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Hiding in Plain Sight - Suspicious Transparency and the Lessons of Literature

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ABSTRACT

Transparency is widely hailed as a cure for distrust, yet it frequently breeds the very suspicion it promises to dispel. Starting from the Epstein files and "Trumparency," this paper shows how the rhetoric of full disclosure fuels conspiratorial doubt. Building on critical transparency studies, it explains why transparency and secrecy are intertwined, and why transparency discourse shares with conspiracy theory the premise of a hidden "backstage." Yet concealment does not necessarily imply withholding access: evidence can be fully displayed and still go unseen, more effectively than behind a locked door. Literature—and detective fiction in particular—knows this all too well. The paper turns to literary strategies for hiding "in plain sight," and, from Poe and Conan Doyle to Christie, Chesterton and Borges, proposes a typology of five: attention redirection, informational drowning, mimetic camouflage, inferential misleading, and contractual exploitation. Transposed to political communication, these strategies help identify how

| concludes with the White House's AI chatbot America.gov, where opacity arises from excessive disclosure, not from withholding.

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1. From Transparency to Trumparency

Few metaphors have proved as successful in contemporary discourse as that of transparency, which promises to cure all ills at once, simply by letting everything be seen. Transparency is now widely hailed as a near-magical remedy for every form of evil, from the abuses of arbitrary power and the corruption of elites to the opacity of bureaucracies and the alienation of individuals. More than ever, it is called to solve the issue of distrust in public institutions. Yet the evidence points to a more ambivalent relationship. Every promise to "shed light" presupposes that something may be hidden in the shadows, so that the demand for openness tends to cultivate the very suspicion it claims to dispel. The more that is disclosed, the more the remainder, whatever has been redacted, delayed or left unsaid, appears to be the part that matters. Transparency thus risks becoming self-defeating: each disclosure invites new questions, and each omission, however justified, can be read as proof of concealment. This paradox is particularly acute in a political climate where trust in institutions is already eroded and where rumors circulate faster than light. It is in this context that the Epstein affair has unfolded in the United States, and with it the troubled fate of the transparency rhetoric of the Trump administration.

"These spirits that I have summoned, I can no longer be rid of them." Like Goethe's sorcerer's apprentice, who loses control of the occult forces he has rashly invoked, Donald Trump has proved unable to close the trap of the Epstein affair, the very affair whose name served him as an incantation throughout his first presidency. In 2024, with the election campaign in full swing, Trump announced that, if re-elected, he would immediately declassify all documents related to the Jeffrey Epstein case, as well as other sensitive files, such as those concerning the assassination of J.F. Kennedy or the 09/11 attacks. This campaign promise was part of an openly acknowledged rivalry with a former occupant of the White House, Barack Obama, who had also pledged to lead "the most transparent presidency in history" ([Obama, 2009](#)). Upon his re-election in 2025, it quickly became clear that Trump would not establish his superiority through a significant volume of declassified documents, but through a rhetorical style: that of plain speaking, of unfiltered speech.

Borrowing a term coined by Sara Guindani ([Guindani, 2019](#)), we might call this idiosyncratic interpretation of transparency "Trumparency". Since then, its distinctive features have only become clearer, and it is now possible to identify its markers: under the rule of "trumparency," permanent exposure serves as

argument, and the performative effect of announcement replaces verification. For Trump's loyalists, the more subjective, excessive, or approximate the discourse, the more sincere it will be perceived to be. Unpredictability becomes the ultimate guarantee of candor. As for the voluminous Epstein file, its release, when it finally came, settled nothing.

2. Epstein Files: The Conspiratorial Boomerang

Having tirelessly galvanized his electoral base through a barrage of conspiratorial insinuations about the murky circumstances surrounding the death of the pedophile financier in 2019, Trump has awakened spirits that he has been unable to shake off. Throughout 2025, he did, admittedly, deploy every means to urge Americans to turn the page. As late as July 2025, he exhorted his supporters to stop focusing on the Jeffrey Epstein affair, calling it a "waste of time and energy" and repeating the nonsensical assertion that the Epstein case was a Democratic set-up designed to harm him. But to no avail: discontent continued to grow within his own electoral base, driven by MAGA influencers. In November 2025, the House of Representatives voted 427 to 1 for the Epstein Files Transparency Act, which Trump signed on 19 November. The law requires the Attorney General of the United States to "make publicly available" all files related to the case. (Epstein Files Transparency Act, 2025). Donald Trump eventually yielded. The release was meant to silence suspicion once and for all and to allow the president to regain control of the discourse of transparency.

It did not. A first tranche appeared on 19 December 2025, and the Department of Justice missed the statutory deadline for completing the release. On January 30, 2026, the Department of Justice published more than three million additional pages, bringing the total release to nearly 3.5 million pages, a process which Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche described as meant to "ensure transparency to the American people." ([Justice, 2026](#)). Heavily redacted, with struck-through dates and obscured names, these documents in fact provided little clarification. This strategy is borrowed directly from the psychology of communication: that of informational saturation, in which everything is done so that the event eclipses the content. The release also proved careless where it mattered most. Survivors later told the Senate Judiciary Committee that it had exposed them to privacy and safety risks, even as the names of powerful men remained hidden.

This overlooks the fact that the promise of transparency feeds on a rhetoric of suspicion: one can promise to shed full light only where something is supposedly afoot in the shadows, and the demystifier owes his existence solely to that of a plot. The MAGA base had long been primed for the most fanciful hypotheses, the high point being the notorious "Pizzagate," named after the absurd theory linking Hillary Clinton to a pedophile ring allegedly run from the basement of a pizzeria in Washington. When certain Trump supporters pointed out that the word "pizza"

recurs frequently in the thousands of pages of the "Epstein library," the Pizzagate theory was quickly put back on the loom.

The mechanism is well known and was studied by pioneers of social psychology, Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman, who gathered their findings after the war in the classic of the genre, *The Psychology of Rumor* ([Allport & Postman, 1947](#)). Rumor fulfils identifiable functions insofar as it seeks to reduce anxiety in the face of uncertainty while corroborating deeply rooted beliefs. Donald Trump's first presidential victory in 2016 drew on precisely such convictions: that Washington was controlled by corrupt elites operating behind the scenes to manipulate the country. The promise to "drain the swamp" in Washington rested on a series of allegations each more grotesque than the last. But while one may be able to control the origin of a rumor, no one can control its propagation.

What the White House strategists seem not to have fully grasped is that the effects of "transparentism" are not confined to partisan boundaries. In November 2025, immediately after ordering the release of the documents, the American president took to Truth Social to invoke the moralizing refrain on which transparentists of all stripes rely: "we have nothing to hide." He then promptly declared that it was "time to move on from this Democrat hoax." The implication was unmistakable: those who have nothing to hide have nothing to fear from disclosure—but do not be fooled, for someone must have been behind the conspiracy after all. Such statements were hardly likely to reassure an online sphere already steeped in conspiratorial thinking. For how could one hear the injunction to "move along, there's nothing to see" without also hearing its darker counterpart: "move along—we have nothing to show you"?

Doubt distils its poison slowly, but once it has taken firm root, its evil spirits are hard to exorcise—a lesson the apprentice sorcerer has learned the hard way. The discovery of the global ramifications of the Epstein network has triggered an earthquake whose aftershocks have not yet subsided. Congressional inquiries have continued: members of Congress were given access to unredacted files, and Ghislaine Maxwell invoked the Fifth Amendment before the House Oversight Committee. Her lawyer then made the strange claim that she would speak "honestly if granted clemency," an offer that sits oddly with the logic of transparency, since truth is promised only in exchange for a pardon. These tremors have also eroded one of the hallmarks of Trumpism: its own idiosyncratic version of transparency. For a long time, government spokespeople had been tasked with relentlessly hammering home this very message. Pam Bondi, like many of her colleagues, had repeated it to anyone willing to listen: *this was—and is—the most transparent presidency in history*. In April 2026, Trump removed her as attorney general, after her handling of the Epstein files had made Bondi a target even of angry conservatives. As it were, the slogan's most prominent guarantor thus fell victim to the affair it was meant to dispel. Vice President J.D.

Vance has since conceded that the administration "mishandled" the release, a rare admission in a presidency that seldom concedes error.

3. Transparency Alone Will Never Restore Trust

For a surprisingly long period, observers were inclined to see in Trump's rambling rhetoric, in its disorderly and impassioned manner, a token of authenticity that seemed to set him apart from what was perceived as the strategic calculation of the establishment. Empirical research has documented this effect. Perceived authenticity turns out to be a product not only of partisan preference but of unfettered, unscripted speech itself ([Pillow et al., 2018](#)). Trump's amateurish, norm-violating communication style was read as the mark of an "authentic outsider" ([Enli, 2017](#)), and his transgressive delivery resonated with audiences more than his opponent's controlled performance ([Bucy et al., 2020](#)). For voters who feel that the establishment no longer represents them, a "lying demagogue" can indeed appear as a more authentic champion of their interests, because his lies and violations of norms signal a break with that establishment. Authenticity is thus attributed to manner rather than to accuracy, so that although he might take some liberties with the truth, for his followers Trump had rehabilitated veracity. Seen in this light, plain speaking functions as a credential that substitutes for verification. This allowed the administration to plant the idea that it was the most transparent presidency in American history, despite multiple maneuvers of concealment—whether the refusal to disclose the president's tax returns, the lists of donors to the White House ballroom project, or extrajudicial killings against civilian vessels in international waters

In the eyes of his most fervent supporters, the mere suspicion that certain files in the vast Epstein dossier may have been deliberately withheld casts this claim in a more ambivalent light. Later disclosures have only fed that doubt. Documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act show that senior FBI officials closely followed the redaction of Epstein material as early as March 2025. The black bars that strike through the pages, masking names, dates, and whole paragraphs, have become the strangest emblem of this affair: a transparency that displays its own opacity, and whose most eloquent feature is what it refuses to show. Each bar is at once a legal precaution for protecting victims' identities and an invitation to speculate, and in the economy of suspicion the blacked-out line weighs more than the legible one.

Beyond the Trump case, and beyond the Epstein files, critical transparency studies have shown why greater disclosure cannot, by itself, restore shaken trust. The Epstein affair offers a particularly striking illustration of how the rhetoric of transparency can remain inseparable from the production of suspicion. Clare Birchall, one of the most prominent voices within critical transparency studies,

has extensively analyzed this mechanism: governments and corporations use open data initiatives to decide *what* to reveal, essentially using transparency as a form of camouflage or obfuscation to hide deeper systemic realities. In that respect, transparency and secrecy should not be seen as polar opposites, but rather as symbiotically intertwined operations ([Birchall, 2011](#)).

The paradox can be understood through Goodhart's law stating that "when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure". What the economist Charles Goodhart observed in monetary policies is true in other contexts too: once openness is pursued as an objective to be demonstrated, rather than as a by-product of honest practice, it ceases to be a reliable indicator of anything. As André Gide brilliantly put it, you can't at the same time *be* sincere and *appear* to be so. In another register, in her work on audit cultures, Marily Strathern showed how systems of accountability do not merely record existing practices; they transform them and once performance is subject to scrutiny, actors begin to adapt their behavior to the criteria by which they will be judged ([Strathern, 2000](#)). Organizations thus learn to manage their appearance. The outcome is a staged performance: a carefully calibrated representation that can become detached from the complexity of everyday practice. This, in turn, sets the suspicion engine into motion, and once observers recognize that what is displayed has been selectively produced, the visible no longer reassures. Rather, it invites speculation about what lies beyond the frame: the gap between the sanitized data and the messy reality it purports to capture. In other words, the more meticulously openness is staged, the more readily its omissions become objects of disbelief.

4. The Dualist Logic of Transparency

The ideal of transparency presents itself as one that aims at overcoming divisions. It is meant to create continuity, to eliminate the opaque boundaries that separate those who know from those who do not, and to overcome the barrier between those who decide and those who are acted upon. In doing so, it harks back to a Rousseauist promise of a permeable society where nothing would remain cut off from anything else, and in which the relation between inside and outside, knowledge and power, rulers and ruled could be conceived as one of unbroken passage (on this critical genealogy, see Alloa, 2022, 2018; [Valdovinos, 2022](#)). Yet this unitarian picture is flawed, inasmuch as the fight against divisions and separations presupposes the very duality it allegedly tries to overcome. As a matter of fact, the critique of the *arcana imperii*—the idea that power necessarily operates through privileged forms of secrecy—can itself reinforce a peculiar two-world-dualism. It divides political reality into a visible surface, where institutions are expected to display their procedures, and a hidden interior, where the "real" decisions are presumed to take place behind closed doors. The more transparency is demanded, the more this invisible interior becomes an object of suspicion:

what is not disclosed is no longer simply unknown but potentially concealing something. Transparency rhetoric thus risks generating precisely the imaginary it seeks to dispel, turning opacity into evidence of a hidden agenda.

In its extreme form, the demand for complete visibility comes remarkably close to the logic of conspiracy theory: both assume that beneath the publicly available account there must be another, concealed account that explains what is really going on. Transparency discourse owes much of its force to the topology of the backstage. Were it not possible to point to a hidden realm where the real business is conducted, the demand for disclosure would lose much of its appeal, and this holds well beyond the circle of conspiracy theorists. Colin Crouch, a widely discussed contemporary political theorist, is a case in point. In his diagnosis of the current situation, he speaks of massive transparency deficits: in the "post-democracy," elections are still held but have shrunk to a "spectacle of the electoral game," whereas "politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests" ([Crouch, 2004](#), p. 4).

Critical transparency studies have rightly emphasized the paradoxical logic at work in contemporary demands for openness. The insatiable drive to expose secrets and compel individuals to confess in public is itself a spectacle, and arguably the most revealing paradox of all. Transparency discourse feeds on the conspiracy fantasy and, in turn, perpetuates it. The demand for ever greater transparency sets in motion a spiral of hypervigilance in which visibility never satisfies the desire for truth, producing not only new forms of self-exposure ([Han, 2015](#); [Harcourt, 2018](#)), but also to an endless cycle of distrust ([Ananny & Crawford, 2018](#)). Literary scholars have been scrutinizing the trope of transparency in contemporary prose, from novels like Dave Eggers's *The Circle* to Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*. In what follows, we test an inverse movement. Rather than applying the findings of critical social studies to the literary field (Martín Salván & Pöhlmann, 2024), we ask whether literature and its play of hide-and-seek can offer insights into the strategies used in current political communication. Our central case is the detective novel, a genre that stages transparency as a weapon: the truth is displayed openly, yet remains unseen. The following sections first examine the affinities between detective fiction, political secrecy, and conspiratorial suspicion, before developing a typology of five strategies of hiding in plain sight and tracing their recurrence in political communication.

5. Literature between Revelation and Paranoia

Political theorists have long insisted on the link between critique and suspicion ([Rosanvallon, 2008](#)). Yet this relationship becomes particularly visible in two literary genres that emerge with modernity: the detective novel and, later, the spy novel. In *The Novel and the Police*, D. A. Miller approaches the relationship between literature and modernity from a complementary angle, arguing that the nineteenth-century novel was itself implicated in the disciplinary mechanisms of modern society, reproducing through its narrative procedures the practices of self-surveillance, classification, and social control ([Miller, 1988](#)). In *Mysteries and Conspiracies*, by contrast, Luc Boltanski examines how detective stories and spy novels respond to the problem of a reality whose underlying mechanisms have become increasingly difficult to comprehend. As the modern state promises democratic participation, it also established an infinite number of complex procedures of classifying and governing citizens that largely escapes the public's knowledge ([Boltanski, 2014](#)). The state proclaimed an ordered and knowable reality through statistics, archives, and institutionalized records, yet its own operations remained partly inaccessible to those it governed. In this respect, it inadvertently reproduced the very asymmetry between rulers and ruled that the Ancien Régime had embodied and that the modern state claimed to leave behind. What comes into question is how to distinguish reality from appearances when the forces shaping reality are not directly visible. To this distinctly modern problem, Boltanski contends, both detective stories, spy novels, and conspiracy theories are related responses. Just as the modern nation-state and its bureaucracy take hold, the detective novel flourishes, as well as spy novels little later. Where these mystery stories meet conspiracy theories is their common assumption of something like a "doubly distributed reality" ([Boltanski, 2014](#), p. xv), a surface reality on which apparently insignificant details point towards a hidden cause which needs to be made fully transparent.

These structural features from literature can be insightful when transposed to contemporary public discourse. In that respect, although transparency advocates and conspiracy theorists need not share a single belief, they share a premise: that the public account is not the whole story. Transparency promises to close the gap between the two realities and cannot do so without first confirming it; conspiracy theory merely takes it at its word. What the one seeks to abolish, the other moves into. Continuing with Boltanski's account, one notices an interesting shift. The detective novel emerges alongside the consolidation of the modern nation-state, whereas the spy novel thrives particularly during the Cold War years. The detective novel typically begins with a local anomaly—a murder, a disappearance, a breach of the ordinary order—the spy novel tends to call into question the coherence of the world as a whole. Even in its most refined form of the

"metaphysical detective novel", the former generally holds out the promise of a key capable of restoring a rational order. Over time, however, this logic gives way to the spy novel and, eventually, to what has been labeled as the "systems novel". Exemplified by postmodern authors like Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, or David Foster Wallace, "systems novels" ([LeClair, 1987](#)) explore characters who are swept up by what they suspect to be invisible and all-encompassing networks of control, but who are also always on the verge of collapse into general meaninglessness.

Whereas the detective novel might still entertain the ambition to shed all the light on the secret forces at play, the spy novel—this is an argument made by literary scholar Eva Horn ([Horn, 2011](#))—is the only form that corresponds to political secrecy, precisely because the secrecy of the state cannot be exposed by documentation alone. To Horn, there is a decisive difference between secrecy as the withholding of known information and secrecy as a condition in which we can't know what we don't know. The second is the one that breeds suspicion, since no disclosure can certify that nothing remains hidden.

Be it as it may, it might be no accident then if mystery novels in all their iterations—from the classical detective novel to postmodern systems novels—have repeatedly explored the razor-thin line between investigative inquiry and the paranoid logic of conspiracy theory. Whether in Poe's *The Man of the Crowd*, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers*, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, or *Foucault's Pendulum* by Umberto Eco, the protagonists are defined by "apophenia", i.e., the tendency to perceive meaningful patterns among unrelated things, which may either lead them to the solution of a mystery or draw them into endless paranoia. What these novels dramatize is the interpretive structure on which the transparency demand also rests: the conviction that behind the visible surface lies a concealed order whose disclosure would finally render the world legible, and that the more intensely one looks, the more depth there turns out to be. Madness always lurks because the search for the concealed order is unfalsifiable, as every disclosure only displaces the secret one level deeper, until suspicion is no longer a means to knowledge but the very form of his world.

The arguably most consummate example, however, may be found in Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Death and the Compass" (*La muerte y la brújula*) (Borges, 1942/1974). A detective investigates a series of murders that appear to follow a Kabbalistic pattern involving the Tetragrammaton and the four points of the compass. Whereas the police commissioner is content with a more pragmatic explanation, detective Lönnrot refuses to let the matter rest. He pursues an ever more elaborate symbolic order in the hope of predicting where death will strike next—only to discover the killer has deliberately arranged the clues to lure him into a trap. When Lönnrot reaches the location he has identified as the site of the

next crime, the murderer is waiting for him and shoots him dead. Borges's story thus exposes this paradox of transparency: convinced that the exhaustive interpretation of clues will dispel uncertainty, the detective fails to consider that the seeming coherence of the pattern may be a means of concealment. What appears to reveal the truth in fact serves to obscure the trap being laid for him.

6. Hiding in Plain Sight. A Typology of Detective Novel Strategies

We can now start to organize different strategies of weaponizing transparency in the classical detective story genre. As literary scholars like Franco Moretti have shown, in the late 19th century, different styles of narrative framing were competing, sometimes within the same very journals ([Moretti, 2000](#)). Although there were exceptions, earlier mystery narratives often reserved the decisive explanation for a final revelation, the classical detective stories from Edgar Allan Poe to Arthur Conan Doyle and the later Golden Age derive their appeal from the promise that the clues have been there all along, and that the reader might have recognized their significance. This promise of the reader's involvement, who could, at least in principle, solve the mystery before the detective does, leads to a total reorganization of the logic of openness and concealment. Rather than a final revelation, the consolidated Golden Age detective story needs to play on a far more paradoxical kind of transparency, one instrumentalizing the gap between seeing and understanding. "The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes," Holmes remarks in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

We can thus make out at least five major strategies in the narrative weaponization of transparency.

1. **Attention redirection.** Here the clue is placed in a marginal position or beside something decidedly more vivid. Alternatively, a suspect is made excessively obvious at the outset, only to be dismissed by the reader, so that attention moves on to other potential culprits. In both cases nothing is withheld: the clue stays fully on display, and what the device manipulates is not what the reader can see but what the reader deems worth looking at. Almost every detective story makes use of this device in some way or another.
2. **Informational drowning.** Here the evidence is not hidden but multiplied, confronting the reader with so many leads and facts that telling the relevant from the irrelevant becomes difficult. The opacity comes not from a lack of information but from an excess of it. Classic examples might include Conan Doyle's *Adventure of the Norwood Builder*, where the investigators are faced with an overload of data that leads them to miss the real clue, or Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*: The reader compares twelve

statements, alibis, a timetable of the night and a handful of minimal contradictions, yet never entertains the hypothesis that all twelve committed the murder.

3. **Mimetic camouflage.** Here the clue is visible but misfiled, fading into the atmospheric background. G. K. Chesterton's *The Invisible Man* is a textbook example: the murderer enters and leaves a closely watched building unnoticed because he is dressed as a mail carrier, a figure so ubiquitous that the watchers swear "nobody entered" even as he passes them, carrying the victim's body in his bag. In Roald Dahl's *Lamb to the Slaughter*, the murder weapon—a frozen leg of lamb—is cooked and served to the investigating officers, who discuss its disappearance while eating it.
4. **Inferential misleading.** Here the strategy plays on the inquirer's inference about a hidden order. This can take the form of reflexive manipulation, as in Borges's "Death and the Compass," where the criminal builds the detective's anticipation into the trap. It can also take the form of an evidentiary inversion, as in Poe's "The Purloined Letter," where the police, assuming that whatever is missing must be physically concealed, miss the missing letter that sits in plain view in a card rack, disguised only by being turned inside out and re-addressed. The letter is, to be sure, also camouflaged, which places the story on the border between this type and the previous one. What makes it a case of inferential misleading rather than mere disguise is that what blinds the searchers is not a lack of evidence but their own premise that concealment and exposure are opposites.

In the first four strategies, the reader is misled about the evidence: its *salience, quantity, appearance, or implications*. In the fifth, the deception operates at another level. The reader is misled about the *conditions* under which the evidence is presented and interpreted. The object of manipulation is no longer simply the clue but the *reader's trust in the narrative contract* itself.

5. **Contractual exploitation** (manipulating trust in the genre). In this fifth case, the deception operates not on the clues but on the rules under which the reader reads them. The detective story rests on an implicit pact (a fair puzzle, an honest narrator, a solution drawn from what has been shown), and this pact can itself be exploited: the reader's confidence in the convention suspends the very scrutiny that would expose the trick. Christie's *Murder of Roger Ackroyd* belongs here, since it exploits the convention that the narrator must be a

reliable witness, turning the reader's trust in the narrative voice into the very mechanism that conceals the truth.

While the first four types operated on a stage of reception, this fifth type is somehow a *meta-type*, as it operates on the very frame in which the reception happens. Playing on the "horizon of expectation" (Jauss), and on the implicit pact with the reader, it shifts the action from exploiting the reader's assumptions about the evidence to the reader's assumptions about the discursive genre at large.

7. From Literature to Political Communication

Can these lessons from literature be transferred to the domain of political communication? With a grain of salt, probably so. The five literary strategies we have identified might help recognizing counterparts in the political domain.

1. *Attention redirection* appears as the management of timing and placement: unwelcome news released at moments of low attention, a decisive figure moved into an annex, a more vivid story set to compete for coverage ([Larocca, 2004](#)). The trial balloon, a drastic proposal floated and then withdrawn so that a milder version passes with less scrutiny, is the political cousin of the too-obvious suspect. The Epstein affair itself offers a case of diversion at the level of discourse: a study of Truth Social posts during the 2025 revelations suggests that the administration's communication shifted toward fresh topics as scandal coverage rose ([Peterson, 2025](#)).
2. *Informational drowning* becomes compliance by volume: a request for documents is met in full, but in a quantity and form that no one can process, as with document dumps, omnibus bills of hundreds of pages, or terms of service. Some scholars have described this as "data snowing": information overload can itself become a form of secrecy because the object of inquiry is buried in an excess of information ([Fan & Christensen, 2024](#)). By flooding the perceptual field with data or making everything visible at once, transparency can obscure meaning. The sheer density of information creates a "glare" that blinds the observer just as effectively as secrecy.
3. *Mimetic camouflage*: Rather than concealing an action, it makes the action resemble something ordinary, procedural, or unremarkable, thereby lowering the likelihood that it will attract scrutiny. The same logic applies when actors adopt the aesthetics of total compliance—displaying checklists, protocols, and formal disclosures—or generate so much procedural noise that consequential details become indistinguishable from routine information. In both cases, what ought to stand out blends into its surroundings: actors hide in plain sight by making the consequential look inconsequential.
4. *Inferential misleading* is the territory of what the research literature calls "paltering", the use of literally true statements to create a false impression ([Rogers et al., 2017](#)): selective baselines, "no evidence of X" suggesting that X is absent, the non-denial denial. Its reflexive form designs a statement in anticipation of how

journalists and fact-checkers will read it, and its "Purloined Letter" form is the open declaration of an aim that audiences discount because they assume real intentions must be concealed.

5. The fifth type, finally—*exploitation of the transparency pact*—gains particular weight beyond literature. Here, what is weaponized is the norm of transparency itself: the vocabulary and performance of openness become a source of legitimacy (Koivisto, 2022). By presenting itself as exceptionally transparent, an actor or institution can turn disclosure into a credential of trustworthiness, potentially deflecting scrutiny from what remains undisclosed, how information is framed, and which questions are left unasked. Transparency becomes not merely a means of disclosure but a means of managing the conditions under which one is scrutinized.

Two differences between the detective novel and political communication stand out and explain why the transfer between them must be made with a grain of salt. First, the reader of a detective novel has tacitly agreed to be outplayed, whereas the public has given no such consent. Second, political communication, unlike a novel, can't always be linked back to an identifiable author with an intention: a document dump may be a deliberate act of disclosure, but it may equally result from bureaucratic routine. Moreover, transparency can be weaponized by those who demand it, whether through maximally burdensome disclosure requests or through allegations of concealment even when disclosure has in fact been complete. Here, groups otherwise opposed on nearly everything—from open-source intelligence collectives such as Bellingcat to conspiracist movements such as QAnon—can converge on a shared format: both demand greater transparency and invite the public into an investigative dynamic, enlisting it to comb through data dumps, connect the dots, and construct a systematic explanation out of apparent chaos. A related mechanism operates on the institutional side, where the carefully staged release of a transparency report follows its own form of emplotment (*mise en intrigue*): it presents the promise to leave stagecraft behind as a carefully orchestrated performance in its own right. This is hardly surprising though, in an age when transparency rhetoric has risen to the most successful modes of storytelling.

The following matrix is an attempt to provisionally summarize the "lessons" that could be drawn from literature for an analysis of the contemporary political discourse.

	STRATEGY	DIMENSION	DETECTIVE STORY (LITERATURE)	POLITICAL COMMUNICATION
i	attention redirection	salience	clue is shown, but eye is drawn elsewhere	facts are released, but timed and placed where no one looks
ii	informational drowning	quantity	clue is shown among so many others that it cannot be singled out	disclosure comes with a cognitive overload no one can process
iii	mimetic camouflage	resemblance	clue is shown, but looks like part of the scenery	the consequential act is made to look like routine or compliance
iv	inferential misleading	expectation	clue is shown, but the inquirer's own premise misreads it	statements are tailored to invite the audience to make a false inference
v	contractual exploitation (meta)	trust in the frame	reader's faith in the genre's rules prevents scrutiny of the narrative frame	performative display of "hyper-transparency" creates a frame that conceals deception

On this last type, some research suggests that a rhetoric of hyper-transparency, with plainness, "nothing-to-hide"-claims and unfiltered speech as its ultimate embodiment, might matter more today than any actual disclosure ([Fenster, 2022](#); [Pillow et al., 2018](#)); other studies in turn indicate that displays of transparency can fuel suspicion rather than dispel it ([Fenster, 2017](#); [Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014](#)). Campaign-finance disclosure is a telling case. Designed to foster accountability by identifying who funds political actors, public disclosure can have the opposite effect: exposing thousands of transactions, intermediaries, and corporate networks may raise doubts about what remains hidden and whether legal mechanisms mask actual political leverage. Transparency International's 2026 analysis of eight European countries documents the underlying problem, finding fragmented disclosure systems and persistent loopholes in all of them ([International, 2026](#)). In sum, the more complete a disclosure regime appears, the more conspicuous its blind spots become. The same dynamic can be observed in visual and textual production. In video, the label "AI-generated" ostensibly resolves the epistemic problem by making provenance visible, but it can also generalize doubt: once viewers know that some images are artificial, they may begin to suspect all images that lack provenance ([Altay & Gilardi, 2024](#)). Similarly, in the wake of successful literary works suspected of substantial AI use, a "100% Human Authored" label has been proposed as reassurance, only to

raise the question of how such a claim could be verified, short of requiring all authors to write under the constant supervision of a bailiff.

As different as they may be, all these phenomena concur in highlighting that the dialectics of ignorance and insight might not be exactly distributed along the lines of secrecy and transparency, but that sometimes, to go transparent might be the best way to hide something you don't want others to know. In contemporary regimes of visibility, opacity no longer necessarily results from withholding information, but is born out of excessive disclosure: what is hidden in plain sight is not the absence of information but the relation that would allow the information to become intelligible.

8. Post-Scriptum on Conversational Bureaucracy

Let's return to where we started off: the issue of government transparency with the case of the current US government. Over the last months, the Trump administration hasn't stopped presenting itself as the most transparent administration in the History of the United States. Already in spring 2026, the White House had launched an official mobile app and described it as providing an "unfiltered, real-time updates straight from the source". The government boasts of offering the best ever transparency on pricing and technology, while on July 30, 2026, the White House "Transparency Task Force" announced it had disclosed a large number of hitherto classified documents. We see the same logic at play: the more emphatically an administration declares itself transparent, the more transparency becomes a claim that itself requires verification. In other words, transparency ceases to reveal anything new and instead becomes a self-referential performance of trustworthiness— and in doing so generates a new object of suspicion.

The latest example to this day is the following. In September 2026, the White House launched anew service called America.gov, meant to act as the ultimate "digital front door" for citizens. Boasting a "secure, intelligent, and service-oriented single point of entry through which an individual can sign in [and] communicate in plain language", its chatbot interface continues to exemplify the paradox of transparency. As it were, the platform America.gov promises to resolve the problem of governmental opacity by turning bureaucracy into conversation, yet the conversational chatbot introduces a new opacity of its own: citizens no longer confront the government through documents, institutions, and procedures, but through an AI intermediary whose selection, synthesis, and refusal mechanisms remain partly invisible. The chatbot itself admits that it has hidden instructions: when *The Washington Post* journalists asked about them, it

reportedly acknowledged their existence but refused to reveal their contents ([America.gov, 2026](#)).

Transparency thus shifts from the visibility of information to the presumed transparency of the interface—itself infinitely fueling further suspicion. Transparency has become conversational, while bureaucracy has learned to smile. "Just ask": the desk hours of the bureaucrat have been replaced by an always available and forthcoming chatbot, ready to respond to any prompt, while keeping the machinery of its speech once more out of sight. The irony is hard to miss. Once converted into conversation, the rhetoric of transparency becomes strangely recursive. The transparent state has not disappeared behind the chatbot; it has simply learned to hide in plain sight—and to answer back.

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