Secrecy

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For people with Internet access, discovering what is going on in the world around us has seemingly never been easier. Using handheld devices, users can instantaneously transmit images, videos, and messages to global audiences, making it possible for us to witness events unfolding in distant places, involving people that we will likely never meet. Seated before computers or with phones in our hands, we have at our fingertips a wealth of information relating to nearly every country under the sun. Much of this information, like the hundreds of thousands of sensitive records and communications published by WikiLeaks, was never intended for public consumption. According to one assessment written at the dawn of the twenty-first century, 'thanks to the revolution in information technology, the spread of democratic institutions, and the rise of the global media, keeping secrets has become harder than ever before' (Finel and Lord 2000, 2). Yet, this apparently inexhaustible supply of open information is dwarfed by the millions of pages of classified documents produced each year, a 'classified universe' that is expanding at an unprecedented rate (Galison 2004, 229). This has led commentators to the paradoxical conclusion that we are living both in an age of transparency, and one of augmented secrecy.

The interplay between secrecy and transparency is a good example of processes of global dis:connection at work. The advent of the World Wide Web is usually identified as a major breakthrough in traditional narratives of globalisation; however, the very innovations that have created the conditions for increased connectivity, particularly file-sharing via electronic platforms, are precisely those driving renewed commitments to state secrecy. In the so-called Information Age, billions of dollars are spent on security classifications each year, while national security disclosures are punished with ever greater frequency and severity in courts of law (Aldrich and Moran 2019, 292). These intertwined processes, of secrecy and transparency, connectivity and disconnectivity, confound linear narratives of globalisation. As the speed and volume of global communications increase, so too does the desire to prevent certain kinds of information from circulating. New forms of online communication are accompanied by new forms of surveillance and control. For example, the development of new digital platforms for user-generated content in the early 2000s caused military authorities to introduce new rules prohibiting military personnel from blogging, commenting online, or accessing popular social media sites. Yet, many of these regulations have since been moderated or revoked as the military itself has tried to instrumentalise social media to improve its public image (Merrin 2019, 112–15). Thus, the history of state secrecy does not follow a

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linear trajectory, from openness to closure or vice versa; instead, secrecy and transparency, like connection and disconnection, exist in dynamic tension.

In addition to challenging linear models of global connectivity, the study of state secrecy also complicates common assumptions about who is being disconnected. Recent histories of globalisation have emphasized the unevenness with which information circulates, contrary to the frictionless movement implied by the metaphor of 'information flows'. Unequal access to information, in this view, corresponds to inequalities along the lines of gender, race, and class, as well as the global inequalities of wealth and privilege that distinguish Western Europe and North America from the rest of the world. This view is reflected, for example, in the concept of 'digital divide': the exclusion of particular groups or geographies from the benefits of digital technology (Heeks 2022, 689–90). State secrecy, however, can affect even those whom we are accustomed to considering as plugged in. For example, using recently declassified records, historians of the Cold War have revealed how the American government was engaging in risky nuclear alert operations that were purposefully discernible to Soviet and North Vietnamese intelligence agencies but concealed from American citizens (Sagan and Suri 2003, 179–81). Writing in the early 2000s, William Arkin (2005, 12) noted that American military operations in the Middle East were visible to regional military leaders, and that their classified status applied only to the American public. Thus, although the conventional wisdom around military secrecy is that it is designed to shield sensitive information from enemy eyes, it is just as often the domestic public who are kept deliberately uninformed (Masco 2010, 450). The history of secrecy, in other words, highlights how dis:connections in global information networks can be deliberate as well as incidental, and are often political and ideological as well as infrastructural.

To be sure, there are many kinds of secrets, not all of which are pernicious. According to philosopher Sissela Bok's (1982, 5) definition, secrecy is nothing more than intentional concealment. No doubt we all have secrets of our own, information which, though trivial in the grand scheme of things, we would rather not broadcast to the world. As noted by sociologist Georg Simmel (1906, 466) (whose work has been foundational to secrecy studies), secrecy is the prerequisite for individuality, without which there could be no inner life. On a day-to-day basis, social interaction would quickly become unbearable under conditions of complete transparency. There are, likewise, good reasons why lawyers, doctors, and journalists adhere to conventions of professional secrecy; they could not fulfil their essential functions otherwise. These kinds of secrets, however, are unlikely to have global implications. In the security sector, by contrast, the stakes are incomparably higher. Secrecy, in this context, can make it difficult for democratic citizens to understand what is being done in their name, thus impeding their ability to hold their own governments to account (Masco 2010, 450). At the international level, secrecy undermines

systems of global governance, making it difficult to enforce human rights protections or international agreements regulating the use of weapons of mass destruction. These are matters of life and death, with the potential to alter the world order.

State secrets of this type are as old as the state itself, but the ideas and practices surrounding them have changed dramatically. For much of human history, secrets were seen as an acceptable technique of governance. Under an absolutist regime, in which monarch and state were conceptually indivisible, a ruler possessed (at least in theory) an unquestionable prerogative to keep his own counsel. In this world, secret treaties were a matter of course, because the general population had no say in matters of war or peace. To distinguish from modern conceptualizations of state secrecy, theorist Eva Horn (2011, 111) labels this the logic of 'arcanum'; 'these arcana', she observes, 'are less a body of dark secrets than a prudent code of conduct for princes who are neither particularly godless nor amoral.' Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century political theorists, among them Botero, Bodin, Ammirato, and Clapmarius, elaborated various techniques of deceit and dissimulation premised on this logic.

Changing theories of sovereignty produced, in turn, changing conceptualizations of state secrecy. Where sovereignty resides with the people, government must be open to be legitimate. In the eighteenth century, as modern ideals of transparency and accountability crystallized, the concept of state secrets likewise began to accrue many of the negative connotations that it still possesses today. Democratization thus engendered a new relationship to the secret, 'the logic of secretum', according to which, Horn (2011, 112) writes, 'the political secret is always accompanied by distrust, speculation, and a will to know more.' Arguments based on raison d'état continued to feature prominently in public discourse, just as they do today, but now had to compete with new convictions about the dangers of secrecy, and the promise of transparency. Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and Jeremy Bentham, for example, were convinced that greater openness would produce a more just international system.

Just as official secrecy was beginning to acquire something of a moral stigma however, it was also becoming more necessary than ever before. Developments in travel (→ **Transport;** → **Im/mobility**) and communications (→ **Communication Technologies**) in the nineteenth century meant that information could travel farther, faster; in this context, critical intelligence could more easily make its way into enemy hands before its strategic usefulness had expired. In an increasingly connected world, governments found it necessary to introduce an altogether new form of disconnection: a legal regime of secrecy.

Britain was the first country to introduce official secrets legislation and provides a good illustration of this historical process at work. The expansion of the press at the end of the eighteenth century required a rethinking of how military

secrecy, in particular, should be defined and policed. Holding correspondence with or giving intelligence to the enemy had long been an offense punishable by death, but the new phenomenon of soldiers writing letters to the newspapers did not neatly fit either of these categories. The General Orders of Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, issued in 1810, are usually cited as the first instance in which the military offence of 'injurious disclosures' was formally identified and addressed. Wellington was incensed that British officers were writing indiscreet letters to the press, since French and Spanish military authorities were easily able to subscribe to these newspapers and thus profit by this intelligence. Wellington appealed to the gentlemanly discretion of his officers, and merely advised them to be careful rather than forbidding them from writing; however, as a truly global mass media began to develop in the nineteenth century, more stringent measures began to be implemented. During the Crimean War (1853–6), improvements in transport and communications meant that tactical information circulated rapidly between Britain, Russia, and the front, causing military authorities to formally prohibit military personnel from writing to the press (Wilkinson 2009, 4). Soldiers continued to write their anonymous letters, however, and so, too, did government officials. As the century wore on, selling state secrets to the newspapers developed into a lucrative business, one that poorly paid clerks were not averse to profiting from. This problem prompted the introduction of the Official Secrets Acts of 1889 and 1911 (Moran 2012, 31). These acts provided the model for the development of state secrets legislation across the empire, including Australia, Canada, and India (Nasu 2015, 369). In the United States, this classification system expanded dramatically in the aftermath of the Second World War, when, against the backdrop of the Cold War, a new national security state took shape overseen by novel government institutions like the CIA and the NSA (Masco 2010, 442).

The long-term effects of these classification systems are difficult to assess precisely because we do not know for certain what has been concealed from us. While there are certain secrets whose existence we can infer even if their substance remains obscure (what David E. Pozen dubbed 'shallow' secrets), more troubling are the 'deep secrets', the unknown unknowns, about which we cannot even begin to speculate (Pozen 2010, 274). As formerly classified documents gradually filter into public archives, historians and political scientists have tried to identify patterns in what was hidden, why, and with what consequences. Perhaps the most well-known such project is the History Lab at Columbia, which harnessed machine learning techniques to process a vast corpus of declassified documents. For historian and project leader Matthew Connelly, the need for this kind of work is urgent. By better understanding how state secrecy operated in the past, Connelly (2023, 11) argues, historians can help to develop new policies that will increase accountability, information security, and public confidence.

For analysts interested in understanding contemporary cultures of secrecy, different approaches are needed. State secrets, though elusive, do still leave traces for those who know where to look, because these secrets are not so easy to keep as one might suppose. For one thing, keeping state secrets means relying on officials to abide by certain codes; as more and more tasks are outsourced to private contractors, the circle of trust is broken, with the result that large-scale document dumps are becoming a routine part of the media landscape. Moreover, though secrets are traditionally conceptualized as absences (→ **Absences**), they often take material forms, occupy space, and produce tell-tale signs. As Trevor Paglen (2010, 760) illustrated using the example of stealth fighter jets, 'because there are no such things as invisible factories, airplanes made out of unearthly ghost-matter, or workers who "don't exist," logics of secrecy are contradicted by their material implementations.' The fact that secrecy is a process, requiring human labour and material infrastructure, is what makes secrecy studies possible. Secrets take work, and they are always in danger of being betrayed. As William Walters (2021, 10) notes, modern scholars of secrecy 'engage secrecy not in terms of binaries or static boundaries but rather dynamic social processes in which concealment, leaking, covering-up, exposing . . . are treated as uncertain practices and effects to be followed over time.'

One of the key insights emanating from this interdisciplinary field is thus that secrecy and transparency should not be conceived in binary terms. Just as connection and disconnection represent different aspects of the same globalizing processes, secrecy and transparency should be conceived as mutually constitutive rather than opposing forces. Transparency might seem like the antithesis of secrecy, but in practice disclosure can be a tool to confuse and distract, to protect some secrets by revealing others. For example, as press historian Sam Lebovic (2016, 187) has pointed out, there is a long tradition of government figures using leaks for partisan purposes, including to manipulate public opinion. Conversely, secrecy is often invested with negative connotations but can be a prerequisite for greater transparency; think, for example, of whistleblower protections, or the imperative for journalists to protect their sources. Transparency is therefore not inherently good, nor is secrecy inherently bad; both are tools that are used tactically in political struggles.

In a related fashion, theorists have tried to temper popular optimism in the transformative potential of transparency. This optimism, Richard Fenster (2015, 152) argues, is premised upon an overly simplistic 'cybernetic' or 'information model' according to which information merely needs to be made public to produce an impact. Just because information is technically accessible, does not mean that it will be understood or acted upon. Using the example of Abu Ghraib, Lisa Stampnitzky (2020, 519) demonstrates that evidence of torture was publicized via major news outlets long before the scandal broke; this leads her to distinguish between

the mere publicization of information (what she calls 'exposure'), and 'revelation', or, the 'collective recognition that there has been a significant change in what is publicly known.' Transparency, in other words, is not an end in and of itself, but instead provides the conditions in which informed debate can potentially (though not necessarily) take place.

As this suggests, one of the major preoccupations of secrecy studies is with secrets that are not in fact secret at all but are still absent from public discussion. Anthropologist Michael Taussig (1999, 5) influentially coined the term 'public secret' to describe 'that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated'. Public secrets or open secrets have become a major preoccupation within secrecy studies, because they raise difficult questions about our own responsibilities as democratic subjects. As theorist Clare Birchall (Birchall 2011, 19) phrased it, with reference to the war on terror, 'what lines of responsibility are there in the instance of a public which has access to information about governmental kidnapping, indefinite detention and prisoner abuse but which chooses to continue *as if* such information were secret?' For Jodi Dean (2018), the fixation with secrets can be, not just an unhelpful distraction, but also an excuse for not mobilizing in pursuit of structural change. The bottom line is that, while secrecy is a problem in democratic society, so too is passivity and inattention.

Studying secrecy, in short, involves thinking about all kinds of absences and interruptions (→ **Interruptions**). Most obviously, classification regimes can impede the free flow of information, making it difficult to know what governments are doing, or to hold them to account. These measures were first introduced in response to improved transport and communication technologies and a context of intensifying transnational exchanges in the nineteenth century. As newly declassified documents make their way into the public domain, historians are developing a clearer understanding of how state secrecy shaped (and obscured) global entanglements in the twentieth century. Yet, while national security secrets might be absent from the official record (at least for the moment), scholars have reminded us that they manifest themselves in other ways. After all, military operations that are secret from the point of view of the domestic public are usually far from secret to the populations targeted by them. Moreover, while some human rights violations might occur in secret, still more are taking place in full view. Thanks to social media, we are inundated daily with images of human death and suffering. This brings us to a more troubling kind of absence: an absence of attention or even, perhaps, of compassion. Knowing about wars unfolding in distant places is not the same as caring about them, and this, perhaps, is the more important form of global disconnection.

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