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Book Review

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BOOK/RESOURCE REVIEWS

Christopher M. Laico , Peter J. Wosh , Alexandra Bernet , Elena S. Danielson , Jenny Gotwals , Gerald Beasley , Amy Cooper Cary , Richard J. Cox , Gregor Trinkaus-Randall , David A. Wallace , Terry Eastwood & Susan Nevelow Mart

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BLACKED OUT: GOVERNMENT SECRECY IN THE INFORMATION AGE. Roberts, Alasdair. *New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 334 pp. (includes notes and index), \$30.00, ISBN-10: 0521858704, ISBN-13: 978-0521858700.*

Alasdair Roberts is an associate professor in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, director of the Campbell Public Affairs Institute at Syracuse University, and a member of the Initiative for Policy Dialogue's Transparency Task Force. He is particularly qualified to write a history of the dynamic tension between the worldwide movement towards government transparency the United States initiated in 1966 with the passage of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and the age-old government preference for secrecy. *Blacked Out: Government Secrecy in the Information Age* is a detailed and engaging history of secrecy and transparency in the post-FOIA world.

Blacked Out focuses first on the context of FOIA laws, then the structures that impact transparency, and finally on technology. The book opens with concrete examples of the effects implementing FOIA laws have had on such diverse problems as local corruption in distributing subsidies in India, the ability to attend prestigious schools in Thailand, and hydroelectric contracts in Uganda. Roberts does not hide his bias: he is in favor of transparency over secrecy. However, he is careful to present the historical foundations and political realities that favor secrecy, so that the reader has a clear and nonpolemical understanding of the policies that foster secrecy in governments around the world and that have informed the position of the Bush presidency.

Roberts excels at the use of specific case studies. His discussion of the healing effect FOIA laws have had in countries dealing with the aftermath of dictatorships—such as East Germany, Chile, and South Africa—is compelling. He also discusses the varieties of bureaucratic attempts to prevent publication, including an example from Russia, where the attempt to hide secret Communist party documents in state archives with only limited access to older documents was foiled by an activist archivist who released the documents.

The worldwide movement towards a “human right to information” hits a road-block at securing a right to “classified information.” And in the post-9/11 world, expanded concepts of classified information create powerful forces opposing transparency. The second section of *Blacked Out* focuses on those forces: opaque security organizations—such as NATO—that require the security of shared information; the privatization

of basic government services that blurs or removes the applicability of FOIA laws; and the rise of supra-national institutions that co-opt diplomatic concepts of secrecy. Roberts once more supplies detailed case studies. In the United States, for example, the patchwork of federal and state governments that have outsourced government services means that citizens in different states may have dramatically different access to information on such varied important concerns as prison conditions or safety information on local utilities. Roberts discusses the benefits of information openness and public checks on the problems posed by the “overload” that results from isolated government decision-making, as well as worldwide examples of institutional methods of blocking access to information.

Roberts finally addresses the technological aspects of transparency. FOIA laws were first implemented at a time when the written records of bureaucracies were tangible documents and were, as a result, about something specific an agency was doing. In contrast, modern agency information comes in a bewildering variety of formats, not all of it structured. Access to digitized information is changing the kind of conclusions that can be reached after getting a response to a FOIA request, as information that was previously extremely difficult to compile may now be extracted from government databases, if there is sufficient time and technological expertise to manipulate the data. It has been the media who has invested the time and supplied the expertise to extract data from vast government databases. One recent example was a manipulation of information from the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) database, which revealed that the federal government had, despite much rhetoric to the contrary, been unsuccessful in securing terrorist convictions.

In opposition to the successes of transparency are problems attendant on easier data creation and compilation. Loss of privacy, U.S. government avoidance of privacy laws by ordering information from private providers, excessive or improper document classification, the use of quasi-classification to protect information that is not classified, and the simple problem of too much data to analyze are all problems confronting transparency in government.

Blacked Out is a great read, marred only by the brief but somewhat disconnected conclusion. Rather than summing up his arguments, Roberts changes direction, and indicts the American public. Why wasn't Abu Ghraib an election issue? Why don't Americans care about these astonishing revelations? Roberts contrasts the apathy he feels that Americans had for the Abu Ghraib scandal with the Watergate disclo-

suress—resulting in Nixon’s fall—and concludes that “the narrative of exposed wrongdoing has been subverted.” The bad guys were not ousted. It is hard to disagree with his call for Americans to assume responsibility for acting on the information that FOIA laws publicize. It is just not a new phenomenon.

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