



Political construction of accountability keywords: Lessons from action-research

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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*

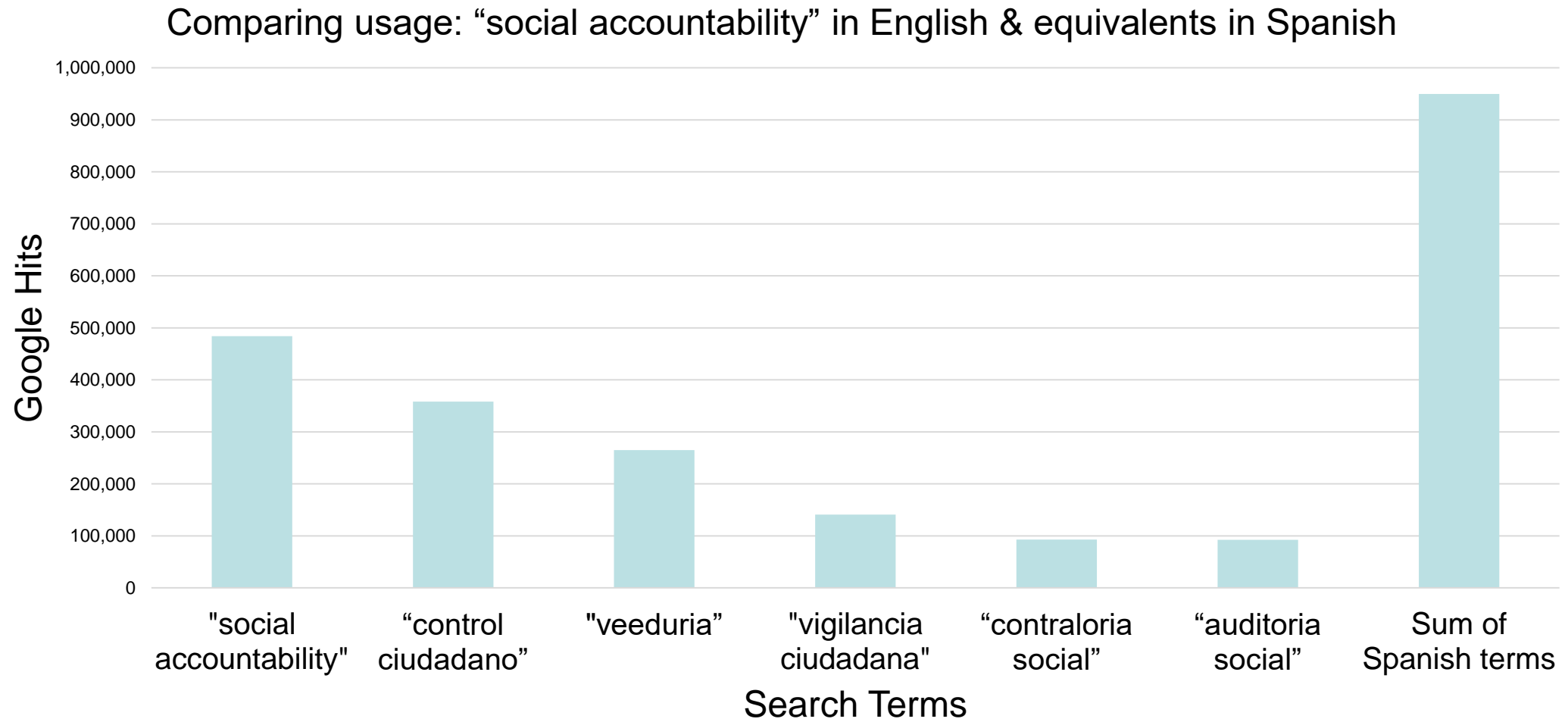
Communicating ideas about accountability

- 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



Unpacking Contested Keywords

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, 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**

In Mexico: Discourse adapted to popular culture

- From 1995-2005, CSO Transparencia 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:** Transparencia’s goal was to go “*tras las apariencias*,” or “behind the appearances”



Unpacking Contested Keywords

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

HARVARD Kennedy School
ASH CENTER
for Democratic Governance
and Innovation



THE TRANSPARENCY POLICY PROJECT

Seeking to understand and improve disclosure systems that protect the public

FULL DISCLOSURE: THE PERILS AND PROMISE OF TRANSPARENCY

By Archon Fung, Mary Graham, and David Weil



In this book, co-authored by the three co-directors of the Transparency Policy Project, we make our most complete argument to date that the careful disclosure of factual information can create incentives that improve public health and safety and further democratic processes. At best, businesses and government officials respond to comparisons of product quality, services and agencies' track records by reducing risks to the public and improving performance. Over the last three decades, such transparency policies have become a mainstream social policy tool.

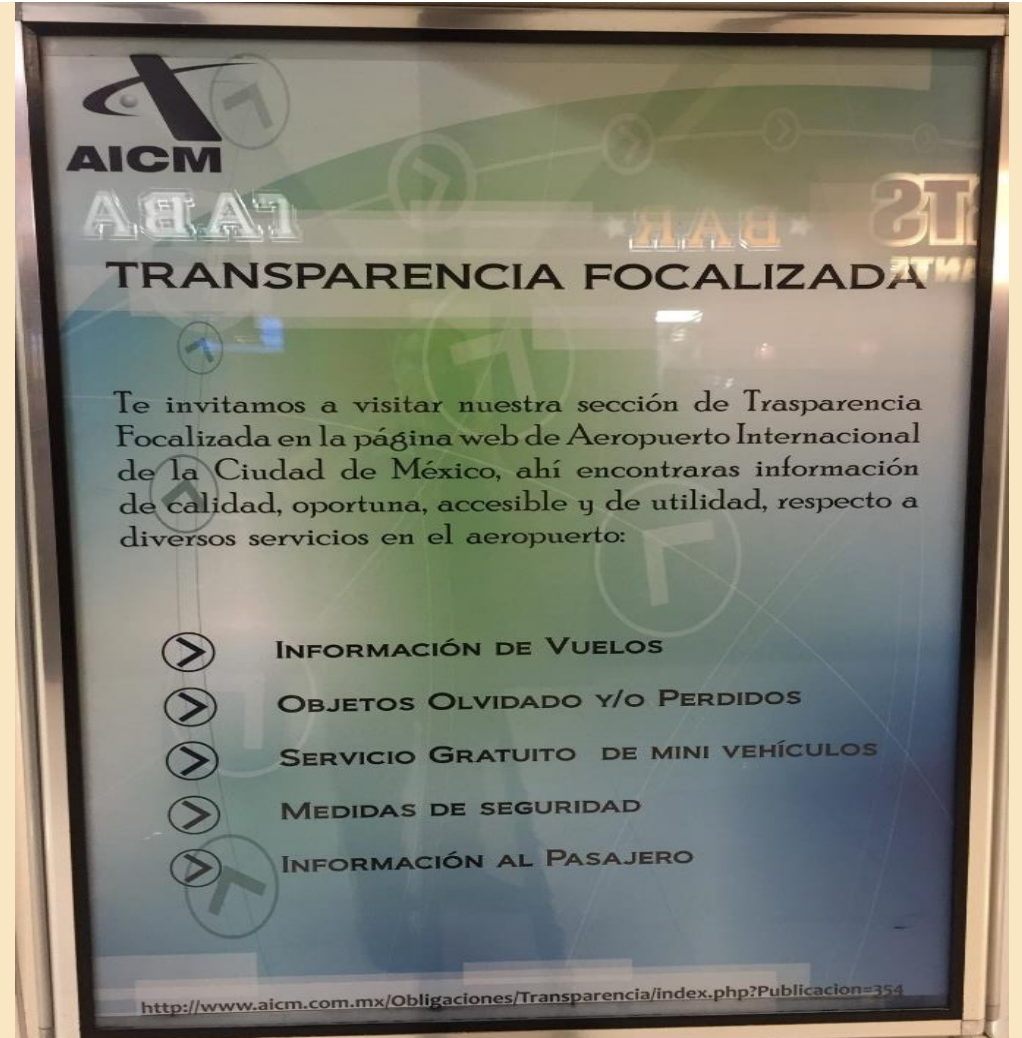
- **Did this attempt to invent a new term work?**
 - TT: 11,500 hits
 - 800+ google scholar hits (high)
- **Academics noticed - but did practitioners?**

Source: <http://www.transparencypolicy.net/full-disclosure.php>

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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” =>



Unpacking Contested Keywords

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**

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**CARMEN YULÍN CRUZ SOTO
WINS THE RIDENHOUR PRIZE
FOR TRUTH-TELLING**

The mayor of San Juan will be honored for her courageous commitment to Puerto Rico after the devastation of Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

**Accountability Lab
calls this recognition
strategy
“naming and faming”**

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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

Tech-led approach	“Sherlock Holmes” approach
Emphasis on using big data to reveal patterns	Finding & protecting insiders who can disclose “smoking gun” behind public accountability failures

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 ?**

Openwashing?



- **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

Global Right to Information Rating Map

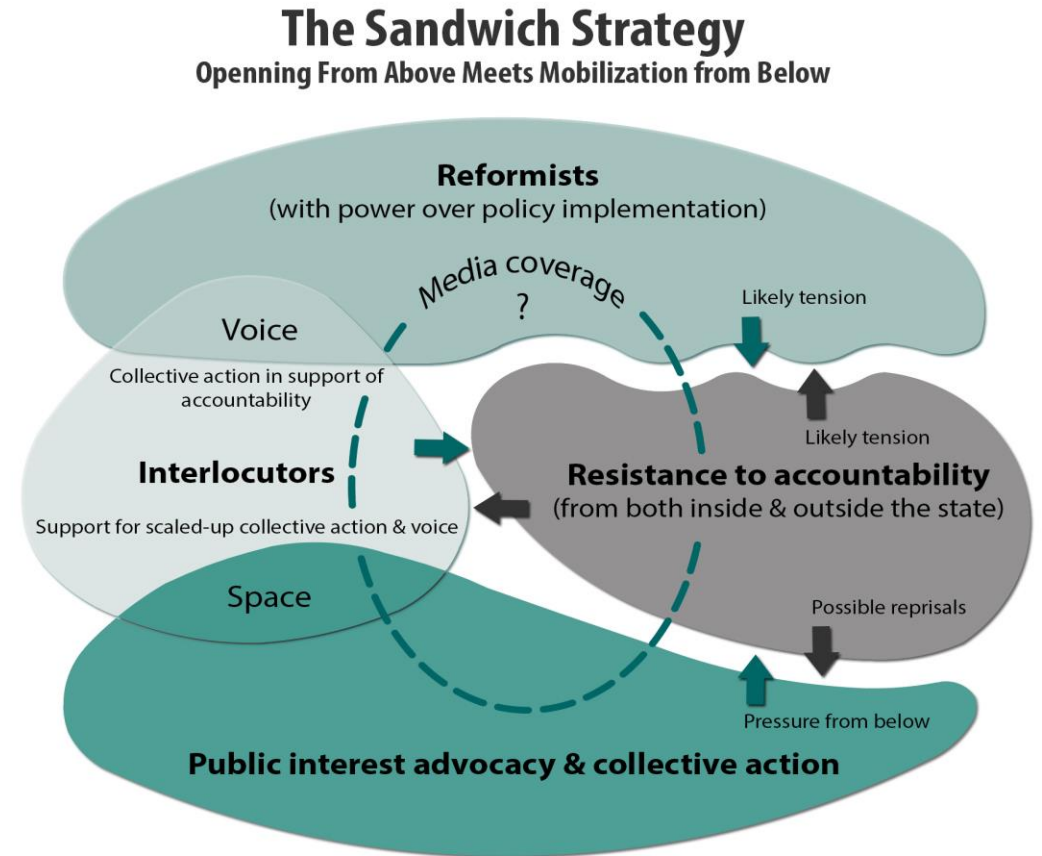


Unpacking Contested Keywords

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*

To sum up:

**Accountability keywords
are both contested terrain...**

....and terrain worth contesting



Comments welcome - thanks

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