CHAPTER 8

Open Skies, Open Minds? Shifting Concepts of Communication and Information in Swedish Public Debate

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Nowadays it is attractive to be ‘open’. Authorities, corporations, political parties, and even countries seek to associate themselves with this appealing adjective. In one recent example, a film entitled *Open Skies, Open Minds* makes the link between the country of Sweden and the concept of openness explicit. Commissioned by the Swedish Institute (2014) to promote Sweden abroad, the film seeks to visualize the ‘core values’ of the official ‘image of Sweden’ – identified as authenticity, consideration, innovation, and openness (Swedish Institute 2008).

Openness has increasingly become a globally circulated metaphor for a democratic liberal society, both as an ideal and a description. In the past few decades openness has gone from being one of several elements of democracy (together with liberty, justice, and equality) to occupying a central position in international discussions on democracy and governance. On the one hand, an expanding body of consultancy reports, research literature, and policy initiatives presents openness as a precondition for better government and deeper democracy, leading to a more accountable public administration and a revitalized public sphere (Hood and Heald 2006; Fung, Graham, and Weil 2007; Piotrowski 2007). On the other hand, the recent ascendancy of openness can also be linked to the growing importance of ‘communication’ and ‘information’ as instruments of power in an increasingly mediatized world (Castells 2007; 2011). As such, openness is not only a lofty emancipatory ideal or a practical tool towards better governance and market performance. It can also be used as an instrument of political rhetoric for detecting risks, framing political struggles as well as identifying and co-opting enemies. As such, openness is political, contested, and constantly in flux.

As the enthusiasm for openness and transparency spreads among NGOs, governments, and corporations alike, academics and activists have in turn become increasingly sceptical of the openness credo. Critics have begun questioning whether it can deliver on its promises, whether it is desirable under all circumstances, and whether it always promotes actual disclosure and public participation (Naurin 2004; 2006; 2007; Lord 2006; Etzioni 2008; Garsten and
Lindh de Montoya 2008; Fenster 2006; 2010). Scholars have recently noted how it can be put to use for generating political legitimacy (de Fine Licht et al. 2014).

While certain policies may be drafted to institutionalize openness, some societies are assumed to already possess a certain cultural or social predisposition in this direction. The metaphorical image of what could be called a culture of ‘societal openness’ includes notions of free enterprise, multiculturalism, progressivism, tolerance, and general sociability. This corresponds with the administrative and academic discourse on ‘transparency’ or ‘institutional openness’, which is concerned with the concrete institutions and regulations that maintain competition, freedom of speech, public access to documents, independent media, and public accountability.

Some countries, like Canada, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US are often considered open primarily due to their diversity, individualism, liberty, and freedom of enterprise. Others are characterized as open societies mostly because of their high levels of public trust, progressive social orientation, inclusive politics, and public access to documents, such as the Nordic countries. While the former societies are often faulted for their shortcomings with regard to institutional openness, the societal openness of the latter countries is far from self-evident.

One of the central problems for any analysis of social ideology, rhetoric, policy setting, or governmental process is the distinction between the formal rules and policies and the implementation of policies and the deeper structure of social relations, social norms, and social power. By providing a historical study of the concept of openness and its multiple uses in Swedish debate, this chapter seeks to open up the issue of a gap between formal aspects and substance as well as of uneven power distribution in the struggle over openness. The main problem of this chapter is to examine why promises of openness have been voiced, how shifting meanings of openness reflect rhetorical and political struggles, and how political contestants may be construed as the friends and the enemies of openness, respectively.

In so doing, the chapter highlights the tension between the dual aims at the core of openness discourse as a ‘cybernetic’ means of providing verifiable information about society and as a ‘libertarian’ policy for insuring the free flow of opinion within society. The chapter explores how these two goals mix in historical as well as contemporary accounts of openness, promising to deliver both more efficient governance and greater democracy at the same time, without clearly identifying any order of priority between these two goals of modern public life.