

Barbara Czarniawska
GRI, School of Business,
Economics and Law at the
University of Gothenburg
barbara.czarniawska@gri.gu.se

Abstract

Several municipal administrations in Sweden have been recently accused of corruption, bribes and other irregularities in their dealings. This paper summarizes the results of a study of one such occurrence in the city of Gothenburg. A brief description of the events is followed by the excerpts from the analysis conducted in the study, and the results are then set in an international context. The paper ends with some suggestions of measures that may minimize possibility of such negative actions.

Keywords:
Corruption
Availability cascade
Risk management
Societal trust
Transparency

Introduction

This text does not follow the format of a standard research paper. It is an essay that grew from reflections accrued during a close encounter with administrative practice, which were then connected to the literature on the topic. This ‘close encounter’ consisted in my recent assignment as a participant in an independent investigation commission, whose three members – a political scientist, a law scholar, and a management scholar (me) – were given the task of scrutinizing the activities of Gothenburg City Council, City Government, city administration, and municipal companies, in light of the 2010 ‘corruption scandal’ in the city. Although the reflections are mine and personal, the view expressed by me is not unique in the literature (for an anthropological views on the matter, see e.g. Herzfeld, 1993). The readers need not agree with my views, but, hopefully, this paper may initiate a wider discussion on the complex matter of corruption and other wicked organizational practices. It also leads to a formulation of hypotheses that may be tested in further studies.

Corruption scandal in Gothenburg

In April 2010, the national Swedish TV program *Scrutiny Is Our Task* revealed several irregularities in municipal dealings in the city of Gothenburg. Most of those irregularities occurred between 2003 and 2009, and had been reported to the police, court, or central authorities by the municipality at the time of their discovery; but they were discussed publicly only after having been described on TV. Our commission was established to determine if anything specific to the functioning of Gothenburg’s City Council and City Government could be seen as permitting or even encouraging bribes and similar irregularities.

Our commission began its work in March 2012, and we divided the tasks according to specialties. I examined the city audits for 2001–2011 and went through minutes from the meetings of involved municipal companies, City

Scandinavian Journal of
Public Administration
19(3): 3-19
© Barbara Czarniawska and
School of Public Administra-
tion 2015
ISSN: 2001-7405
e-ISSN: 2001-7413

***Barbara Czarniawska** is Torsten&Ragnar Söderberg Professor of Management Studies at GRI, School of Business, Economics and Law at University of Gothenburg, Sweden. She takes a feminist and processual perspective on organizing, recently exploring connections between popular culture and practice of management, and robotization of work processes. She is interested in techniques of fieldwork and in the application of narratology to organization studies. Recent books in English: *Cyberfactories* (2012), *Coping with Excess* (ed. with Orvar Löfgren, 2013) and *Social Science Research From Field to Desk* (2014).

Council, and City Government, the documents open to the public in Sweden. Additionally, I followed media coverage of the developments, focusing on the local daily, *GöteborgsPosten (GP)*, on the assumption that it both reflects (via the many interviews the journalists had conducted) and shapes the public discourse¹. Our work ended on 13 June 2013, when we presented our report (Amnå et al., 2013).

Although we were of roughly the same opinion concerning the answer to the main question posed to us, I have noticed that we differed on some of the measures taken to prevent future municipal corruption. My opinions deviated somewhat from those of my colleagues, and, it needs to be added, from the common opinion on the matter, including those of municipal councilors, officers, and the media. I see it as a cultural encounter, a position I explain at length in this paper.

Selected results

Cases of corruption

In our report, we described the legal details of the cases of alleged corruption that ended up in the court. Here are five of the seven, chosen as illustrative of the irregularities that occurred:

- A technical manager at the Municipal Housing Company, received 23.8 tons of bricks from a Danish company in 2003, and paid only for their transportation (the company did not win the public tender in the municipality).
- An official in Sports and Associations Administration was accused of accepting bribes between 16 May and 17 June 2007. Bribes, with a combined value of SEK 11,310, consisted of an eye examination and a pair of eye glasses (SEK 8,470); two tickets to the musical, *Mamma Mia*, at the Scandinavium Arena, SEK 650 each; and two dinner packages, SEK 770.
- During the same period in 2007, another official in Sports and Association Administration was accused of accepting two VIP packages for *Mamma Mia*, valued at SEK 2,495 each.
- A rental official in Municipal Housing Company was accused of accepting a Jacuzzi bathtub worth SEK 40,000 in June 2008 from a shop owner, and between March and September of the same year accepted from the same shop owner a container of lamps worth SEK 3,550, a door window valued at SEK 435, and an robotic vacuum cleaner worth at least SEK 900, without paying for any of it.

- One of the officials in the Sports and Associations Administration was accused of accepting, between August and October 2009, the transportation of a piano, SEK 4,775; cleaning and window cleaning, SEK 5,662; and delivery and installation of a heat pump, SEK 19,990.

These local misdemeanors were relatively typical. Coincidentally enough, at the time they were happening, our colleagues in the Department of Political Sciences received a huge grant to study corruption and measures taken against it, from a global perspective. That grant was the basis for construction of the Quality of Government Institute, which regularly delivers a series of noteworthy reports (see e.g. Rothstein, 2011). The Institute did not study corruption in our municipality, not least because the sums of bribes or value of services rendered were minuscule compared to those studied in other countries. One of the program leaders, political scientist Bo Rothstein, suggested in a local newspaper interview that the disproportionately strong reaction against revealed irregularities has a strong connection to the level of taxes: the higher the taxes that people pay, the more upset they are by learning that their money ended up in private pockets of dishonest officials or politicians. Rothstein's thesis is a convincing one. Indeed, the reactions were extremely strong, as I show in the next section.

Delectatio morosa

Delectatio morosa is a cousin of *Schadenfreude*, but it is joy, not over the misfortunes of someone else, but over one's own misfortunes to which the term refers. In that it also differs from self-pity, because it is joy rather than pity: 'Look how awful it is for us! Can your misery compete with our misery?'

We introduced this notion in our report because we could trace this paradoxical attitude both in the media and in our interviews with the politicians and officials. The general public knows it from such bestsellers as Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy ('Did you think Sweden is boring? To the contrary!'), but it was already present in the detective stories of Henning Mankell, and it spread to other Scandinavian countries with the help of such bestselling authors as Norway's Jo Nesbø and Denmark's Jussi Adler-Olsen. It is probably closely related to the assumption made by the media: if things work as they should, the stories are boring, and happy stories are of less interest than unhappy ones (Edelman, 1988; Luhmann, 2000²).

The journalists on the TV series, *Scrutiny Is Our Task*, opened a discussion period immediately following their program, 'The bribery scandal in Gothenburg', which aired on 28 April 2010. Journalist JJ:

'I think most frightening is the way they act. I think actually that these are gangster methods. (...)³

JJ continued in the same style in the local newspaper, *GP*, 17 May 2010: 'Worse than North Korea, said JJ about Gothenburg's incapacity to satisfy journalists'

curiosity when he discussed bribes, power and media with [Gothenburg's Mayor].’ And here are some headlines from *GP*:

Two suspected of bribes – so far (*GP* 7 July 2010)

Imbroglia accelerates all the time (*GP* 9 September 2010)

The Municipality of Gothenburg paved for bribes (*GP* 13 September 2010)

GP's journalists were not the only ones touched by *delectatio morosa*. A reader sent a letter to *GP* on 8 October 2010: ‘Thank you [followed by a list of city units involved in the scandal] (and this list can be much longer), for showing that it is not only criminals who frighten people into silence. (...) We do not need any Mafia – we have our politicians and officials!’ The *Southern Sweden Newspaper* speculated on 17 October 2010: ‘It could be Sweden's biggest bribe imbroglia’. Is it too much to read a touch of disappointment in the tone? Gothenburg lost to Malmö in competition for the title ‘Chicago of the North’⁴; so perhaps it can enter the contest again with bribes as the basis for the honor?

Scrutiny Is Our Task again opened a discussion period on 29 October 2010, this time with the decisive title ‘The corrupted city’. *GP* cited some of the entries the next day:

Prosecutor: ‘Cheating is a much bigger issue than we believed.’ (...) We believed that there is no corruption in Sweden, but we were clearly blind. We did not see the phenomenon – until now.

She was to be frightened into silence. [an external consultant, a whistle-blower, who registered her conversation with the Managing Director of one of the involved units].

And later:

GP 16 November 2010

Bribe imbroglia grows again (...)

Almost twenty people are now under suspicion, but their number will increase, says [the prosecutor].

Is it fear or hope that can be read into this? This tone was common in the media:

TV, SVT RAPPORT 26 May 2011: Corruption common in Sweden. (...) Every fifth company boss in Sweden can consider paying a bribe to win advantage in business or to keep clients. (...) Additionally, every fourth Swedish company boss believes that corruption is common in Sweden, in spite of the fact that we are usually described as one of the least corrupted countries in the world. (...)

GP 4 October 201: Turn over every stone. (...)

With time, it has become obvious that we are not dealing here with a few citizens who acted incorrectly, tried to cheat the municipality, or ignored existing rules and regulations. To the contrary, there are distinct signals that the City of Gothenburg has been permeated by a culture based on friendship corruption, unclear division of responsibility, and under-the-table deals.

GP 11 February 2012: This is how Bribecity was created (...)

GP 12 February 2012: Only another name for corruption

In this feudal democracy, corruption has become a norm, called networking.

So, how corrupt was the city? There were seven legal actions, almost half of which was quashed by the first instance and half of which were confirmed by the second instance. Some sentences have yet to be handed down.

Availability cascade

Why, then, this *delectatio morosa*, and what consequences can it have? Daniel Kahneman described a common phenomenon that he called ‘availability cascade’. He and other researchers investigated what people do when they are asked to estimate the frequency of events in a certain category (for example, ‘bribes in the City of Gothenburg’). They discovered that: ‘instances of the class will be retrieved from memory, and if the retrieval is easy and fluent, the category will be judged to be large’ (2011: 129).

What instances are easiest to remember? The most dramatic ones, of course. And as a result:

...[a]n availability cascade is a self-sustaining chain of events, which may start from media reports of a relatively minor event and lead up to public panic and large-scale government action.

The cycle is sometimes sped along deliberately by ‘availability entrepreneurs,’ individuals or organizations who work to ensure a continuous flow of worrying news. The danger is increasingly exaggerated as the media compete for attention-grabbing headlines. Scientists and others who try to dampen the increasing fear and revulsion attract little attention, most of it hostile: anyone who claims that the danger is overstated is suspected of association with a ‘heinous cover-up’. (Kahneman, 2011:141–142).

But not all voices joined in. Here is an example of a well-balanced commentary from 2 September 2011 (*GP*):

Continue to turn over the stones⁵.

It is important that citizens not believe that there is silent acceptance for cheating and bribes, that system errors were not corrected, and that not enough has been done to find the guilty ones. (...)

It is difficult to believe, however, that Gothenburg is more corrupt than other Swedish cities. It is most likely that certain industries are more open to cheating and wangling than others are, and that dishonest people use their positions for their own gain. (...)

But it is wise not to believe that everything will be solved with a 'zero tolerance' action program and rules. Were it so, we would have long ago ridged society of crime. Dishonest people will always try to exploit the system, but the municipality's task is to make it difficult for them to do so – and to reestablish trust in the municipal organizations.

After all, in spite of this general upset, it is important to see that the absolute majority of city employees are honest. And, in the pursuit of the right way to act, we must avoid the creation of an informer culture, full of fear, in which the control apparatus is more important than trust and shared responsibility.

I could not agree more, but this view was not widely shared. Naturally, an extensive action program has been designed.

Some countermeasures

Clean Construction

Some of the measures taken were relatively commonsensical, and, if introduced properly, were certainly to the point. For example, the 'Clean Construction' program:

Clean Construction is a cooperative project aimed at supporting healthy competition and countering any criminal behavior wherever the city is building apartments, public premises, and other buildings for the citizens of Gothenburg.

Clean Construction will favor serious construction companies that employ legal workers, who work at safe construction sites with a good workplace climate. To ensure this, a Clean Construction project will be dedicated to developing a set of common routines and rules that will be obligatory for all contractors who work for or within the city. (From the City's webpage).

Similarly, the City Office has been working to develop a set of clear instructions defining what is considered to be a bribe or other encouragement to illegal behavior, and what should be the desirable reactions to it. In our Recommendations section we emphasized, however, that such documents must be few and well known to everybody. In the study we counted something like 120 similar regulative documents.

Consolidated Heat Map

Accusations of corruption intensified the City of Gothenburg's contacts with various audit companies, which offered their products, including the fashionable Consolidated Heat Map (see Figure). The Consolidated Heat Map is a graphic way of representing the results of the analysis of *operational risk*, introduced by the EU committee Basel II as obligatory for all European Union banks (Czar-niawska, 2012), but which was imitated by the public sector as well. This is how Basel II defined 'operational risk':

External Fraud – theft of information, hacking damage, third-party theft, and forgery;

Employment Practices and Workplace Safety – discrimination, workers compensation, employee health and safety;

Clients, Products, & Business Practice – market manipulation, anti-trust, improper trade, product defects, fiduciary breaches, account churning;

Damage to Physical Assets – natural disasters, terrorism, vandalism;

Business Disruption & Systems Failures – utility disruptions, software failures, hardware failures;

Execution, Delivery, & Process Management – data entry errors, accounting errors, failed mandatory reporting, negligent loss of client assets;

Internal Fraud – misappropriation of assets, tax evasion, intentional mismarking of positions, bribery.

The evaluators assess the probability of such events, then draw risky activities on the Consolidated Heat Map in red, safe activities in green, and those somewhere between safe and risky in yellow.

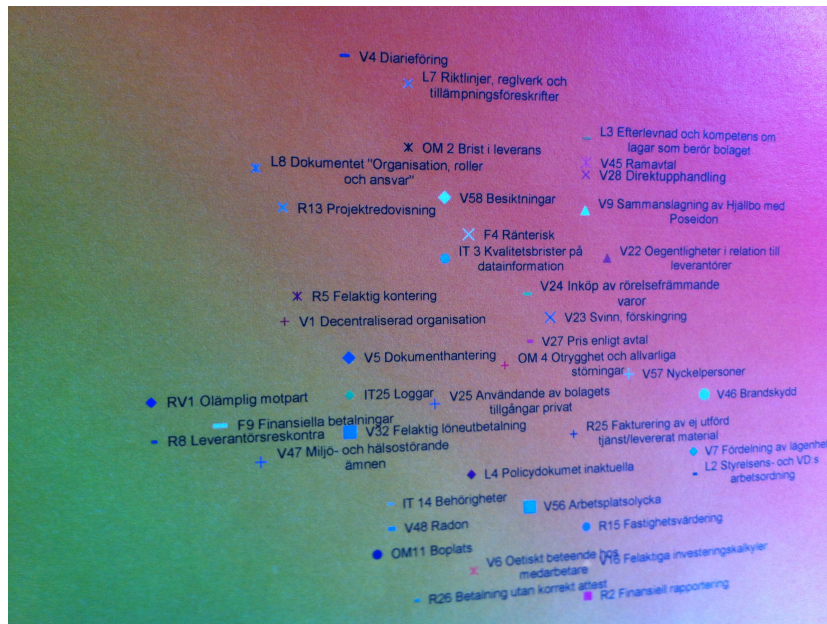


Figure: Consolidated Heat Map

In his *Risk Management of Everything* (2004), Michael Power concluded that risk management is an attempt to manage the unmanageable:

On the one hand there is a functional and political need to maintain myths of control and manageability, because this is what various interested constituencies and stakeholders seem to demand. Risks must be made auditable and governable.

On the other hand, there is a consistent stream of failures, scandals and disasters which challenge and threaten organisations, suggesting a world which is out of control and where failure may be endemic, and in which the organisational interdependencies are so intricate that no single locus of control has a grasp of them. (2004: 10)

Of course it is possible to calculate market risks or credit risks, but operational risk, in the wide definition quoted here, brings Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of Snark* to mind (Czarniawska, 2012). Yet many popular social science texts such as Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society* (1992) propagate the idea that it is exactly now, in contemporary society, that risks have become huge and must therefore be managed (with the tacit assumption that they *can* be managed).

Critical voices in UK suggested that various measures undertaken by the government with the purpose of risk management amount to 'organised paranoia' (Power, 2004: 19). Power himself thought that risk management would

soon become the central mechanism of internal control. Yet even if the techniques used in the evaluation of operational risks seem to be relatively arbitrary, it is not impossible that such a joint estimate can be quite correct. The only problem lies in the fact that by definition they cannot foresee events with *high impact and low probability*, such as the case of Nick Leeson, who caused the collapse of Barings Bank through fraudulent trading – or precisely the bribes in Gothenburg. Still, a map with red, yellow, and green markings can have a tranquilizing effect. Power called such measures ‘control myths’, but these are rather contemporary control rituals.

Whistle-blowing

One of the first measures introduced by Gothenburg City was to open a whistle-blower unit at a law office independent of the city administration. The main justification for this move was that ‘it is very popular in the private sector’. There is no need to repeat the well known history from the 1980s of public administration turning to the private sector as its role model (see e.g. Czarniawska, 1997). Private sector imitation continues. My surprise was that nobody criticized the proposal from the point of view of damaging societal trust, the fundament of a well functioning society, to quote Piotr Sztompka (2007).

In conversations with my colleagues and in listening to the media, I concluded that my deviant perception was due to my Polish origins. This is not a statement concerning ethnicity or ‘mentality’: I am referring there to a concept of *collective memory*, a concept launched by Maurice Halbwachs (1950) and more recently developed by Connerton (1989) and Ricoeur (2004). People ‘remember’ things they never experienced, and remember experiences in the way they have been collectively elaborated.

People in Sweden did not experience centuries of enemy occupation. To most Swedish citizens, the informer society remains a topic of fiction, such as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. People in Poland, however, during two centuries of foreign occupation, two 20th century wars, and life under a pseudo-Communist regime until 1989, learned all shades of this phenomenon. My 85 years old brother has just written his memoirs from the World War Two in Vilnius (then the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth). He described the arrest of our father in 1941. The Soviet People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) opened a ‘complaint office’ in Vilnius, where each complaint was rewarded with five rubles – a significant sum of money at the time. Old quarrels and animosities surfaced. In the case of our father, a neighbor likely ‘complained’ about his anti-Soviet political activities before the war.

Conversations with my Swedish colleagues and friends revealed another difference in perceptions. For them, an action against the law was, by definition, immoral; for me, obedience or opposition to the law was a moral *decision*. Here, a generational difference is relevant: my youth was spent under the shadow of the Nüremberg trial. As Hanna Arendt so convincingly demonstrated (Arendt, 1968), many of the accused Germans could not understand their guilt, as, in their perception, they only followed the laws and the orders of legitimate superiors.

These observations led me to formulate two hypotheses, which may provide yet another explanation for the phenomenon of corruption.

The hypotheses are not competing, but complementary; if confirmed, they may help to explain differing patterns of corruption in various countries. (It needs to be added, however, that they are limited to those European countries where the cultural differences are not too large for sensible comparisons).

Hypothesis 1: Fear of an informer society opens the door to corruption.

This hypothesis can be corroborated by the fact (which needs to become more systematically confirmed) that countries in Europe that presently suffer from corruption are exactly those that were well acquainted with the phenomenon of informing during World War II: the countries from the ex-socialist bloc, but also Italy. Indeed, the word ‘informing’ in Polish is the English equivalent of ‘whistle-blowing’.

Hypothesis 2: Fear of corruption opens the door to an informer society.

The oldest historical example of this hypothesis is the Spanish Inquisition. Its goal was to prevent the Church and the faithful from spiritual corruption. The Soviet and German ‘complaint offices’ were quoting the same goal to explain their activities. After all, the commonplace use of the term ‘corruption’ equates it with dishonest or fraudulent conduct by those in power; in philosophical, theological, or moral discussions, corruption is spiritual or moral impurity or deviation from an ideal.

Not only my colleagues, but also the politicians and officials of Gothenburg City who answered our survey did not agree with me. They thought that the whistle-blowing function was an excellent idea; however, only 43 per cent of those who received the survey responded, so the opinions of 57 per cent of 39,800 people remain unknown.

To me, individual whistle-blowing is an heroic deed; as an institutionalized practice, however, it is the first step toward an informer society. Notably, one of the main (and heroic) whistle-blowers in this case, the consultant who recorded an intimidating conversation, agreed with me, though she did not mention the danger of an informer society. She simply said (*GP* 2013-06-18) that:

As far as I am concerned, the municipality can close down the ‘whistle-blower’ function. It is completely nonsensical. It is unnecessary in a healthy organization. If the organization is unhealthy, however, such a function is only for show. A useless waste of taxpayers' money. Instead, listen to and respect those who problematize what is taken for granted, so that nobody will be afraid to whistle when they feel like it.

In general, it can be said that most people – the politicians, the officials, the journalists, and the researchers – were in favor of greater transparency. I now set this tendency in a wider context – in both time and space.

Transparency and its history

Over the last couple of months, whenever I've switched on the radio for my morning coffee, I've heard serious, generally hushed voices talking about the fundamental need for complete transparency if we are to enjoy a properly functioning economy and the rule of law. Or else about total transparency in government affairs. Or about the need for transparency in all administrative decisions. (Bieńczyk, 2005/2010: 13)

Polish author Marek Bieńczyk freely admits his obsession with transparency, and his book under that title traces the history of transparency in philosophy, art, architecture, literature, politics, and administration, of which only the first and the last two are of relevance here. Writing about the origins of the concept, he said:

The word *transparence* reportedly first appeared in its public sense in 1361, in a text by Nicole Oresme, a theoretician of finance; it was then used primarily in the language of mercantile law. Later, it mostly drifted in the depths of poetry. Over the last quarter century, however, it has come back to us in the titles of books (...), finding use in meditations upon how society functions in its new media – virtual spaces.

But as an ethical principle for the workings of governments and other institutions, transparency has only recently acquired an explicit right to exist. (Bieńczyk, 2005/2010: 79–80)

Bieńczyk mentioned the role of Gorbachev's policy of transparency (*glasnost*) in this resurgence. But it was Jean-Jacques Rousseau who gave it its modern meaning, though alluding to the Aristotelian notion of *diaphanes*. In Rousseau's version, however, the word has a psychological meaning: of the true self being visible to everybody. Rousseau's social and political theory was built on the dichotomy of transparency and obscurity, however, which was then passed first to the Romantics, and later to Enlightenment (*Lumières*, *Aufklärung*, *upplyssning*, *Oświecenie* – in all languages, it is a promise to see with more light).

But the last decades of the 18th and the first decades of the 19th century brought the first opposition to this idea of transparency; mesmerism, hypnosis, and later psychoanalysis denied the possibility of a direct gaze into the true self. It was deeply hidden from its owners and observers alike, and demanded extraordinary techniques that removed only a few layers of opacity.

The non-transparency of existence is today a philosophical and psychological dogma. (...) But transparency was never completely suppressed (...) As a category of social and political discourse and an ethical postulate within the workings of institutions both political and economic, it appeared a quarter of century ago and still seems to be spreading, becoming today one of the basic imperatives of social life (Bieńczyk, 2005/2010: 72–73).

In Bieńczyk's opinion, France is the world leader in the use of the word. Poland, like Sweden, adopted the Latin expression, not trusting their local equivalents (*przejrzystość* and *genomsynlighet*, respectively). And its meaning now differs not only from that of Rousseau's, but even from that employed in 1988 by Milan Kundera, who claimed that the politics of transparency led to the invasive Communist state and its violent precursors, the French revolutionaries. Kundera defined transparency in *The Art of the Novel*:

TRANSPARENCY: A very common term in political and journalistic discourse in Europe. It means: the exposure of individual lives to public view (...) Axiom: the more opaque the affairs of State, the more transparent an individual's affairs must be; though it represents a public thing, bureaucracy is anonymous, secret, coded, inscrutable, whereas private man is obliged to reveal his health, his finances, his family situation, and if the mass media so decree, he will never again have a single moment of privacy either in love or in sickness or in death. The urge to violate another's privacy is an age-old form of aggressivity that in our day is institutionalized (bureaucracy with its documents, the press with its reporters), justified morally (the right to know having become first among the rights of man). (Kundera, 1988: 150)

Since then, Bieńczyk suggested, the notion has been widened, and has acquired an additional, institutional-bureaucratic dimension. The individuals are under constant supervision, but politics and bureaucracy can be seen, too:

It may seem that, considering the number of institutional scandals that have been made public, societies have discovered the virtue of transparency, a revolutionary virtue: we will investigate, we will be vigilant, we will expose everything, from this day forward nothing will escape our attention, no government will be able to exercise its power in secret (...) Transparency is demanded by the market, public opinion, the media, and even individual consumers, who want to know how the products they purchase were manufactured ... (Bieńczyk, 2005/2010: 79, 83)

Not denying his own – and great many artists' and architects' – obsession with transparency, Bieńczyk did not mince words when it comes to this latest version of the notion:

... transparency is the new opium being distributed to the people, the great civilized substitute for the feeling of having even a modicum of power.(...) At least we'll have that; inequalities won't go away, nor will poverty or unemployment, social welfare systems will remain imperfect, the financial system far from ideal, excise taxes way too high, gas too expensive, but all decisions (even the worst of them) will be made 'in complete transparency,' *en toute transparence*. (...)

In the social sphere there is no transparency as such; [it is] dependent on the discourse that dominates at a given moment, on current needs. And this transparency by and large only sets the usual political game in motion, propped up by the manipulation of words. In political and social life, the catchword 'transparency' is invariably accompanied by the concurrent production of new obscurities, of new shadow-zones. (Bieńczyk, 2005/2010: 95, 99)

Are Kundera and Bieńczyk so critical of the notion of transparency because of their experience of totalitarian states? Perhaps. But then one should be learning from that experience, rather than ignoring it. One thing is certain: Language is never transparent.

Transparency in Sweden

In 2006, Charlotta Levay and Caroline Waks edited a volume entitled *The Pursuit of Transparency (Strävan efter transparens)*, which describes transparency measures undertaken in the Swedish health sector. The editors and contributors did not know Bieńczyk's book, which existed only in Polish at the time, but the historical inserts to the volume, though never commented upon, allude to the same origins that he described in his book (Rousseau and 'crystal houses', for example). Additionally, although the examples from practice concern the health sector, all the contributors emphasized the fact that, specificity of the sector aside, the phenomenon they studied was observable in the whole of the Swedish public sector.

Writing in Levay and Waks' volume, Kerstin Sahlin-Andersson noticed the paradox that transparency shares with many other fashionable terms: It is opaque, and open to a great many interpretations. The pursuit of transparency primarily takes three forms in Sweden: rules, accounting, and audit. These instruments do not show the world as it is, however; they all create a specific image of the world. In other words, transparency must be constructed, mediated, and edited. How this happens was the purpose of the studies reported in the Levay and Waks' volume.

As to the reasons for the pursuit of transparency, apart from the obvious but rarely mentioned imperative to follow global fashions, three are usually quoted. Transparency facilitates individual choices (a central concept in the marketized public sector); it helps to increase efficiency and the quality of products; and it prevents corruption. Obviously, this last is the most relevant issue in the present context.

Sahlin-Andersson ended by quoting Power's (1997) claim that increased audit initiates a vicious circle of mistrust, and concluded with words close to those of Bieńczyk: Transparency's instruments – regulation, accounting, and audit – make certain things and aspects visible, while hiding others.

Anders Forssell and Anders Ivarsson Westerberg have asked a provocative question: 'How much does transparency cost?'. They highlighted a general development in the Swedish public sector: the increased time dedicated to administration. In the health sector, physicians and nurses dedicated about 25% of their time to administrative tasks. This means also that administration has been 'amateurized'; it is not the professional administrators who perform administrative tasks, but the representatives of other professions – most likely slower and less efficiently.

Forssell and Westerberg suggested that one should differentiate among three types of administrative tasks: constitutive (organizing a certain type of production), effectivizing (the existing production process), and legitimizing. Easily distinguished in theory, in practice they tend to blend into one another. Most of physicians' and nurses' administrative work consists of documenting their activities. Much of this work contributes to internal transparency and could therefore be seen as constitutive and/or effectivizing. There can be too much of a good thing, however. Various regions (the health sector is organized by region in Sweden) have 400–800 different IT systems, for instance, many of which are incompatible. Compared to that multiplicity, the Municipality of Gothenburg's countermeasures of self-declaration, with its 156 questions, seems perfectly manageable. And, although obtaining legitimacy through a positive presentation to stakeholders, higher authorities, and the media is an obvious duty of every organization, the question is always: 'Where does the limit lie?' and the desirable answer is: 'Just before the legitimization starts to exert a negative influence on production.'

In the end, Forssell and Westerberg sharpened their provocative question even further, by asking: Is transparency worth its price? The answer must depend upon *to whom?*

For democracy, increased transparency should be useful, all in all. It gives the politicians, the voters, and the general public the possibility of achieving insight into the organization's activity, and therefore of judging it. It should also be good for the state of law, or due process. Increased transparency should strengthen the legal rights of individuals. The only problem could be the amount of information and ac-

counts demanded from organizations. There is an obvious risk of (...) drowning in information.

But the answer is not so obvious when it concerns welfare. As we demonstrated earlier, there is a risk that the cost of all control attempts in public organizations can be so high that they will impair the production of welfare itself (Forssell and Westerberg, 206: 210).

This conclusion has been corroborated by Irvine Lapsley (2009) who, though not speaking about financial costs, spoke of the danger that welfare professionals' time will be dedicated more and more to the documentation of their activities rather than to the activities themselves.

Perhaps, therefore, a cure for Gothenburg's illness does not lie in a further increase in the application of 'transparency technologies'. What else remains?

Alternative countermeasures

Our report suggested that the cases of corruption had been – indirectly – related to something that was called 'Gothenburg spirit', which, until the oil crisis of 1976, denoted cooperation across party lines (Jönsson, 2013); and from the 1990s onward referred to cooperation between public and private organizations, in the spirit of New Public Management. A despotic previous mayor was also mentioned as a reason to fear the reporting of irregularities higher up the organizational ladder. I have no doubts about the veracity of both claims, but the contents of the corruption case indicate something bigger than mere Gothenburg spirit – something more like a 'spirit of the times'. Observe that during the alleged economic crisis, practically every newspaper – beginning with UK and dutifully imitated in Sweden – has a supplement instructing its readers on how to spend money (even *The Guardian* has it!). Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) located the origins of this *Zeitgeist* in the USA, and in the culture of 'I am worth it'. VIP dinners, bricks for a villa, a robotic vacuum cleaner, a Jacuzzi – these are not deeds of global criminals building their prosperity in tax-free havens.

One of the denouncers was the ex-wife of the accused. The pair had brought one another to court several times during the course of their divorce in relation to the division of property. These were not international crooks – merely a Hollywood wives and husbands playing out their personal dramas in Gothenburg – with our tax money.

Gothenburg city councilors can hardly influence the spirit of the times. At the end of our report, we formulated ten recommendations that would improve the functioning of the municipality's governance and administration. As to corruption more specifically, it should be enough to formulate one document (rather than the multitude of documents we found) that would define corrupt behavior, and what to do in situations in which incentives for such behavior are present. Additionally, it should be obvious to whom one can turn – internally – in case of observed irregularities, so that instead of whistle-blowing, everybody would be able, as the quoted consultant said, to whistle free when they wanted to.

References

- Amnå, Erik; Czarniawska, Barbara; and Marcusson, Lena (2013) *Tillitens gränser*. Gothenburg: Göteborgs stad.
- Arendt, Hannah (1968) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. New York: Viking.
- Beck, Ulrich (1986) *Risk society. Toward a new modernity*. London: Sage.
- Bieńczyk, Marek (2007/2012) *Transparency*. Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press.
- Connerton, Paul (1989) *How societies remember*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Czarniawska, Barbara (1997) *Narrating the organization. Dramas of institutional identities*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Czarniawska, Barbara (2011) *Cyberfactories. How news agencies produce news*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Czarniawska, Barbara (2012) Operational risk, translation, and globalization. *Contemporary Economics*, 6(2): 26–39.
- Edelman, Murray (1988) *Political spectacle*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara (2009) *Smile or die: How positive thinking fooled America & the world*. London: Granta.
- Forssell, Anders and Westerberg, Anders Ivarsson (2006) Vad kostar transparens? In: Levay, Charlotte and Waks, Caroline (eds.) *Strävan efter transparens*. Stockholm: SNS förlag, 185–215.
- Halbwachs, Maurice (1950/1992) *On collective memory*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Herzfeld, Michael (1993) *The social production of indifference*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Jönsson, Sten (2013) Den goda Göteborgsandan fick sin dödsstöt redan 1976. *Göteborgs-Posten*, 17 June.
- Kahneman, Daniel (2011) *Thinking, fast and slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Kundera, Milan (1988) *The art of the novel*. New York: Grove Press.
- Lapsley, Irvine (2009) New Public Management: The cruellest invention of the human spirit? *ABACUS. A Journal of Accounting, Finance and Business Studies*, 45(1): 1–21.
- Levay, Charlotte and Waks, Caroline (eds.) (2006) *Strävan efter transparens*. Stockholm: SNS förlag.
- Luhmann, Niklas (2000) *The reality of the mass media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Power, Michael (1997) *The audit society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Power, Michael (2004) *The risk management of everything*. London: Demos.
- Ricoeur, Paul (2004) *Memory, history, forgetting*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Rothstein, Bo (2011) *The quality of government: Corruption, social trust and inequality in a comparative perspective*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Sahlin-Andersson, Kerstin (2006) Transparensens former. In: Levay, Charlotte and Waks, Caroline (eds.) *Strävan efter transparens*. Stockholm: SNS förlag, 19–50.
- Sztompka, Piotr (2007) *Zaufanie. Fundament społeczeństwa*. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Znak.

Notes

¹ More on the role of media in the circuit of culture in Czarniawska, 2011.

² Luhmann (2000: 27–35) compiled a list of selection criteria used for the news: 1) surprise, 2) conflict, 3) quantities, 4) local relevance, 5) norm violations, 6) events provoking moral judgments, 7) events presented as actions of individuals, 8) topicality, and 9) provocative opinions.

³ All translations from Swedish are mine, BC.

⁴ In both cities, there were incidents of foreign gang warfare.

⁵ An allusion to the Mayor's promise.