VIRTUAL NETWORKS AND ETHICS: AN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH IN A NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION
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Abstract – This paper analyzes the opportunities offered by information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the related ethical issues they raise within the transparency practices of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Based upon a one-year study of a European NGO, the Italian Association of Blind People, it presents compelling empirical evidence concerning the main ethical, social and economic challenges that NGOs face in the development of more transparent relationships with the public and the related role that is played by ICTs. In particular, this study shows that, although attempting to be extremely transparent is held as an important ethical value, ICT-enabled information disclosure is limited by privacy and security concerns and by the pressure of financial supporters and benefactors and potential NGO competitors who vie for grants and donations. Finally, this paper presents implications and suggestions for managers of NGOs and policy makers.

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, recurrent scandals have involved not only the business sector (e.g. the Enron and Parmalat collapses), but also several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that were supposed to be engaged in charitable initiatives -- e.g. the U.N. Oil For Food Program or the U.N. sex scandals in Sierra Leone, Liberia and New Guinea and financial abuses and mismanagement at United Way of America. As a consequence, individuals have lost confidence in many institutions, even those claiming to have only humanitarian purposes.

While there is no ‘silver bullet’ that will prevent all questionable practices in organizations, transparency -- defined in the business sector as the degree of completeness of information, provided by each company to the market, concerning its business activities [1] -- has been recently advocated as being an important ethical practice able to improve the trust and confidence that stakeholders may have in business organizations [1,2] ‘Be transparent! and then you are a good citizen’ [3] This increasing societal interest in transparency has been acknowledged by firms around the world. Indeed, [4] has recently demonstrated that the most cited ethics principles in the codes of conduct of multinational companies have to do with transparency, honesty and fairness with the respective frequencies of 55, 50 and 45 percent.

In this context previous studies have argued that information and communication technologies (ICTs) can provide a valuable platform to those firms interested in improving their level of transparency [1,5] In particular, Internet-based technologies can assist a firm to increase the information available about its business practices and to create a direct relationship with geographically dispersed individuals. For example, a recent article published in Wired magazine introduces the term “radical transparency” [6, 7]. It refers to the capability of a firm’s top management to employ various Internet-based technologies such as blogs and collaborative websites to create a direct and continuous dialogue with customers and more in general with all stakeholders [7].

Despite the rising societal expectations of higher levels of organizational transparency overall and the new opportunities offered by ICTs, the current research literature has analyzed the perspectives related to this issue primarily in business or governmental organizations [8,9]. Based upon research carried out in the area of corporate accountability, in this study we will analyze the ethical issues related to transparency and the related role of ICTs in an NGO. In particular we will analyze the main ethical challenges that an NGO must confront in the development of more transparent relationships with the public and the related role played by ICTs. In order to reach these research objectives, we present a case study of an important Italian NGO -- the Italian Association of Blind People -- that has extensively adopted and currently employs ICTs in support of its attempts to be a transparent organization. We show that transparency is intended by this NGO as an important ethical value both in its relationship with the external public, as well as in the management of it activities with internal constituents. Moreover, we find that higher levels of transparency in the internal relationships are acknowledged as an ethical approach to manage human resources, to solve problems and to make important decisions. But, improvements in an NGO’s level of transparency are not always acceptable as various ethical and organizational forces can affect its transparency level. We identify five main forces that have a significant bearing upon the level of NGO transparency: privacy, security, financial supporters (donors), competing institutions and beneficiaries.

This paper contributes to the literature dealing with transparency in several ways. First, based upon Vaccaro’s [1] and Vaccaro and Madsen [2] models, we extend the understanding of ethical and socio-economical concerns related to transparency to the particular context of NGOs. Second, the paper provides an analysis of the contributions and the new perspectives offered by ICTs for the improvement of NGO transparency both in the relationships with the external public and in the management of internal activities. In this regard, it demonstrates that ICT is a “transformative technology” ([10] having the power to change social relationships and, in particular, by assisting an organization to attempt practices that will allow it to become “extremely transparent” [7].

The paper is organized as follows. The next section provides a literature review and details the research questions being posed. The third section presents the
research methodology adopted for the analysis of the case study. Section four provides detailed description of the uses made of ICTs by the Italian Association of Blind People in its attempt at transparency improvement. The fifth section discusses the insights that can be drawn from the case study and the related perspectives for further research. Finally, conclusions drawn from the work are provided.

2. Accountability in NGOs: how does Transparency Matter?

Concerns about accountability in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have increased over the past two decades [11]. Several factors have contributed to this rising interest: a series of highly publicized scandals that have eroded public confidence in nonprofit organization, the rapid growth of NGOs around the world [12] that spurred the need to spread more information concerning the activities of these institutions and the ever more relevant role NGOs currently maintain in the development of important social and economic initiatives at the national and international level [13]. In addition to the interest of the public’s opinion, scholars and researchers of applied ethics and accountability have argued that NGOs are special institutions that should achieve excellence in accountability and social responsibility. Indeed, NGOs are considered to have a heightened moral obligation to act in the public interest and as a result they must be accountable for what they publicly declare and for the positions that they take through the development of their social and economic initiatives [14, 15, 16].

Different ways to respond to this increasing demand for accountability were recently implemented by national governments (e.g. the U.S., Australia), inter-governmental institutions (e.g. the United Nations and its Food and Agriculture Organization) and by the NGOs themselves. National and inter-governmental institutions have increased the amount of documentations NGOs have to provide in order to receive further financial backing. On the other hand, NGOs have unilaterally developed and implemented different strategies to improve their accountability. Ebrahim’s [11] taxonomy distinguishes between attempts as: reports and disclosure statements, performance assessments and evaluations, participation, self-regulation, and social audits.

Another way to understand the NGO accountability process is to distinguish between external and internal accountability practices [17, 18]. The first typology refers to the reporting of information concerning various NGOs’ practices to national and international institutions through the fulfillment of formal documentation, which is often required by certain regulatory agencies. Internal accountability is related instead to the disclosure of detailed information concerning the initiatives and activities of an NGO to all its other stakeholders outside of national and international agencies.

In this context, it seems evident that transparency represents an interesting perspective related to the issue of NGOs’ accountability. Several authors [19, 16, 14] have in fact suggested that, when considering mechanisms for ensuring accountability, the most obvious is to ensure that NGOs are transparent. A brief overview of the research literature in business ethics and accountability confirms that transparency is very often advocated as the ingredient necessary for the development of more trustworthy and accountable institutions. For example, the recent report of Independent Sector, a coalition of NGOs and other organizations addressing various issues confronting charitable giving in the US, titled “Strengthening Transparency, Governance, Accountability of Charitable Organizations” (2005, pp.5) maintains that “Every charitable organization should, as a recommended practice, provide more detailed information about its operations, including methods it uses to evaluate the outcomes of programs, to the public through its annual report, website, and other means.” Moreover, Cohen [20] has pointed out the need to improve the transparency of the relationships between NGOs and three important stakeholders, i.e. governments, financial supporters and the public.

It’s worth nothing that the ever more acclaimed importance of transparency is due, in part, not only to the pressure of civil society and of governmental institutions seeking more detailed information concerning the practices of these organizations, but also to the new opportunities that have arisen with the diffusion of Internet-based technologies that have been developed globally. With respect to the business sector, Tapscott and Ricoll [5] have argued that information and communication technologies (ICTs) can transform commercial organizations in naked corporations, i.e. firms without secrets, whose business practices and activities are public and very well known. Vaccaro and Madsen [2] detailed the case of a multinational firm that has effectively employed Internet-based technologies to increase its transparency and thereby strengthen the trust of its customers resulting in positive commercial impact.

Despite of the increasing societal and institutional demand for transparency and the new and more effective opportunities offered by ICTs to improve information availability, NGOs seem to be resistant in improving their transparency levels. For example in 2003, the Global Accountability Report [21] claimed that international NGOs provided little online information about their activities compared with other organizations. Although scholars and practitioners [e.g. 21, 16] have referred to this evidence, there are no studies that have analyzed the causes of it. One possible explanation is that the attempt to disclose relevant information concerning NGO practices may raise a variety of other ethical issues that, in turn, limit the kind and amount of information that can be made available. For example, [1] has presented a framework demonstrating that transparency...
improvements in business are accompanied by concerns for the privacy and security of a firm’s stakeholders. Moreover, financial forces, such the threat of competing institutions, can impinge upon the inclination of a firm to shift toward higher transparency levels [2]. Based upon several previous studies into the conditions of organizational transparency, this work intends to extend the current literature to an analysis of the impact of ICTs on NGOs transparency and the related ethical issues that can arise. Thus, our research questions are: How do ICTs assist NGOs to increase the transparency of their operations so that they can become more accountable? What are the main ethical challenges that NGOs face in the development of more transparent relationships with their various stakeholders?

3. Research Method

As one way to address these research questions, this study presents the case of Unione Italiana Ciechi e Ipovedenti (UICI) <http://www.uiciechi.it/>. It is part of a four-year research project designed to understand the ethical issues associated with the impact of ICTs on the relationship between different kinds of organizations such as corporations, NGOs, higher education institutions and society at large. The selection of this case has been made for several reasons. First, this NGO recognized transparency as an important ethical and organizational issue. This feature is significant to analyze because it can show how a strong belief in the value of transparency can lead to the transformation of organizational processes and practices. Second, over the last decade UICI has invested significant amounts of financial and organizational resources in the implementation of ICT tools, and in particular Internet-based technologies. Finally, during the preliminary case study selection we recognized this organization as an example of one attempting to be “extremely transparent.” The last two features are very important to analyze and understand how ICTs can be effectively employed to reach high degrees of transparency. The generalization of the empirical insights of this paper will be focused on the opportunities offered by ICTs to transform organizations from opaque into “extremely transparent” and on the potential related ethical issues associated with this process.

The research questions that we intended to address led us to the choice of conducting an exploratory study of a given case example. Moreover, the lack of ad hoc models related to the issues of transparency in NGO practices suggested adopting an exploratory approach for data gathering purposes. Data gathering was performed in four main ways: direct observation of UICI’s web sites, interviews with UICI personnel and with its stakeholders, reviews of internal UICI documents and finally, reviews of publicly available reports (e.g. reports of trade unions, market studies). We observed UICI’s web site bi-

1 It is worth noting that in Italy, NGOs coincide with non-profit organizations. As a consequence this case study offers insights related to a non-profit non governmental organization.

monthly for 16 months. We monitored eventual site changes or the creation of new parts of the web site (e.g. new web pages, online communities, etc.) verifying the related impact on the organization’s level of transparency. For example, during the fifth month of observation, we noted that UICI launched a new version of its website with a resulting increase in the amount of information being made available to the general public. We recognized such a modification as an increase in the company’s overall level of transparency.

Moreover, we conducted interviews with a set of diverse stakeholders: employees, managers, suppliers, beneficiaries, collaborators, etc. Interviews followed two different approaches: open interviews [22] during which interviewees were asked generic questions about current activities of the organization, the status of ICT-related projects, etc., and focused interviews [22] during which the respondent was interviewed for thirty-five to forty minutes using a specific, but flexible, set of questions. In addition, managers provided internal documents in order to validate and integrate the results of the interviews. Finally, we analyzed official documents from UICI over the last 5 years such as its annual reports, protocols with other institutions, etc.

A major concern with our research method was the “trustworthiness” [23, 24] of the information obtained, i.e. the external and internal validity and reliability of the qualitative data gathered throughout the study. The external validity of our findings, i.e., establishing the domain to which the findings of this study can be generalized and applied [25, pp.23], is verified by: a) detailed descriptions of the organizational and the environmental context b) development of interviews with a wide range of stakeholders c) development of near-verbatim transcripts of interviews. Reliability, i.e., demonstrating that the operations of this study can be repeated with the same results [25, pp.33], is verified by: a) data triangulation between the different available information sources b) protecting the confidentiality of interviewees in order to prevent biased answers and c) a detailed description of the procedures adopted during data gathering (e.g. methodology adopted for interviews). For example, data gathered through the interviews of UICI’s employees of regional offices were triangulated with: a) statements provided by the staff of the National headquarters, b) data provided by UICI’s beneficiaries, and, c) the information available from the UICI website and those of its partners. Internal validity, i.e., establishing causal relationships between the phenomena analyzed in this study [25, pp.23], is assured by a) our extended analysis of each organization’s web site, b) triangulation of information sources and c) peer debriefing (one of the authors discussed with several UICI’s stakeholders the results of the study).

4. Unione Italiana Ciechi e degli Ipovedenti

The Italian Union of Blind People, Unione Italiana dei Ciechi e degli Ipovedenti-ONLUS (UICI), was founded in 1920 in Genoa (Italy) with “the only aim
to support and integrate blind people in society” (Art.3, Statuto Sociale). This NGO is involved in a variety of activities and services in support of blind people such as their representation in governmental institutions, the organization and management of schools for people affected by ocular diseases, the translation of newspapers and other publications in Braille language, etc.

The UICI has its organization geographically distributed throughout the country of Italy. Its headquarters is located in Rome and it has at least one center in each Italian province. Since 1996, Internet-based technologies are extensively used by UICI to: a) share important information with its beneficiaries, other members and with the public and b) provide several online services. Indeed, given the geographical dispersion of blind people in Italy, the Internet is considered by UICI management as an indispensable tool having the potential to increase the quality of its services and to improve the effectiveness of its relationships with beneficiaries, members, other institutions and the public in general.

During the last decade, UICI’s website has been constantly modified and improved through the creation of new sections, services and links to other institutions of potential interest to blind people. According to the interviews we conducted with several UICI managers, the use of the website has gone through at least two different phases. During the first phase, which concluded late in the 1990s, the website was created with the aim of briefly providing very general information about UICI activities. However, the more recent versions of the website were developed with the idea to provide specific information necessary to understand current and forthcoming activities at the NGO and to create a direct relationship between it, the community of blind people and the public. The current version of the UICI website is divided in 17 main sections: a Welcome and Preliminary Information, an Online Radio, Organization Structure, Section for people with partial visual capabilities, Documents, Services, Opportunities for Volunteers, News, an Online Forum, National Meetings, UICI friend institutions, International Activities, Online Library, Contacts, Multimedia Archive, Electronic Magazines and Newspapers and the Website’s Observatory. We classified six main kinds of information categories available on the website: organization structure, official documents, internal reports, services/products, partnerships and forum & contacts. A synthetic description of the information disclosed in the UICI’s website is reported in Table 1.

Although the website provides very detailed information concerning UICI activities, the interviews with managers of this NGO have confirmed that several ethical and economic/social forces have affected information disclosures made by this NGO. In particular, we have found at least five forces affecting UICI’s transparency policy. Two of them are related to ethical concerns, namely, privacy and security, while the other three -- the pressure of benefactors, the threat of competitors and the information requests of beneficiaries - are related to financial/social forces. Table 1 also details the forces that impact disclosure in each of the aforementioned information categories.

Privacy issues play a very important role in the decision about what information should and should not be disclosed by the UICI. In addition to Italian law regulating privacy matters, UICI is particularly interested in following and respecting the privacy expectations of its beneficiaries and other stakeholders. Indeed, according to the interviews, blind people expect “that our personal identity and relationship with UICI should be maintained completely confidential … shared neither with other beneficiaries, nor with normal [i.e. people without vision diseases or damages] people” [Interview, 2006]. As a result of this privacy expectation, UICI carefully avoid the disclosure of personal information about its beneficiaries and employees and provides only personal information concerning its top management of the UICI National and local centers.

Another important ethical force that moderates UICI’s transparency is security. The disclosure of detailed information concerning UICI activities may be exploited for fraudulent purposes. For example, the information concerning financial transfers to UICI beneficiaries or to other institutions is maintained confidential in order to avoid potential robberies. By the same token, personal information of UICI managers who reside in areas with high levels of criminality – such as the southern part of Italy – is not available on the website for obvious security reasons. The avoidance of identity theft would also be a prudent concern in the process of deciding what information to disclose or not.

According to some of those who were interviewed, two categories of stakeholders recently have pressured UICI to improve its level of transparency. They are UICI members and beneficiaries. All interviews confirmed that UICI members are extremely interested in social responsibility and business ethics issues and in the role played by UICI in Italian society. As stated above, this NGO is the official representative organization of blind people before the Italian government. As a consequence, UICI members expect that the activities and the goals of this NGO will be “extremely clear not only inside the community of the blind people but also in civil society” [Interview, 2006]. According to a manager of a regional UICI office, “several blind people identify themselves with our association, so, they ask UICI to share detailed information concerning its activities because they intend it as a way to express their ideas and rights to non-blind people” (Interview, 2006). A similar perspective was recently provided by the UICI National President in a long letter he wrote to the national delegates (Daniele, 2005). Transparency is also intended as a way to illustrate to all stakeholders that the financial support provided by

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2 It is interesting to note that one of the authors – who had extensively analyzed this website at length – discovered during the interviewing process that he was more well informed of the nature of some specific UICI practices than were some of its top managers.
the Italian government is appropriately used, and that UICI generally addresses real humanitarian rather than political or business objectives. As a consequence, UICI is expected to be “very careful, precise and satisfactory in providing information to the public...because it’s the only way to convince others about the importance of our organization... it’s impact on blind people and in turn on society” [Interview, 2006]. Among others, UICI undertook a very interesting ‘extreme transparency’ initiative: its board of the executive directors regularly posts on UICI’s website all complete vocal recordings of its meetings, during which the most important decisions for the future of UICI’s are made.

According to the interviews, transparency is also acknowledged as a necessary ethical requirement to manage human resources fairly, to solve problems and to make important organizational decisions. Although UICI’s employees never pressed for improvements in the transparency practices at the NGO, top executives decided to adopt transparency initiatives in the management of internal relationships as well. This policy had a favorable reaction throughout the NGO. For example, UICI’s General Direction Office posts online the annual budget for administrative and human resources expenses. According to a manager of a regional unit of this NGO “the fact we know how much the General Direction spends assure us that money is well spent... because they know that I can ask them the reasons for each expense” (Interview). By the same token, an employee of another regional unit maintained that “…the fact I know the salaries of my colleagues assures me I am fairly paid and that there are not preferences…” [Interview]. Moreover, transparency is known by internal stakeholders as a policy in support of organizational decision-making processes because “if everyone here knows we have a problem, he/she can offer their solution...a lot of times we do not have any idea of how to resolve a problem and someone of another office or a beneficiary arrives with the solution...” (Interview).

UICI’s financial benefactors and donors represent another major societal force affecting this NGO’s level of transparency. The principal UICI supporters are the Italian government, private companies, individual donors and the European Union. Financial supporters, and in particular governmental institutions and agencies, very often request detailed information on how their financial contributions are being expended. The policy currently in force at UICI is to prepare ad hoc documents with formats and the degree of detail required by financial benefactors and to post only a synthetic document that has less detailed, aggregated data concerning financial allocations on the website. According to interviewees, this use of data aggregation is a very suitable policy because it guarantees, at the same time, the disclosure of information that could be of interest to stakeholders, the respect of legislative norms and ethical expectations of employees and beneficiaries. Finally, such a policy of transparency avoids sharing excessive data that, in turn, paradoxically reduces the transparency level of an organization by creating an inordinate amount of information that is burdensome for the end user and that might be called “data asphyxia.”

The last force we identified as having an impact on UICI transparency is represented by potential and present competitors. The last decade has witnessed an unexpected rise of NGOs in Italy and all over the world. As a consequence, fund raising has become very difficult for NGOs since there is a real competition in the market for benefactors and charitable donations. Although UICI is a unique national organization representing blind people in Governmental institutions, there are several NGOs working in areas very closely related to UICI and that have started to be competitive in obtaining national and regional grants for special interest groups that aid people with disabilities of many kinds. As a consequence, information disclosure at UICI is constrained in what regard information and data that can be exploited by competing NGO for the application to grant and other financial supports.

It is worth noting that the Italian government does not play a role in determining the level of NGO transparency. Indeed, the legal requirements for detailed reports and documents acted by Italian Governmental agencies are only used to the check the appropriateness of NGO expenditures and there are no regulations requiring that NGOs engage in information disclosure to other stakeholders such as beneficiaries and individual donors. In other words, it would appear that UICI is a proactive organization when it comes to transparency matters.

5. Discussion

The analysis of this case confirms that ICTs have the potential to improve an NGO’s capabilities to disclose information concerning their practices and to develop more effective and direct relationships with the public by attempting to become extremely transparent. It has showed that the proper use of Internet-based technologies can transform an NGO from an opaque organization to one that values transparency because it can empower stakeholders. For example, the possibility to download the audio recording of all board meetings from the UICI website allows stakeholders to witness and virtually participate in important moments of this organization and, consequently, to acquire very detailed information concerning its current practices and objectives. By the same token, fairness in stakeholder relations is advanced when the UICI website allows any stakeholder to learn how financial resources are distributed among departments and to see what the salaries of top managers of the organization happen to be.

The results of this study confirm previous ones – e.g. [7, 10, 26, 27] that have identified virtual tools as “transformative technologies” capable of reshaping the activities of individuals and the practices of groups into new forms of social behavior. In particular, Internet-based technologies have the potential to revolutionize NGO’s internal and external relationships due to their capability...
to store and transmit almost infinite amounts of information without time and space constrains. It is worth noting that UICI intends transparency as an important ethical value both with respect to its relationship with the external public as well as with its internal members. In particular, the development of transparent relationships with the public and with beneficiaries is understood as a way to demonstrate that donations and other financial resources are appropriately disbursed to pursue humanitarian objectives. In this instance, transparency is a form of accountability. Moreover, we found that the adoption of higher levels of transparency in the development of internal relationships is acknowledged as a necessary ethical requirement to fairly manage human resources, to solve problems and to make important decisions. In these instances, transparency takes on the form of organizational governance.

On the other hand, improvements of an NGO transparency are not always considered ethically acceptable or proper and there are limits to the level which NGOs and other organizations can be transparent. Indeed, various forces can affect the level and degree of transparency at an NGO. Our exploratory analysis has led to the identification of five main forces – two of which have to do with ethics and three that relate to organizational concerns -- that have a significant bearing upon how extreme transparency can be implemented at an NGO. They are privacy, security, financial supporters (donors), competing institutions and beneficiaries.

Improvements in an NGO’s transparency have to take into account of the privacy of employees and beneficiaries. Indeed, UICI has to limit the detail of information concerning its current practices in order to respect the privacy that has been instated by law as well as the privacy expectations of their employees and beneficiaries that may surpass legal requirements. This is a very important issue in the case we have analyzed since the beneficiaries are people with serious handicaps that very often have an expectation of maintaining their complete anonymity. By the same token, employees expect that their personal data (financial, medical, etc.) will be considered confidential information and not be publicly disclosed.

Another important ethical force affecting the NGO’s transparency is security. The disclosure of detailed information about the practices of an NGO can threaten individuals, groups and the NGO itself needs to be carefully considered. For example, information concerning financial transfers between different centers of the same NGO or from the NGO to beneficiaries can be exploited for fraudulent purposes, such as identity theft. Similarly, the personal information of upper level managers in these organizations should be kept hidden in order to protect their safety and those of their relatives. Nevertheless, our case confirmed that the security issue is often dependent on the geographic and environmental conditions where the NGOs and its stakeholders are located.

The transparency of NGOs can be affected not only by the two aforementioned ethical issues, but at least by other three social/economic forces. The first is represented by potential competitors. Although NGOs are generally founded for humanitarian purposes, they very often compete with other similar institutions to receive financial support from the Government and from other Institutions such as the European Union. The development of a “market for humanitarian initiatives” consequently affects the transparency of NGOs. Indeed, the spread of specific information concerning current and forthcoming activities of an NGO can be exploited by other competing NGOs to concur for a grant or for the creation of a competing service.

The second economic/social force is represented by financial supporters. A big part of NGOs endowment is generally based on the donations of individuals, other organizations and Governmental Institutions. Since every single supporter tends to influence NGOs decision making processes, higher levels of transparency can cause the reaction of those supporters that disagree with the decision made by the NGO. On the other hand, any financial supporter is interested to know how the money disbursed was used by the NGO. The information strategy adopted by UICI is to create ad hoc reports that are sent directly to each financial supporter and lately to post on the website only part of the data provided to each supporter.

An interesting result concerns the use of data aggregation policies to address contrasting transparency expectations, such as the requests of more detailed information acted by benefactors versus data protection expectations of beneficiaries and employees. In such cases, data aggregation allows to hidden sensible data, i.e. information whose spread could cause the infringement of ethical expectation and/or legal norms, but at the same time to assure the requested levels of information transparency. Although this policy is not easy to implement in everyday activities – indeed it requests very accurate scrutiny of legislative norms and stakeholders’ ethical expectations – it has the additional potential advantage to resolve the dilemma raised when the excess of information reduce the overall transparency of an organization due to “data asphyxia”. In this latter case, the increase of the amount of available information is counterproductive of an organization transparency because every person is capable to effectively read and retain a limited number of data.

The results of this study open new perspectives for research and managerial practice. First, it has shown that ICTs can be effectively used to improve internal and external transparency at NGOs. Moreover, increases in information transparency are effective ways to address the issue of accountability. As a consequence, policy makers and other practitioners should work on the implementation of routines and processes that – through the use of ICTs – will promote a progressive increase of transparency. Second, this study has shown that the process of data aggregation is very effective in resolving
contrasting transparency forces, but it is extremely difficult to implement due to the need to address a variety of legislative norms and social/ethical expectations at the same time. Future managerial practice should focus on the development of useful references and norms that can help NGO managers to implement data aggregation.

Finally, this study demonstrates that the main forces affecting increases in the levels of organizational transparency are an NGO’s beneficiaries, on the one hand, and its financial benefactors, on the other. Although Governmental agencies request detailed documents concerning the allocation of public funding, this study of UICI shows that European, national and regional governmental institutions do not make regulatory demands concerning an NGO’s transparency policy with its other stakeholders. An important implication for public policy makers should consequently concern the development of legislative norms on transparency levels that NGO should adopt in the relationships with the public.

The results of this study open new avenues for further theoretical and empirical research. First, while this work performs an explorative empirical analysis on the potentialities of ICTs to support transparency initiatives and on some related ethical issues, further research should focus on the current use of ICTs in NGOs and on the related ethical problems perceived by stakeholders in relation to the issues of transparency. For example, we expect that extensive stakeholder surveys will point out the existence of other ethical matters (e.g. protection of intellectual property) associated with attempt by organizations to achieve transparency. Moreover, people from diverse social and cultural environments may see different ethical problems associated with transparency and these differences need to be measured and understood.

We also believe that additional empirical research needs to be completed (i.e. micro-level case study research) concerning how ICTs can be used in support of organizational attempts at transparency. Since the results of a single case study such as the one found in this paper cannot be generalized, it is likely that ICTs, and in particular internet-based technologies, can offer various ways to support internal and external transparency other than those described in this study.

Finally, new theoretical and empirical investigation should focus on the relationships that might exist between internal and external transparency. The case analyzed in this paper presents an organization that intends and sees external and internal transparency as two distinct issues. We believe that these two different organizational dimensions of transparency coexist and that they can affect one another mutually. For example, making information transparently available within an NGO can create a problem if an employee of that organization moves to another similar one and takes such information from their former employer to the new position and shares it there. In such situations an external competitor NGO now has knowledge meant only for the eyes of internal stakeholders. Such problems and their solutions will become the focus for future research.

6. Conclusion

By presenting an empirical analysis on the impact of ICTs on an NGO’s attempt to be extremely transparent and on the ethical issues associated with such attempts, this paper offers a point of connection between the domains of business ethics, information ethics and public policy. We believe that transparency can open a common point of discussion between such different research fields where ethics, technology, business and public policy matters merge in personal, organizational and social life. “Transparency is the word of our time’ [28] was recently proclaimed in the New York Times. This study shows that transparency is not just a fancy word for our time, but also a new contemporary ethical issue now and for the coming future. We believe that academic research cannot miss the opportunity to address this new ethical challenge when organizations attempt to be extremely transparent.

References


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<th>INFORMATION TYPELOGY</th>
<th>BRIEF DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>ETHICAL CONCERNS</th>
<th>ECONOMIC-SOCIAL INHIBITORS</th>
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| ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE     | a) Organization Structure (Detailed biographic information of the President, data and links to the website of regional centers)  
                           b) List of National and Regional boards and their members compositions  
                           c) List of Administrative Managers, Contact person  
                           Ex.                                                                 | Privacy          | Competitors               |
| OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS & FINANCIAL DATA | a) Official regulations for the management of financial resources  
                           b) Balance sheet                                                                 | -                | -                         |
| INTERNAL DOCUMENTS           | a) Detailed internal reports of the organization expenses and investment during previous fiscal years  
                           b) Audios of the meetings of the National Board committee  
                           c) All internal communications concerning administrative, organization, logistic, fiscal decisions made by every National committee  
                           Ex.                                                                 | Security & Privacy | Competitors               |
| SERVICES                     | a) Radio  
                           b) Audio Books online  
                           c) Newspapers online  
                           d) Subscriptions to mailing lists  
                           Ex.                                                                 | Security          | Competitors               |
| PARTNERSHIPS                 | a) Link, contact person and document of protocol agreements with other organizations that support blind people  
                           b) Event and activities organized in collaboration with National and International Partners | -                | -                         |
| FORUMS & CONTACTS            | a) Online forums (e.g. Professional Education, Equal opportunities for blind students)  
                           b) List of e-mail addresses of President and Headquarters offices  
                           c) List of e-mail addresses of UICI boards (e.g. board of equal opportunities, board of sports and entertainment)  
                           d) List of e-mail addresses of local offices                                                                 | Security          | Competitors               |

Table 1: Information typologies available on the UICI website and their related ethical concerns or economic/social inhibitors.