Book Review

Roberts, Alasdair. 2006. *Blacked Out: Government Secrecy in the Information Age*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

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Krista Boa

PhD Candidate, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, Canada, <mailto:k.boa@utoronto.ca>

In *Blacked Out*, Alasdair Roberts, introduces the topics of transparency and government secrecy through a discussion of the marked increase of access to information legislation, also known as freedom of information legislation, enacted in the 1990s. Roberts is one of the foremost scholars in this field, as well as a long-term right-to-know advocate and user of access to information measures. Roberts contextualises right-to-know movements globally through a survey of their victories, particularly by tracing the trend toward enacting access legislation. He notes that in the early 1980s, only 8 countries had access legislation, but over the following two decades that number rose sharply to 59 countries (as of 2004). Through telling examples of exposing corruption and government abuses in India, Thailand, Japan, Great Britain, and Uganda, among others, he demonstrates the benefits of a legislated right to access government documents, and government transparency more generally.

The global trend toward enacting access legislation would seem to imply a distinct shift toward openness, but Roberts wonders if it is that simple, prompting him to ask the central question of his book: “Has the old presumption of secrecy really been overthrown in favour of a new presumption of openness?” (18). And indeed, the answer is “no.” Roberts shows that legislation alone is not sufficient to counter histories and practices of secrecy. *Blacked Out* is a series of essays discussing several factors that interfere with a presumption of openness: attitudes of those in government, security, and law enforcement; the conditions and practices of governance; and information and communication technologies.

One area where ideas of transparency have little to no traction is the security and law enforcement sectors. Roberts shows that most legislation contains exemptions to a right of access for information—sections that allow information relating to national security and law enforcement to be withheld from the public. In the post 9/11 era, particularly, but in no way only, in the United States, the scope of information falling under the auspices of national security has grown substantially and includes information about infrastructure that was previously available. Roberts also points out that the trend toward greater networking of security agencies increases the amount of information shared between agencies, while also reducing the amount of information shared externally. The most stringent agency in the network, in terms of access, tends to govern the amount of access any associated institution can offer.

Another related impediment is the attitudes of those in power to transparency, which would allow their decision-making to be questioned and errors exposed. Roberts shows that the George W. Bush administration, particularly Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, had long opposed transparency. As *Blacked Out* was written just after Bush’s election to a second term, the amount of time spent on this analysis might appear dated. New US President Barak Obama made a number of explicit statements favouring of transparency upon taking office. However, as those following public debates of access to

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information in Canada have seen, those in opposition or new to power tend to be significantly keener on transparency than those who have been in power for some time. It will be interesting to see if the reduction of transparency brought about by the Bush administration is reversed under the Obama administration.

Roberts spends several chapters showing how the structure and practices of governance have direct implications for access to information. First, access depends on a professional civil service and well-organized records. Where these are absent, access and transparency are severely curtailed. Second, governments are increasingly outsourcing functions to the private sector, which is generally not covered by access legislation. Therefore, what might once have been subject to access legislation becomes exempt. A similar situation exists in the context of supranational organizations, like the World Bank or the World Trade Organization. As Roberts points out, these types of organizations often push developing countries to enact mechanisms of transparency, but they themselves highly resist being subjected to the same requirements of openness. Indeed, access legislation is national and thus has no bearing on supranational organizations. Nevertheless, supranational organizations have direct effects on policy development in individual countries.

Finally, Roberts covers technology and the implications of vast stores of digitized information for openness and transparency. This is perhaps the most ambiguous topic Roberts addresses. While information and communication technologies can drastically improve the conditions for openness by capturing more in writing and facilitating dissemination, they also can create problems. The sheer volume of data can be overwhelming. Furthermore, much of the data is unstructured and diffuse. Compared with paper-based bureaucracies which create more limited types of documents, in a digital environment information appears in all sorts of forms, from databases to emails and spreadsheets to presentation files, stored idiosyncratically on personal computers and communication devices. Roberts points out that the practical barriers to transparency that existed in a paper-based world are being displaced by new practical barriers of a digitized environment.

The accountability that transparency allows not only comes from legislating mechanisms for access to information but requires people to hold their governments accountable. Roberts closes with a call for an engaged citizenry, which culminates in the final lines of the book: "Do we have a right to information? Certainly. But we also have a responsibility to act on it" (238).

While many aspects of his discussion are specific to the United States, particularly focusing on the administration of George W. Bush, *Blacked Out* cannot be accused of only being relevant to that administration or of being overly US-centric. The United States has one of the earlier pieces of access legislation (preceded by Sweden in 1766) and is one of the main models on which other countries have based their access legislation. Furthermore, Roberts draws on the experiences of a wide range of countries throughout, and the impediments to openness he discusses are applicable to all countries. *Blacked Out* is an excellent book, written by one of the foremost scholars in the field. It is engaging, informative, and accessible not only to those who study the right-to-know and access legislation, but to anyone interested in accountable public policy-making and democratic governance.