

Book Reviews

Colin Darch and Peter G. Underwood.

Freedom of Information and the Developing World: The Citizen, the State and Models of Openness. Oxford, U.K.: Chandos, 2010. 317p. \$80 (ISBN 9781843341475).

Freedom of information—a citizen’s right to request and obtain information from the state—tends to be regarded as an unproblematic good. That is precisely why this excellent book by two South African scholars is so valuable. Colin Darch is a researcher based at the African Studies Library at the University of Cape Town. Peter G. Underwood is Director of the University of Cape Town Centre for Information Literacy as well as Professor of Librarianship at the University of Cape Town. They examine assumptions underlying the adoption of freedom of information principles and laws throughout the world and explore local histories and political systems affecting its implementation in developing countries. Far from being unproblematic, freedom of information is described as “a deeply subversive way to reconfigure the relationship between state and citizen by specifying how and under what terms political knowledge is shared.”

The authors show that, although the first freedom of information act was passed in Sweden in 1766 and information rights were included in human rights declarations after World War II, the specific sense of a right to access to state documents is relatively recent. And law is only a beginning. Governments throughout history have been secretive, and to a large extent remain so. Studies of bureaucracy indicate that “non-compliance is not an aberration.” Even in Western countries with well-developed systems of record-keeping, the state is a “site of struggle.” Governments find ways to avoid complying with the law, and pre-emptive destruction of documents continues to take place.

Darch and Underwood question Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which states that freedom of information aids economic development; prevents hunger, environmental damage and disease; reduces corruption; and enables democracy. They find such claims overstated and point out that “inflation” of the concept of human rights can be counterproductive. They suggest that the moral argument might be better framed as a duty of the state rather than a right of the citizen.

The book continues with detailed case studies of freedom of information in individual countries where local conditions have determined outcomes. China offers an example of a country where increasing access to information has occurred without democracy. Russia under Putin is approaching a “condition of near-obsessive secrecy.” Conditions in individual Latin American countries vary greatly, from the impenetrable secrecy of police archives in Guatemala to the legacy of natural resource exploitation in Bolivia to the issue of media access in Brazil. Access to information in the Philippines is based on case law rather than legislation.

The situation in Africa is covered in detail, although the case histories do not claim to be typologies. The authors admit at the outset that “this chapter does not consist of a series of stories in which virtue triumphs over oppression.” Zimbabwe, where colonial records were purposely destroyed and bellicosity continues, is certainly a discouraging case. Nigeria presents a more encouraging example due to an outspoken press and experienced human rights groups, although freedom of information legislation was voted down there in 2008. Some access and demand exist in Mozambique among elites, but there are linguistic and



socioeconomic barriers to widespread use of information. South Africa exemplifies an incomplete transformation from the highly developed, bureaucratic, and secretive apartheid state to a country with explicit freedom of information rights but low citizen use and sporadic data collection. African countries, however, are “not a basket case.”

This book more than meets its objective of interrogating common assumptions about the universal application of freedom of information rights. The nonideological stance of its authors is one of its strengths, along with their superb research and mastery of theory, history, and politics in many domains. It leaves a rather dispiriting impression in the end, as if freedom of information were not merely an unattainable ideal but possibly a mistaken one. In the final chapter, the authors propose a tentative solution: movement toward nonjuridical, nonadversarial practices (break the “hermeneutics of suspicion”), toward a culture of access in which governments recognize that secrecy leads to bad policy. The Wikileaks model is mentioned too, where technology enables direct action against an authoritarian state. Truthfully, however, the authors have no solution or policy recommendations to offer, which may be just as well given their distrust of universal solutions. Readers should be grateful for their temperate and stimulating treatment of a subject that largely has gone unexamined by library professionals.—*Jean Alexander, Carnegie Mellon University.*

June Abbas. *Structures for Organizing Knowledge: Exploring Taxonomies, Ontologies, and Other Schemas.* New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2010. xxi, 248p. alk. paper, \$85.00 (ISBN 9781555706999). LC2010-024861.

Organization is at the heart of the library profession: without organization both physical (as on shelves) and virtual (as in databases and OPACs), users cannot access information and materials. As the

library grows to include more digital resources and users begin to create their own metadata, librarians must expand their concepts of knowledge organization beyond traditional means of description and classification.

June Abbas's *Structures for Organizing Knowledge: Exploring Taxonomies, Ontologies, and Other Schemas* discusses the many ways in which human beings organize objects and how librarians and other information professionals can make use of these tendencies to design effective tools for organizing information. The book is not a practical guide for designing and developing said tools, nor a detailed explanation of the schema used therein; rather, it is an overview of the underlying concepts that shape human organizational behavior and, thus, tools for organizing knowledge.

Abbas divides the book into three “threads”: Traditional Structures for Organizing Knowledge, which covers organizational structures commonly used in libraries and the academic world and the history thereof; Personal Structures for Organizing Knowledge, which covers organizational structures developed by individuals; and Socially Constructed Structures for Organizing Knowledge, which covers organizational structures that are developing as a result of Web 2.0 technologies, such as folksonomies, tagging, and bookmarking. Each chapter begins with “Focus Points” that present the basic concepts to be presented in that chapter and concludes with “Thought Exercises,” a series of questions about the concepts discussed; there are also ample bibliographical references. Abbas notes in the preface that the book is written for library and information science students as well as practicing professionals and researchers, for whom the “Thought Exercises” might serve as assignments; for others, discussion points.

The first “thread” encompasses chapters 1–4, which include an introduction to the concept of knowledge organization as well as the historical development of