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Book Review

Sandra Braman (2006) *Change of State: Information, Policy, and Power*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press.

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Braman's *Change of State* is driven by a concern that the US government's information policy is having detrimental social and political effects. To demonstrate this, the reader is treated to something of a compendium of a book. For legal scholars, the author identifies twenty 'information policy principles' in the US Constitution and suggests how current policy supports, undermines or transforms them. For policymakers, Braman offers a comprehensive breakdown of the types and stages of information policy. Such a typology is also of use to political scientists, for whom Braman is keen to provide a theoretically and empirically informed model for information policy analysis. And for students, the book contains not so much a glossary as a 90-page appendix of 'bibliographic essays' that review the literature around key terms in the field. Even if one disagrees with the Braman's theoretical and political perspectives, such a comprehensive account of social changes being wrought by policy and technology will offer something of interest to a number of audiences.

The book's most impressive contribution is in its attempt to make distinct what is 'information policy' against the backdrop of the many types and roles of information in public policy per se. Without an explicit understanding of information policy, legislation would be (and often is) weak, contradictory and difficult to supervise. But do we define information policy according to a list of areas requiring regulation, according to particular industries, according to social impact, or in line with legacy legal categories? None of the above, apparently. For Braman, information policy is any law connected to the creation, processing, storage and transportation of information - the 'information production chain'. In itself, this chain is a useful heuristic both for lawmakers and social scientists seeking to identify their respective objects of scrutiny. But it isn't so simple: each stage of the chain can cover a range of activities, and the whole heuristic will depend on various definitions of 'information'. To gain control, Braman combines, as if on a grid, these stages of the chain with six types of information to produce a model, one she hopes would serve for both making and analysing information policy in the US. Notwithstanding inevitable omissions and competing approaches to policy analysis, this model could easily be a platform for subsequent studies by students and researchers, and facilitate dialogue between academics and policymakers engaged in this field.

The US Constitution has principles applying to all stages of the information production chain, Braman suggests, and how these principles are applied through the legal structure will impact upon social identity, social structure, borders, and on social change per se. A large portion of the book is given over to analysing this connection between the US Constitution and these themes. On the first, it is primarily the relation of information policy to the communications environment that determines individual, group and state identities, for Braman. After detailing how this currently plays out, taking in issues of privacy, anonymity, control of genetic information, the census, and other intersections of law, information and the individual, Braman concludes that the US state is gaining more control to manage and utilise citizens' identities.

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Instead of individual self-determination, legally-relevant representations of citizens are increasingly controlled by the state. On the second theme, Braman works through the detail of the intersection of social structure, technological structures, and informational structures (e.g. accounting systems and government databases) to argue that again citizens are losing out, thanks in part to political decisions within the informational state, particularly the PATRIOT Act and restricted freedom of information following the attacks of September 11 2001.

The chapters on borders and social change offer more perceptive and thoughtful arguments, not least because of a closer integration of theory with detailed analysis. Braman's consideration of the extension of US regulatory activity outside US geopolitical borders is noteworthy, describing how customs activities are exported to track goods and people before they arrive on US shores, and through legal harmonisation in which US law often becomes the template for international regulations. But successful administration of bordering processes is not matched in other regulatory fields, as Braman's chapter on social change suggests. A number of contradictions in US policy emerge, for instance between espousing the virtues of decentralisation in an information economy versus continual top-down administration of research and the arts, and between promotion of technological change as a positive process versus the restrictions on informational flows and development in certain scientific fields. What these point to, Braman argues in her concluding chapter, is the critical absence of a defining mode of regulation appropriate to a world of increasingly fluid social, technological and information systems. She points out the perils of policymaking systems rich in data but poor in institutional memory or political narratives.

A major difficulty arises from the book's title and central thesis, namely the change from 'bureaucratic welfare' state to 'informational' state. Unfortunately, just a page is given to the former, and while The State is given a bibliographic essay, the lack of attention to such a central tenet of the book is a serious oversight. For Braman, the two forms of state can be distinguished by the form of power each exercises: the bureaucratic welfare state operates through structural power, the informational state via informational power (defined as the manipulation of instrumental, structural or symbolic forms of power through control of the information and information flows they depend on). Yet this dichotomy between forms of state deserves scrutiny. Take the state's operation of security policy, one of Braman's concerns in the post-9/11, war on terror context. Is security policy not still defined by impersonal procedures, manipulation of data by administrators, and categorisation of objects ('dangerous' people, 'moderate' Muslims). The informational state intensifies these aspects of bureaucracy: impersonal decision-making is enhanced by information systems. Braman herself describes the US administration's use of statistics for data-matching as the basis, today, for profiling suspects. The individual becomes a probability, a risk to be managed rather than a citizen or dignified human. It is the very extension of the bureaucratic state – rationality and impersonality placed beyond democratic oversight – that underpins many current concerns about the erosion of civil liberties.

As for the bureaucratic *welfare* state, or indeed our international welfare institutions (IMF, World Bank and so on), these are hardly superseded. State administration is as intimately woven into civil society as ever; again, changes in information technologies enhance this administration. If Braman's thesis is that information and information policy are so ubiquitous that a paradigmatic shift in governance has occurred, then what difference – analytically or politically – does it make to call something informational? If no process is without an informational aspect, and information is increasingly embedded in surfaces and bodies, then the information-ality of things and events may not be our primary concern in political and social analysis. In fact, questions of bureaucratisation and other 'old' issues become more urgent and require re-thinking in today's 'informational' conditions.

A further, minor issue is unresolved. Repeatedly, a sentence will begin, 'In the terms of complex adaptive systems theory . . . ', as Braman makes a statement about some process or other. If complex

adaptive systems theory is so relevant as to deserve repeated citation, it would have helped if Braman spent some time explaining this theory and perhaps applying it to her analysis in a systematic way. It is one of the few key terms not receiving a bibliographic essay at the end of the book. Given her arguments about the difficulty of regulating societies in conditions of fluidity, if Braman had brought to bear theories of emergence or complex adaptive systems consistently to all the data and detail in the book, her contribution may have been more sophisticated and decisive, though possibly at the expense of a general readership. Another avenue for consideration arrives at the conclusion's end: given the information systems and tools we have today, is today's state the only political form we can envisage? Clearly Braman is thinking within the parameters of the US state, but many of the trends and problems she identifies have relevance beyond the US and there is no reason that non-American readers cannot provide the spark of imagination she hints at.

Change of State certainly has something to offer, for the sheer volume of issues confronted, for the model of information policy analysis proposed, and as a trigger for further consideration of the problems Braman raises. Her plea for greater attention to and oversight of the uses of information and information policy by the US government is strengthened by the thoroughness of her study of legislation and its effects. Having provided such a comprehensive overview, I look forwarded to seeing whether the author chooses to follow up with a more theoretically developed analysis and whether other scholars and practitioners make use of her analytical model.