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Book Reviews

Who Needs to Know? The State of Public Access to Federal Government Information. Patrice McDermott. Lanham, MD and Washington D.C.: Bernan Press, 2007 and 2008. 292 pp. \$19.95, ISBNs 978-1-59888-050-2 and 978-1598883077.

This book is one of very few that have appeared in recent years that provides an assessment of federal information policy in general and public access to federal information in particular. The author, Patrice McDermott, holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Arizona as well as a Master's degree in library science from Emory University. She currently is the director of OpenTheGovernment.org and was the former Deputy Director of the Office for Government Affairs at the American Library Association Washington Office. Prior to this she worked for OMB Watch, a government watchdog organization, as well as in other positions broadly related to federal information policy and access. Suffice to say that the author brings substantial background, experience, knowledge, and insight on both the workings of the federal government as well as to topics related to public access to government information.

The book is not for the faint-of-heart as the author methodologically describes step-by-step and action-by-action how public access to federal information has been significantly eroded; how the Executive Branch – largely through the George W. Bush administration and the Congress – has shrouded access in a veil of secrecy, bureaucratic regulations, and Executive Branch assertions; and how, in the digital environment, the public's ability to find and then access federal government information is increasingly compromised.

The book has two parts. The first deals with public access where a “regulatory” framework exists. This part examines the state of public access in the context of a government that is approaching almost total conversion to digital records in the conduct of its business. In this section of the book she discusses:

- The Federal Records Act
- The Federal Depository Library Program and GPO Access
- The Paperwork Reduction Act and Circular A-130
- The E-Government Act of 2002
- The 1996 Amendments to the Freedom of Information Act;
- Freedom of Information Act in context of the Ashcroft and Card memos; and
- Sensitive but unclassified information.

This part provides an overview of the various laws and regulations, how these have been implemented, and the impacts from this implementation.

Part II of the book “examines the impact on public access to government information and government accountability where such a ‘regulatory’ framework is lacking – or ignored” (p.4). Much of this section of the book examines the Bush administration's resistance to accountability through various uses of executive power. Included in this section is the “propagandistic use of information to shape both domestic and foreign opinion, its politicization of science, and its expansive controls on access to informed government officials” (p. 4–

5). This second part of the book, even more so than the first, also reads as an indictment of our federal government officials and their efforts to hide or otherwise discourage access to government information in a range of venues.

The book has a number of important strengths. First, the sheer extent of specific examples and references to the problems documented in the access to government information and the government's inadequate (or compromised) implementation of laws and regulations is impressive. Second, it provides a number of insights regarding how laws were made and/or implemented, that would otherwise not be known except for the personal knowledge of McDermott as related in the text. Third the dedication that the author brings to this book is clear from the first page and continues to the end. This is the passion of a person who cares very much about access to federal government information and wants others to share that passion. Finally, the author has brought together in one source a vast array of information and sources broadly related to federal government information and policy that simply is not available elsewhere. As such, the book serves as a valuable reference tool and compendium of information on access to federal government information.

Overall, this book is a must read for anyone with an interest in federal information policy and access to federal government information. It is of importance to researchers, political scientists, librarians, government officials, public advocacy groups, and citizens concerned about the manner in which they are being governed. Although the author may be criticized for letting her passion at times drive her reporting of events, this text is a good, solid overview of recent government activities and decisions that have directly affected our access to federal government information – and at a cost of \$19.95 this is quite a deal. This book is highly recommended.

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Governance and Information Technology: From Electronic Government to Information Government. Viktor Mayer-Schönberger and David Lazer. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007. 314 pp. \$37.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-13483-5.

Governance and Information Technology offers a pragmatic view of electronic government (e-government) and its impact on society. Unlike the majority of e-government literature, the book demonstrates information technology's achievements without undue optimism and is clear to point out where e-government has not lived up to the academic hype. The editors' theme is how to turn electronic government, which focuses on online service provision, into