Which SUVs are most likely to roll over? What cities have the unhealthiest drinking water? Which factories are the most dangerous polluters? What cereals are most nutritious?

In recent decades, governments have sought to provide answers to such critical questions through public disclosure to force manufacturers, water authorities, and others to improve their products and practices. Corporate financial disclosure, nutritional labels, and school report cards are examples of such targeted transparency policies. At best, they create a light-handed approach to governance that improves markets, enriches public discourse, and empowers citizens. But such policies are frequently ineffective or counterproductive. Using an analysis of eighteen U.S. and international policies, Full Disclosure shows that the information provided is often incomplete, incomprehensible, or irrelevant to consumers, investors, workers, and community residents. To be successful, transparency policies must be accurate, must keep ahead of disclosers’ efforts to find loopholes, and, above all, must focus on the needs of ordinary citizens. This title is also available as Open Access on Cambridge Core.


Archon Fung is Associate Professor of Public Policy at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. His research examines the impacts of civic participation, public deliberation, and transparency on public and private governance. He has authored three books, including Empowered Participation: Reinventing Urban Democracy (2004), and edited three collections; more than fifty of his articles have appeared in journals, including Political Theory, Journal of Political Philosophy, Politics and Society, Governance, Journal of Policy and Management, and American Behavioral Scientist.

Mary Graham is a Research Fellow at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government and a Visiting Fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C. Her research focuses on the use of information strategies to foster social change, the politics of public information, innovative approaches to health and safety regulations, and new trends in environmental policy. She is the author of Democracy by Disclosure (2002) and The Morning After Earth Day (1999). Graham has written for the Atlantic Monthly, Financial Times, Environment, Issues in Science and Technology, the Brookings Review, and other publications.

David Weil is Professor of Economics and Everett W. Lord Distinguished Faculty Scholar at Boston University School of Management. His research spans labor market policy, industrial and labor relations, occupational safety and health, and regulatory policy. He has published widely in these areas and has also served as adviser to the U.S. Department of Labor, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and other agencies. He has written two other books, including the award-winning A Stitch in Time: Lean Retailing and the Transformation of Manufacturing (1999), and his articles have appeared in numerous journals, including the RAND Journal of Economics, Industrial and Labor Relations Review, Harvard Business Review, and the Journal of Policy Analysis and Management.
Full Disclosure

The Perils and Promise of Transparency

ARCHON FUNG
John F. Kennedy School of Government,
Harvard University

MARY GRAHAM
John F. Kennedy School of Government,
Harvard University

DAVID WEIL
Boston University School of Management