

Book Review

Roberts, A (2006) Blacked out: Government Secrecy in the Information age. New York. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 0521858704

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I have an addiction. I am a freedom of information junkie, and I have been addicted for over three decades. What's more, I have spent a great deal of that time trying to persuade others, both inside and outside the US, to share this passion, this preoccupation. No wonder I was able to read Alasdair Roberts' Blacked Out in two sittings. It is informative, comprehensive, engaging, challenging and – in a word – satisfying.

Roberts' story opens with a story. A series of stories, actually. And, unlike the dark title of the book, these stories are not about information's being "blacked out" but about governments' being "lighted up." The first tells about how disclosures under the Right to Information Act in the Indian state of Rajasthan revealed widespread fraud and corruption in the food rationing system. Another tells about how information found under the Thai Right to Information Act showed that influence by leading politicians and business people skewed admissions practices in a prestigious elementary school in Bangkok. In Japan, the story is the release of the names of hospitals supplied with contaminated blood products; in the UK, the disclosures of over a million pounds in EU farm subsidies paid to the royal family. These and others are the stories of FOIA successes around the globe. And a comforting group of stories they are.

There is also lots of carefully documented history in the volume. Based on my own research into and involvement with evolution of the FOIA and open government

in the US, I found the historical discussions to be accurate and thorough. But this is ground that has been plowed before. Likewise, Roberts' discussion of secrecy and security is not news; it has been masterfully explored by former Senator Moynihan in his little book on Secrecy. And Roberts' description of the Bush administration's efforts to undermine open government practices and policies has already been eloquently deplored by Tom Blanton in a number of hard-hitting articles.

Roberts himself does a masterful job in explaining and exploring the many faces of bureaucratic resistance to open government and the tactics employed – particularly in Ireland, Canada, and the UK – as part of the "ideology of resistance" to disclosure laws. Governments that are adopting or amending their access laws, as well as FOI law users and advocates, can learn much from these lessons in recent history.

I think Roberts is at his best as he analyzes more deeply and more insightfully than has been done in one place before why freedom of information will not always take root and flourish. The challenges he identifies consist of not just bureaucratic resistance but structural impediments. His cases in point:

- Information is being increasingly shared within networks – which has become imperative in the international war against terrorism – but with this comes the necessity to prevent disclosure of that information. The result is that the penchant for secrecy of international institutions will now stand in the way of access to information under national laws. (Roberts' remedy: let national rules govern disclosure.)

- The privatization of governmental functions and consequent building up of information in private institutions not subject to open government regimes also stand as substantial barriers to disclosure. (Here Roberts argues for a South African-style right to information held by private organizations.)

- Supranational institutions are now assuming what were formerly domestic roles for government (the EU and WTO are two obvious examples); this leads inexorably to the holding of information pertaining to national interests by international bodies with long traditions of opacity. (Robert would like to see greater transparency in these institutions, but recognizes the likely insurmountable obstacles in the way.)

- There is a "metamorphosis of government information" from a finite number of paper documents into near uncountable electronic records results in a stockpile of "liquified" information; this tends to align businesses against disclosure, impose unmanageable costs and burdens on NGOs that desire access to complex technical databases, and in many jurisdictions raise threats to personal privacy.

Roberts occasionally betrays an outsider's bias, most often when he portrays as usually evil (that is, inimical to greater transparency) the role of business interests in the world of information protection and disclosure. But he also shows a remarkable neutrality when he acknowledges that his assessments and predictions might be wrong (regarding, for example, the implications of supranational institutions) and when he recognizes that proposals he favors have no practical chance of being adopted (like the application of public access regimes to private organizations).

Blacked Out provides much food for thought. But the stories with which it opens are the sweet desserts; the last paragraphs – with their bleak assessments – could provoke a bout of indigestion. "The problem of excessive secrecy has worsened recently," opines Roberts. And instead of the public's fighting back to maintain open government information, there is "an alternative and bleaker scenario." This is a scenario—

in which complaints about secrecy are deployed by citizens to rationalize their disengagement from the political process, or their tolerance of noxious policies. How, after all, can citizens be expected to participate actively in politics, if critical information is being withheld from them? How can they share responsibility for the actions of their leaders if they have incomplete knowledge of those actions?

The with this depressing thought, the last paragraph becomes a call to arms: "The struggle to advance transparency is important, and it is far from over." Professor Roberts gives us, with his history lessons, success stories, and keen analysis and insights, a valuable weapon in our battle to stem and ultimately reverse the growth of government secrecy in the information age.