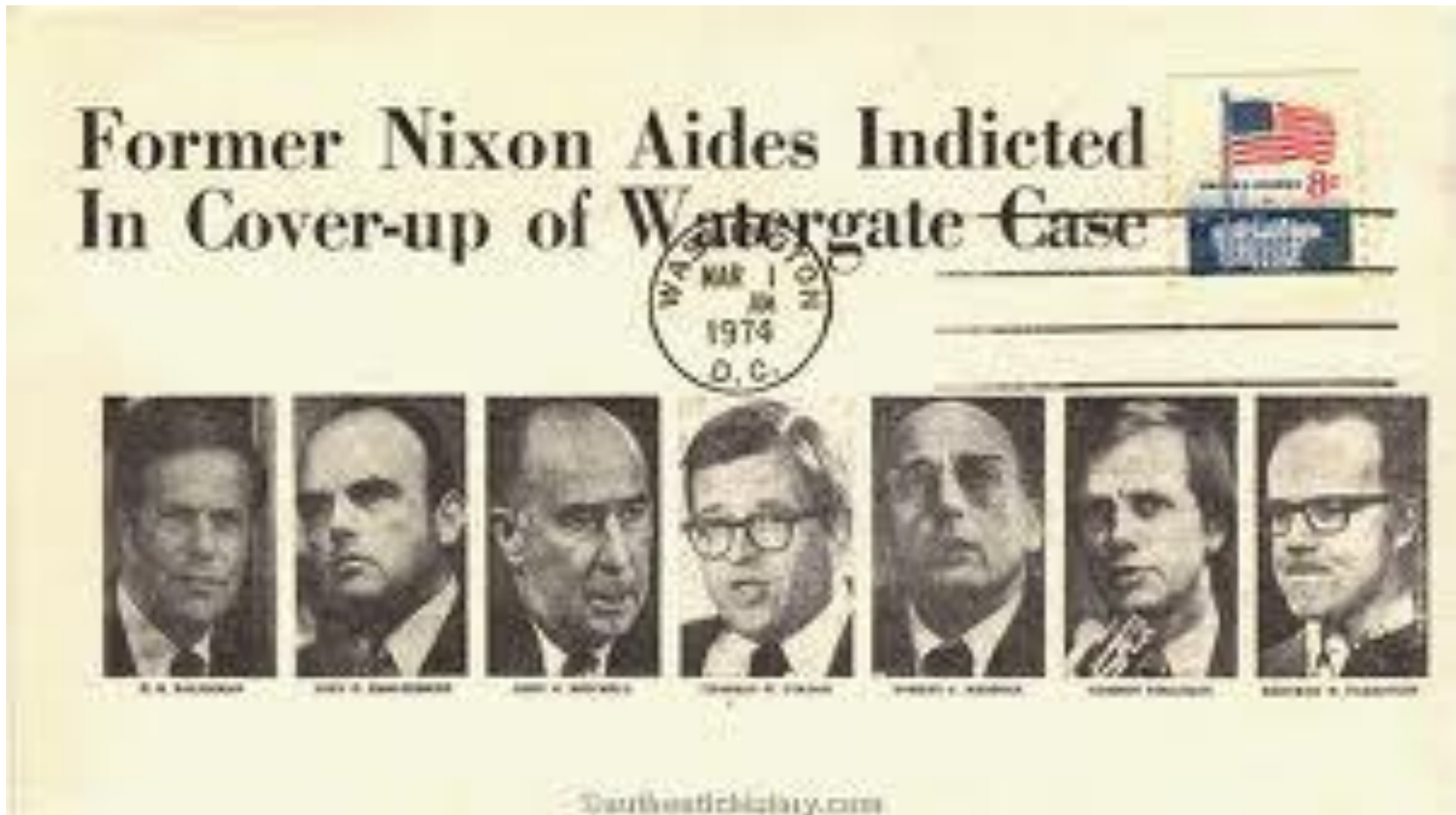


Transparency in the political domain

- Better *accountability* through checks and balances
- Stronger *democracy* through a better debate
- More robust *solutions to wicked problems* through civic engagement



Pros and Cons: Accountability



Pros and Cons: Democracy



AIR QUALITY INDEX

Air Quality Index (AQI) Values	Levels of Health Concern
0 to 50	Good
51-100	Moderate
101-150	Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups
151-200	Unhealthy
201-300	Very Unhealthy
301 to 500	Hazardous



Pros and Cons: Social Learning



Right dose in the political domain

- Civic competence
BUT in an equitable fashion
- Checks and balances
WITHOUT generating
perverse effects
- Open information BUT
no confusion through
information overload



Transparency in the administrative domain

- More *efficient and effective policies* through error detection
- More *integrity* in the public sector through exposure
- More *resilience* through collective intelligence



Pros and Cons:

- 'Given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow.'



Pros and Cons (2): Integrity

- **‘Sunlight is the best disinfectant.’**



Pros and Cons (3): Resilience

Download more graphics at www.psdgraphics.com



Right dose in the administrative domain

- Policy error reduction
WITHOUT high
administrative burdens
- Detecting
transgressions BUT
STILL space to think
- Risk management
WITHOUT amplifying
risks



What does it take to apply the right dose?

- Knowledge
- Debate
- Context
- Leadership



Knowledge about transparency

- Insights in mechanisms and effects of transparency
- Research helps to identify pitfalls and develop approaches
- Some findings from previous research into transparency:
 - Layered information
 - Information and communication
 - Online and offline media



Debate

- Political debate
- Public debate
- Beyond ideological positions:
 - Post-hoc access to information
 - Contextualization of data



Context

- Fit with existing checks and balances
- Fit with stakeholders and user groups
- Fit with value orientations



Leadership



Thank you!

More information: a.j.meijer@uu.nl

