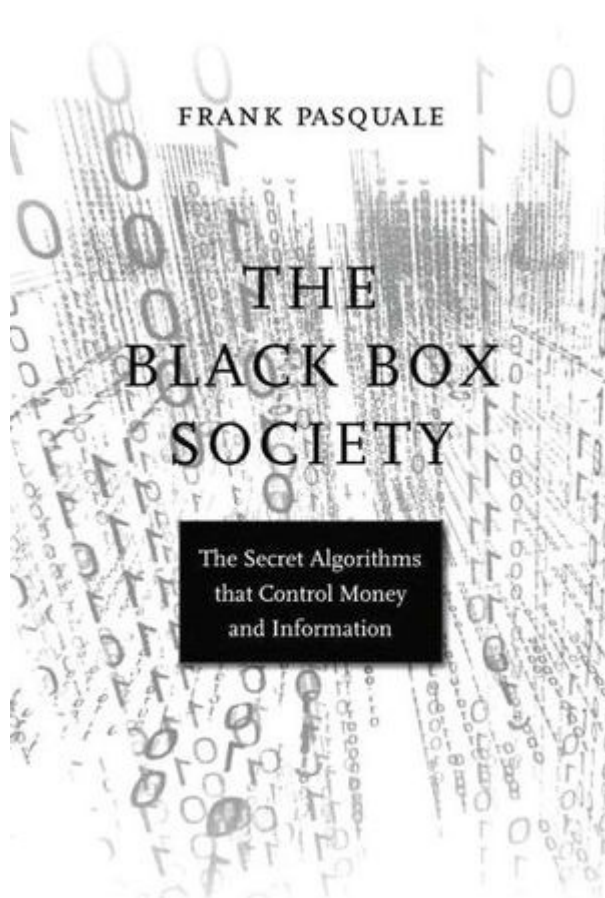


'Black Box Society' well-researched

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"The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information" by Frank Pasquale. Cambridge, Mass.; Harvard University Press, 2015. 320 pages, \$35.



"As technology advances, market pressures raise the stakes of the data game," Frank Pasquale explains near the beginning of "The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information," his new best-seller on the evolving dangers indigenous to the information age. "Surveillance cameras become cheaper every year; sensors are embedded in more places. Cellphones track our movements; programs log our keystrokes. New hardware and new software promise to make 'quantified selves' of all of us, whether we like it or not. The resulting information – a vast amount of data that until recently went unrecorded – is fed into databases and assembled into profiles of unprecedented depth and specificity."

Pasquale is definitely onto something significant with "The Black Box Society." For starters, my respect and admiration for George Orwell grew with each page I read. The world Orwell so ominously described more than 75 years ago is on the verge of becoming reality, driven in large measure by technological advances he could not possibly have foreseen. Pasquale shows us how those in power – be it by political or economic

means, or by sheer force – can use the tools of the digital revolution to foster and maintain an iniquitous advantage over their adversaries. And whereas the least knowledgeable have always been at the mercy of the more sophisticated to some extent, the forces Pasquale describes have now aligned so precisely that the fabric on which much of human civilization has been built is in danger of being shattered. In a very real sense, the world Pasquale envisions is potentially much more sinister than the one Orwell imagined.

Pasquale did his undergraduate work at Harvard University, where he graduated summa cum laude with a social studies degree in 1996. He earned his J.D. from Yale Law School in 2001. After working in the private sector for three years, he joined the faculty at Seton Hall University in 2004. A member of the Council for Big Data, Ethics and Society, he has been with the Yale Information Society Project since 2009. Although he has written nearly 40 scholarly articles and legal opinions, this is his first book.

"The Black Box Society" is meticulously researched, with 83 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the six relatively succinct chapters that comprise the main text. Pasquale's writing

style is clear and concise; readers with minimal background in the subject matter he addresses so eloquently will have little difficulty following his arguments and appreciating his conclusions. He advances his primary thesis on multiple levels from a variety of perspectives. The way he interweaves the technological, philosophical and cultural dimensions implicit in the desire to keep the general public oblivious to the behind-the-scenes architecture some use to maintain control is masterful. Then again, although the techniques may be cutting edge, the motives are typically as old as civilization itself – it's usually about acquiring and maintaining an economic edge.

The author pursues a three-pronged approach for understanding and deconstructing the ongoing attempt to keep information secret, based on the three strategies employed by those to whom it benefits to do so. The first attempt typically entails an effort to maintain “real” secrecy, which involves erecting a barrier between content one wishes to keep confidential and those seeking to uncover it. An example of “real” secrecy would be passwords, encryption systems and limiting physical access to servers or other data storage devices. The second tactic encompasses “legal” secrecy, which involves enacting laws and administrative guidelines designed to limit the availability of certain types of information. For example, employees of corporate entities are legally prohibited from divulging sensitive information they encounter and process as part of their jobs.

The final ploy, and the one I find most intriguing, is called “obfuscation,” which describes what many individuals and institutions do when content they want to keep secret has been potentially compromised. Here, the intent is to confuse those who have somehow managed to gain access to otherwise restricted data by overwhelming or purposefully misleading them. This is usually accomplished by providing too much information, so investigators are in effect trying to find a needle in a haystack, or by purposefully providing invalid information along with the accurate, basically surrounding the truth with lies.

Although Pasquale does an admirable job of keeping the narrative fairly balanced, his libertarian bias shines through at various points. He makes it clear in several passages, for example, that he is an unabashed fan of Friedrich von Hayek and free markets. At the same time, it is important to remember that the fundamental need for transparency within both the public and private sectors, as well as the constant vigilance necessary for preserving an open and free society are not unique to any particular economic ideology. These things are fundamental to our collective identity as Americans; as such the concerns Pasquale raises are more universal in nature. Everyone stands to lose if we continue on our current path.

“Sometimes secrecy is warranted,” Pasquale acknowledges. “We don't want terrorists to be able to evade detection because they know exactly what Homeland Security agents are looking for. But when every move we make is subject to inspection by entities whose procedures and personnel are exempt from even remotely similar treatment, the promise of democracy and free markets rings hollow. Secrecy is approaching critical mass, and we are in the dark about crucial decisions. Greater openness is imperative.”

Pasquale admits the road ahead is going to be an uphill battle, but he insists we must rise to meet the challenges that lie just over the horizon; there is simply too much at stake. In order to realize their full potential, democracy and capitalism require unfettered access to truth. I strongly recommend “The Black Box Society” to anyone concerned about preserving our way of life.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*