

Why risky and amoral ‘transparency’ fails as a lone ethical concept*

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Transparency is a concept frequently arising in ethics discussions but poorly conceptualized and, in some cases, even harmful. Searching outside the term’s current general popularity in media ethics and in public relations, a literature review revealed that many scholars from various disciplines have misgivings and concerns about transparency. Other professions are used to discuss the problems that arise when relying on transparency for ethical guidance. Consequentialist, virtue, and deontological ethics all object to the use of transparency as an ethical construct. Many problems emerge, based on a Kantian reading; for example, transparency does not ensure good intention; and, transparency does not equal veracity, as transparency can also be used for unethical purposes. Immanuel Kant did not discuss transparency as an *a priori* (reasoned from cause to effect) moral concept but awarded *prima facie* (on its face) moral worth to *good intention* (the highest form of good), dignity and respect, and duty – in a context of rational moral autonomy. Transparency is not on its own considered a moral construct but rather its use should be accorded to intention. Transparency can be used for either ethical or unethical *intention* - therefore the term transparency is rendered amoral (without moral status on its own) and should not be used as a lone ethical construct but must be combined with stronger concepts for more rigorous moral analyses. Transparency as a professional standard is also explored yet proved problematic across other professions from health care to AI. Ethical analyses, as added to the issues management process, is advised and discussed. The lexicon of strategic communication management should replace transparency with more meaningful terms rooted in moral philosophy and conceptually grounded for not only clearer understanding but also for enhancing organizational responsibility, ethical principle use, and ethical outcomes. Good intention, veracity, full disclosure, visibility, candor, clarity, completeness could aid precision in our ethical analyses. As a lone unqualified good, pure intention should drive veracity, disclosure, dialogue, and so on. These terms are offered in conclusion as a normative and practical alternatives (or amendments) to risky and amoral transparency. Greater acumen in our lexicon can enhance the professionalism of the field and strengthen its analyses by aligning it with the discipline and analytic of moral philosophy, using the well-examined traditions of ethics therein, and stand the field in organizational and ethical leadership with other professions.

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Purpose

Transparency is a concept frequently arising as an ethical standard in discussions of strategic communication academics and professionals. Transparency is discussed in relation to ethics in numerous contexts. But it is assumed that we know what transparency consists of and it is without question or unequivocally an ethical answer to complex questions.

Yet, transparency is often bandied about without further study, elucidation, or elaboration, as in, for example, “This case needs transparency.” Therefore, a rigorous philosophical examination of transparency based on moral philosophy as well as professional and academic use is warranted. This study offers an issues management framework for understanding risk reduction as the forum for examining ethical constructs and analyses such as transparency; as compared with ethical concepts from moral philosophy, specifically Kantian deontology, such as responsibility, duty, dignity and respect, intention, or moral autonomy.

Immanuel Kant was a modern philosopher (1724-1804) who originated the principle-based, non-consequentialist paradigm known as deontology (literally the study of duty). As a moral philosophy, deontology used the approach of virtue ethics and sought to make it universal, or applied equally to every rational being by virtue of reason (as opposed to aristocracy, education, or affluence). In this way, Kantian philosophy uses radical equality to state that all rational beings can use moral discernment to understand their duty to the moral law, to create a universal position that can be applied equally to all people, maintains dignity and respect, and is based on good will (as opposed to self-interested outcomes). These precepts are what Kant called the categorical imperative, or three moral tests he designed to eradicate bias and ensure equality and pure intention.

Kant accorded the highest moral worth to good intention, a concept that cannot be assailed (even in excess) but results in a universal good (Sullivan, 1989). This universal approach is sometimes known as the law of non-contradiction, as Kant’s first principle of reason, meaning a logical application of the rule would not contradict itself (Guyer, 2019). Kant (1785/1964) conceived several concepts as involving innate moral worth, goodness or ethicality associated with the term and its use but accorded the *highest* moral worth to goodwill or pure moral intention as the only *incorruptible* good that is unqualified in nature (Sullivan, 1989). As an unqualified good, pure intention should drive veracity, disclosure, dialogue, and so on (DeGeorge, 2010). These terms are offered in conclusion as an alternative or amendment to risky and amoral transparency.

Risk, Issues, and Issues Management

No study of risk is complete without a thorough understanding of issues management and how it is applied in a rapidly changing environment. The rapidly changing landscape of

strategic communication includes numerous ethical challenges. Applications of strategic communication are diverse, ranging from leadership or organizational communication to marketing and consumer outreach, to governmental regulation and public sector communication, to artificial intelligence use and regulation, to international trade and finance, to management itself (Bowen & Erzikova, 2025).

These strategic communication areas (among numerous other specialties within strategic communication), all hold a broad range of issues that normally contain numerous ethical components. Issues can be societal trends, shifts in demands or a competitive environment, or even a changing international environment. These issues are problems, regulations, or public policy changes comprised of varying levels of risk, to be managed – known as strategic issues management (Heath, 2025).¹ [Author note: Risk management is a financial tool not to be confused with the issues management of problem solving]. Issues management was conceived of as a strategy for managing public policy issues in response to increasing activist pressure, increased regulatory scrutiny, and environmental turbulence. Issues management was conceived of in the 1970s but it is, by its very nature, futuristic. This futurist perspective has always been a part of issues management: one of the canonical works by Chase (1984) is named *Origins of the Future*.

Futurism is demonstrated in one classic definition of issues management offered by Coates, Coates, Jarrat, and Heinz (1986):

Issues management is the organized activity of identifying emerging trends, concerns, or issues likely to affect an organization in the next few years and developing a wider and more positive range of organizational responses toward that future. Business and industry, in adopting issues management, seek to formulate creative alternatives to constraints, regulations, or confrontation (p. ix).

These scholars observed something key: An increased risk level necessitates research and a strategic response of organizations, considering the future and creative problem solving. Issues management is futuristic in that it allows time to research and create strategy options in a proactive or interactive sense. This future-minded approach to strategy lessens reaction time, offers management numerous alternatives, enhances autonomy, and allows an organization to increase efficiency.

Organizations not using issues management futuristically lose efficiency and the opportunity to create proactive strategy and are often caught in a reactive or accommodative loop responding to changes (Heath & Palenchar, 2009), rather than helping to create change proactively (Bowen et al., 2024) and build interactive strategy (Buchholz et al., 1994). Public affairs and policy creation is an inextricable part of issues management strategy (Heath, 1997; Lerbinger, 2006) which allows organizations to change and react to their environment with strategic intelligence (Bowen & Heath, 2020) rather than a vague and unrealistic goal of mutual benefit which is often impossible in a heavily regulated industry.

Missing from the classic Coates, Coates, Jarrat, and Heinz (1986) definition of issues management offered above is the concept of identifying and studying ethical dilemmas. Although not stated explicitly, ethical problems would constitute issues, and most issues

management problems also contain an element of ethical responsibility. These scholars, no doubt, viewed ethics as one part of the issues management equation, though the hindsight of observing numerous scandals would conclude that ethics should be an explicit part of issues management to avoid oversight and worse: corruption. Infamous cases of unethical behavior have seen organizations lay claim to transparency as a defense. For example, though large amounts of disclosure, problematic data can be hidden or obscured. One such example can be seen in Pacific Gas and Electric's cover-up of hexavalent chromium as a simple "rust inhibitor" yet its presence in the water supply led to birth defects and cancer. Avoiding using transparency to obscure negative information may be more problematic than perceived if negative information is not shared with communication professionals (Berger, 2005; Berger & Reber, 2006).

There are many reasons to attend to avoiding ethical complications and using ethical issues management to build relationships based on trust and respect. Ethical issues management can add to positive organizational outcomes, such as overall efficiency among a workforce (Karnes, 2009) and commitment among consumers (Uzunoğlu et al., 2017), attributed to organizations who do identify and address ethical concerns proactively.

Adding Ethics to Issues Management

Ethical analyses were first suggested as an explicit concern in the issues management process by Bowen (2000) who suggested a duty-based framework to guide issue decision-making based highly on Kantian deontological ethics. This Kantian framework of ethical issues management (Bowen, 2005) included a section asking questions to ensure moral autonomy and objective rationality, or freedom from bias, and an examination of organizational policies. The Kantian framework included the three forms of Kant's categorical imperative (a 3-part universal moral test of duty, dignity and respect, and good intention) to examine the dilemma with stakeholders, publics, the self, organization and governing elements, as well as society as a whole. Applying deontological ethics to issues management was tested and confirmed as the predominant useful paradigm in two global organizations (Bowen, 2002).

The issues management process was summarized in six steps by scholars (Buchholz et al., 1994) seeking to make the process useful and meaningful in management practice. Ethics were added explicitly as an analysis component in step three by Bowen, Rawlins, and Martin (Bowen et al., 2019) and again expanded upon in more detail by (Bowen et al., 2024). These scholars (Bowen et al., 2024) suggested that ethical analyses play an explicit role in at least three of the steps of the issues management process:

1. Identify issues and trends. (incl. ethical responsibilities)
2. Evaluate issue impact, *ethical values*, and set priorities.
3. Conduct research and analyses, *including ethical analyses*.
4. Develop *ethical* strategy and strategic options.

5. Implement strategy.
6. Evaluate strategy. (p. 288, emphases original)

These scholars did not mention transparency, or offer the specific ethical tests to be used as a step in this model, but discussed moral autonomy in the publication as a transition to a codified ethical perspective, with specific means of analysis to follow. Bowen, Lovari, and Timmermans (Bowen et al., 2024) focused upon institutionalizing ethics as a routine component of the issues management process for managers and scholars in this field. Explicitly including ethics in several steps of the issues management process, it is not an afterthought but an overt part of the research and analyses of any problem.

Linking issues management to ethics also necessitates a macro-perspective on the role of that function not only within organizations, but also within society. Heath argued that society exists for the collective management of risk, necessitating issues management (Heath, 2001), or the enacting of strategic issues in the public square along with appropriate policymaking by organizations (Heath & Nelson, 1986). Scholars have also noted that civil society enactment (Taylor, 2010) and a normative role for ethics in the civil discourse of problem resolution (Bowen, 2010) strengthen a commitment to ethical analyses not only for an organization to do well, but also for it to do good.

As a way for strategic communicators to manage and reduce risk as well as maintain responsibility, issues management offers a framework that can inculcate research, ethical decision-making, and strategy. Egregious ethical scandals such as those at Volkswagen or Wells Fargo, among numerous others, offer ample rationale for including ethics as a codified part of the issues management process. As strategic communication grows in complexity and importance, as part of the public policy and public affairs process on numerous issues from human rights to artificial intelligence, the gravity of ethical analysis weighs heavy on the shoulders of communication professionals. An uncertain future, rife with risk and conflict, ranging vastly from natural disasters to warfare, require acumen in ethical analyses (Bowen, 2025; Bowen & Erzikova, 2025).

But how does transparency relate to issues management analysis? Is the concept “transparency” strong enough to warrant its frequent recommendation and use as an ethical standard? Imprecise standards, varied meaning, and differing usage render the term transparency vague and suspect as an ethical basis for strategic communication.

A closer examination of the concept of transparency should elucidate whether transparency is warranted to include in numerous ethics models and discussions offered by strategic communication scholars and as a basis for the analyses required in strategic issues management. These questions haunt ethics in the strategic communication discipline and serious study of the often-used term transparency is needed. Thus, the research questions driving this study are:

- RQ. 1. Does transparency succeed or invite risk when used as a basis for ethics?
- RQ. 2. Do other professions successfully employ transparency as an ethical construct?
- RQ. 3. Are there superior ethical standards than transparency?

Parameters of this Review

Many disciplines have much to say on ethics and moral decision making: Moral philosophy, behavioral ethics, cognitive psychology, organizational psychology, theology, developmental psychology, management, and business ethics, to name a few. Of these, moral philosophy is the oldest and most direct form of reasoning related to ethics, based in philosophy or the love of knowledge. Within moral philosophy, metaethics (meaning), normative ethics (principle), and applied ethics are all different pursuits within the discipline, with practical pursuits and the professions dominating applied ethics (e.g., medical ethics, legal ethics, and so on). Thoroughly reviewing the literature of numerous fields is an impossibility in the space of one article, so this piece focuses on the intersection of issues management and strategic communication with transparency.

Due to the common use of the term transparency but its relatively underexplored parameters, a two-step exploratory literature review of numerous fields was used. In the first phase, a search of the literature for “transparency” in Academic Search Complete, Web of Science, and Scopus library databases was conducted (search terms included: transparent, transparency). Articles with transparency in the title or keywords were identified, downloaded, and searched for relevance. Those with a significant *focus* on transparency ($n = 56$) were included in the review for this study while those using transparency as a descriptor or tangential term were excluded from this study. Although this process is a qualitative one, it was selective in searching for articles containing a definition of transparency, a discussion of or justification for the term, an analysis or a critique of the use of transparency in a philosophical or professional context, or an explication of when the concept was relevant or not useful. In phase two of this research, a number of books (about 50) and articles (about 30) in moral philosophy were consulted, searching for the term transparency or related concepts such as obfuscation, veracity, truth, and untruth, visible, opaque, and opacity as expanded search terms to the lack of the term transparency in philosophical literature and indices. Those discussions were used in building the arguments and subsections of this paper. A small number of strategic communication, public relations, and media ethics sources were also used to compare and contrast different perspectives on and uses of transparency, to create a dialectic with expected usage versus philosophical usage.

As part of this interdisciplinary approach, other professions offer comparative examples in their literature to illustrate the application of transparency in conceptual and real world situations. Creation of case examples from news stories and legal filings was used as illustration. To expand communication literature, the very nature of this study is interdisciplinary, though it is based in moral philosophy. In conclusion, philosophical conceptions from virtue and deontological traditions were brought to bear on the research questions, with resulting practical recommendations.

Defining Transparency

Transparency is defined by Heald (2006) as the principle of enabling the public to gain information about the operations and structures of a given organization. This form of transparency has become a goal in and of itself in recent times, or one that is encouraged as enabling the market to self-correct, through consumers with knowledge and access to transparent information. In this manner, economic transparency is presumed to foster the “invisible hand” that will allow self-correction in *laissez faire* capitalism without a need for government regulation. In media ethics and public relations, the term is rarely defined but used colloquially and assumed to mean visibility.

Media ethics scholar Plaisance (2007) discussed transparency as an ethical recommendation and with a positive regard for the term rather than seeing it as one of amoral status depending on usage. Plaisance (2007) read transparency alone as what he termed a ‘gift’ of veracity from Kant, though one can argue that veracity and transparency are not synonymous. The difference may be one of what discipline is involved. Transparency and veracity are not equivalent in moral philosophy. Veracity is indeed a moral/philosophical principle, from which springs truthfulness; transparency stands amoral (without moral status in and of itself) as its ethical stance is determined by usage.

Kant himself distinguished between truthfulness, lying, social convention, discernment, privacy, deceit, and untruthfulness (Guyer, 2019; Price, 2003). The term veracity is embraced in virtue ethics (Aristotle 1910/322BCE; Singer, 1994), where one does not find transparency, but focus on the principle of veracity as means of defining truthfulness or honesty. Many communication and media ethics books are silent on the topic of transparency (Patterson & Wilkins, 2002; Parsons, 2004; Knowlton & Parsons, 1994; Christians et al., 2001). Other communication scholars (Oliveira & Goncalves, 2024; Pearson, 1989) regard transparency as one ethical consideration among many that can be used to support responsible organizational commitments in society.

Also positively explained, political philosopher Etzioni (2010) pointed out that the *Wall Street Journal* has couched transparency as the antidote to burdensome government regulation. Even in this strong conception of transparency conceived in economic theory, there is a problem with the conception in that its use is assumed to be good or ethical. The risk with this assumption is that transparency cannot assure a level playing field of fairness or that it is used with only good intention – unethical transparency exists and is used on a routine basis, as explained herein. The problem of not having fuller accurate information access also impedes using transparency as a stand-alone ethical construct. As Kronewald argued, “The concept of transparency is contingent upon the availability of clear and unambiguous information about the originators of communication or messages” (p. 49).

Arguing in favor of transparency, Plaisance (2007) wrote, “Even if transparency is not always a sufficient condition for more ethical behavior, its absence is a prerequisite for deception” (p. 193). But, this is not the case in the professional world of public relations and strategic communication, whose practitioners state in interviews (Bowen, 2008) that

transparency is used as a form of deception. So, not only is its presence no assurance of ethical behavior, it is often used as an excuse, obfuscation, or “window dressing similar to greenwashing without intent to have true environmental impact.

Further, transparency is often mandated by government rather than enforced due to sociological or communitarian social norms and controls. Making the operations of an organization visible (Edgett, 2002) or discoverable is an admirable starting position, but does nothing to ensure that the inner workings of that organization, including priorities, management, or disclosures, are ethical. In fact, transparency is more likely unethical than ethical because it places the burden of surveillance, analysis and discovery on the observer – those outside the organization, rather than inside it and in authority over its decisions. This displacement of responsibility can lead to a moral abrogation of organizational ethics, such as in a prior study’s communication officer’s cynical statement, “We knew no one would find it, but we put it out there so they couldn’t say we hid it” (Bowen et al., 2016). This type of unethical case of ‘transparency’ constitutes what Fleming (2025) called, “abuses of knowledge in the public realm” (p. 187).

It is for these reasons that in moral philosophy, transparency is not routinely discussed as an ethical construct, as the term itself is imprecise and its usage based on other ethical constructs such as good or bad intent. Analytical philosophy reveals far too many problems with the concept of transparency for it to pass the bar of being included in an ethical analysis, as it is *prima facie* amoral. To be amoral means that transparency’s ethical status is determined by the user rather than by the concept as one holding innate goodness. Transparency is similar to a tool such as a stone cutter’s saw. This saw can create great works of art when used with good intention, or be used to fell a structure on unsuspecting occupants when used with unethical intention. The intention drives the tool and hence defines its moral status.

In one case example, in a critique of the pharmaceutical industry’s drug marketing and clinical trial database practices, Falit (2005) wondered if increased transparency was actually worth anything, given the rollout problems explained by four pharmaceutical associations, or if it were simply “contrived public appeasement” (p. 391) illustrating that the intention behind transparency is the important variable. This example alone, if not even for the support of thousands of others, illustrates why transparency holds no innate moral worth of its own as a standard for ethical decision making or analyses.

Transparency in Extra-Disciplinary Literature

Searching outside the term’s current general popularity in media ethics and in public relations, a literature review revealed that many scholars from various disciplines have misgivings and concerns about transparency. The potential for artificial intelligence (AI) to reshape entire industries and nation-states is well-discussed in the literature as are calls for algorithmic transparency. Therefore, this area provides an especially rich discussion of

transparency as well as problematics in its application. Klenk (2023) explained that algorithmic transparency is a common goal but can also be manipulative. Klenk (2023) argued that manipulative transparency may have numerous motives other than revealing reasoning to users such as regulatory compliance or impression management necessitating an urgent need for a critical perspective on transparency.

Philosophers of technology (Wang, 2022, 2023; Zerilli et al., 2019), likewise argued that humanity needs to worry about manipulative transparency because the social and power related implications of algorithmic transparency offer it motive for deception toward observers. Current public policy standards for requiring transparency were assessed (Felzmann et al., 2019) to be not rigorous enough to generate actual transparency of the algorithm better understood as relational transparency or explainability.

Licon (2024) concluded, “transparency can be morally and politically corrupting.”

In the realm of politics and economics, transparency is said to have the potential for corrupting decisions because it applies reputational concerns onto purely moral judgments. Hypocrisy, half-truths, and deception are the results (Licon, 2024). Although Licon (2024) cites evidence showing the deontological judgments are preferred above the consequential and reputational, the author argued that inauthentic moral and political judgments are often undertaken for show - counter to personal moral convictions, increasing a political cost for popularity, concluding that “transparency corrupts” (p. 41).

Paul (2015) also described using transparency in conjunction with intention is not a workable ethical construct. She explained that “the Transparency approach to explaining knowledge of our intentions fails” (p. 1529) because it can introduce schematic bias. Paul (2015) argued that we know of our intentions by theorizing about ourselves but these decisions are often first-person privileged. Counter, Boyle, drawing on Sartre’s non-positional self consciousness, posited transparency does not exist in the mind because knowledge of “the world constitutively involves a kind of implicit self awareness” (p. 1014).

Noting its ambiguity, while confusing the self-evident good of a concept with the intention supporting its use, Metzen (2025) argued that there are three types of transparency: “mere transparency, publicity, and accountability” (p. 1) that could redeem the vague concept. Noting that philosophers have broadly discussed the danger of the transparency concept, Metzen (2025) tried unconvincingly to support it with other concepts such as regulation, disclosure, and trust – nonetheless belying the weakness of the original concept noting numerous ways that it “can backfire” (p. 10).

According to Mitchell (2025), trust is not congruent with transparency because transparency requires the truster to constantly check and verify information, implying that a lack of trust exists. If trust is a result of transparency, what would be the motivation to continue to use and monitor transparency for either party? The resulting tautology once again illustrates the conceptual frailty of transparency as an ethical concept.

Although the concept of transparency was not apparent in the issues management literature, it does appear more commonly in the general lexicon of strategic communication and public relations. It is a particularly prevalent part of the codes of ethics of some professional associations, yet is still ill defined and used with great assumption as to its

meaning, use, and role as an ethical standard. A study (Bowen, 2016) regarding the use and precision of ethical terms in the field found transparency problematic due to public relations professionals using transparency to abrogate their moral responsibility of disclosure. For example, one participant of the prior study (Bowen, 2016) said, “as long as it was put out there and we have been transparent then it’s up to them.” Another public relations participant in an ethics study (Bowen et al., 2006) reported, “We are transparent with so much information they will never find the thing we are worried about. No one would.”

Other critiques included that transparency inspired an “audit culture” rather than one of critical moral judgement. Bowen (2016) recommended replacing the term transparency with honest disclosure, contextual disclosure, or veracity. In answering RQ 1, the conclusion, based upon the literature discussed above, is that transparency poses a risk for organizations or professionals attempting to employ it as an ethical construct and it fails to be satisfactory as a standard for ethics. The amoral status of the transparency concept renders it useless in an ethical framework, even when supported by more powerful concepts, as it would introduce an amoral element counter to ethics and undermine ethical decision making.

For issues management and strategic communication, transparency poses great risk through its amoral status and is not acceptable for use as a term related to ethics or ethical analyses. Strategic communication has long argued for its status as a profession and for a seat within the dominant coalition, so it is bound to act as professions act with regard to high and knowable ethical standards (Berger & Reber, 2006; Wright & Turk, 2007). However, because of the term transparency’s prevalence among the professions, such as engineering, medicine, or finance, one wonders if transparency is something useful in those limited contexts?

Exemption for Professional Services?

In professional services such as accounting, finance, engineering, law, or medical care, transparency may indeed prove valuable. The potential for collusion, corruption, and usuary (e.g., data exploitation or similar) are rife when those in positions of power hold access to information and data that others (in less exclusive positions, i.e., clients) do not. Exposure, disclosure, and clarity of standards and processes, as well as protections, are needed when handling sensitive and private information (Bowen, 2024). A case study analysis in this area may prove helpful.

A recent case in the United States elucidates the need for disclosure and ethical standards within professional service communities. In this case, the University of Alabama – Birmingham was recently found to be using (or “stealing”) the body parts of penitentiary inmates without permission or authorization, much to the shock and horror of inmates’ families, who filed subsequent lawsuits alleging there was no informed consent (Hrynkiw, 2024). How was this procedure allowed to happen as part of a university teaching hospital

with an institutional review board and medical ethics panel (Wood & Gauntt, 2024)? What were the standards of “transparency” and full disclosure regarding body parts? Why had no one on the ethics panel or institutional review board determined that inmates themselves, or family members, must agree to organ donation -- rather than using secretive organ harvesting? The exploitation, loss of rights, will, and body determination in this case offer a staggering glimpse into what happens when a system is in charge of “transparency” as opposed to valuing the moral determination of individual autonomy.

The hospital defended itself by using transparency -- mentioning a policy that body parts are not returned after an autopsy, concluding that everyone should know that was standard procedure (Hrynkiw, 2024). How subjects should know that information was not specified and the hospital declined to comment on the case (Wood & Gauntt, 2024). In this case, a legalistic approach had overridden all ethical concerns but was couched in terms of transparency as if families were familiar with fine print in voluminous forms related to the potential future use of inmates’ body parts.

Another shocking factor of the University of Alabama – Birmingham’s case is that though these organ harvesting operations after autopsy without permission happened at the state’s largest hospital, the news media has been relatively silent on the case. Silence may be viewed as complicity at worst (Bok, 1983), or viewed at best as a complete failure of the fourth estate “watchdog” function of the news media (Theus, 1993). The news value alone of organ harvesting should have placed the issue high on the media agenda and it should have been framed as a case of exploitation of rights of the weak, disadvantaged, or underserved.

The case example of the University of Alabama – Birmingham’s missing body parts also shows us why transparency is amoral and fails as a guiding ethical construct. Although legal cases and arguments are still underway, it is possible, that state officials had some legal right to body parts after an autopsy of those in custody. However, facts and chain of ownership are unclear and disputed, and this custody would conflict with the ideas of human rights and dignity strongly represented in Kantian ethics. This is what the hospital alleged but is unclear; it could be something that families even acknowledged - at some point – unknowingly, due to the arcane and voluminous amount of legal forms, documentation, disclosures and other information provided to them. If this hypothetical proves true, then technically the state had transparency; but, in actuality, it violated every standard of normative ethics, including Kantian dignity and respect, as the humanity form of the categorical imperative.

In summary, transparency can be effectively used to obscure important facts and information by its sheer volume or intent. This use of transparency to obscure is common, yet patently unethical in this case because it violates the ethical tradition of deontological respect and dignity (Place et al., 2021), as well as good moral intention. It also violates the responsibility of duty to *legitimately* disclose pertinent information rather than conceal it while disclosing it along with volumes of other difficult and often less than relevant information. Without discussion, one cannot be certain that inmates or relatives understood the “practice”

of organ harvesting, especially with differing language, hearing, and reading abilities present in prison populations (Whitehead, 1985).

This case may seem exceptional, but public relations professionals have previously acknowledged using transparency to “hide” unethical actions or problematic facts (Bowen, 2008). Legitimate disclosure is not transparency, but full and contextual understanding and discussion that offers a feedback loop of symmetrical communication including opportunities to ask questions, study the problem, listen, and engage in dialogue to ensure full understanding (Place & Flamme, 2024). Transparency is thus not a moral concept but a legalistic one that fails the test of providing veracity or ethical valence.

Professional services often require an element of confidentiality that can, unfortunately, also lead to concealment, secrecy, exploitation of this access, and wrongdoing. No doubt, financial incentives for ethical misdeeds or working ‘outside of the rules’ are indeed compelling. So strong is the need for “daylight” in this area that Justice Brandeis of the US Supreme Court questioned if transparency acted as a “disinfectant.” Although the term transparency is weak, one can argue for contextual/full disclosure, informed consent, non-ambiguity, dignity and respect of involved persons, veracity, and symmetrical communications as cornerstones of professions (Wright & Turk, 2007). These ethical securities would be particularly important in professions that use secrecy.

In the healthcare context, researchers (Alizadeh et al., 2025) argued that opacity or a lack of transparency was found to decrease access to information, reduce service quality, increase corruption, erode trust, and create ineffective decision making. Another study in that sector (Mooghali et al., 2024) found that a lack of transparency can decrease physician confidence in and use of even effective devices, with this lack of understanding hampering patient outcomes. Pharmaceutical communication researchers (Lopert & Rosenbaum, 2007) focused instead on the term fairness, but argued that transparency in drug pricing was desirable yet perhaps impossible to implement internationally. It is clear that transparency is central in medical and professional ethics -- yet it is compromised by its amoral status. Because transparency can be used for good or for harm, it is amoral, making it not an ethical concept but one that is determined by the intention of its user. Moral intention directs transparency to moral purposes or as illustrated in the above case, unethical purposes veiled behind a wall of transparency with the burden of discovery on the user, not the decision maker.

Despite the term’s prevalence in professions, transparency (as amoral) should not be used alone as it invites a great deal of risk. Disclosure, discussion, and contextual disclosure should supplant the use of transparency, and if it must be used for common parlance the term should be combined with more rigorous Kantian ethical constructs. A stronger and more thoroughly conceptualized ethical analysis is supported by concepts that link to the *a priori* good, relying upon those that have moral status, such as honesty and servant leadership, as well as other ethical constructs that foster patient care (patient rights, full consent, and dignity, for example).

Therefore, RQ 2 concludes that transparency is not a rigorous or fully conceptualized ethical concept that can support professional ethical standards and practice.

Philosophical Analysis & Alternative Concepts

Philosophical perspectives most often use an outcome-based approach (consequentialist reasoning, such as utilitarianism) or a principle-based framework (virtue and deontology). Though the differing approaches have their own offshoots, strengths, and weaknesses, a general guideline is that the ethical can be found in either creating a greater good or in living up to the highest moral principles or virtues. Even a simplistic conception of each school of thought can offer critique of the transparency concept when used as an ethical guide.

In a consequence-based framework, transparency is potentially corrupting, particularly for heavily regulated or public traded organizations (Mill, 1861/1957). Transparency is undertaken from compulsion or for public view rather than from moral regard, in this environment of consequence. Then transparency incentivizes inauthentic behavior for public consumption rather than reasoned judgment based upon moral ends, leading to a loss of autonomy and the potential for corruption. Licon (2024) reasoned:

Transparency incentivizes people to foster distinct (inauthentic) moral identities—one personal and one public—or to make moral judgments based on reputational reasons that sometimes diverge from the moral facts. In either case, transparency can be morally and politically corrupting. (p. 40)

Transparency undertaken for the public good in a utilitarian sense does not work as a motivating factor for creating the greatest good in an ethical sense, but in a perceptual and reputation sense that quickly becomes self-serving. The utilitarian calculus of the maximum good created with the minimum amount of harms (Elliott, 2007) then can no longer apply to the ethical situation because transparency has compelled outcomes or outsized implications over that which may be more ethical.

Philosophers (Licon, 2024; Metzen, 2025) agree with O'Neill (2002) who argued that transparency can encourage decision makers to be less honest, engaging in half-truths or compromised ideals to appear favorable, rendering transparent information not trustworthy. This problem is disqualifying of using transparency in a consequentialist paradigm, because the ethical solution output is tainted by incorrect or biased information input. A logical fallacy ensues, meaning transparency undermines the utilitarian calculus. Numerous problems with applying transparency a consequentialist or utilitarian approach are reviewed below, as well; however, incorrect input renders the greater good outcome calculation null before it begins. Virtue ethicists see no benefit of transparency as an amoral construct because it does nothing to practice the core virtues of building an ethical character. In fact, placing the burden of truth and discovery on the recipient of information is patently unethical to virtue ethicists.

Deontological philosophers who, akin their foundations in virtue ethics, base moral worth on principle rather than consequence (Scruton, 1982), are perhaps uniformly opposed to

the concept of transparency. Because transparency itself holds no principle to be evaluated, it is rarely discussed as even a remote part of ethics. This disdain for the concept is not in response to its overuse in the professions, but because it has no bearing on true moral analyses, which have rigorous conceptual frameworks posited, dissected, criticized, and reconstructed over thousands of years.

Kant asked for decision makers to judge independently, using their will to rationality and moral autonomy as guides rather than prudential self interest (Kant, 1963/1930). Although deontologists acknowledge that the self is part of this conception (Kant, 1997; Newton, 2019), analytic, research, and reason should drive moral decisions rather than bias that often results when using a transparency idea or determining what facts to offer. Transparency asks for comprises in moral autonomy. Deontologists hold that the internal locus of control of the autonomous decision maker, categorically obligated by duty to the moral law to do the same act other rational decision makers would undertake, is a superior ethical framework that seeks to use moral principle (Sullivan, 1989).

Control is a crucial variable of moral autonomy in this argument, though deontology insists that duty, respect, and good intention also alight with moral autonomy to uphold a moral principle that would be upheld in a perfect kingdom of ends (Kant, 1783/1977). Deontology offers these terms as analytically superior to the amoral term transparency due to their ability to further a kingdom of ends and harmonize with a prior good that is the ultimate ideal of normative ethics (Kant, 1948).

RQ 3: Superior alternatives to transparency exist through the traditions of moral philosophy and are summarized above and synthesized below for ease of implementation.

In conclusion, strategic communicators create risk when using an amoral concept to attempt to provide ethical direction. This ambiguity leaves the ethical framework open to interpretation, situational perspectives, and bias, as well as the lack of a foundation in moral intention that is needed to drive ethics.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, returning to an ethical issues management framework allows organizations to minimize risk introduced by a failure to include ethical analyses and management decision-making and organizational activities. In order to include ethics in the issues management process the adapted framework reviewed above is recommended. More specific inclusions include philosophical frameworks such as the principle of veracity from virtue ethics and a deontological decision-making framework based on Kant's three forms of the categorical imperative (1. duty to universal, rational moral principle; 2. dignity and respect, and 3. good intention). These moral frameworks offer well researched and rigorous means of including ethics in organizational decision-making. Yet, the ease and popularity of recommending transparency can be problematic by placing the burden of responsibility on receivers of information (stakeholders, publics, regulatory agencies, and so on) as well as by using disclosure as a substitute for truth.

Returning to the research questions listed above, studied through literature analysis from various fields outside of communication and compared with our own, and is illustrated by small case examples, reveals additional concerns. Transparency as an ethical construct has failed to meet a minimum standard in each of the Research Questions (RQs) posed in this research. To summarize, these RQs, with new answers in italic, are:

RQ. 1. Does transparency succeed or invite risk when used as a basis for ethics? *Transparency fails as a loan ethical concept because of its immoral status and invites risk.*

RQ. 2. Do other professions successfully employ transparency as an ethical construct? *No, transparency obscures or reduces moral intention in the professions, as seen from small cases in artificial intelligence, health, or energy.*

RQ. 3. Are there superior ethical standards than transparency? *Yes, numerous well conceptualized alternatives are offered in moral philosophy, as synthesized in the list below, most prominently guided by good intention or the pure moral will and the principle of veracity.*

In fact, analyses in case examples showed that the inclusion of an amoral term such as transparency can invite risk through numerous intentions and biases, instead of reducing that risk through ethical issues management. Transparency can be used as the defrayment of responsibility for an obfuscation and can be harmful to ethical decision making.

When asked if transparency can still be included as part of an ethical model, framework, or approach in strategic communication, the philosophically astute say no. Transparency is not based on good intention alone but is amoral, defined by how it is used, and thus should not be included in an ethical framework. Why would one weaken an ethical framework within an amoral concept that adds nothing other than risk? It is likely due to the colloquial usage and common understanding of transparency that lends itself to easy discussion among management. However, the lack of precision in the concept of transparency and how it is applied leave numerous definitional questions open, inviting risk rather than using ethical issues management to reduce uncertainty and risk.

In fact, inclusion of transparency would weaken the rest of the concepts by acting as an amoral non-contributor that introduced a level of risk and uncertainty inappropriate when conducting an *ethical* analysis. Transparency should be wholly replaced with ethical terms involving a sense of goodness and *a priori* moral worth, such as good intention, veracity, full contextual disclosure, honesty, dialogue, questioning, and understanding. Such concepts are geared toward moral worth - though not entirely incorruptible with the exception of the good moral will (Kant, 1785/1964). As the only incorruptible concept, good intention or good will should, of course, be a cornerstone of ethical analyses. The inclusion of good will is the primary concept which places the analysis firmly in the school of Kantian deontology, providing an unassailable cornerstone then assisted by the other two forms of the categorical imperative (those being duty, and humanity's dignity and respect), and grounding in rational moral autonomy.

Issues management, including rigorous ethical analyses, based on the superior and thoroughly conceptualized terms from moral philosophy will help organizations be more responsible and effective, and prevent numerous problems, disasters, or scandals. Using concepts based in moral philosophy also foster the ethical leadership of the communication

function in business ethics (Versteegt et al., 2025), in managing ethical issues with moral duty, excellent analytical prowess, and noteworthy philosophical mastery.

Synthesizing the shortcomings of transparency and offering stronger alternatives for implementation in practice

The numerous shortcomings of transparency as an ethical principle arise from its status as an amoral concept. It is simply without moral status and can be used for good or evil, productivity or corruption, and is neither ethical nor unethical a priori.

Transparency is a risky concept to discuss with ethics because it can be neither good nor bad but it is defined and evidenced by its usage. And, who knows? Intention for usage is vague and mutable, at best. To summarize the discussion above, transparency fails as an ethical construct due to numerous concerns, as listed below. Following this list are recommendations for implementing a normative, deontological ethical analysis that is rigorous and based on sound moral philosophy. The following list should be a helpful, practical guide for implementing the arguments presented in the above article.

Risks, Pitfalls, and Drawbacks of Transparency

- amoral status (intention is ambiguous)
- riskiness
- allows concealment
- obfuscates
- places burden of truth/discovery on external observers (locus of control is not with the ethical decision maker as it should be)
- denies moral agency and individual control
- denies autonomy in decision-making
- incapable of conveying moral intention
- can be used to scapegoat, victimize, gaslight, or blame
- can be regarded as “enough”
- assumes information access for all
- places the burden of data analyses on stakeholders
- may offer short-term unfair advantage in the marketplace
- can be used for insincere appeasement
- encourages half-truths and corruption
- Schrödinger’s cat problem - one does not know the intent behind transparency until it is “too late” and consequences have resulted
- data dumps can actually suppress laissez faire capitalism
- can meet the regulatory standard but not an ethical one

Kantian Alternatives to Transparency based on Moral Philosophy

- good intention or the pure moral will (the only concept that is considered good without qualification) (This is the kingdom of ends form of Kant's categorical imperative)
- veracity
- dignity and respect (The humanity form of Kant's categorical imperative)
- honesty
- universal decision holds equally for others (The duty form of Kant's categorical imperative)
- reversibility
- full disclosure
- contextual disclosure (Bowen, 2016)
- moral autonomy (locus of control is with the ethical decision maker)
- ethical issues management
- dialogue and symmetrical understanding
- virtuous character and integrity
- question asking is encouraged (understanding is goal rather than compliance)
- data collection to verify 'assumptions'
- rigorous testing
- openness eschewing secrecy
- duty and responsibility
- practiced virtuous character in problem solving and issues management
- acts harmonizing with a possible kingdom of ends where only good will remains

The above practical reconceptualization can be used in implementing ethical analysis as part of decision making in any type of organization, with any size or mission. Routinely using issues management to conduct ethical analyses using these terms will help professionals and their organizations make more reliably ethical decisions. It will also serve to enhance the credibility of the strategic communication discipline as one in line with the intellectually rigorous discipline of moral philosophy, and foster an understanding of the role of normative ethics in building more responsible and trustworthy organizations as positive contributors to society.

Biographical Note

Shannon A. Bowen, Ph.D., (University of Maryland) is a Professor at the University of South Carolina where she founded (along with Dr. Bruce Berger and Dr. Elina Erzikova) the *Global Strategic Communication Consortium* to study ethics and futurism in strategic communication, resulting in the *Handbook of Innovations in Strategic Communication: AI, Futurism and Directions* (2025). Her research areas are applied ethics, artificial intelligence (AI), internal communication, and issues management. Bowen won numerous awards and top papers, including the Robert L. Heath Award from ICA and the Jackson, Jackson and

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Notes

¹ Risk management is a financial tool not to be confused with the issues management of risks and problem solving.