



## Open secrets

Rowland Curtis and Kenneth Weir

### Introduction

In the days preceding the final preparations of this *open issue*, something happened. On 3 April 2016, details concerning Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca and its client list were leaked via several journalists and global news services, centring on the firm's documented role in providing offshore incorporation and wealth management services to a number of high profile clients. Journalists at the *Washington Post*, *Fox News*, *The Guardian* and elsewhere, were quick to label this as a scandal, with *Washington Post* claiming it as 'the biggest global corruption scandal in history' (Drezner, 2016). Hyperbole aside, this development was intriguing, particularly as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) anticipated an imminent full release of the companies involved in the alleged tax evasion and money laundering schemes developed for clients. These events, and other stories like this, highlight the secrecy and opacity of corporate arrangements, as identified by the first of no doubt many organisational theorists to comment on the breaking story.<sup>1</sup>

The last issue of *ephemera* opened by posing questions regarding the corporate form and its regulation (Jansson et al., 2016). It includes a focus on how intersections between economic, political and legal practices and institutions have shaped the nature and purpose of the corporation. Through a study of these intersections, the issue explores how regulatory mechanisms and codes have shaped the specific ways in which corporations are publicly judged. With regard to questions of transparency and openness, such mechanisms have shaped

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Professor Carl Rhodes, available at: <http://www.2ser.com/component/k2/item/21540-the-panama-paper-trail>, last accessed 5th April 2016.

channels of public communication in ways that, while enabling claims as to the transparency of their operations, have also served to screen off public attention from some of the murkier realities of corporate life.

A multiplicity of power relations operate through organisational features such as agent-principal privilege and the production of an expert technical class (see Jansson *et al.*, 2016; Levina and Orlikowski, 2009). These combine to facilitate the production and disclosure of public information while important processes and their outcomes are placed backstage (Costas and Grey, 2014; Power, 2004). The partial disclosure of activities or information can provide the appearance of transparency in meeting particular legal obligations, while also conferring a privilege to organisations that limits further disclosure of information. Studies of corporate disclosure testify to this, as narratives of corporate impact on the environment are twisted into statements of self-congratulation, publicised largely in pursuit of economic benefit (e.g. Gray, 2006). Environmental impact disclosures thereby create a duality of transparency-secrecy, sustaining the primacy of commercial imperative while shielding organisational interests from further public scrutiny. Changes in legislation have also afforded additional protections to compliant organisations (Levina and Orlikowski, 2009), reinforcing a legal environment that continues to uphold significant degrees of organisational privacy (Costas and Grey, 2016).

Leak events, such as those of the files of Mossack Fonseca, are largely received as disruptions to the normal order of retention and disclosure of information, providing insights into the mundane operation of organisational secrecy. In a recent interview on the subject, however, Yanis Varoufakis, Economics Professor and former Greek Minister of Finance, was equivocal:

Well firstly I am exceptionally pleased that there are many of those who have enjoyed, not so much tax avoidance but tax immunity, who are having sleepless nights; this is a wonderful whiff of transparency. Even though it may be short-lived, it fills me with joy; but at the same time it fills me with worry, that we are focussing too much on a fake sense of surprise; the only thing that is surprising is that we get surprised by this.<sup>2</sup>

In these terms, the leak event is, on the one hand, something that might be celebrated by those concerned with tax justice; on the other, something which can sensitise us to a certain inertia and complicity with the mundane order of things. For Varoufakis, we might interpret, the sense of surprise is 'fake' to the extent that knowledge of offshore banking and tax avoidance mechanisms has

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2 Channel 4 News, 4<sup>th</sup> April 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZjqicN8Zug>, visited 12<sup>th</sup> May 2016.

been in the public domain for some time. We may be talking about corporate secrets, but in this sense we are talking about open secrets – known unknowns we might say, in Rumsfeldian terms – and thereby an operation in secrecy in which we might all, to some extent, be complicit. Activities of leaking and whistleblowing, furthermore, are also rarely innocent with regard to the play of political interests, and can just as easily serve the reproduction of privilege and inequality as help reduce it.

With regard to management and organisation studies, in our empirical research we regularly make appeals for ‘access’ to organisational sites and informational sources. Critical studies of organisation have often been in harmony with transparency campaigners in an implicit project to help make visible that which has previously been hidden or rendered obscure in organisational life (see Alvesson *et al.*, 2009 for a review). In these ways, scholars of organisation can be seen to have reinforced certain ideals regarding transparency and disclosure, but in so doing some may have neglected a sensitivity to the way in which secrecy and disclosure always work in a binary way: in both foregrounding and backgrounding, and in promoting always partial and provisional ways of seeing in organisational life (see Neyland, 2007; Law and Mol, 1998). We are thereby led to a reckoning with the tinge of injustice that attends our representational endeavours, as we reinforce what are always contingent accounts and perspectival truths. Full disclosure therefore as an ever retreating, mythical horizon.

### **The visible and invisible**

While drawing on a range of distinctive subject matter and contexts, such themes of openness, closure, and the intertwining of the visible and the invisible run through this ‘open’ issue. These can be seen perhaps most directly in the article ‘A vanishing act: The magical technologies of invisibility in care work’ by La Cour *et al.* (this issue). It explores how those providing home care service to elderly citizens in Denmark have adapted to the introduction in 2005 of a personal digital assistant (PDA) in the monitoring and managerial oversight of their work. While the goal of introducing the PDA was to increase the transparency of service provision at the point of care, in practice its introduction had the effect of enabling care workers to shape and bend what is recorded in official records, such as the time taken between particular jobs and locations. The article explores the complex interactions of levels of representation-and-reality in the interactions of government care workers with both patients and practices of official record keeping. While the PDA was introduced with the intention of rendering the movements of workers more transparent, the PDA instead often became a tool

for care workers to engineer degrees of autonomy and creativity in their working lives – degrees of autonomy seen by the workers as essential for achieving the high levels of patient care the PDAs were originally introduced to support.

The PDA meanwhile is viewed by the authors not as a neutral tool, but as something imbued with a ‘magic’ that lends legitimacy and primacy to its representations of organisational reality. This stems from their application of Bourdieu’s (1991) work on the concept of the *skeptron* – a technology bubbling with social and symbolic capital that delegates power to the speaker. For the authors, the state-sponsored use of the PDA ascribed it a measure of symbolic capital and legitimacy, and the PDA’s vision of the world increasingly ‘gained a monopoly on what counts as real’ in the workplace. Technology here is bound up with relations of power that are productive of authoritative accounts of organisational worlds, yet which also provide degrees of invisibility and autonomy to workers acting on the ground.

## **Openness and closure**

Where the La Cour et al. article offers some illuminating reflections on questions of visibility and invisibility, the articles by Maestriperi (this issue), Almqvist (this issue) and Rodin (this issue) can be seen to share related themes of openness and closure by reference to some very different contexts of organisational life. In the article ‘Professionalization at work: The case of Italian management consultants’, Lara Maestriperi draws upon the case of Arianna, a management consultant, to examine struggles for professional accreditation and identification among contemporary knowledge workers. For Maestriperi, management consultants face many contemporary challenges, brought about not only by changes in the nature and composition of the workforce but also by the weakening of professional organisations and affiliations. Such knowledge workers are thereby seen to oscillate between positions of informal recognition and social acknowledgement, but as generally lacking the visibility of a defined professional status – as explored here in the context of changes in Italian labour markets. The experiences of Arianna are thereby drawn upon to explore the challenges faced by knowledge workers in seeking to consolidate and legitimise their professional status. Instead of judging such phenomena according to what Maestriperi describes as more traditional Weberian accounts of professionalisation entailing worker strategies for professional closure, through the example of Arianna, contemporary questions of professionalisation are reposed according to combinations of reputational, performative and relational elements. Maestriperi thereby offers a reconception of professionalisation according to ideals of more fluid market principles and contingent networks.

Where Maestriperi explores themes of openness and closure through the increasingly mobile and contested nature of professionalisation in Italian business services, Martin Fredriksson Almqvist (this issue) explores similar themes through reflections on the Pirate Party phenomenon as a set of organised interventions into the politics of openness and closure in the digital domain. As explained by Almqvist in the article ‘Pirate politics between protest movement and the parliament’, the Pirate Party is a global network of political parties concerned to challenge parliamentary actions perceived by activists as impinging upon the freedom of information in the digital age. Reviewing developments in social and digital protest movements, Almqvist begins by questioning how a decentred movement came to take more conventional party-political forms. Building upon work by Ulrich Beck (1997) and Maria Bakardijeva (2009), this is theorised in the article as sitting in tension with the parties’ earlier ‘sub-political’ or ‘sub-activist’ lines of association. Through interviews with members of Pirate Parties located in Sweden, Germany and the US, Almqvist provides an analysis of how activists have come to terms with the Pirate Party as a parliamentary political formation. With regard to themes of openness and closure, Almqvist’s paper explores the divide that emerged between those seeking to further the aims of the political movement through the political party, and those who sought to do so through supposedly more disruptive ‘sub-political’ associations. By situating the Swedish example in the context of experiences from Pirate Parties further afield, Almqvist is able to explore the tensions and harmonies between these different political strategies and the different openings and closures that they have entailed for those involved.

In the article “‘Developmental talk’ as confession: The role of trade unions in workplace governance’, Lika Rodin (this issue) also offers an example from the Swedish context, but rather than looking at party political activism, she instead focuses on trade unions and their changing roles in the contemporary workplace. While Swedish trade unions have been adjusting to a period of economic deregulation, Rodin examines the role of trade unions as a force of change in opening up workplace subjectivities to new managerial styles and the promotion of an enterprise ethos. In the Swedish context, trade unions have traditionally been associated with a social democratic outlook that promoted notions of solidarity between employer and employee in workplace relations. As documented in Rodin’s account, Swedish trade unions have been at the centre of such changes, shifting away from social democratic norms towards more direct modes of managerial intervention. Such trade unions, for Rodin, are increasingly informed by neoliberal ideals of a market-oriented individualisation, inhabiting a space through which neoliberal logic and ideology is promulgated into contemporary Swedish working life.

The focus Rodin takes to explore such transformations is with regard to performance appraisal interviews known as ‘developmental talks’, but which are conducted by trade union representatives rather than line managers. Rodin offers an analysis of a developmental talk training video through a Foucaultian framework: workers’ participation in such confessional practices are seen to involve a project of self-transformation, as part of projects to adapt workers to the entrepreneurial demands of the neoliberal workplace. The article thereby draws attention to the role of trade unions in the workplace in the embedding of new forms of marketised subjectivity. With regard to the themes of openness and closure running through this issue, by contrast to the supposed openness of these developmental discussions, they can also be seen to entail particular closures in workplace subjectivity. Through a discourse analytic approach meanwhile, Rodin is also keen to explore the potential openings that such discursive practices may also afford as the basis for new forms of resistance to the competitive individualism of enterprise culture.

### **Circuits of imitation and distinction**

Having traced themes of openness and closure, visibility and invisibility running through these diverse articles, two further contributions extend these earlier themes with regard to the operation of a certain duplicity or presentational sleight of hand in management knowledge. Simon Lilley and Martin Parker (this issue), in their article ‘Management knowledge in the mirror: Scholarship, fashion and Simmel’, offer commentary on the study of management fashion in the field – in particular the work of Timothy Clark and colleagues (e.g. Clark, 2004; Clark and Greatbatch, 2004). In noting the largely ceremonial referencing of writers on fashion from beyond the field – such as Simmel, Veblen and Tarde – they offer their own engagements with these authors to develop an understanding of fashion and the fashionable as intrinsic to the workings of sociological phenomena rather than as superficial distraction. Through this perspective, they explore how certain authors writing on management fashion in the field have taken (fashionable) interest in fashions in management knowledge, while also displaying certain anxieties concerning the drawing of lines between the authentic and inauthentic in management knowledge.

The authors’ review of literature on fashion in the field thereby becomes an opportunity for a set of reflections on the nature of academic fashions, and a reckoning with the inevitability of our own embeddedness in ‘circuits of imitation and distinction’. With regard to themes of openness and closure, visibility and invisibility, we might say that certain commentaries on management fashion have required the careful ‘dressing up’ of their arguments

in concealing the central ironies at play in the pursuit of unblemished objectivity or utility. Lines drawn between the substantive and the merely fashionable may therefore be harder to sustain than some in the field may have liked to suggest. As the authors put it, once fashion is admitted, we all need to look in the mirror more attentively.

It is this very irony of management knowledge that is also manifested in the note by Nick Butler (this issue), offering a reflection on Alvesson and Spicer's (2012) introduction of the term 'functional stupidity' into the lexicon of management scholarship. Butler delivers a critique of the authors' contribution, set in the context of debates on the 'impact' of management research beyond the business school. In considering the broader reception of Alvesson and Spicer's article, Butler suggests a divide in purpose in the article. Whilst produced for both academic and practical audiences, for Butler ambiguities and inconsistencies in Alvesson and Spicer's notion of 'functional stupidity' suggest tensions between scholarly rigour and popular reception that prompt further reflection on the 'impact' and value of academic knowledge.

To place this alongside Lilley and Parker's reflections on fashions in management scholarship, both articles seek to engage particular academic literatures as an occasion for wider reflection on the nature of our scholarly practice. Where Lilley and Parker provoke a reckoning with the inseparability of our practice from phenomena of imitation and differentiation, Butler's note questions the stakes of a striving for fashionability, both within and beyond the business school. It is in rendering visible these tensions and contradictions that the two contributions resonate with themes running through the wider open issue, with regard not only to the openness and closure of academic debate, but also to what might be both backgrounded and foregrounded in our engagements in organisational life.

## Book reviews

The four book reviews that complete this open issue offer evaluations of recently published treatises on organisational scholarship and contemporary capitalism. In brief, Frost's review of Jessica Whyte's *Catastrophe and redemption: The political thought of Giorgio Agamben*, considers the redemptive element of Agamben's work, covering his work on biopolitics, human rights and contemporary commodity culture. Mary Phillips next considers the power and poetry of poetic writing in Pitsis' *The poetic organization*. Ann-Christina Lange reviews Max Haiven's analysis of financialisation presented in *Cultures of financialization*, praising Haiven's contribution to contemporary theorising on both finance

capitalism and financialisation. Complementing this is Roscoe's examination of Martijn Koning's *The emotional logic of capitalism*, which details how financial capitalism, in spite of recent economic failures, continues to maintain an affective hold.

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### **the editors**

Rowland Curtis is a member of the editorial collective of *ephemera*.

Email: r.curtis@qmul.ac.uk

Kenneth Weir is a member of the editorial collective of *ephemera*.

Email: khw11@le.ac.uk