

Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace," Hal Roberts, Nart Villeneuve, Ethan Zuckerman, Colin Maclay, Ronald Deibert, John Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski, Jonathan L. Zittrain (editor), and Miklos Haraszti (Foreword)

<http://www.epic.org/redirect/050611AccessControlled.html>

The Open Net Initiative (ONI)'s Access Controlled is the activist's answer to the CIA's World Factbook. The title plays off an earlier volume, Access Denied, to signal that worldwide domestic efforts to infiltrate informal, decentralized online movements and to disrupt their internal communications have grown subtler and far more potent. Each new generation of tactical innovation, and the ONI identifies three, is increasingly complex. Access Controlled focuses on guiding readers through the technical, social, and legal measures that make such efforts possible.

The book's breadth and depth is considerable: a single-stop reference for the new status quo on government censorship. ONI's core methodology is innovative, as its research agenda documents the wider ecosystem of factors that normalize censorship and related methods of government control on the web. The result is a comprehensive and meticulous account of the landscape of "power, rights, and rule in cyberspace."

Jutting out over that landscape are powerful democratic campaigns that engage traditional forms of power across the globe. In response, some governments have supplemented threats of physical violence with efforts to identify informational choke points, cut off access to internet content, and disseminate misinformation. Others have started to outsource the enforcement of online repressive norms by exerting both official and illicit pressure on private intermediaries, including Internet service providers and host websites. Still others are documented as having deployed "Internet Brigades:" pro-state bloggers that post "prepackaged propaganda" as part of targeted, long-term misinformation campaigns. The ONI has categorized the recent widespread adoption of all of these measures, including the U.S.'s warrantless wiretap surveillance program, as a "third generation" of internet control.

ONI considers the degree to which this latest generation directly undermines the spread of salient politically relevant information to be revealing. Secretive governments simultaneously shroud their own conduct and enhance citizen transparency. Accountable governments, on the other hand, should idealize state transparency and individual freedom. For those of us in the United States, then, it is encouraging that the Supreme Court recently affirmed the right to informational privacy as rooted in this country's foundational document: the U.S. Constitution. On the other hand, it is also particularly troubling to see just how many state actors perceive active propaganda as the most cost-effective method to address popular demands for good government reform.

Recent efforts by autocrats in the Middle East and North Africa to disrupt and destroy alternative political voices on Facebook and Twitter have laid bare the potentially dire ramifications of such misguided perceptions. The clarion call for governments to respect the fundamental rights to expression, assembly, and personal privacy has reached a fever pitch in country after country. And as George Orwell once wrote: "[t]o see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle."

For its readers, Access Controlled moves the struggle away from recognizing the new status quo and toward realizing what to do about it.

As citizen movements rise and coalesce around meaningful government reforms to stem third generation controls, the obvious last step is for governments to enforce the rule of law. That mandate applies across the board, from the Egyptian military to European Data Protection Authorities; from the Chinese politburo to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

-- Conor Kennedy