

Book Review

Klein, Mark. 2009. *Wiring Up The Big Brother Machine... And Fighting It*. Charleston, South Carolina: BookSurge.

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Aaron K. Martin

Information Systems and Innovation Group, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK. a.k.martin@lse.ac.uk

In *Wiring Up The Big Brother Machine... And Fighting It*, Mark Klein provides a critical account of the US government's surveillance alliance with the telecommunications industry, and the role he played in consummating that marriage before trying to end it. This is a story about resistance to surveillance, written not by an academic, but by a telecommunications technician. Between 2003 and 2004, Klein worked for AT&T in San Francisco, where he discovered details of what he considered an illegal National Security Agency (NSA) surveillance program. In this short, self-published book, he recounts his discovery of Room 641A, the moral quandaries this discovery caused and his struggle to publicize the ongoing collusion between AT&T and the NSA. As an insider involved in building the surveillance apparatus he later sought to blow the whistle on, Klein provides an engaging firsthand account of the political dynamics of surveillance and resistance in post-9/11 America and the legal wrangling that subsequently engulfed both Congress and the White House.

Surveillance studies scholars will appreciate this book on many levels. For one, it is very seldom that we gain access to accounts of surveillance operations written by those individuals involved in the surveillance activities (cf. Jones 2005). Klein tells us how he unwittingly "wired up" a "vacuum cleaner" surveillance system that facilitated the indiscriminate, large-scale collection of phone and Internet communication data for later analysis. Millions of people, including American nationals communicating within the United States, were caught in the dragnet. It was the warrantless wiretapping of domestic communications that was, and remains, highly controversial. Klein explains the historical trends in technological automation that made such broad surveillance possible and links this discussion to what he sees as the lamentable disempowerment of organized labor in the telecoms industry. According to Klein, crippling the unions effectively reduced AT&T's exposure to human resistance to its unlawful collaboration with the NSA. Klein's whistle blowing attests to the ever-important role that conscientious moral agents can play in exposing perceived wrongdoings.

If Klein's individual resistance is impressive, his account of the mainstream media's reluctance to report his discoveries is disheartening. After Klein reached out to the *LA Times* with specific details about the operation, they sat on the story for months and even contacted top-level government intelligence officials about it, before ultimately giving up on the scoop. It was at this point that Klein's worries escalated. He states, "I began to panic...because I was in the most vulnerable position: The government was on to me, but I did not yet have a published article and the protection that comes with publicity" (61). Only after the government intervened in the lawsuit against AT&T did the old-line media reluctantly pick up the story, thus giving Klein some protection. This included a *New York Times* editorial. But it was the 'new media' that eventually gave him the most important coverage by revealing the cold details of the spying, when *Wired.com* published the detailed technical documents which the old media had shied away from.

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The response from civil society was equally mixed. While the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC) failed to contact Klein after being given some of the material, the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) played an important part in Klein's experiences by supporting his pursuit of justice. The EFF's legal team worked tirelessly to bring those responsible for authorizing and establishing the wireless wiretapping program to account. Klein's relationship with the media, his allegations of the media's close ties to government, and his depiction of the critical role played by civil society as a legal intermediary, contribute to more sophisticated understandings of the different actors involved in building, sustaining, and resisting surveillance, moving us away from outdated watcher-watched dichotomies.

The central role played by the telecom carriers in this surveillance operation deserves special emphasis. Corporate complaisance was "essential to complete the surveillance" (115). Without the cooperation of the private companies that own and operate the network infrastructure, the government could not accomplish its eavesdropping mission. This observation highlights novel opportunities for resistance to surveillance, expanding the range of actors who can participate in opposition (Martin, van Brakel, and Bernhard 2009). This resistance works in many directions. As Klein points out, telecom giant Qwest refused to engage in what it deemed illegal and immoral surveillance activities, but were allegedly punished with the withdrawal of lucrative government contracts.

I believe the surveillance studies community will admire the various stratagems of secrecy that were manifest in this case. Potential dissenters were, with some irony, silenced by their government security clearances. Klein was fortunate that he did not have a security clearance and managed to bypass such censorship. AT&T later tried to prevent Klein and the EFF from pursuing a lawsuit against the company by claiming the unclassified documents Klein had collected while working there contained confidential and proprietary information: trade secrets. The judge involved in the case was not convinced. The Feds tried invoking the state secrets doctrine in an attempt to invalidate the lawsuit, but this unusual judge still refused to dismiss the case. As Klein points out, this move only brought more media attention. Ultimately, it took an act of Congress to change the law to grant retroactive immunity to AT&T and other telecommunications companies. This unprecedented manoeuvring effectively ended the lawsuit.

As someone interested in interpretations of technology and how they can differ amongst actors in particular contexts, I found the certainty with which Klein writes about the systems he strove to take down fascinating. Indeed, despite having minimal access to information about the inner workings of Room 641A and the technologies involved (apparently he only once stepped inside the room and the documents he accessed were not classified and relatively generic), throughout his campaign Klein remained sure in his knowledge about the immorality (if not illegality) of the program. Judging by the reactions of AT&T and the various government players involved, Klein was likely correct. Nonetheless, I wonder what academics aligned with social constructivist or relativist views of technology would say about Klein's resolute attitude and his steady interpretation of the events. Were AT&T and the US government's interpretations of the program and its legality equally valid? Had Klein suspended his judgments about the surveillance operations he discovered we might not have ever found out about this remarkable case. What does this 'real world' story say about our theories of technology?

Klein offers a gripping tale about an unexpected, intimate encounter with the surveillance machinery that we as surveillance studies scholars seek to understand and conceptualize. I highly recommend this work to researchers interested in personal accounts of the dirty work of both surveillance and resistance. General audiences, too, will enjoy this book immensely.

References

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