

*Book Review***RADICAL SECRECY: THE ENDS OF TRANSPARENCY IN DATAFIED AMERICA. By Clare Birchall. University of Minnesota Press, 2021.**

The book raises important questions about what kind of data citizens should share with governments, and how transparent about data collection and use governments should be with citizens. The central argument seems to be a call for greater transparency surrounding data collected by nation-states, even though the author concedes that all governments require a degree of secrecy to protect them from other governments. However, the arguments for and against secrecy and transparency set up a false choice with no real resolution. It is simply not possible for a government to be fully transparent and secure at the same time. What is available to a government's own citizens is, in effect, available to the world and thus a threat to a nation's security. The book argues that nation-states have monopolized secrecy and seems to buy into a conspiracy of covert surveillance of citizens without offering real evidence.

The strength of this book is the extensive literature that is covered in each chapter. A weakness is that for the most part, the reviews of literature read like a collection of facts with no coherent line of reasoning. For example, chapter 5 covers extensive literature about the concept of "secret", which leaves readers with interesting food for thought, but also pondering the purpose of the chapter, which is more semantics than substance and only tangentially connected to the problem of the secretive collection of citizens' data by governments. Chapter 2 offers examples of openness (or lack thereof) from the administrations of recent U.S. presidents but provides no central thesis about what the reader should conclude from the examples.

Government surveillance for political agendas should be the least of our worries. Chapter 4, the most interesting chapter in the book, addresses the issue of surveillance through use of social media and other online activities. The author acknowledges that the business models of giant

social media corporations rely on opaque algorithms and data extraction obscured by complex and hard-to-find user agreements, but fails to mention the political polarization and disruption of democratic processes that recommendation algorithms have caused, which is far more detrimental than any harm caused by democratic governments. We no doubt live in the era of surveillance capitalism, as the book suggests, but capitalism exists in the private sector and is not a direct function of governments. Why do we accept widespread corporate surveillance while protesting the fraction of data collection done on the part of the government?

Overall, the book is dense and the line of reasoning often is hard to follow. The arguments and counter arguments for and against governmental secrecy and transparency often cancel each other and leave the reader pondering the point of making the arguments. After reading the book, re-reading the introduction and conclusion, it is still unclear what central point the author sought to make. It is an intellectual exercise without a conclusive argument or resolution.

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