Political construction of accountability keywords: Lessons from action-research

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Prof. Jonathan Fox
Director, Accountability Research Center
School of International Service, American University
www.accountabilityresearch.org
Why lessons from action-research?

- Research needs to be more useful to change agents
- Better dissemination helps, but is not the main bottleneck
- Go upstream: *Who sets research agendas?*
- Takeaways that inform ARC, new action-research incubator:
  - Broaden access to agenda-setting
  - Question thinker-doer dichotomy
Point of departure…

- Democracy & accountability are on the defensive around the world
- We have underestimated the power of *disinformation*
- So how do we communicate better, to broaden our reach?
- That’s where keywords come in…
Keywords communicate big ideas

- **Accountability** – as a “trans-ideological” idea – is up for grabs

- So how do we communicate the term’s democratic potential?

- Accountability keywords have different meanings, to different actors, in different contexts – and in different languages

- The resulting ambiguities can either constrain or enable change strategies
Within accountability field, keywords tilt framing

Everyday examples include:

- “Offline” means “disconnected” – how can that evoke participation?
- “Constructive engagement” – implies that more adversarial approaches to authority are inherently not constructive
Keywords are contested

- Fight over meanings is not “merely academic”
- Especially when we lose those fights
- Keywords lift up some ideas and actors while silencing others
- They point fingers, with embedded “causal stories” (Stone, 1989)
- Democratic forces, on the defensive, need more effective responses
Key transparency/accountability ideas got hijacked

- “Fake news” (who decides what is fake?)
- “Drain the swamp” (who decides what is corrupt?)
- Clinton’s emails (is hacking proactive disclosure?)
- Trolls & bots & electoral targeting (whose voice gets listened to?)
- Open data arguments used by pro-pollution policymakers
This contested terrain poses challenges

- How can we learn from experiences with the invention & circulation of keywords?
- Ideas about who gets to govern – and how – will be contested
- Some of our terms can be seen as specialist jargon or alienating
- Yet others resonate with common sense and can go viral
Keywords for discussion today

1. Accountability
2. Right to Know
3. Targeted Transparency
4. Whistleblowers
5. Openwashing
6. Sandwich Strategies
Unpacking contested keywords

1. Accountability
Yes, “accountability” is hard to translate literally into other languages

But let’s avoid “linguistic determinism”

Its meaning is both politically constructed & contested in English as well

Accountability clearly refers to the exercise of power, but its *directionality* remains profoundly ambiguous
Upwards or downwards accountability?

- Consider the accountability assumptions behind:
  - SDG metrics (national averages point *upwards*)
  - Partisan bias in anti-corruption prosecutions (e.g., Brazil, Colombia)
  - Prison-industrial complex vs BLM (US)

- Civic tech generates data to support accountability in both directions, but the causal chains are very different (Peixoto & Fox, 2016)

- To focus on the “downward” dimension, try “public accountability”
Focus on the idea rather than literal translation

Comparing usage: “social accountability” in English & equivalents in Spanish

- "social accountability" (500,000)
- “control ciudadano” (400,000)
- "veeduria" (300,000)
- "vigilancia ciudadana" (200,000)
- “contraloria social” (100,000)
- “auditoria social” (50,000)
- Sum of Spanish terms (1,000,000)
2. Right to Know
The “Right to Know” was politically constructed

- In the US, R2K starts with journalists & popularized by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962)

- US legal principle: “the individual has the right to know the chemicals to which they may be exposed in their daily living”

- Community Right to Know Act in 1986 (base for paradigm case of civic tech: [www.scorecard.org](http://www.scorecard.org), 1998)

- Implicitly, R2K is broader than transparency, which focuses on access to information that is in the hands of institutions
In India: “right to know, right to live”

- India’s right to information campaign popularized R2K in 1996, with the slogan “right to know, right to live”

- Their call, led by MKSS, linked social justice and anti-corruption struggles with demands for the right to information about government anti-poverty programs

- Grassroots campaigns grounded and legitimated a successful national advocacy campaign for a 2005 law – with teeth
From 1995-2005, CSO Trasparencia promoted informed grassroots participation in official rural development projects, but faced a translation issue…

- **Challenge:** To organizers, “transparencia” sounded too technical & too close to “transa” (slang for deception)
- **Solution:** Trasparencia’s goal was to go “tras las aparentias,” or “behind the appearances”
3. Targeted Transparency
Targeted Transparency

“The use of publicly required disclosure of specific information in a standardized format to achieve a clear public policy purpose”

TT Action Cycle:

- Focuses on user perceptions as the starting point
- Integrates disclosure and perceived ‘actionability’ into everyday routines
  - toxic release inventory
  - nutrition labels
  - vehicle fuel efficiency & safety ratings

Source: Fung, Graham & Weil, Full Disclosure, 2007
Targeted Transparency

Did this attempt to invent a new term work?
- TT: 11,500 hits
- 800+ google scholar hits (high)

Academics noticed - but did practitioners?

Source: http://www.transparencypolicy.net/full-disclosure.php
Dilemma: TT is a concept that is all about uptake…

- How has it been taken up?
- Watering down is a risk
- The Mexican government’s transparency policy officially adopted the term…
- But they use it only to mean “useful information” =>
4. Whistleblowers
**Whistleblower: Political repurposing of existing term**

- Another keyword that is hard to translate…
  - Negative connotations in Spanish, German: “informer”

- Yet current meaning *in English* – was invented in the early 1970s by Nader’s consumer rights movement
  - Before, whistleblower referred to sports referees & police on the beat
  - Early use in 1969 vs a soldier who revealed US military’s My Lai massacre

- 50 years later, he is remembered with Ridenhour TruthTeller Prizes @ [www.ridenhour.org](http://www.ridenhour.org)
Honoring truth-tellers…

Accountability Lab calls this recognition strategy “naming and faming”
Implications for ideas about evidence

- Whistleblowing: suggests alternative approaches to evidence for accountability that can capture the imagination & frame public debates
  - How to communicate causal stories about accountability issues?
  - Scientific or legal criteria?
  - Both can reveal otherwise-invisible patterns
  - Different approaches to “connecting the dots” behind system failures

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<th>Tech-led approach</th>
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<td>Emphasis on using big data to reveal patterns</td>
<td>Finding &amp; protecting insiders who can disclose “smoking gun” behind public accountability failures</td>
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Unpacking Contested Keywords

5. Openwashing
Openwashing: Also politically constructed

- Derived from “greenwashing” (term invented by Greenpeace, 1989)

- Handy epithet, but definitions are in flux, for example:
  - “to spin a product or company as open, although it is not”
  - Open government policies that serve to cover up persistent impunity
  - Consider “testilying” (NYT: new police video cams prove perjury but fail to produce accountability)

- Examples from OGP: Guatemala, Romania, Azerbaijan… and ?
Guatemala's former vice-president Roxana Baldetti, after her arrest on corruption charges (at court, Aug. 24, 2015)

She was the senior official in charge of EITI, CoST & OGP
How to define openwashing with analytical precision?

- Do “you know it when you see it” or can it be an analytical category?

- Does it refer to:
  - Weak transparency initiatives that coexist with persistent accountability failures?
  - Deliberate attempts to use transparency reforms to cover up impunity?

- Dilemma: Open government + impunity could reflect either
  - Conflict within the state over whether to reform or
  - Intent to deceive
  - …or both
Does the term “openwashing” apply to Mexico?

- Mexico ranks #1 globally for info access...
- Mexico also ranks #135 in TI’s CPI...
- Impunity persists at all levels...
- OGP in Mexico disrupted by expose of govt spyware attack on CSOs

Unpacking Contested Keywords

6. Sandwich Strategies
Sandwich strategy: Failed keyword?

- Tries to capture synergy between
  - Reformers in both state & society
  - *Virtuous circles* of mutual empowerment to offset anti-accountability forces

- First attempt at launch: 1992 book
  - Little uptake, gave up, moved on
  - Except…

*Source: Revised version of diagrams in Fox (1992: 220).*
In Philippines: “bibingka strategy” caught fire

- Filipino activist scholar Saturnino “Jun” Borras’ 1999 cross-cultural adaptation of the idea
- “Bibingka,” a rice cake baked both from above and below
- Today the term resonates still widely among national public interest groups in the Philippines
Today’s takeaways

- Accountability strategies face the challenge of communicating more effectively – not only to govern better, but to defend rights & democracy.

- Challenge to our field: How can we deploy more engaging, accessible terms that are grounded in national and popular cultures?

- Two approaches are especially relevant:
  - Repurposing existing terms to communicate accountability initiatives
  - Inventing new terms that have the potential to go viral because they resonate with already-existing common sense

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To sum up:

Accountability keywords are both contested terrain...

...and terrain worth contesting
Comments welcome - thanks

Prof. Jonathan Fox
@jonathanfox707
@AcctResearchCtr
fox@american.edu
www.jonathan-fox.org
www.accountabilityresearch.org