In 1966, the U.S. Congress passed the landmark Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), giving the public the right to government documents. This “right to know” has been used over four decades to challenge overreaching Presidents and secretive government agencies. FOIA has also become a model for other nations, spawning similar laws in sixty other countries. Nonetheless, the struggle for openness is far from over. This book describes the tactics that politicians and bureaucrats around the world have used to preserve government secrecy. It explains how profound changes in the structure of government – privatization of public services, the rise of powerful international organizations, the growth of tightly knit networks of security agencies – are complicating campaigns for openness. The complex effects of new information technologies – sometimes enhancing openness, sometimes creating new barriers to transparency – are also described. Blacked Out provides an invaluable overview of the challenges confronting the new global movement for open government.

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BLACKED OUT

GOVERNMENT SECRECY IN THE INFORMATION AGE

Alasdair Roberts
The Maxwell School of Syracuse University
The eye of the public makes the statesman virtuous. The multitude of the audience multiplies for disintegrity the chances of detection.

Jeremy Bentham, 1785

Our country has forgotten how to keep a secret.

Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. Secretary of Defense, 2004
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In 1999, a fellowship at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars allowed me to contrast Canadian experience with the United States’ track record under its older Freedom of Information Act. I also had the privilege of working with Laura Neuman and other staff at the Carter Center, learning more about efforts to improve transparency in the Caribbean and Latin America.

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The last decade has witnessed the emergence of a remarkable international community of scholars, advocates, and public servants interested in open government. The members of this group correspond regularly and rely on each other for advice and support in their campaigns for transparency. The extent to which this network has grown over a few short years – in breadth, in depth of interconnectedness, and in sophistication of dialogue – has been extraordinary. I have learned a great deal from the members of this community. I am particularly indebted to David Banisar, who has for several years done an extraordinary job of tracking international developments in this field; to Toby Mendel, Law Programme Director of ARTICLE 19; and to David Goldberg, for his manuscript comments.

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The massive glass cupola of the renovated German Parliament, opened in 1999. The British architect Norman Foster said that he intended the Parliament to be "transparent, its activities on view." The cupola contains an observation platform "allowing the people to ascend above the heads of their political representatives." Photograph by Hendrik Brixius.