

Book Review

‘Brokering Access: Power, Politics and Freedom of Information Process in Canada’ edited by Mike Larsen and Kevin Walby

Transparency is a hot topic, especially in recent years there has been an explosion of important publications and special issues in *Information Polity*, *International Review of Administrative Sciences* and *Government Information Quarterly*. Freedom of Information (FOI) Acts are seen as the legal backbone for a more transparent government [2]. A recent book edited by criminologists Mike Larsen and Kevin Walby sheds light on how scholars and investigative journalists try to use FOI type laws to gain access to government information in Canada.

This is not a traditional, scientific, edited volume about transparency and FOI. The main added value of this book does not lie so much in developing scientific concepts or empirically testing theoretical propositions, but in gaining insights in FOI from a critical science and activist perspective. This is clearly stated in the preface by Ann Cavoukian, who has been Ontario’s Information and Privacy Commissioner since 1997. She upholds a vigorous argument against the deplorable state of FOI in Canada. This argument perfectly catches the gist of the book: information access in Canada is very limited and a reform is badly needed.

Indeed, this is in line with other studies that confirm that Canada does not seem to have the best of records when it comes to transparent government [4]. Unfortunately this book does not ask the question whether Canada is more secretive than other countries and if so, how this can be explained. Nevertheless it seems as if Canada’s FOI legislation does not function too well and that a major reform is needed indeed [4,5].

This point is brought forward in a poignant manner in Ann Rees’ chapter about executive branch resistance of openness. The chapter is based on her personal experience with information requests to the Prime Minister’s office (PMO) about the lumber industry, which made the headlines in the summer of 2006 because of a dispute between American and the Canadian lumber industry. Based on a detailed account of her own experience with information requests Rees notices a general lack of transparency (PMO is exempt from any information requests), and a reluctance by the public service to call attention to irregularities. This is due to the increased concentration of political power in the PMO and she concludes that *‘Canada’s PMO is a closed shop, staffed primarily by spin doctors and political strategists hired specifically to take advantage of the cloak of secrecy to control and manipulate the public’s perspective of what happens in that secret world.’* (p. 65).

Another such example can be found in the third chapter by Jim Bronskill (‘Flying the Secret Skies’), who paints a similar bleak picture of Canada’s openness in a very different domain. Bronskill, a Canadian Press reporter, shows how claims of national security often outweigh access to information. In doing so governments make it challenging for researchers and journalists to uncover a full story and often access is not immediately given.

This interplay between ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’ resonates throughout the book, and is where it gets its title (‘Brokering Access’). Larsen and Walby note that *‘we use the term “access brokering” to describe the range of interactions involved in the filing and processing of ATI [Access to Information] requests.’* (p. 17). This means that the requester brokers access with government, a process in which ATI

officers have a special gatekeeper position. Getting access may depend on personal relationships with such an officer. Overall, the book gives detailed insights in access brokering and the role of gatekeepers in accessing information. The chapters provide informative and sometimes personal chapters in which frustrations and triumphs of researchers and investigative journalists are shared with the reader.

Although the main topic of the book concerns information access in Canada, the book has two major contributions that reach beyond this topic. The first contribution lies in the critical science perspective of this volume. Although there is a general trend in social science – including the e-government scholarship – towards rigorous and positivist science, the editors argue that a critical perspective is also needed in order to change things, and that we should also analyze the discourse and views of those in power.

This is an important message to many of us, who seem to have an optimistic, and somewhat instrumentalist, view on, for instance, e-government. In investigating e-government we often ask questions such as ‘which factors contribute to e-government success?’ Or, a slightly more critical, but still instrumental example ‘what are barriers to e-service delivery?’ We hardly ever take on the critical perspective: ‘what is the politics of e-government?’, and ‘who benefits and who doesn’t with e-government?’ These are nevertheless important questions that deserve more attention in addition to the current e-government scholarship.

Secondly, editors Larsen and Walby propose government information access as a valuable research method to gather data about government processes: ‘ATI [Access to information] can provide social scientists with a more nuanced understanding of how government agencies do what they do.’ (p. 17). This way scientists can go beyond discourse and look into so-called ‘dirty data’; what is happening behind the curtains. The idea of dirty data was developed by Gary Marx in 1984 and is used in a chapter by Yavar Hameed and Jeffrey Monaghan. Dirty data refers to: ‘information which is kept secret and whose revelation would be discrediting or costly in terms of various types of sanctioning.’ [3, p. 79]. To access this information this chapter also offers some concrete advice. For instance, the ‘mosaic effect’ is mentioned as a feasible strategy. This means as much as trying to get data using multiple venues of access. Government organizations are far from infallible and this also regards its strategies to exert control over information. Often there are many actors and they are prone to errors. Using multiple access point increases the chance of ‘errors’ and thus getting information one way or the other. The most practical ‘how to’ chapter is that by Justin Piché who describes various phases of accessing information: online content search, informal information requests (e.g. asking through e-mail), formal information requests (through FOD), further informal information requests (e.g. using tactics such as bluffing to get the information you want).

Leaning heavily on a critical science perspective this book contradicts the idea that freedom of information is a neutral tool. This is an extremely rich book and is full of examples how transparency is utterly political and can be a battle between insiders and outsiders. The book is written from the perspective of the outsiders. Although this approach is to be commended the reader might sometimes miss a ‘critical perspective on critical science’. Only once is the perspective of a relative ‘insider’ brought forward; in the post script by Information Commissioner Suzanne Legault. Legault calls for a more constructive dialogue in order to find pragmatic solutions that take into account the fine line between the need for transparency and the need, in some circumstances, to protect certain information from being disclosed. In addition, one might question the actual power of governments, and to what extent governments exercise control over information flows. For example, it is argued that leaks, mistakes and open sources are so common that permanent secrecy is costly and very difficult to accomplish [1].

In sum, although the aim this book is to be critical, its argument might have been fortified if this other side of the story had been taken into account – even to a small degree. That being said, the authors of

this very rich edited volume provide a welcomed and provocative contribution by showing the value of critical science and highlighting access to information as a means of investigation.

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