

## **Change of state: information, policy, and power**

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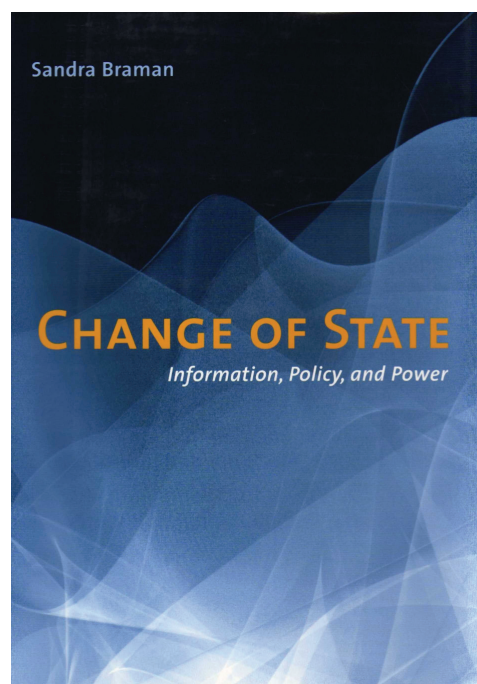
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This book aims at analyzing information policies within the context of the USA, especially by showing the changes which are happening in power mechanisms and in the work of the state.

In the last decades, economic, social, technological, and political transformations have intensified and changed the role of information. The globalized economy is based on communications networks, new knowledge and information structures underlie the economy's movements and, little by little, they modify the means of communications, intellectual activities, and even the exercise of citizenship. The information system has become a tool for power: it is the object of state policy, used for exerting internal power over economic and social activities and for controlling citizens. In addition, it has been extended to foreign relations, with strong economic and military implications.

In the conceptual part of the book, the author defines information as an asset that is part of any decision-making process, which can be democratic or, conversely, bureaucratic. The recent evolution in the use of information after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, points to authoritarian tendencies, which jeopardize the maintenance of participative democracy.

In her definition of information, the author discriminates different aspects: information as a *commodity* (standardized information, sold or bought by industry businesses), as a perception of patterns (information which reduces uncertainty and is associated with a complex significance), as an intervention agent (with an active role, within pre-established limits, causing certain decisions to become almost automatic due to the previ-



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ous answers), as a group of possibilities in the outlining of a potential future, and as a constitutive force in society. These multiple aspects allow for great richness in the interpretation of observed facts. In addition, as is shown, information cannot be reduced to static data, stored for consultation. It is a group of dynamic signals, capable of detecting latent situations or false potentials.

In the conceptualization of the power system, the author discriminates different and complementary types of power: an instrumental type (a power which “shapes human behaviors by the manipulation of the material world, via physical force”); a structural type (the “manipulation of the social world by means of rules and institutions”); a symbolic type (the “manipulation by ideas, words, and images”); and an informational type (the “manipulation of the informational bases”, in the three preceding ways). (p.25)

In many contexts, information plays an active role, which is becoming increasingly more important in terms of power. The state creates regulatory mechanisms of the information system in order to keep its power over vast groups of economic, social, cultural, and military activities. For example, it is about maintaining society’s cultural standards, through control over newspapers and publishing houses, and the imposition of English on minorities as a single language, among others. On the international level, the information system has had a central role, since the cold war, and now is concentrated on the goals of the so-called “war against terrorism”. Its function is also fundamental in economic control and enterprise competitiveness mechanisms applied throughout international markets.

In the evolution which has occurred in the modern and post-modern periods, the author points out great transformations derived from technological innovations. Modern decades have been dominated by centralizing technologies and by means of mass communications, such as television. At the present time, the so-called post-modern time, there is predominance of the decentralized systems, organized in networks, which are technically made viable by the Internet, on a worldwide scale. Such evolution transforms the old mechanisms of information emission and reception (from few to many), by establishing closer and more selective links between information producers and users.

The author does a detailed analysis of the constitutional aspects of the USA in terms of information policy. Defined and modified over history, these aspects include the conditions of freedom of expression, access and circulation of information, property rights, restrictions to freedom in times of war, definition of what is or is not considered treason, authorizations for gatherings and associations, etc. Many of these provisions dated back to the Cold War era. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the George W. Bush administration, and many conservative political groups, have exerted pressure in order to change and harden the legal provisions regarding the production and use of information in all sectors of economic, social, political, and cultural life. In the name of the war

against terrorism, things like freedom of expression, free circulation of information, and citizens’ privacy are being questioned. The so-called “Patriot Act” promotes constitutional amendments which aim precisely at imposing stricter measures regarding these things, especially in terms of surveillance of ordinary citizens, through the monitoring of communications (telephone, messages, e-mails, cookies which identify visitors to suspect websites, etc). One of the main tendencies in the recent information policy evolution is, thus, the imposition of serious restrictions to freedom of expression, a supporting pillar of the concept of democracy, so valued in America’s ideals, in the name of a new “national security” doctrine. Even in the context of universities and libraries, retention mechanisms for scientific and technological information are planned, in certain areas of knowledge (especially biology, physics, and chemistry).

People’s privacy is increasingly controlled. Activities, beliefs, sundry relationships are monitored and data about them are stored in database systems, which may also include, in some cases, genetic information, such as DNA. Another tendency of the information surveillance systems is the increasing inclusion of digitalized maps and satellite localization techniques.

It is also interesting to note that the current preoccupation regarding restrictions to freedom of expression is not limited to the control of people’s voices, or speeches effectively pronounced or spread by any written or audiovisual means of communication, but also includes “symbolic actions”, that is, any kind of acts or gestures (for example, the burning of a flag) which may be interpreted as suspicious from the point of view of the established order. Symbolic actions are also detected in cultural or artistic works or manifestations.

One of the consequences of this vision about the role of information in the American power system relates to border control not only between states-nations, but also between social groups and different entities. These boundaries are not limited to geopolitical aspects anymore, but rather include economic and social activities, the different areas due to cultural, ethnic, religious, or any other criteria. We thus get to a paradox: on one hand, the new information technologies apparently offer the possibility of life without borders (in its many meanings), but, on the other hand, due to political, diplomatic, commercial, and military reasons, the information systems are used by the established power to hold the borders which are convenient to them, including those regarding people’s movements (especially in the case of immigration, as in what happens from the South to the North of the American continent).

Another aspect that is also mentioned by the author refers to the information mechanisms at the service of political institutions and the electoral or voting systems, always considered a primordial condition to representative democracy. In addition to manipulations in the local electoral research systems, in order to favor the campaign of one candidate or another, a suspicious use of certain types of electronic voting is shown. Once again, there is

a paradox; on one hand, new information technologies allow for decentralization, with great freedom of expression, access to information, and diffusion, but, on the other hand, in certain contexts, its use may be manipulated due to certain political or economic interests.

In brief, the book demonstrates an important conceptual effect about the role of information in power systems, under the control of the State, and offers a very detailed analysis of the facts and tendencies which have occurred in the last few years in the context of the USA, including its constitutional aspects. The fantastic scientific and technological progress which characterizes the information systems, on the one hand, make possible better, more adequate or more precise decision-making conditions for economic agents, citizens, electors, and others, but, on the other hand, due to the setting created in the context of the “war against terror”, the information systems are being shaped and oriented towards stricter control of citizens, jeopardizing the continuity of participative democracy.

The main conclusions are exposed in the last chapter. The author summarizes the main responses to the questions formulated initially. Among others, she considers that the “informational state” (a state which systematically uses its information systems to implement its policies) “increasingly knows more about individual citizens but, on the other hand, the individuals know less and less about the state” (p.314). The information state has replaced the old “panoptic” by the “panspectron”, in order to electronically watch individuals. Another

conclusion: “the use of digital technologies limits, instead of broadening, the possibilities for significant participative democracy” (p.315). Despite being increasingly powerful, the information system does not offer citizens conditions of perfect transparency in political life; on the contrary, it feeds suspicions about certain electoral results. Another change is happening: “in the information state, the individual disappears as such, and becomes a probability” (p.316), that is, he is a statistically defined profile. Therefore, an individual with a certain profile might be seen as a suspect, even without ever having committed any crime.

The book is divided into nine chapters, making up a total of 326 pages, to which 90 pages of “bibliographical essays” are added, in which the author mentions her sources and makes detailed comments on all the fundamental concepts she uses in each chapter. Following these, there are another 107 pages of bibliographic references and, finally, a 16-page remissive index. All this indicates that it is an important and very well-documented book, a true reference manual or research tool for those who study information policies and the evolution of power in the USA. Although the book’s contents are strictly contextualized in that country, we may imagine that the conceptual framework and the type of approach it offers may be of great value for those who want to study the information mechanisms of other states and societies which are already have a high level of information technology available, as is the case of Brazil. 