Book Review

Review of Haque, Akhlaque. 2015. *Surveillance, Transparency, and Democracy: Public Administration in the Information Age*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.
153 pp. Hardcover. US\$49.95. ISBN: 978081738772.

Ozge Girgin

Queen's University, Canada
14og@queensu.ca

In *Surveillance, Transparency, and Democracy: Public Administration in the Information Age*, Akhlaque Haque explores and theorizes “the role of information and information technology in government” and its effects on “institutional change” using a public administration framework (2015: xv). Discussing implications of data collection and its usage, this book is a timely addition to surveillance-related literature in diverse disciplines. It contributes to the broader surveillance studies literature by outlining the effects of dataveillance on administrative decision making, institutional dynamics, and public leadership. Haque asserts that public administrators’ reliance on information systems and non-contextual data for decision making contributes to the increasing “disconnect” between public officials and citizens, which can lead to deterioration of trust and depreciation of democracy (105). *Surveillance, Transparency, and Democracy* will be particularly engaging for scholars who are interested in the impact of information technologies and data practices within public administration as well as those who are familiar with Actor Network Theory, information theory, and science and technology studies.

In the first part of the book, Haque addresses the theoretical foundations of his arguments by drawing on information theory. Emphasizing that policy makers are increasingly motivated to look to numbers for answers to social problems, he explains how statistical data—devoid of situational meanings—fall short of explaining circumstantial factors that contribute to social issues and cannot, in fact, inform leaders and public administrators about the real conditions of their citizens. Moreover, exploring the use of technology within public administration, Haque points out that employing technology and software that are primarily designed for the private sector contradicts public-sector values. He articulates how these technologies neither prioritize citizen-driven information management nor make room for street-level bureaucrats’ situational knowledge. The author claims that these factors may lead public administrators to make policy decisions based on incomplete information, thus disconnecting public officers from their constituents and eroding citizens’ trust in their leaders.

Haque highlights the importance of integrating the citizens’ values and “local context” into administrative decision making to better respond to social problems (65). Accordingly, he argues that technology can be utilized to inform public officials about social practices of people, and he proposes

contextualizing information by using information and communication technologies as “relational tools” for “interpretive inquiry” through methods such as narrative inquiry, photovoice, and data visualization (65, 73).

The author discusses the social implications of surveillance practices by connecting them to ethics, leadership, and democracy. He illustrates possible consequences and discriminatory outcomes of decisions made based on data mining practices. Referring to centralized information systems and data sharing among US agencies, and the use of predictive models, the author highlights the increased vulnerability of less-privileged and minority groups. Haque exemplifies how social inequalities are reinforced when private companies and entities aggregate publicly available data to categorize individuals or spaces into discriminatory groups for commercial purposes. The author also stresses the ways in which categories created by public officials affect citizens' lives in unintentional ways, and he addresses the significance of providing public officials and leaders with ethical guidance in relation to the consequences of dataveillance. Haque highlights “information asymmetry,” “information inequity,” and the non-transparency of governments, emphasizing how these are at odds with democratic values (104).

In the closing chapter, Haque carries the above arguments further by putting forward the concept of the “practice-administration dichotomy,” which refers to using information for administering and controlling rather than for creating value with and for citizens (111). This dichotomy is one of the book's most crucial messages, highlighting the ways in which the data-driven approach detracts public administrators from their main duty of improving the “human condition” through their over-reliance on quantitative measures that may not question the underlying causes of social problems (103). Haque contends that governments gather “information from citizens in order to serve them better is a collective myth,” and he asserts that technologies should be better used to understand citizens' “shared values and practices,” and “to defend and strengthen democratic institutions” (118, 123, 124).

Social sorting, data mining, and the implications of surveillance of particularly the most vulnerable populations have been crucial issues for scholars in surveillance studies and in related disciplines. Haque's study contributes to this literature by providing a public administration framework and by emphasizing how the relationship between the over-reliance on data and the institutional dynamics of public administration might enhance asymmetries between citizens and public officials. However, while he primarily uses the literature of science and technology studies, communication studies, and public administration, the book rarely engages with recent surveillance studies literature or with the part of that literature that directly addresses the relationship between surveillance practices and democracy. Even though the book exemplifies data mining practices of federal and local agencies, it does not refer—other than in the preface—to the 2013 Snowden revelations or to the NSA surveillance practices. Inclusion of these issues in the body of the book would have further strengthened the author's arguments, as the revelations are considered vital for current discussions of democracy and transparency. By referring to a large variety of sub-issues and theories, the author tries to offer a comprehensive account of the ways in which information technologies and information have affected public administration; however, trying to convey such rich content in a limited number of pages renders *Surveillance, Transparency, and Democracy* quite dense. Despite these issues, Haque's book is a valuable resource for scholars working in the fields of surveillance studies, public administration, and science and technology studies, who would like to learn more about the effects of data practices on the institutional dynamics of public administration.