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Transcendental Mediation

A critical analysis of journalistic transparency

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Abstract

Transparency has been advanced as a potential remedy for falling trust in journalism. By allowing readers to see more of the production process, journalism is thought to become more trust-worthy. This thesis offers a critical examination of the existing concept of journalistic transparency with the view of providing an alternative conceptualisation.
In the first part, it subjects journalistic transparency to a concept analysis, arguing that transparency contains contradictory epistemological commitments to mediation.
In the second part, it explores journalistic transparency empirically through a case study of UK investigative journalism outlet The Bureau Local. By performing content analysis on a published investigation and three open chatroom discussions and triangulating data with interviews, it finds that The Bureau Local produces transparency in two epistemologically and ontologically different ways. The findings from the concept analysis and the case study form the basis for a reconceptualised notion of journalistic transparency that splits it into two concepts: analytic and synthetic transparency.

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1. Introduction

Trust in journalism is falling (Newman et al, 2020). In a polarised society, the credibility of the media is increasingly questioned from across the political spectrum. News digitalisation has made it easier than ever to reject traditional media narratives in favour of other sources of news. Challenged with altering news habits of consumers, journalism is fighting for readers' attention and trust against social and alternative media.

Meanwhile, the digital era has also afforded journalists with an unprecedented ability to share large amounts of information. What was previously carefully selected as part of a package can now be disseminated in bulk. Open data sources and live streams are just two of the tools that media organisations can use to convey information.

In this context, transparency has emerged as a promising contender for restoring trust in journalism. If the audience lacks trust in the processes, the logic goes, journalists can show them how it works. No longer does the audience need to make a blind leap of faith but can slowly walk its way back to trust, clutching the handrail of transparent evidence.

The high hopes pinned to transparency are prevalent in all fields with interest in journalism. In academic research, transparency started to become a topic of interest in the early years of the millennium (Koliska, 2015). Challenges from non-traditional content producers such as bloggers further intensified a search for a new ethical principle for the 21st century, with many turning with hope to transparency (Phillips, 2010).

Among professional journalists, transparency is also heralded as a solution to a wide spectrum of trust issues. A prime example is The Trust Project, a consortium of news companies aiming to restore trust in journalism through increased transparency. Following a rigorous research process involving "dozens of in-depth interviews with a diverse spectrum of public voices" (The Trust Project, 2020), the project devised new media transparency standards in the form of trust indicators.

The project identified 37 indicators, subsequently narrowed down to a prioritised list of 8: Best Practices, Author/Reporter Expertise, Type of Work, Citations and References, Methods, Locally

Sourced, Diverse Voices and Actionable Feedback. Each indicator comes with a set of collaborator material, providing templates and guidelines for media organisations who wish to participate. The indicators span across every part of journalistic news production, united by one common denominator: transparency.

In journalism, research on transparency has mostly focused on online news journalism (eg. Karlsson, 2020; Curry and Stroud, 2019; Koliska, 2015), data journalism (Zamith, 2019), or algorithmic journalism (Diakopolous and Koliska, 2016).
Investigative journalism shares many characteristics with these forms of journalism, but it also differs in important respects. Carson and Farhall (2018, p. 1902) has devised a set of criteria, judging five criteria to be essential to an investigative piece:

1*. Does the article set the agenda/or is exclusive to that publication?
2*. Is the story an example of active journalism?
3*. Is there evidence of time and research?
4*. Does the story investigate? Verifies information.
5*. Is the story of political relevance or of some import to the public sphere?

Several of the characteristics may be relevant to studies of journalistic transparency. For example, Karlsson (2010) argues that transparency is a result of a tightening deadline, forcing journalists to open up production processes online. For investigative journalists working on longer timelines, time pressure is less of a concern. As a result, the function of transparency may differ.

Furthermore, investigative journalism is in the business of establishing truth (Ettema and Glasser, 1998). It is not primarily a platform for exchanging different points of view, contributing to a public discussion. It sets out to establish what happened. Thus, while investigative journalism is one of the most trusted forms of journalism, it is also an epistemologically ambitious one. Studying transparency in an investigative journalism context can yield insights into how transparency is intended to buttress truth-claims in an era of skepticism towards media narratives.

The proposed transparency solution is not unique to journalism. It follows a societal megatrend in which transparency has been touted as a panacea to many contested issues, leading it to gain quasi-religious significance (Hood and Heald, 2006). Transparency has been proclaimed a new paradigm in fields such as politics, law, management studies, economics, and scientific research.

In recent years, the rise of transparency has attracted interest from scholars. The field of Critical Transparency Studies has emerged with scholars from a diverse set of academic fields (Alloa, 2018). Common to their approaches is a desire to spell out the logic of transparency, arguing that it is a "more complex phenomenon than embodied in mainstream understandings of it" (Koivisto, 2019, p. 440).

Against this background, I find two research gaps in existing scholarship on journalistic transparency.

First, journalistic transparency has not received extensive critical conceptual analysis. Existing analyses have largely failed to take into account recent research from other fields, such as the emerging field of Critical Transparency Studies.

Second, transparency in digital investigative journalism has not been studied. Reich and Mor (2018) have studied the use of DocumentCloud, a transparency tool for investigative journalists. However, no studies have explored the concept of transparency in digital investigative journalism.

1.1. Aim

The aim of this thesis is to critically analyse the concept of journalistic transparency. It argues that journalistic transparency is insufficiently conceptualised, causing problems in both journalistic practice and academic research. By critically examining the concept of transparency and empirically exploring it in digital investigative journalism, it seeks to provide a better understanding of journalistic transparency with the view of placing it on firmer conceptual ground.

1.2. Research questions

To gain a better understanding of journalistic transparency, I intend to explore its conceptual content. Specifically, I want to explore aspects relevant to how it can help to restore trust in journalism, which I take to be an epistemological question. This leads to my first research question:

RQ1: *What are the epistemological commitments of transparency?*

The case study intends to study transparency in its natural setting to understand transparency in digital investigative journalism. I thus arrive at a second research question:

RQ2: How is transparency performed in digital investigative journalism?

The first research question will be answered through a concept analysis. The second research question will be answered through a case study. In the case study, I will use two qualitative research tools: qualitative content analysis and interviews.

The Bureau Local is an investigative journalism project, launched by non-profit organisation The Bureau for Investigative Journalism in 2017. Bringing together local reporters across the United Kingdom, it tries to fill gaps of local investigative journalism that has been left by a lack of funding. It is a digital-native outlet that claims a commitment to transparency (TBIJ, 2020a).

2. Literature review

2.1. The emergence of the concept

Journalistic transparency lacks a strict definition, but the general gist of it was captured by Allen (2008):

> *"[The ethic of transparency] goes something like this: the news media are facing increased examination of their daily product that leads to more and more criticism. The best way to respond to that criticism is by letting people see the process that leads to the creation of those products. Once they see the process, people will understand how journalistic decisions are made and credibility will be improved"* (Allen, 2008, p. 324)

Transparency further implies that journalists who open up their production process will voluntarily act in accordance with norms and regulations and that those that do not will be corrected. Transparency, then, also carries the promise that "seeing a phenomenon creates opportunities and obligations to make it accountable and thus to change it" (Annany and Crawford, 2018, p. 974).

It was not until the turn of the millennium that the principle of journalistic transparency was more explicitly invoked. In the first edition of their seminal textbook The Elements of Journalism, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) included transparency as a virtue of journalism. In their vision, transparency constituted a key part of good reporting, inviting the reader to see the sources and methods of a journalist in order to establish trust.

In the digital era, journalism found its legitimacy challenged by new forms of news production (Carlson, 2017). The internet ushered in a new kind of journalism, breaking with traditional conventions and hierarchies (Deuze, 2003). Bloggers were utilising the networked nature of the internet, relying heavily on hyperlinks (Singer, 2007). The high-speed production of digital news meant that pain-staking fact-checking was increasingly shunned in favour of quicker publication. In online news, "accuracy and sincerity reside in transparency" (Phillips, 2010, p. 379). While traditional media was slower to catch up, they soon realised the potential of the web to reach new audiences and disseminate information.

The spread of journalistic transparency raised interest in academic research. Early papers focused mainly on normative arguments for transparency. Some scholars considered journalistic transparency an ethical norm (Plaisance, 2007; Philips, 2010). Others (Allen, 2008; Ward, 2014) urged for caution. In general, however, transparency was considered a promising solution to the challenges of journalism in the digital era.

2.1. Empirical studies

In the late 2000s, studies began to test transparency empirically. Three strands of empirical studies can be identified.

One strand of empirical studies has focused on trying to empirically assess the link between transparency and trust. Karlsson and Clerwall (2018) found some support for transparency tools such as hyperlinks, but note that "the main finding is that transparency has a much higher status among researchers and journalists than it has among the respondents" (Karlsson and Clerwall, 2018, p. 1926). Karlsson (2020) found that a positive evaluation of journalistic transparency correlated with previous trust in journalism.

Similarly, Wintterlin, Engelke and Hase (2020) found that views of transparency that related to user-generated content differed between different types of news consumers. Koliska (2015) and Curry and Stroud (2019) found limited or no empirical support for the hypothesis that the audience trusts transparent journalism more while Meier and Reimer (2011) reported that some transparency instruments such as editorial explanations were associated with credible journalism among the readers.

A second strand has examined to what extent transparency has been implemented in journalism, using quantitative and qualitative research methods. Zamith's (2019) quantitative content analysis indicated that data journalism has not implemented transparency as a professional norm on a wide scale, finding that "day-to-day data journalism is [not] especially transparent" (ibid, p. 471).
In a qualitative study, Chadha and Koliska (2014) found that US journalists from different newsrooms engaged in transparency merely on a strategic and superficial level, enabling them

to “appear transparent without offering substantive insights into the journalistic process” (ibid, p. 215).

Finally, scholars have also studied to what extent journalists view transparency as an ethical norm. Hellmueller, Vos and Poepsel (2013) looked at whether transparency has replaced objectivity as a normative paradigm among journalists, finding mixed results that they interpreted as signs of “pre-paradigmatic conflict” (ibid, p. 299). Vos and Craft (2016) studied how journalistic transparency is constructed discursively, concluding that “transparency, for all of its discursive advancement, is probably not a settled institutional norm” (ibid, p. 1516).

To summarise, empirical studies have not been able to produce any conclusive results on transparency. There are several potential reasons for that.

Studies on trust have noted methodological problems of how it should be measured. The studies have generally consisted of questionnaires or interviews with members of the public after reading articles with varying degrees of transparency. Most studies have therefore raised a methodological problem that the effects on trust of transparency mechanisms may need longitudinal research.

A different reason that is relevant to my thesis is that a poorly understood concept can cause methodological issues. To study transparency empirically requires an operationalisation of the concept into measurable variables. It is the conceptualisation of transparency that lies at the foundation of measuring it. To say that transparency can be captured by measuring a particular variable is to work with a presupposition of what the concept is. If that concept is not clearly understood, validity will be low.

Similarly, for research into what extent transparency is an ethical norm, a clear definition of transparency is key. Otherwise, there is no way of ascertaining whether respondents refer to the same phenomenon, leading to studies with low validity. In the next section, I will go through a number of ways that transparency has been conceptualised before I provide my own proposal.

2.2. Conceptualisations

Most scholars agree that journalistic transparency involves the availability of information about factors influencing news production. Beyond that, various attempts of conceptualising it in more detail have been provided.

Karlsson (2010, 2020) differentiates between three forms of journalistic transparency: disclosure transparency, participatory transparency and ambient transparency. Disclosure transparency refers to mechanisms that disclose decisions during news production, such as hyperlinks, original documents and editorial explanations, while participatory transparency refers to ways of interacting with the audience, such as discussion forums and contact opportunities. Ambient transparency, a category formed at a later stage from further analysed data, is defined as the provision of information that adds context but does not relate directly to the content.

Meier and Reimer (2011) add an axis to Karlsson's original categories of disclosure and participatory transparency, turning it into a 2x2 matrix. Complementing the differentiation between one-way and interactive transparency is a difference between article and process transparency. Article transparency can include material that pertains to the product while process transparency refers to editorial routines and decisions. In many cases, there are overlaps between the four boxes of the matrix, as transparency mechanisms can relate to many aspects simultaneously.

Koliska (2015) distinguishes between information about the process of news-making - production transparency - and information about the news-makers - producer transparency. Drawing on previous studies, he operationalises transparency in features such as hyperlinks, time stamps, original documents, editorial statements, and contact opportunities.

For Gynnild (2013), journalistic transparency is split into three principles. Arguing that previous definitions of transparency "gravitate towards a very general and abstract understanding of what the phenomenon implies" (p. 451), Gynnild's three principles reflect journalistic transparency's normative commitments:

> The principle of accountability refers to making journalistic methods and data visible
> The principle of interactivity invites readers to participate in the production process

> The principle of background openness provides relevant information about the journalists

Ward (2014) defines journalistic transparency as “[allowing] citizens to look into the internal workings of newsrooms, viewing their operations, decisions, and conduct”. It produces two types of transparency: methods of editorial production and influencing factors.

Craft and Heim (2020) differentiate between availability and disclosure, arguing that the former is passive while the latter is active. In being transparent about a story, availability transparency could be to “post a list of commonly used newsworthiness criteria to its website” while disclosure transparency could be to include “an editor’s note with each story explaining its newsworthiness” (ibid, p. 312).

Haapanen (2020) summarises the current selection of transparency features, dividing them according to whether they seek to establish transparency in producer, production, or through participation. However, Haapanen is critical of most features, arguing that they fail to convey transparency. Instead, he says, “editorial texts seem to be the most potent means among the vast array of established transparency features that can open up and explain journalistic decision-making“ (ibid, p. 5).

Conclusion

On this last note, I agree with Haapanen that journalistic transparency features often fail to achieve transparency. However, I believe that his - and all others’ - view of transparency is not sufficiently backed up by epistemological considerations, making it vulnerable to its own criticism.

While some of these conceptualisations latch on to real differences in the concept of transparency, they fail to describe them at their most fundamental level. For example, that transparency about news items differs compared to transparency about the production process (Meier and Reimer, 2011) is best explained, I will argue, not by reference to their differing entities, but because they work according to different epistemological principles with ontological consequences.

To distinguish between different actors or tools of disclosure is important, but to avoid the concept of journalistic transparency to solidify into predetermined categories we must first understand why different transparency forms differ in the first place. Thus, while these conceptualisations indicate important differences, I think that they neglect a more fundamental distinction in the concept of transparency.

3. Methodology

3.1. Qualitative research

To delve into the nature of a concept is to use qualitative research. That means that qualitative work with the view of specifying a concept is a crucial foundation for any scientific endeavour. In a situation of insufficiently conceptualised concepts, quantitative research will be plagued by low validity — ”it then ends up counting the wrong kinds of things in its attempts to answer the questions it is asking.” (Erickson, 2018, p. 87).

This thesis argues that an underdeveloped concept of journalistic transparency has led to quantitative studies counting the wrong things. Moreover, it argues that previous qualitative research has failed to properly address this issue. Using qualitative methods, this thesis aims to provide a better understanding.

Faced with this task, there are several tools at our disposal. Qualitative research has traditionally consisted of five main approaches: narrative research, grounded theory, case study, phenomenology and ethnography. For these approaches, there are several available methods of data collection, such as content analysis, interviews, field studies and discourse analysis.

In this thesis, I have chosen to explore journalistic transparency through two different methods: concept analysis and case study, consisting of content analysis and interviews.

First, I will conduct a concept analysis of transparency to clarify its conceptual conditions and epistemological commitments.
Second, I will perform a case study on The Bureau Local, a digital investigative journalism outlet in the United Kingdom. In my research, I will use two methods of data collection: qualitative content analysis and semistructured interviews.

The need for a two-part thesis is motivated by their different contribution to the study. As such, the parts are separate and not reducible to each-other.

A concept analysis is not sufficient on its own because it approaches transparency at a level of high abstraction, probing its conceptual conditions. To analyse its properties in isolation would not take its concrete expressions in a natural setting into account.

A case study is not sufficient on its own because it would risk neglecting the logical structure that drives its implementation. Empirical research is made possible by understanding its conceptual limits and possibilities.

Concept formation is necessarily prior to empirical research. There is no measurement without a working definition. For this reason, the thesis begins with a concept analysis before it moves on to empirical work. However, this is not to be understood as a linear journey with an end-point. Rather, it is a part of a continuous interplay between conceptual and empirical work, meaning that “concepts are not produced somewhere in the mind of the researchers; they arise out of, and are in constant dialogue with, empirical research” (Maggetti et al, 2015, p. 24).

After my concept analysis and empirical case study, I again return to an abstract level to provide a new definition of transparency, with the intention of making it subject to further research and revision.

3.2. Concept analysis

Concepts are our way of thinking about the world. By delineating a portion of reality, concepts can generalise statements that otherwise would be restricted to its own local non-conceptual expression. Concepts whose meaning we agree on form the basis for all of our exchange of knowledge, making all knowledge “a necessarily socially determined conceptual construction” (Danermark et al, 2018, p. 33).

In some cases, conceptual construction work is a relatively straight-forward process, involving an early formation phase with only occasional maintenance afterwards. Such cases often lend themselves to quantitative and predictive research as they can provide a stable conceptual backbone to the study.

In other cases, the concept is subject to different definitions. In the social sciences, the subject of study involves human beings and their relations, meaning that “to devise, define and utilize concepts is a special form of analysis” (Maggetti et al, 2015, p. 25). In those studies, concepts will only be temporarily defined at the outset before being subject to continuous revision during the course of the work.

This thesis argues that journalistic transparency is in the second category, which may have contributed to the inconclusive empirical studies on journalistic transparency.

To achieve a better understanding of transparency, I will perform a concept analysis. The starting point is a formal definition of transparency, provided by Michener and Bersch (2013). In their definition, transparency consists of two mutually necessary and sufficient conditions: visibility and inferability. Inferability, in turn, consists of three substitutable components: disaggregation, simplification and verification.

By drawing on work on transparency from other fields, primarily law (Koivisto, 2016) critical theory (Alloa, 2018), and management studies (Heald, 2006), I examine the commitments of transparency. The conclusions from the analysis will serve as signposts as I develop a framework for exploring journalistic transparency in a natural setting.

3.3. Case study

Yin (2018) identifies three points that determines the suitability of case study as a method:

(1) your main research questions are “how” or “why” questions
(2) you have little or no control over behavioral events
(3) your focus of study is a contemporary (as opposed to entirely historical) phenomenon

If a thesis meets these criteria, a case study may be a good option.

The first point is satisfied by my research question: How is journalistic transparency performed by The Bureau Local? This is in contrast to studies that try to capture statistical correlations or prevalences.

The second question refers to the study of transparency in a natural setting. Journalistic transparency can be explored in experimental settings, but so far, it has mainly consisted of audience surveys (see eg. Koliska, 2015; Karlsson, 2011). My area of interest is how journalistic transparency is manifested by journalists in digital investigative journalism, making it infeasible to recreate an experimental context to isolate potential variables.

Finally, journalistic transparency is a contemporary topic of research, which is also a key motivation behind the study. It makes sense, then, to study it in its current manifestation.

A different feature of the case study is that it is open to several sources of evidence, making it suitable to studies that include data “needing to converge in a triangulating fashion” (Yin, 2018, p. 15). As I use both a content analysis and interviews as data collection methods, I can use these different kinds of data to jointly inform the analysis.

Another feature of the case study is that it allows for a holistic approach when it comes to researching different forms of transparency. There are many variables that could potentially affect an organisation’s expression of transparency: editorial values, material resources, journalists’ attitudes, etc. In a variable study, I would have to control for variables from different organisations when comparing different forms of transparency. In a case study, I can assume that there will be more similarity within an organisation thanks to similar organisational structure, editorial leadership, etc.

This raises the question of the generalising ambition of the case study. By avoiding to control for variables, I also disclaim any notion of how it may extend to others. However, my case study has clear generalising ambitions in that it attempts to modify an existing concept.

Yin (2018) differentiates between two types of generalisation: statistical and analytic. In statistical generalisation, results are extrapolated from a sample to the rest of the population.

It is important to emphasise that a qualitative case study is not a statistical sample. Any findings will not be statistically possible to extrapolate. Analytic generalisation works according to a different logic in which data is shown to fit a theory. My case study will explore how the concept of transparency is implemented in practice, allowing analytic generalisation to other cases.

Selecting a case

Generalising ambitions require a careful selection of the case. Yin (2018), again, provides a benchmark: “Given access to more than a single candidate case, you should choose the case(s) that will most likely illuminate your research questions.” (ibid, p. 59). My research questions serve to contribute to the overarching project of reconceptualising journalistic transparency. Based on this, I identified three criteria that guided the search for a case:

First, the case would have to demonstrate a commitment to journalistic transparency. If transparency is not a guiding value for the organisation, it is likely harder to observe in practice. Second, a case would have to be at the forefront of digital transparency. Given that transparency is tightly connected to the increase in digital technology, I wanted a case that had a digital mindset.
Third, for practical reasons, the organisation would have to grant access to interviews. An analysis that did not gain access to its subject would potentially miss important ways of transparency-making.

Meeting these criteria was The Bureau Local, a project run by UK outlet The Bureau for Investigative Journalism.

The Bureau Local was founded in 2017 as a response to an increasingly tough market for local investigative journalism. The project brings together local reporters and citizen journalists who want to participate in local journalism. An editorial team consisting of an editor, two reporters, a data lead and two community organisers centrally formulate ideas and distribute tools and data to its members (The Bureau Local, 2020).

This model requires a high degree of transparency in order to ensure successful cooperation between the members, with The Bureau Local explicitly committed to transparency. The Bureau Local, then, can be seen as a potentially far-developed case of journalistic transparency.

3.4. Qualitative content analysis

I will use qualitative content analysis to explore journalistic transparency empirically.
Hsieh and Shannon (2005) note that there are three different approaches to qualitative content analysis: directed, conventional, and summative. A directed qualitative content analysis can be used when there is a strict framework in place that can be applied to data. A conventional

content analysis is more commonly used when there is not a set framework to depart from. Finally, a summative content analysis starts with quantifying words in a text before it delves into its latent meaning to create an interpretation (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

In my empirical study, I will explore two different kinds of transparency candidates. First, I will analyse resources on the website that claim to be transparent. Second, I will analyse three chatroom sessions to explore alternative ways of transparency.

Taking the respective types of content into account, I have chosen to use a directed content analysis and a conventional content analysis.

3.4.1. Directed content analysis: Open Resources

A directed content analysis takes an existing theory and applies it to the phenomenon under study, using primarily deductive reasoning. Its goal is to "validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1281).

I have adapted a framework based on Lev Manovich's (1999) theory. In his theory, narrative and database constitute two different ways of presenting information in the digital era. I take his distinction as my starting point and apply it to digital investigative journalism with the view of explaining transparency. As the framework is partly grown out of the concept analysis, I will go into it in more depth in Chapter 5.

Data

The Bureau Local has produced seven major investigations as of July 2020. For all of these investigations, The Bureau provided a set of resources, including sets of raw data.
To understand how The Bureau Local displays transparency in investigations, I analysed an investigation published on their website.

In general, articles were relatively similar as The Bureau Local is a data-driven outlet whose investigations rely on quantitative data. My reasoning for choosing an investigation to analyse was based on its typicality, meaning that it should consist of quantitative facts. I decided on an investigation that was published on 4 March 2019:

Revealed: The thousands of public spaces lost to the council funding crisis (TBIJ, 2019a).

This was then compared with a data document that was published in conjunction with the investigation:

Local authority property disposals and redundancies made 2014-18 (TBIJ, 2019b)

These two documents make up the data for the directed content analysis.

The decision to only analyse one text with its appending data source is partly based on the epistemological and ontological features of the theory. As I will explain, the theory views data as structurable with a low degree of context-sensitivity. As I hypothesise that all investigations are structurally similar but that chat sessions (see next section) may be more context-sensitive, I judged that the marginal increase in validity from further data collection was greater in the conventional content analysis than in the directed content analysis.

Coding

I developed my framework based on Lev Manovich's theory, which will be explained in Chapter 5. I then coded every quantitative fact - 15 in total - and matched them with corresponding data in the database. I did not treat facts that were derivative of facts presented earlier in the article as separate.

3.4.2. Conventional content analysis: Open Newsroom

A conventional content analysis is used when there is little previous research on the theory. By having a more open theoretical approach, new categories can be formed that "flow from the data" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1279).

The limits of the framework used in the directed content analysis together with insights from the concept analysis led me to explore other ways of being transparent. I chose to analyse Open Newsroom, a virtual discussion organised by The Bureau Local.

The Bureau Local regularly organises one-hour panel discussions on a topic decided on by the central team. Following the discussion, an open discussion is arranged on their Slack channel under the hashtag #OpenNewsroom. The sessions - open to everyone - are led by community organisers. In the sessions, reporters, activists, readers, editors and any other interested parties can gather to exchange views. The conversations are broad-ranging, but they have journalistic coverage in mind.

During the global pandemic in 2020, the Open Newsroom could no longer be arranged live. Instead, it was broadcast on the platform Crowdcast (see below for implications for data collection).

While there is no strict framework, I was guided by previous research. There has been research on the potential of online collaborative software such as Slack as a site of transparency (Moran, 2020). Furthermore, I used insights from my directed content analysis.

Data

The analysed data consisted of three discussions during Open Newsroom sessions in the summer of 2020:

Climate Change (7th May)
Race, Inequality and Coronavirus (4th June)
Young People in an Uncertain World (2nd July).

Originally, I had planned to analyse messages on platform Slack. As a result of the migration to Crowdcast, many comments instead took place in the comments section in connection with the broadcast. While the Slack sessions were still organised, they became considerably less lively as the conversation moved to a different platform. For this reason, I have only included Crowdcast comments in my analysis.

Coding

I identified the relevant unit of analysis as messages sent from entities representing The Bureau Local. Participants were judged to be representing the organisation if they introduced themselves as such in the chat. The rationale was that transparency required that other participants knew that they speak on behalf of the organisation.

In total, there were 185 messages in the analysis.

The messages were then coded using an inductive method. I was guided by the benchmark of disaggregation that, following the concept analysis and the directed content analysis, emerged as a key concept (for a discussion on disaggregation, see Chapter 4).
However, in some instances, messages contained several different types of messages. I used a code up strategy, meaning that messages were marked according to the most disaggregated content.

3.5. Interviews

To triangulate my findings from the content analyses, I conducted interviews with two members of the editorial team at The Bureau Local.

There were two primary reasons for using interviews.
First, a case study allows for triangulation between sources of evidence, making it easier to view a concept from different standpoints.
Second, transparency is enacted by people. Their ways of thinking and speaking about transparency is part of the object of study.

The interviewees both had responsibilities relating to promoting transparency at the organisation.

Charles Boutaud, Data Lead at the Bureau Local, responsible for creating and distributing data resources, such as raw data sets, reporting recipes, and technological source codes.
Shirish Kulkarni, Community Organiser at The Bureau Local, leading discussions on Slack between members of the reporting network.

Interviews can vary to what degree they are structured. A structured interview has narrowly defined questions, leading to more specific responses. By contrast, an unstructured interview allows respondents to speak freely on topics. A semi-structured interview falls in between the two poles, meaning that the questions have a general structure but also allow respondents to speak freely. Qualitative interviews tend to be less structured (Trost, 2010).

My interviews were semi-structured, meaning that I had a particular field - transparency - that formed the basis of the questions, but that interviewees were allowed to speak freely on the topic. The interviews were opened with a general question of how the respondent thinks about transparency in his work. It then progressed to concern specific elements of their roles.

The interviews took place via video chat, ranged between 30 and 60 minutes and were transcribed to increase familiarity with the material.

3.6. Validity and reliability

Validity

Validity is the degree to which a study measures what it purports to measure (Yin, 2018). This is a particularly relevant question for this thesis as it is partly motivated by the argument that an underdeveloped conceptualisation of transparency has led to studies with low validity. It is therefore key to avoid such a trap.

The concept analysis is intended to ensure validity in the content analysis by attempting to spell out its paradoxical commitments beforehand. Validity has also been sought by triangulating data from content analyses with interviews to gain a better understanding of specific instances of transparency.

Validity can be challenged by a small size of analysed content. This could be applicable in this case: in the directed content analysis, the analysed material consists of one published investigation. In the conventional content analysis, it consists of three chatroom discussions. While more data would raise validity, I believe that the material is enough to ensure validity with respect to the purpose of the empirical study: to explore ways of achieving digital investigative journalism.

Another challenge to validity is that the analysis took place virtually on Crowdcast instead of the usual set-up of a live panel discussion followed by Slack discussion. It is possible that this affected the content of the sessions. However, from observing Slack discussions at The Bureau Local, I judge them to be similar, meaning that validity remains high.

A different challenge concerns the type of transparency that is produced at The Bureau Local. What motivated my research into journalistic transparency was its potential remedy for reinstating trust in journalism among the public. In The Bureau Local, transparency is partly motivated for other reasons. Transparency is at least partly an effect of communication with reporters in the reporter network rather than to increase trust with the audience. As a result, it may be argued that journalistic transparency in The Bureau Local takes on a special character, making results difficult to generalise to other digital investigative journalism outlets.

However, I argue that validity can be preserved for two primary reasons.
First, the reporters were not employed by The Bureau Local but part of a wider collaboration network. With over 1250 reporters in the network, this makes them more similar to the wider public.
Second, all transparency measures at The Bureau Local were open to and partly directed to the public. If they had not been open to the public, I would not have proceeded with the case study. As I do not make any causal claims on how transparency had come to be, nor any claims of the prevalence of transparency in the industry, but seek to gain a better understanding of journalistic transparency's mechanisms, I judge that validity for this study remains high.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the possibility of reproducing the results, requiring the study to be executed accurately and rigorously (Yin, 2018). A qualitative study is not replicable in the same sense as a laboratory study. However, a study should be able to display a high level of trustworthiness.

In my directed content analysis, reliability is high thanks to its highly structured theoretical framework. This requires coders to stick to a particular conceptual frame.
In my conventional content analysis, reliability is potentially lower due to a more open coding process. If reliability is low, there could be difficulties in reproducing the study.

However, I have tried to ensure reliability by measures such as putting the data in tables to gain an overview and make sure that messages are accurately coded. I have also transcribed the interviews to make sure that no words were lost or misunderstood. That way, I hope to create a thesis with high reliability/trustworthiness.

3.7. Limitations

The following topics would have been relevant to and improved this thesis:

First, a concept analysis would benefit from further tracing the conceptual genealogy of transparency. In this thesis, I only dip down in history to sketch its historical origins before I take its current conditions. Transparency, then, appears almost synchronic, a paradoxical signifier floating in semantic space. In reality, transparency as a concept has undergone political twists and turns to arrive at its current valence. A thorough conceptual genealogy could also shed further light on its historical relation to journalism.

Second, a qualitative content analysis of constructed sites could include much more data, analysed with other tools. For instance, a netnography of chatrooms could allow for an in-depth study of how transparency is performed, leading to new insights. A different methodological approach could be better equipped to grasp ways of being transparent on its semantic edge.

4. Concept analysis: journalistic transparency

Transparency has only recently emerged as a panacea for all kinds of issues, but it has existed as a concept for a long time. Here, I briefly trace its origins before I outline its formal conditions.

4.1. A brief history of transparency

Originating as a concept in antiquity, the Greek word diaphanês (diaphaneity) could best be translated to translucidity (Alloa, 2018). In Alloa's view, Aristotle undertook an important step in expanding the concept of diaphaneity to also include a generative aspect. It led to two different aspects of transparency, setting the stage for its later metaphorical use:

> *"1. Translucidity: the permeable quality of a medium that (spatially) lets the vision through*
> *2. Generativity: the productive quality of a medium that (causally) lets something come into view.*" (Alloa, 2018, p. 35)

The transparency ideal gained traction during the Enlightenment (Baume and Papadopolous, 2015). In an era skeptical of masks and appearances, more disclosure of information heralded a new way of structuring society. The growth of a public sphere would allow discussion to flourish and enlighten its citizens to make better decisions.

In the Enlightenment world-view, secrecy was the main obstacle to a better informed citizenry and thus a functioning democracy. The Freedom of Information Act in Sweden serves as an example of the publicity ethos. Implemented in 1766, it was the first law of its kind in the world and forged a tight link between transparency and freedom of the press (Appelgren and Salaverría, 2018). Here, transparency as a normative and an epistemological concept were closely related as *sapere aude* - dare to know - became the rallying cry of Enlightenment, nurturing the close relation between knowledge and vision.

In the 20th, the Enlightenment ideals were problematised in an increasingly complex society. This was captured by Bertold Brecht, who called for new methods to uncover reality.

> *"The situation [in capitalist society as a whole] is now becoming so complex that a simple "reproduction of reality" says less than ever about reality itself. A photograph of a Krupp or AEG [a German enterprise producing electric appliances] factory reveals practically nothing about these institutions. [...] And so what we actually need is to "construct something," something "artificial," "posed.""* (Brecht, 1931, quoted in Teurlings and Staff, 2014, p. 5).

Brecht argued that mere observation was not enough for understanding. Instead, reality must be mediated, even constructed, leading to an epistemological problematisation of transparency. In Brecht's discussion, "transparency and knowledge are sometimes juxtaposed, contrary to the liberal take on these matters, which tends to equate the two." (Teurlings and Staff, 2014, p. 5).

Turning a physical quality into a metaphor involves making claims of how the world is constituted and how we can come to know it. The Enlightenment ideal and its problematisation by Brecht point to two different interpretations of "making visible" inherent in the concept of transparency. In the next section, I will try to lay out this tension more formally.

4.2. Conditions for transparency

Michener and Bersch (2013) identify two jointly necessary and sufficient conditions for transparency of information: visibility and inferability. While visibility connects to transparency's literal originals through the absence of visual obstacles, inferability is the ability to draw accurate conclusions from what can be seen.

This leads to an asymmetry in the concept of transparency, in that "the qualities of visibility are intrinsic to the information, whereas inferability is also contingent on the receptive capacity of the intended audience" (Michener and Bersch, 2013, p. 237-238). It follows that an immense weight is put on the question of what constitutes inferable information for conditions of transparency to obtain.

In Michener and Bersch's analysis, inferability consists of three components measuring to what extent transparency is disaggregated, verified, and simplified. Unlike the two prior conditions for transparency, inferability is a matter of degree, making its components adaptable to its intended audience.

Disaggregated information refers to raw data. Raw data is desirable because it is purported to be less mediated, making it “harder to ‘cook’ or ‘game’ it out of professional or political motivations” (Michener and Bersch, 2013, p. 239).

Simplified information is data that has undergone some treatment. When raw data is too raw, it could be “*mediated* by assigning it scores or labeling devices that make it easier to understand for the layman” (ibid, p. 239, my emphasis).

The push and pull over mediation is the inner tension of transparency, captured by Koivisto’s (2016) term ‘icono-ambivalence’. In its skepticism towards mediation, transparency is iconoclastic. It seeks to bring down representations and narratives. But to convey what is hiding behind the mask, it needs to use tools of representation, resorting to iconophilia (Koivisto, 2016). Transparency, then, is going in two opposing epistemological directions.

That raw data must be mediated is not only applicable to particularly complicated cases. Rather, raw data in itself is a contradiction in terms: even in its rawest form, “data are always already social, subject to narrative and interpretation” (Birchall, 2014, p. 82).

The choice of the term “simplification” by Michener and Bersch (2013) reveals an epistemological bias at the heart of transparency. It implies that only minimal mediation is needed to clean up the disaggregated information. In Koivisto’s (2016) framework, this tension is expressed more neutrally by the iconoclastic-iconophilic distinction. I take these distinctions to refer to the same tension over mediation, spoken from different normative standpoints.

In law and political studies, the concept of transparency is predicated on the idea that the “transcendence of governance would take care of its own representation so long as the impediments blocking its visibility for the viewer were removed” (Koivisto, 2016, p. 5). In journalism, this translates into the idea that transparent information would be capable of speaking a truth that is inaccessible to mediated journalistic narratives. In reality, however, transparency requires choices. To be transparent is to produce information, which presumes a particular way of knowing. Determining what constitutes inferable information comes with epistemological and ontological commitments.

Crucially, transparency has rarely spelled out these commitments. Instead, transparency has come to connote “making visible” in a general sense, turning it into a “magic concept of modernity” (Alloa, 2018).

A magic concept is an idea that promises to solve a wide range of problems by its mere invocation. It is characterised by “a high degree of abstraction, a strongly positive normative charge, a seeming ability to dissolve previous dilemmas and a mobility across domains” (Pollitt and Hupe, 2011, quoted in Alloa, 2018, p. 29). It gives it a semantically unstable core, which makes it difficult to oppose.

To understand how transparency has become a magic concept, it is useful to see how metaphors work. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors allow us to isolate parts of an object or an experience to understand it better. A mind, for instance, can be characterised as both a machine and as a brittle object. This means that we can refer to malfunctioning of the mind in two different ways, depending on what metaphor we use as base (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 29) :

He broke down. (Metaphor: The mind is a machine).
He cracked up. (Metaphor: The mind is a brittle object).

These different expressions can live side-by-side as they are based on different characteristics of the mental experience. Their appropriateness is determined by the context of the event that we want to describe. For instance, a machine breaking down is normally a calm process whereas a brittle object that shatters is a violent process. We apply the metaphor according to what we perceive as suitable to the situation.

The metaphor of transparency is based on the metaphor that *seeing is understanding.* In its metaphorical usage, transparency is alternately thought of as a window and as a flashlight, corresponding to a passive and an active way of seeing (Koivisto, 2016). In some metaphorical uses, transparency is a window on the world, allowing us to see everything within it. In others, it is a light that lights up dark corners, such as in American judge Louis Brandeis’ famous declaration that “sunlight is the best disinfectant” (Louisville, 2020).

We are able to say both "He broke down" and "He cracked up" because we can perceive mental issues in different ways. Similarly, the metaphors of transparency as a window and as a flashlight co-exist within the concept because *there are multiple ways of seeing.* By isolating different parts of the process, they characterise two different ways of how we come to understand the world. Specifically, they differ in relation to mediation: a window is a passive way of seeing an unaffected reality while a flashlight requires an active selection of what to light up.

If ways of being transparent were consistently and explicitly applied through "transparency as a window" or "transparency as a flashlight", transparency as a concept would contain less tension. That would allow us to judge how it thinks that we come to understand the world. However, the term "transparency" often leaves these epistemological commitments left implied, leading to its unresolved position on mediation.

That a metaphorical concept contains different ways of understanding is not problematic in itself. As transparency is based on the metaphor that *seeing is understanding*, the concept *seeing*, by definition, also contains these ways. However, seeing takes place at a higher level of generality, making it unlikely to become a strongly normative term. To call for understanding through seeing prompts the question of how we ought to see it. My argument is that the use of transparency as a normative term implies a specific epistemology that is masked by its semantic vagueness. While seeing is too general to become a normative concept, transparency entails specific - if contradictory - epistemological commitments.

To reiterate, transparency is semantically unstable due to encompassing two ways of seeing differing with respect to mediation. Its epistemological commitments regarding mediation that are entailed in its characterisation of transparency as either a window or a flashlight are often left implied when we speak of "transparency" in a general sense.

However, this semantic instability is not arbitrary. Transparency is governed by an inner logic, structuring its metaphorical application.

We can see this by comparing it to another metaphor: illumination. To illuminate is to supply with light or, in its metaphorical usage, to make clear. In certain metaphorical contexts, to illuminate and to make transparent can thus be synonymous.

However, remnants of their literal roots make these metaphors behave differently. Illumination is ontologically committed to a world of relations. To be illuminated is a property of an object that is lit up by something else. If the relation is not present, the property ceases to exist. A piece of glass is no longer illuminated if you turn off the lights.

By contrast, transparency in a physical object is a property in the entity itself. In its literal sense, transparency is the quality of an object that is capable of letting through light. Literally, then, transparency implies a world of entities where such qualities are part of their physical structure. It does not require constant *transparency-making*[1] by a different entity in the way that *illuminating* does. A piece of glass is still transparent even if you turn off the lights.

I argue that a part of the meaning of transparency is carried over from its natural-world ontology in which the literal concept originated to its metaphorical usage. Specifically, it is rooted in an idea of transparency as a property intrinsic to entities. As a result, it seeks to remove obstacles to visibility that it perceives as extrinsic to entities, meaning that superfluous interpretations must be dissolved.

If this was transparency's only epistemological direction, it would be a univocal concept in that it would seek to disaggregate all interpretations. However, there must be interpretation for meaning to arise. As we saw, transparency promises its information not only disaggregated but also inferrable. To fulfill this promise, transparency has come to include a constructive tendency.

Another comparison with a neighbouring concept can make this clear. Heald (2006) characterizes the difference between openness and transparency as their attitude to interpretation, asserting that "[o]penness might therefore be thought of as a characteristic of the organization, whereas transparency also requires external receptors capable of processing the information made available" (Heald, 2006, p. 26).

[1] It is worth noting that transparency lacks a comfortable verb form equivalent to, for instance, illuminate.

This is an important distinction to understand how transparency turned into a magic concept. If we accept Heald's distinction, openness is a property of the entity itself. This is similar to transparency's disaggregating drive that stems from its natural-world ontology, requiring it to go beyond mediation to locate the property of transparency in the object itself. However, objects cannot be understood without interpretation, forcing transparency as a metaphor to take on an interpretative aspect that gives rise to its paradoxical nature.

Thus, transparency has not simply turned it into a generic concept of "making visible" in general nor is it merely a polysemic concept with a semantically unstable core. Instead, the stretched concept is structured according to a particular logic.

While transparency has come to encompass both an affinity and an hostility towards images, it uses these terms in a particular order: it strives for disaggregation. Using Koivisto's terminology, it matters that its iconoclasm precedes its iconophilia. Using Michener and Bersch's terminology, it matters that simplification mitigates disaggregation. Transparency desires destruction and requires construction.

This affects the meaning of transparency as a normative term. Transparency may be forced to adopt tools of construction in order to make itself intelligible, but the point of the spear is always disaggregation. To call for transparency is to reach for tools of destruction.

Treating transparency as synonymous to a more general concept such as "seeing" masks its bias for disaggregation. Treating it as disaggregation ignores its reliance on simplification. By recognising this unsolved tension of disaggregation-simplification, we are able to move beyond transparency as merely a semantically unstable signifier to a term with a specific epistemological logic.

4.3. Conclusion

The research question that this concept analysis was designed to answer was:

RQ1: *What are the epistemological commitments of transparency?*

In this chapter, I have analysed transparency as a metaphor, arguing that it contains a) contradictory attitudes to mediation that b) tend towards disaggregation. That transparency contains multiple ways of seeing provides signposts for my empirical investigation as I turn to studying journalistic transparency in a natural setting.

5. Case study: The Bureau Local

The Bureau Local is a project started by UK organisation The Bureau for Investigative Journalism (TBIJ). Launched in 2017, it was designed to fill gaps in local investigative journalism by bringing together people from across the United Kingdom. While local reporters make up a key part of the network, it is open for anyone to join. It focuses primarily on data-driven investigative journalism. In July 2020, just over 1250 members had joined the network, which include journalists, academics, data scientists and members of the public (TBIJ, 2019).

The editorial team of The Bureau Local acts as a central node in a network, creating the theme of the investigation. The team also gathers data that it publishes in connection with every investigation. The team consists of an editor, two reporters, two community organisers and one data lead. Until July 2020, The Bureau Local had launched seven major investigations, revolving around a single theme such as homelessness, local power, and the impact of Brexit (TBIJ, 2020c).

In this case study, I intend to explore how transparency is performed by a digital investigative journalism outlet. The study will use two types of qualitative content analysis: directed content analysis and conventional content analysis. The findings will be triangulated with data from interviews.

5.1. Directed content analysis: Open Resources

Under the heading of “Open resources”, The Bureau Local provides a set of tools that relate to each investigation. Its stated aim is to allow users to peek behind the curtains:

> *“Bureau Local is committed to transparency. We ask it of organisations we investigate, and of ourselves as well. On this page you will find the workings behind our investigations and guides for taking our stories further. We hope this makes the investigative process accessible to local reporters as well as the public.”* (TBIJ, 2020a)

The resources are divided into four categories:

Data refers to the evidence that make up the factual basis for the investigations. The data typically comes in spreadsheet format.
Reporting recipes are how-to guides that allow users to recreate the steps taken to create the story.
Code is the computer codes were used to create data, for example through scraping.
Resource is any other information that could be useful, such as reports or documents.

In the introductory quote, transparency is explicitly cited as the reason for the open resources. Furthermore, providing raw data is often mentioned as a key transparency feature (see eg. Karlsson, 2020; Koliska, 2015) For these reasons, open resources is a suitable starting point to start the study into transparency at The Bureau Local.

To do that, we need a theory. Through the concept analysis, it emerged that transparency consists of two different oppositions to mediation. For open resources, I hypothesise that they create transparency through disaggregation. To test this theory, I will adapt a semiotic framework of Lev Manovich and apply it to the text.

5.1.1. Theoretical framework

The framework is based on the distinction between narrative and database, devised by digital theorist Lev Manovich (1999). Drawing on structuralist theories of semiotics, Manovich has explored new ways of structuring information in a digital era, arguing that the database logic marks a substantive shift from the narrative way of presentation.

Narrative has been the traditional way of presenting journalism, involving “the selection and sequencing of textual aspects into a meaningful whole” (Carlson, 2017, p. 68). Not only must journalistic narratives be meaningful but they are also claimed to be true. While journalism has gone through several major epistemological crises throughout its history (Anderson, 2018), leading it to experiment with more impressionistic forms such as New Journalism. For investigative journalism, however, facts remain at the center of its world-view (Ettema and Glasser, 1998).

By insisting on facts while facing risk of rejection of its truth-claims, investigative journalism has looked to transparency for help. Bypassing traditional narratives, transparency, it is hoped, can offer a direct route to reality and allow readers to see for themselves.

A narrative selects its pieces and arranges them in a meaningful order. This is in contrast to a database. A database lacks prioritization, instead “[representing] the world as a list of items” (Manovich, 1999, p. 85).

For Manovich, this difference is best understood by reference to linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of language. Saussure is famous for the structuralist view, dividing language along two axes: syntagm and paradigm. Words are pieced together in a chain and form coherent sentences according to rules of structure. The meaning of the sentence arises out of selection from the paradigmatic axis and combination along the syntagmatic axis.

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="3">⬍
Paradigmatic axis</td><td>I</td><td>love</td><td>shoes</td></tr>
<tr><td>You</td><td>hate</td><td>hats</td></tr>
<tr><td>He</td><td>likes</td><td>shirts</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Syntagmatic axis ↔</td></tr>
</table>

In this small set, there are three paradigms with three syntagms in each. To string together a meaningful sentence requires us to combine words according to linguistic rules. That way, we can create a meaningful statement by stringing together syntagms from the paradigms.

This idea was taken up by structuralists such as Roland Barthes and Claude Levi-Strauss, applying it to a wide range of phenomena, including anthropology, art, and fashion.
In Manovich’s framework, it applies to narratives altered by new media. Narratives gain their meaning through the selection of particular units (such as scenes) placed in a particular order. In a cinema narrative, we can think of the actual sequence of scenes as the syntagmatic axis and all possible scenes that we can choose from as the paradigmatic axis.The database, on other hand, orders units in a minimally prioritised way, making it narrative’s “natural correlate” (Manovich, 1999).

To analyse investigative journalism, I argue that facts are the appropriate unit of analysis as they carry the meaning of the story. Following this logic, I will treat facts as syntagms that can be chosen from fact paradigms. The framework can in principle be tested on all types of journalistic content. However, in this analysis I will focus on quantitative facts as The Bureau Local is a data-driven outlet, meaning that their investigations largely rest on statistics.

Traditionally, the members of a paradigmatic set related to each-other virtually while the syntagmatic set related to each-other materially. A written sentence would consist of selected words out of many possible options. Similarly, a cinematic narrative would consist of selected shots and scenes with all alternatives hovering above in a non-realised realm of possibilities.

In the database, this relation is reversed. As it presents data in a minimally prioritised way, it is the actual selection that is a yet unrealised possibility. Manovich explores how this is expressed in different forms of art, such as interactive video games. Disassembling the narrative into pieces, the user can navigate his or her own path.

What is key to a structuralist account of meaning is that it occurs in its internal relations to other components. I adapt this structuralist theory to transparency by reversing its meaning-making logic. The goal of transparency, in this view, is to reduce meaning (that is, mediated interpretations) by decomposing narrative into data. That makes it a suitable theoretical framework to explore transparency in digital investigative journalism.

5.1.2. Findings

In March 2019, The Bureau Local published an investigation titled *Revealed: The thousands of public spaces lost to the council funding crisis* (TBIJ, 2019a). The investigation found that councils used income from sale of assets to make council workers redundant. The first paragraphs of the text set up its main findings:

> *“The local government funding crisis has become so dire that councils are being forced to sell thousands of public spaces, such as libraries, community centres and playgrounds.*

> *In a double blow to communities, some local authorities are using the money raised from selling off buildings and land to pay for hundreds of redundancies, including in vital frontline services."* (TBIJ, 2019a, para. 1 and 2)

The investigation goes on to describe the overall picture on the national scene. It then launches into detailed facts about the investigation, starting with the following paragraph:

> *"In Bristol, the number of council workers made redundant jumped ten times from 39 the year before the new rules were introduced to 401 the year after. The council paid for many of the redundancies by using proceeds from the sale of assets, which that year included a historic library."* (TBIJ, 2019a, para. 10)

Here, we can make out a number of facts that have been formed from the database, such as:
Bristol made 39 council workers redundant in the year that the rules were introduced
Bristol made 401 council workers redundant in the year after the rules were introduced
Bristol sold an historic library

Syntagmatically, these facts gain meaning in their positioning to each-other. It may be noteworthy in itself that Bristol laid off 401 council workers in one year or that an historic library was sold in that same year, but the meaning of the story is shaped by placing the facts in conjunction. By connecting them, the journalist is weaving together a narrative, supporting its moral subtext ("it is wrong to use income from sale of historic buildings to lay off council workers").

Paradigmatically, the facts refer to a list of other similarly shaped facts. By referring to laid-off workers in two particular years, we are assuming that there are statistics also for other years. In singling out a particular building, we are assuming that there are other sold assets that are knowable in the same manner to us.

The narrative rests on a proposed link between a sale of assets and the number of council workers made redundant. Using the logic of disaggregating transparency, we can reverse-engineer the journalist's work to assess this claim. In the narrative, the redundancies of

15/16 and 16/17 are imbued with meaning through their selection. In the data, they lay side by side with other figures.

Local Authority	Redundancies 14/15	Redundancies 15/16	Redundancies 16/17	Redundancies 17/18
Bristol, City of	80	39	401	42

By flattening the data, we can assess to what extent it supports the narrative that the journalist proposed and either agree with it or challenge it with counter-narratives.

We may want to disaggregate the text for other reasons. The Bureau Local is a national outlet, covering all of the United Kingdom. It has chosen Bristol because it is a national outlier. We may agree with that claim, but we are more interested in knowing what the situation is in other parts of the country. In this instance, the counter-narrative can be complementary to the presented narrative rather than antagonistic to it.

> *"An example I give often is: if you only look at the national average, you could say "oh well, employment increased in the last quarter in the UK". And then someone in Sunderland or Grimsby or some industrial town in the north could say "no, that's not true." I think that feeds into disenfranchisement where people don't see themselves within the national narrative and they think that therefore they are not being represented and that journalism doesn't speak to them or care about them."* (Interview with Charles Boutaud, Data Lead, 2020)

In the text, Bristol is prominently featured. The difference between Bristol and other cities is grasped by placing figures into context. In the data, Bristol is placed between the councils of Brighton and Hove and Broadland. It is ordered alphabetically with no other prioritisation. The fact is stripped of narrative meaning and returned to the place it was taken from.

Local Authority	Capital receipts used to finance redundancies 16/17	Redundancies 15/16	Redundancies 16/17
Brighton and Hove	£1,376,513	205	156
Bristol, City of	£5,300,000	39	401
Broadland	£0	7	2

By making the full data transparent, the national narrative can be disassembled and local ones can be produced. This explains how transparency is achieved. I identify three characteristics of this transparency:

- It seeks to be exhaustive. It is always looking for more to disaggregate.
- It seeks to detach from context. The purpose is to disperse interpretation to delve down to the entity itself.
- It seeks to detach from the sender. Again, the purpose is to only retain that which belongs the entity that is to be made transparent, not the manner in which it was presented.

As a data-driven outlet, most investigations conducted by The Bureau Local are based on databases. It means that it can relatively easily disseminate data that it did not use, allowing readers to recreate narratives. Even so, full transparency of the database is difficult.

> *"After publication, we always open the data from the investigation. But obviously not all of it. There is some raw data that I've worked with that is just a file of hundred thousands of rows of data and I won't publish that because it's useless for most people. But the final file when we identify the data points that were useful, that's the one we're going to make public to people."* (Boutaud, 2020)

Transparency as a metaphor hinges on the link between vision and understanding, making it an ocularcentric metaphor (Koivisto, 2016). Interestingly, transparency seems to retain its visual component even when it is dealing with more abstract representations.

> *"I try to not put more columns in my Google Sheets than I can see on my screen. It's a stupid thing but if there are more columns then people will go "that's too much" and they will quit."* (Boutaud, 2020)

Some mediation is required to allow readers to make sense of transparency. If we nonetheless imagine that we bypass these constraints and make all data in the database accessible, full transparency has been achieved. However, it merely moves to the next existential question: how did this world come into being?

In Open Resources, The Bureau Local goes a long way to begin to answer this question. In the Reporting Recipe, there is a section called "Context", informing the reader that it was the law change in 2016 that gave rise to the idea to gather the data (TBIJ, 2019b).

However, for every paragraph, the database logic becomes increasingly stretched. We are no longer in a position to assess every possible choice that could have been made in the creation of the database. Put differently, transparency is increasingly mediated. This suggests that the framework of Manovich is no longer applicable but that we need a separate method.

5.1.3. Conclusion

In this analysis, I have attempted to answer the research question: how is transparency performed in digital investigative journalism? This directed content analysis finds that transparency is performed through disaggregating the narrative into a database. The analysis finds that the framework can explain the logic of transparency in journalistic narratives that rest on data. However, applying it to other entities, such as journalistic decision-making, indicates the limits of the framework.

5.2. Conventional content analysis: Open Newsroom

Every month, The Bureau Local extends an invitation to participate in their Open Newsroom session. The concept includes a panel discussion followed by a discussion on messaging application Slack. Here, reporters in the network, stakeholders in the community and any interested party can join together for a discussion on common themes. During the global pandemic in 2020, the event was hosted virtually on Crowdcast (see Chapter 3).

In the literature on journalistic transparency, opening up the newsroom is a key transparency feature. Allowing viewers to access online collaborative software such as Slack has been conceptualised as potential transparency tools for media organisations (Moran, 2020).

The Open Newsroom sessions at The Bureau Local are not claimed to provide a raw look into the real workings of the newsroom. However, the concept analysis and directed content analysis have indicated that transparency may be achieved in different ways. By analysing Open Newsroom sessions, I explore if transparency can be performed by other means than disaggregation.

5.2.1. Theoretical guidance

In the directed content analysis, I tested a framework that explored transparency through highly structured data. As this framework was eventually found inadequate for some entities, I now turn to other ways of thinking about transparency. In this conventional content analysis, I have no fixed coding framework to guide my inquiry. However, I am guided by my findings in the concept analysis and in the directed content analysis.

What the concept analysis showed was that transparency is conflicted with regards to mediation, containing both a disaggregating and a constructing drive. In the directed content analysis, I found that disaggregating transparency sought to return all interpretations to a natural state of data. I also found that this logic cannot cover all instances of journalistic transparency.

In the Open Newsroom session, I am interested in exploring ways of being transparent that are not based on the disaggregating drive. From that, I hypothesise that the data in the conventional content analysis will differ from the data analysed in the directed content analysis with respect to mediation.

Coding the messages according to their level of transparency would lead to a case of circular reasoning as transparency as a concept is under revision in this thesis. For that reason, I will code messages according to their level of disaggregation.

To speak of a level of disaggregation only makes sense from within a disaggregating perspective of transparency. To that extent, I remain in the epistemology and ontology of my previous framework. However, by being explicit with this outlook, I intend to use it as a starting point to explore other ways of being transparent. Taking disaggregating logic of transparency as a benchmark, I can then assess how transparency may be performed in other ways.

Total disaggregation would be to lay out every possible option. We have already found that this kind of disaggregation is impossible to present. However, as transparency also allows for a constructive wing, we cannot from that infer that there is no transparency in the sessions. It means that we must assume all messages as being potentially transparent.

5.2.2. Findings

Analysing three sessions, I gathered 185 messages that were posted from accounts representing The Bureau Local. In contrast to the directed content analysis, I did not code according to a pre-set syntagm-paradigm scheme but I formed groups inductively. Five main topics emerged with respect to disaggregation.

1) **Social messages**

These were greetings that did not have any significant factual content. As potential bearers of transparency, they are the least disaggregated.

Example 1: "*Hi all, I head up the Bureau Local and am looking forward to a great discussion today!*". Editor, Young People session.

Example 2: "*Some great questions from people already - if you would like to ask a Q of our panel, please do add it using the Ask a Question tab on the left - thanks*" Editor, Corona Virus session.

2) **Questions**

Questions have a subject-matter content that makes it possible to infer topic of interests in the asker. However, the nature of a question is that it does not supply answers, making it little disaggregated.

Example: "*Yes John that's a really interesting question, why is it that the barrier to political involvement is so much greater or unappealing than the barrier to activism". The Bureau Local official account, Young People session

3) Factual statements

These are statements of fact or opinion that relate to other topics. It may indicate what subjects that the provider of facts is interested in.

Example: "*In terms of trying to get hold of access to relevant data in Scotland (where there are NO black politicians), the STUC Black Workers Committee has published this letter https://www.stuc.org.uk/media-centre/news/1447/stuc-black-workers-committee-open-letter*" The Bureau Local official account, Young People session

4) Opinions about other things

An opinion reveals what the organisation things about a particular issue or topic. However, what it means for its journalism (about which we are exploring transparency) is not always clear.

Example: "*Yes, air pollution is such a key issue in cities and often links to socioeconomic data*". The Bureau Local official account, Climate Change session

5) Opinions about journalism

These are opinions that relate directly to journalism.

Example: "*I think there is a role of long -term reporting. I find one of the challenges is the reporting that only looks at a slice of the issue and then stops. But if reporters and newsrooms*

follow an issue and policy, it can change the way we understand how these issues play out."
Editor, Climate Change session

To summarise my findings, the most prevalent type of messages in the sessions was *social messages* with *facts* coming in second. *Opinions about journalism* was the least prevalent type. Overall, messages displayed low levels of disaggregation.

The point of gathering and coding the data was to see if and how transparency is performed. To answer this question, I will pose two questions to the data.
First, is it disaggregated?
Second, is it transparent?

I will answer this question by analysing a message in the "opinions about journalism" group from the Editor of The Bureau Local:

"*I think there is a role of long -term reporting. I find one of the challenges is the reporting that only looks at a slice of the issue and then stops. But if reporters and newsrooms follow an issue and policy, it can change the way we understand how these issues play out."*

Is it disaggregated? It does not directly underpin any particular narrative. It may be connected to journalistic stories, but there is no direct relation between them in the way that we saw with narrative and data. Importantly, as we will see, this does not seem to be the key motivation behind the message. The Editor does not intend to lay out all facts but only a curated part through a message.

Is it transparent? To provide knowledge about editorial values is commonly mentioned as a transparency feature. On its own, its practical value to a reader may be low, but it can comfortably fit the current definitions of transparency.

If we accept that the message is a) not intended to be disaggregated but b) an instance of journalistic transparency, we have here a second type of transparency that runs counter to the definition provided in the directed content analysis. This is predicted by the concept analysis that found two epistemologically opposing views on mediation.

Contra the definition of the first transparency, I argue that this second transparency differs in three corresponding ways:

- It is curated. It does not intend to lay out all possible facts but it makes an active selection.
- It is context-sensitive. It cannot be - and is not intended to be - interpreted outside of the context that it was conveyed.
- It is performed. It cannot be divorced from the way in which it was conveyed.

I will return to the formal features of these two transparencies in Chapter 6.

These features allow for all messages in the newsroom to be potentially transparent - even social messages. Disaggregation is no longer the standard against which we judge transparency. However, to be transparent they require interpretation, meaning that we need to interpret the messages to know if they are transparent.

The primary purpose of this chapter is not to judge how transparent these sessions are. While that is an important question for future research, I focus on drawing out what mechanisms that they rely on to convey transparency. To do that, I will briefly go through options at our disposal when we seek to interpret messages.

One way of interpreting messages is to treat each message individually referring to the intent of the sender. In this situation, we conceptualise Open Newsroom as a meeting spot for many purposes, one of which is to occasionally display transparency. This is how I interpreted the message that referred to long-term reporting from the Editor.

What such an analysis would likely conclude is that some messages are instances of transparency while others are not. That a greeting is epistemologically capable of conveying transparency does not mean that it always does.

However, we can also choose to analyse messages as a collective unit that is informed by an overall structure. What we have, then, is an external explanation that informs the relations between the messages. On such a view, it is beside the point to interpret social greetings as non-transparent but opinions about journalism as transparent. We are not examining every message with the view of locating meaning in it, but we attempt to grasp what the purpose of the session is. In such a framework, a social greeting and an opinion contribute to transparency that is located in the discussion as a whole.

It means that we view the activity in the sessions through the lens of transparency. Such an analysis requires us to choose the lens carefully. To avoid our data to merely say whatever we want it to say, we must think about other possible explanations that may fit the data better. One way of doing that is to use abductive reasoning, also known as "inference to best explanation" (Danermark et al, 2018).

Abductive reasoning allows us to view the material by recontextualising it in light of another theory. In this case, we saw messages as an instance of transparency. By providing an alternative explanation, our interpretation could change drastically.

Suppose for example that we think of the discussions as a commercially motivated exercise, intended to strengthen relations with customers in order to increase sales. In this view, the messages take on a radically different meaning. Rather than social greetings contributing to the overall goal of transparency, we may think of apparently transparent messages as tools of establishing contacts. The way in which messages relate to each-other would flip. In the transparency example, social greetings were auxiliary to the main messages relaying transparent information. In this example, we can imagine the reverse example with opinions serving as a way of maintaining a social connection.

Applying this reasoning to this particular case leads me to ask: what is the best explanation to describe the messages in The Bureau Local's Open Newsroom?

It is relevant to know what the intentions behind the activity are. For The Bureau Local, Open Newsroom is not advertised nor primarily conceptualised as a transparency tool.

> *"I have a background in mental health work and counselling. So I come at it from that perspective. Journalism organisations talk a lot about investing in long-term relationships*

> *with our audience and build trust that way and no-one does it."* (Interview with Shirish Kulkarni, Community Organiser, 2020)

Open Newsroom, then, is not intended as a window into the day-to-day operations of The Bureau Local. Rather, it is a social session for building relations and exchanging ideas with thew of

> *"What that [Open Newsroom] is about is for people to know where our heart is and what our motivations are, so that maybe in a year's time when they have a sensitive story, we become entirely predictable. So they know if they bring a story to us or if they just want to ask us a question, they know what kind of response they are going to get and that is going to be a positive and sort of nurturing bond."* (Kulkarni, 2020)

According to The Bureau Local, the sessions serve the purpose of making the organisation predictable through creating social bonds. We can then view predictability as a rival explanation to transparency. Using abductive reasoning, we can recontextualise the data to see which theory it fits.

An in-depth answer to this question would require a concept analysis of predictability to see exactly what it entails. For now, I take "achieving predictability" in an Open Newsroom context to mean "conveying information that allows people to accurately infer how we will act in the future".

In the content analysis, data was formed in five groups with respect to its level of disaggregation. Overall, the messages had a low level of disaggregation. That they serve to form social bonds is corroborated by the finding that the most prevalent type of messages were social messages, indicating that The Bureau Local act as moderators. From the perspective of disaggregating transparency that we explored in the directed content analysis, this would immediately disqualify transparency as an explanation. As the messages are mediated, they would not be transparent, with predictability a more likely explanation.

To say of an organisation that it is predictable involves no claims regarding how one came to that conclusion. It requires a rule-bound logic, but it does not specify how predictability is achieved. To say of an organisation that it is transparent, however, is to make epistemological claims about how the information was imparted. I argue that one reason for this is that transparency contains a disaggregating component. If we remove disaggregation as an epistemological criterium, as we did in identifying the second transparency, the difference between predictability and transparency largely evaporates.

Why is this important? The point is not to claim that predictability and transparency are always identical concepts. Nor is it to claim that predictability cannot be a better way of interpreting the messages in the Open Newsroom sessions.

However, to rein in the concept of transparency, we must see what transparency is and what it is not. The definition that I provided for predictability was “conveying information that allows people to accurately infer how we will act in the future”. Recalling the introduction to this thesis, this definition seems close to what journalistic transparency is intended to do: restoring trust in journalism.

Forcing transparency to require disaggregation that is in practice impossible to achieve closes off avenues of alternative ways of being transparent (in a broad sense), perpetuating its constant vacillation. To open up for these alternative ways does not require us to stretch the concept any further but merely to trace the outer edges of the existing concept, finding that a constructed concept of transparency is possible.

5.2.3. Conclusion

The research question that this part was designed to answer was: How is transparency performed in digital investigative journalism?

In this content analysis, I find that some messages in the Open Newsroom are instances of journalistic transparency, leading me to identify a second transparency that differs epistemologically from the Open Resources transparency. Further, I compare predictability and transparency as potential interpretations for Open Newsroom, finding that their difference dissolves by identifying the second transparency.

However, to say that transparency is performed through construction says little of its particular ways of being. My analysis shows that transparency can be transmitted through interpretations within its current concept of transparency. To investigative transparency empirically is to make those interpretations. That remains a key avenue for further research.

6. Discussion

In the concept analysis, I found that transparency contains an inner contradiction over its relation to mediation. This contradiction has led transparency to gain status as a “magic concept”, proposed as a solution to falling trust in journalism.

In the first part of the case study, I adapted a semiotic framework from Lev Manovich and applied to investigative journalism, finding that transparency is achieved by breaking down narratives into databases. I identified this transparency by its main characteristics as it seeks to achieve full transparency and detach from its context and performative aspects.

In the second part of the case study, I identified a second type of transparency that embraced curation, context and performativity.

The difference between these transparencies, I argue, stem from opposing epistemological views on mediation, in which one seeks to disaggregate interpretations while the other actively mediates. Following this, I will refer to them as *analytic* and *synthetic* transparency.

6.1. Analytic transparency

Analytic transparency refers to its disaggregating epistemology (analysing = pulling apart). By pulling narratives apart, it strives to return all interpretations to fundamental atoms of data. In the directed content analysis, this was shown by showing how journalistic investigations rest on facts that can be traced back to its origins in a ‘flat’ database.

Structuralism and data has been connected before by studying the rhetoric of natural language generation companies (Veel, 2018). The idea of natural language generation is to add meaning to data, echoing earlier structuralist theories of language. In its reverse direction, meaning is removed. This is the logic of analytic transparency: by shedding surplus meaning, it claims to uncover the lean core of the thing itself.

This disaggregating epistemological direction commits analytic transparency to an ontology. For analytic transparency, interpretations are made up of more fundamental structured atoms of facts that it strives to return to. At root, data is structured and commensurable. In the database, all data has the same shape thanks to the disaggregation of all imposed interpretations. However, this ontology is unstable as it can constantly be subject to the “transparency” criticism, disaggregating transparent data into ever smaller units.

6.2. Synthetic transparency

Breaking with the database logic, a different way of “making visible” is formed out of the insufficiencies of analytic transparency. Synthetic transparency refers to its constructing epistemology (synthesising = bringing together).

If analytic transparency views the world as consisting of stable entities, synthetic transparency is based on a world in flux. For synthetic transparency, there are no fundamental atoms of facts that we can return to. Instead, data only exists as theoretical constructions within larger frameworks of meaning. By engaging with data, it has already been defined. Rather than being captive of an eternal search for essence, synthetic transparency actively acknowledges its mediating and open-ended nature. If the aim of analytic transparency is to *denarrativise*, synthetic transparency seeks to *renarrativise*.

From an analytic perspective, synthetic transparency is partial transparency. It fails to uncover the object, remaining in the subjective world of interpretations.

From a synthetic perspective, analytic transparency is bound to use predetermined concepts that it has no capacity to change. As we are forced to use interpretations, we are better off taking an active role in mediation.

The content analysis showed that analytic transparency as an end-state is impossible. Even at its most disaggregated, transparency contains the seed of its own construction. It may be inferred, then, that synthetic reasoning is always a part of transparency through selection, performativity, etc. However, to say that all transparency therefore is synthetic transparency would not capture what I mean by the distinction. I have tried to isolate here what I take to be the source of tension, the view on mediation.

This difference between analytic and synthetic transparency is best brought out by thinking about transparency as a normative term. Confronted with a mediated narrative that we want to make transparent, what do we do? Denarrativise or renarrativise? For analytic transparency, more disaggregation is always better. For synthetic transparency, that is not the case. This difference means that, contrary to analytic transparency, the ontology of synthetic transparency is not a structured world of atoms of facts but of constructed interpretations with varying shapes.

Even within a framework of synthetic transparency, however, to embrace active mediation does not necessarily entail the view that all entities require an equal amount of active mediation. It seems fair to say that some entities seem more capable than others of carrying stable meanings within structured frameworks over time and place. I return to this question in chapter 6.4.

6.3. The value of the distinction

The distinction between analytic and synthetic transparency forces transparency to be open about its epistemological and ontological commitments. By drawing out these two specific ways of being transparent, the overall concept of transparency can become more general. Just as the normative call to understand something would prompt us to ask in what we ought to understand it, a more general concept of transparency would force us to specify how we should be transparent about something.

To show why I think this is important, I will now introduce three examples where I think that my distinction would provide a better understanding of transparency.

First, in 2007, Aktuellt, a Swedish flagship news programme at the public broadcaster SVT, started a project named Öppen redaktion ("Open newsroom") with the explicit purpose of promoting transparency (Hanell, 2019). A camera team received access to the newsroom with the material put together by two editors and published on SVT's website.

If transparency simply required visibility, a webcam in the corner of every room may have been the best option. However, as discussed, transparency must also be inferred. Using the framework of analytic transparency, we could say that it needs structuration.

To start with, this requires a delineation of the database of all potential decisions that were discarded in favour of the actual decision - the boundaries of the ontology. In this case, it was the editorial meetings, primarily the one in the morning (Hanell, 2019). Structuration also requires a judgement on what entity inside the database is related to the output. For example, it means distinguishing between the opinion of the intern and of the editor in chief to reflect their impact on the decision process.

Quickly, the transparency project ran into problems. The journalists preferred to discuss sensitive matters by the coffee machine, although they were discouraged to do so. Forced to discuss it at the meetings, the journalists “polished” the way they spoke (Hanell, 2019). Both the outer boundaries of the database - the place for the discussions - and the data within it - the nature of discussions - were affected by the presence of the camera.

After two years, the experiment was cancelled. While the idea was lauded as innovative, it had hardly provided a transparent look into the inner workings of the newsroom. Evaluating the project at the time, the editors argued that, for the sake of credibility, the open newsroom had to become less arranged (Hanell, 2019). It was their own mediating presence that stood in the way of transparency.

To recognise that transparency contains conflicting attitudes to mediation could help to evaluate in what way data should be presented. In the project, transparency is first invoked as a solution and then rejected as a failure as it cannot produce data that speaks for itself. Transparency is seen as necessarily containing disaggregation, meaning that it must not impose interpretations on the content. As it becomes difficult to portray a newsroom without interpretation, the transparency project is abandoned. To allow for transparency to be actively mediated, as in the case of synthetic transparency, could allow for less volatile use of transparency as its limits and possibilities become clearer.

Second, Chadha and Koliska (2014) have studied to what extent transparency practices have disseminated into American newsrooms. Referring to Goffman’s theory of impression management, they set out to explore whether transparency has allowed viewers to peer into the backrooms of journalistic news production.

They find that journalistic transparency mainly consists of easily implemented “quick fixes”, giving only an appearance of transparency. Newsrooms engage in “‘the optics of transparency,’ in which the line between the frontstage and backstage does not disappear but simply shifts.” (Chadha and Koliska, 2014, p. 15).

Impression management can be a useful way of describing a failure of transparency. However, in this case, it commits to an ontology of a true non-mediated essence waiting to be uncovered. In this view, it is not transparency that is the issue but journalists’ failure to implement it. Through impression management, the blame for opaqueness is again put on mediation, risking that we keep longing for that utopian promise of “immediate mediacy” (Alloa, 2018).

To say that, as Chadha and Koliska (2014) do, “[n]ews organizations thus seem unwilling to let audiences look too far into the hidden back regions” (ibid, p. 15) implies that it is only the secrecy of journalists that stand in the way of our understanding of journalistic news-production.

Yet there may be things that are not simply waiting to be uncovered but must be actively produced. By failing to realise this difference, news organisations may be *unable* to let audiences look into its hidden back regions. The analytic-synthetic distinction allows us to speak of the world as ontologically plural that require different epistemological strategies.

For Goffman (1956), impression management is not the obscuring of an essential reality with false facades but it is a condition of all social interaction. Similarly, we may view “the management of visibilites” (Flyverbom, 2016) as a fundamental condition of transparency.

In both these examples, transparency is taken as per the analytic epistemology to mean reducing mediation. However, as the concept analysis showed, it is only through mediation that transparency can be inferred. This traps analytic transparency in a loop, constantly searching for non-mediated meaning.

In some instances, this loop is less voracious as entities are not subject to calls for more transparency. The interpretation of a simple dataset may reasonably hold across individuals and time. In other instances, interpretation is contested, such as when the editorial values of a newsroom are to be conveyed. Here, synthetic transparency is an attempt to step out of the loop, changing the angle of attack by resisting its own impulse to disaggregate. Playing with the equivocation that has allowed for the rise of the concept, we may say that transparency is not always the most transparent option.

In my third example, Haappanen (2020) discusses live journalism, a new transparency project in Finland. By performing texts live on stage and including information about its production process, journalists allow the audience to gain a better understanding of how journalism works.

That live journalism is referred to as transparency shows that the concept stretches over different epistemological attitudes, as the concept analysis indicated. Live journalism is not disaggregated in any analytic sense. This makes it vulnerable to its own disaggregating drive that it is not transparent enough. From an analytic transparency perspective, there is always more to show. To achieve transparency by presenting texts on a stage would soon lead to questions of what to include and exclude.

Designating live journalism as an instance of synthetic transparency instead is to acknowledge mediation as a necessary rather than undesirable part of its way of being transparent. That can prepare it for the analytic transparency charge that more transparency always means less mediation.

Synthetic transparency projects such as live journalism would still have to defend its strategies of being transpraent, of course. To say that transparency is always mediated does not mean that all ways of mediating transparency are equally transparent.

However, if the call to disaggregate comes under the general flag of transparency, it is hard to counter. The analytic-synthetic distinction highlights the inner tension of transparency, making a call to provide analytic transparency an epistemologically specific position that signifies more than mere “unveiling”.

This cuts to the heart of what I have been trying to do in this thesis. I have argued that transparency has become a magic concept through its opposing epistemological directions concerning mediation. Splitting the concept in two strips it of its magic powers.

Without its capability to construct, (analytic) transparency is reduced to a disaggregating direction.
Without its will to disaggregate, (synthetic) transparency loses its appeal as non-mediated information.

Mediation is epistemologically costly. It requires credibility. It is precisely because it is hard to get people to accept your truth-claims that journalism has turned to transparency as a potential solution. As a magic concept, transparency has claimed to bypass mediation by promising data that could speak for itself. Splitting the concept in two brings the price of mediation in line with its real epistemological costs.

This is particularly important as journalistic transparency research is, I argue, approaching a junction. In the literature review, I showed that empirical data about the efficiency and possibilites of journalistic transparency is inconclusive. However, hopes for transparency remain high.

In an audience study, Karlsson (2020) finds that trust in transparency correlates with trust in journalism. The hope for transparency has been that self-evident transparency would restore trust in journalism. Instead, the study suggests that transparency faces the same epistemological challenges as journalism. Rather than being captive to a Sisyphean quest for non-mediated information, an analytic-synthetic distinction allows us to shift the focus to *how* we ought to mediate it.

6.4. Theoretical considerations

To answer that question, we must have a way of evaluating when analytic and synthetic transparency is applicable.

Analytic and synthetic transparency are two ways of approaching mediation. As we are faced with interpretations, disaggregation and construction represent opposing directions in our desire to make them transparent. There are multiple ways of seeing and our decision will have consequences for what things we see. What a discussion can help with, then, is not to conclusively choose one over the other, but to be better equipped at evaluating in which situations they are suitable.

Analytic transparency is well equipped to disseminate large amounts of information thanks to its highly structured form. It is able to produce wide-ranging transparency about commensurable entities. But as we saw in the case study, that framework is not always adequate.

We can remain agnostic for now as to whether this is because our concepts are imperfectly formed and the world wants to crawl out of its skin, because social or political interests are involved in a battle to redefine social reality, or any other reason. From a discussion of journalistic transparency, what is relevant is that whenever concepts are frequently contested, the softer touch of synthetic transparency may be better to contain it.

As I mentioned previously, these considerations are obviously not unique to transparency. Rather, they are long-debated issues in all kinds of knowledge-production. This is also the point. Treating transparency as a form of knowledge-production forces it to think of modes of disclosure.

Contestation is not the only criteria to have in mind when we choose between ways of being transparent. Investigative journalism is not just looking to be transparent about things in general. It is structured by particular goals and limits.

Han (2015) has written on what he critically calls the transparency society, arguing that it turns humans into products.

> *“The society of exhibition is a society of pornography. Everything has been turned outward, stripped, exposed, undressed, and put on show. The excess of display turns everything into a commodity; possessing “no secret,” it stands “doomed . . . to immediate devouring.*” (Han, 2015, p. 11)

In Han’s view, transparency is dehumanising. But Han is interested in a broader question of how we live in a society that is defined by transparency. Not all activities necessarily have humanising as their ultimate goal.

We can see that by exploring how investigative journalism covers other subjects than itself. An epistemological issue for investigative journalism is to decide what is worth bringing to light. As a tool, investigative journalists often engage in objectification of moral standards (Ettema and Glasser, 1998). Objectification turns vaguer ethical arguments into tangible definitions, making it easier to create solid criteria of newsworthiness.

In many cases, the law is the basis of such an objectification, with journalists being able to sidestep thorny moral issues. In my interviews with The Bureau Local, I asked about the reasoning for disclosing ethical standpoints of the outlet, referring to a recent investigation into homelessness.

> *"That was really an investigation of, essentially, the regulations on this, saying that housing benefits should cover the bottom 30 % of private actor rent across all areas. Is that true? And it turned out to be very much not true. That isn't saying homelessness is bad, it is just interrogating the stated aims of the government and providing the data for that."* (Interview with Shirish Kulkarni, 2020)

The objectification of moral standards is in line with analytic transparency. It requires a framework of indicators corresponding to whatever it is supposed to measure. Failing to comply with its own regulations serves as an indicator of dishonest behaviour, placing newsworthiness on firmer ground.
If transparency relies merely on objectified indicators, it could form its own hyperreality, "isolated from material standards or other organizational referents" (Christensen and Cheney, 2015, p. 85). In that case, the measuring indicator is no longer related to what it is supposed to measure.

In Nietzsche's metaphor, we are flies on a pane of glass, mistaking data for reality (Schneider, 2019). Yet can there be another view in which we mistake reality for data. That is to say, we search for ontological depth where there is none. In that case, the proxy no longer stands for something else but it becomes that which is to be measured. For example, we may say that for politicians in office, to follow the law is not indicative of honesty, it *is* honesty. What such an objectification allows is to carve out an ontologically stable part of reality as it only exists in virtue of our explicit definitions, making it possible to apply analytic transparency on a wider scale.

There seems to be instances of that in journalistic transparency. Take the example of funding. The Bureau for Investigative Journalism and many other non-profit organisations are transparent about its main sources of income (TBIJ, 2020b). However, the disclosed information is not inferrable in the same way as editorial statements are, for example. While editorial statements set out to accurately convey values and practices in the organisation, the whole point of information about an established journalistic outlet's stream of income is that it says nothing about its journalism. It does not aim to represent any particular behaviour and it therefore cannot misrepresent it. Transparency is achieved through the very act of disclosure.

Of course, the decision of refusing to look below objectified indicators could itself be questioned on grounds of transparency, restarting the infinite regress of transparency that it was intended to solve. Again, we see that full transparency must be grounded in a non-transparent guarantee of the system, or transparency will keep chasing its own shadow.

6.5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out to answer two research questions:

RQ1: *What are the epistemological commitments of transparency?*
RQ2: How is transparency performed in digital investigative journalism?

In the concept analysis, I found that transparency is plagued by an inner contradiction in its relation to mediation. Structured by the ontological roots of its literal meaning, transparency seeks to disaggregate to uncover the thing in itself outside of all interpretations. At the same time, transparency relies on interpretation to make information intelligible, giving rise to a paradoxical concept.

In the case study, I found that The Bureau Local performed transparency in two epistemologically and ontologically different ways. First, I found that it achieved transparency through disaggregation by providing the data underlying investigation. I termed this analytic transparency. Second, I found that it provided transparency that did not disaggregate but relied on interpretation by participating in chatroom sessions. I termed this synthetic transparency.

Alloa (2018) notes that a magic concept like transparency appears as fundamentally undialectical, “bereft of any negative outside” (p. 46). To split the concept in two is an attempt to create an outside on the inside - a dialectic - that allows transparency to sharpen its meaning against criticism. This, I believe, is particularly important in the case in investigative journalism. Fighting the battle against secrets, armed with rapidly increasing information-sharing capabilities, investigative journalists are tied to transparency as a normative ideal. What they may find is that transparency is difficult even in the absence of secrecy.

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