



Section 1. Economics

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BEYOND DISCLOSURE: HOW AUDIT CULTURE TRANSFORMS TRANSPARENCY INTO PUBLIC TRUST IN DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

Governments worldwide have embraced transparency as a cornerstone of modern administration, assuming that disclosure naturally builds accountability and trust. In practice, openness alone has not achieved that outcome. Information without interpretation can create confusion instead of confidence. This paper argues that genuine trust arises through audit culture – the habits and values that turn oversight into moral dialogue. According to Power’s 1997 study, the spread of auditing created an “audit society,” where verification became ritual rather than understanding. Building on that idea, this paper shows that when auditing is treated as communication rather than control, transparency gains meaning. Drawing from the experience of the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) and contemporary governance research, it suggests that democratic legitimacy depends less on how much data is released and more on how well citizens can read it as proof of integrity. In my observation, transparency becomes powerful only when it is joined with reflection and interpretation.

Keywords: *audit culture, transparency, accountability, public trust, democratic governance, ethics in administration*

Introduction

Over the past two decades, governments and international organizations have invested heavily in open-data portals, performance dashboards, and freedom-of-information regimes. The intention was clear: make processes visible to build trust. According to the

Edelman Trust Barometer (2024), however, many societies still show deep skepticism toward public institutions. The paradox is striking – people see more but believe less.

The problem lies in assuming that information automatically conveys fairness. Numbers show outcomes but rarely reveal

motives or reasoning. Roberts's 2009 analysis explains that accountability succeeds only when combined with empathy and explanation. Many citizens, faced with lengthy reports, struggle to find meaning behind the figures.

This paper proposes that audit culture provides the missing interpretive bridge. As Bovens (2007) has noted, accountability works when it becomes a conversation between state and society. In my professional experience, transparency efforts that ignore this interpretive dimension often create fatigue instead of trust.

The following sections trace the shift from bureaucratic secrecy to transparent governance, explore audit culture as a transformative practice, and examine how the UN OIOS turned oversight into a form of credibility-building communication.

Conceptual Foundations

Bureaucracy, transparency, and audit culture form three stages of administrative evolution. Bureaucracy values control, transparency promotes visibility, and audit culture emphasizes interpretation.

Max Weber's theory described bureaucracy as a rational system of hierarchy and rules ensuring fairness through predictability. While effective for order, it left citizens detached from the reasoning behind decisions. Over time, democratic pressures demanded more openness.

Transparency reforms arose as a moral reaction to secrecy. Hood's 2006 historical review showed that governments began equating visibility with virtue. Freedom-of-information laws promised to make institutions accountable to citizens rather than to themselves. Still, as Strathern (2000) argued, transparency often turned into performance – officials disclosed data mechanically, with little concern for comprehension.

Audit culture entered to resolve this tension. Power's 1997 study described how auditing became a social grammar of trust. The auditor's report was no longer just a ledger of figures but a narrative about credibility. More recent studies, such as de Vries and Kim (2023) and Christensen and Lægreid (2022), underline that effective transparency requires explanation. In practice, govern-

ments now face not a crisis of information but a crisis of interpretation. Citizens expect sincerity more than perfection; they want to understand the ethical reasoning behind policy choices.

From Bureaucratic Control to Transparent Governance

For much of the twentieth century, secrecy symbolized professionalism. Administrators believed that discretion safeguarded neutrality. At the same time, growing civic awareness demanded that governments show how and why decisions were made. Hood's 2006 research noted this movement from closed bureaucracies to open administrations.

Freedom-of-information acts and open-budget portals were designed to restore legitimacy through visibility. Still, experience showed that disclosure alone could not guarantee comprehension. According to the OECD's 2021 assessment, many citizens experienced "information overload"—a flood of data without clear context. Compliance reports filled with technical language met formal requirements but failed to connect with readers.

Audit culture provided a corrective. Power's 1997 work emphasized that auditing gains strength when it interprets rather than merely verifies. When auditors explain *why* numbers differ from expectations or *how* risks are mitigated, information becomes knowledge.

Nordic audit institutions illustrate this approach. As discussed by Christensen and Lægreid's 2022 study, plain-language summaries and visual formats helped make financial findings intelligible to ordinary citizens. I have seen similar transformations in international settings: when auditors communicate respectfully and clearly, staff begin viewing them as allies rather than inspectors.

Transparency without context can quickly produce cynicism. Roberts's 2009 argument about "intelligent accountability" reminds us that oversight must listen as well as measure. Audit culture, by adding ethical dialogue, turns disclosure into education.

Audit Culture as Transformative Practice

Audit culture transforms governance on cognitive, ethical, and participatory levels.

Power's 1997 study observed that auditing functions as a language of trust. I would add that it also serves as a mirror – showing institutions what their conduct looks like to the public.

Cognitive transformation occurs when auditors turn figures into narratives that ordinary readers can grasp. When a deviation or surplus is explained through reasoning rather than numbers alone, oversight becomes transparent storytelling.

Ethical transformation refers to auditors acting as moral interpreters. Roberts's 2009 research emphasized that credibility arises from fairness and communication, not fear. When auditors speak with understanding, they transform criticism into learning.

Participatory transformation opens oversight to citizens. The OECD's 2021 report on accountability highlighted how some countries now publish accessible audit summaries and encourage feedback. Citizens become collaborators in evaluating performance, reinforcing democracy through shared oversight.

The United Nations OIOS Example

The UN's Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) demonstrates how audit culture can evolve inside a vast bureaucracy. Established in 1994 to strengthen internal integrity (United Nations General Assembly, 1994), OIOS initially issued dense internal reports aimed at administrators. According to the OIOS 2022 annual report, these documents uncovered problems but rarely rebuilt confidence.

Around the mid-2010s, the office began to rethink its mission. Auditors visited field missions to discuss findings before finalizing reports. In one procurement review, they discovered that confusion over conflicts of interest – not deliberate misconduct – caused repeated errors. Instead of imposing penalties, OIOS created ethics workshops and new training materials. Hood's 2006 reflections on transparency support this idea: openness must teach, not punish.

I have seen comparable shifts across various UN administrative offices. People who once regarded audits with anxiety began turning to auditors for clarification and practical advice. According to the OIOS (2022) report, the office responded by releasing concise public summa-

ries of its major audits, written in plain, direct language. These summaries focused on lessons learned and concrete corrective steps, helping strengthen the UN's credibility among member states and its own personnel.

This shift turned auditing into a dialogue about integrity. The OIOS example reflects what Christensen and Lægreid (2022) call the "learning turn" in public accountability – oversight as collective reflection rather than command.

Implications for Democratic Trust

Trust in governance depends less on perfection than on perceived honesty. Vigoda-Gadot's 2007 study found that citizens judge institutions by fairness and openness more than by flawless performance. When governments interpret their actions clearly, citizens sense respect and inclusion.

Three conclusions follow.

First, legitimacy comes from comprehension. When audits explain ethical reasoning, people understand decisions even when they disagree. Kim and de Vries's 2024 analysis shows that comprehension reduces suspicion by linking performance with integrity.

Second, audit culture promotes *intelligent accountability*. Roberts (2009) argued that genuine responsibility combines independence with empathy. Oversight that listens and contextualizes fosters cooperation.

Third, participatory audits expand democratic engagement. Yang and Holzer's 2006 research found that citizen involvement in performance evaluation strengthens trust. When oversight invites questions, democracy grows stronger.

Even so, challenges persist. Audit fatigue can dull public interest, and politicians may misuse audits for partisan purposes. To avoid this, auditors need both autonomy and humility. Christensen and Lægreid (2022) suggest that reflexive awareness – the ability to critique one's own process – is key to sustainable accountability. In my observation, institutional credibility must be re-earned continually; it cannot be secured once and for all.

Conclusion

Transparency is essential but incomplete. Data can expose actions, but interpretation reveals meaning. Power's 1997 argument

still holds: auditing gains value only when it transforms checking into understanding. Audit culture provides that interpretive frame, turning disclosure into trust.

The OIOS experience shows that even large bureaucracies can evolve toward ethical communication. When auditors explain rather than accuse, they rebuild relationships between governance and society. Governments aiming to renew public confidence should focus less on the quantity of disclosure and more on the quality of interpretation.

According to the OECD's 2021 findings, citizens prefer clarity and honesty over sheer openness. In my professional view, when audit reports speak plainly and connect with people's real concerns, oversight becomes a form of civic education.

Audit culture thus bridges bureaucracy and democracy. It translates rules into values and procedures into credibility. The future of public trust depends not on how much governments reveal but on how sincerely they explain what they reveal.

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