



Book Review

Laidler, Keith 2008. *Surveillance Unlimited: How We've Become the Most Watched People on Earth*. Cambridge: Icon Books.

264 pp, Paperback \$20 (Can). ISBN 978-1840468-77-9

Rebecca Morrison

PhD Candidate. University of Alberta, Canada, <mailto:rlm1@ualberta.ca>

Keith Laidler's *Surveillance Limited: How We've Become the Most Watched People on Earth* is a comprehensive overview of a widening network of surveillance technologies. Laidler sketches an "overarching surveillance canopy" (83), detailing the surveillance of movement, communication, consumption, identification and biometrics in order to convey the extent to which surveillance has become a totalizing force in our lives. The driving momentum behind Laidler's book is his belief that "the ability of this technology to invade every aspect of our lives is never considered in its frightening entirety...It is time to take stock of 'surveillance unlimited' and to ask just where this huge proliferation of innovative, and largely unknown, technologies may be leading" (11).

Working from this assertion, Laidler's book is largely an overview and consideration of the wide reaching implications of the ever increasing reach of surveillance technologies. From his opening chapter "A Day in The Life of The Database Citizen" Laidler impresses upon his reader the level of detail to which surveillance technologies are able to gaze in on our everyday lives. In returning from a business trip to Germany, uttering the words 'Al Qaeda' on his mobile phone, and employing Sat Nav in order to navigate the streets of London, Laidler's citizen's every activity is plotted onto an eerily detailed surveillance map. As everyman 'John Brown' moves about throughout his day the information collected on his activities becomes ever more detailed, voluminous and critically, according to Laidler, ever more integrated into a comprehensive surveillance picture whereby information is communicated among diverse surveillance systems. Laidler's opening is dramatic, captivating and effectively underlines the importance of his consideration of 'surveillance unlimited.'

Drawing on an impressive array of sources from debates in the House of Commons to an expanse of literatures, to police papers, conversations with CCTV operators and newspaper articles, Laidler crafts a convincing polemic against the tide of surveillance technologies, and is emphatic about the prospect for the widespread misuse and abuse of these technologies. The book builds his case block by block, each chapter paying particular attention to one aspect of surveillance: the technologies of the watcher and the ubiquity of CCTV; the development of identity card schemes and the application of biometrics in the UK; the monitoring of consumer activities and communications; and the increasing synthesis of surveillance databases into seamless profiles and so on. However, Laidler's semantic choices seem at times, overly partisan and dramatic. His tone threatens to oversimplify the very complex and variable forms of surveillance which Laidler is himself at pains to sketch, into a nebulous 'bad' surveillance, against which we should all resist. Laidler's description, in chapter twelve, of "the political and industrial elite, whose main concern is to maintain the population as passive, acquiescent over-consumers of the goods which confer on these same elites power and prestige" (204) is case and point. These gross oversimplifications of the balance of power between those surveilling and those being surveilled detracts from Laidler's

Morrison, Rebecca. 2009. Review of Laidler's *Surveillance Unlimited: How We've Become the Most Watched People on Earth*, *Surveillance & Society*, 6(3): 337-338.

<http://www.surveillance-and-society.org> | ISSN: 1477-7487

© The author(s). 2009 | Licensed to the Surveillance Studies Network under a [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license](#).

otherwise considered treatment of the complexities of participation and resistance, the perceived innocuousness of technology and its changing role in our lives.

Reading Laidler's book I found myself, at numerous points, wanting a more nuanced consideration of changing forms of power: how it is implemented and maintained in light of the emerging forms of surveillance technologies he outlines. Laidler is so keen to sketch the overarching canopy of surveillance, and to convey the possible implications of these technologies that, on occasion, he conflates technological capacity with implementation. He very clearly outlines the capacity of new surveillance technologies but leaves the reader wondering when, where, and if these capacities are ever fully realized. Laidler mentions the transformation of the watcher given technological development yet fails to detail these changes. Questions arise over what is done with the data and how much of it is actually digested and made actionable. As Laidler himself notes "The technology itself is neutral, as is the case for most of the topics covered in this book. It is the uses to which the system is put that can become a cause for concern" (61). His consideration of the "uses to which the system is put" is largely extrapolated from the capacity of the technology involved and would have benefited from further concrete examples of how the technology has actually been implemented. Likewise his consideration of 'surveillance unlimited' would be strengthened by a parallel discussion of the shifting frontiers of intention and interest, and what it means to wield power in this emerging environment.

That being said, Laidler's book is an impressive comprehensive overview of a wide network of surveillance technologies, both existing and emergent. Laidler's ability to envision the potential dangers of 'surveillance unlimited' in its frightening entirety, engages the reader at the same time as reinforcing the centrality of surveillance to all facets of contemporary life and thus the urgency of surveillance studies. For those readers looking for an astute introduction into surveillance studies Laidler's book is indispensable. An engaging, well organized synopsis, Laidler's *Surveillance Unlimited* emerges as a shrewd appraisal of a complicated amalgam of the players, technologies, gateways, and databases of surveillance in contemporary society. Because it maps the terrain of surveillance in its entirety, Laidler's book would work exceptionally well as an introductory undergraduate text in a course on surveillance. For those more familiar with surveillance studies, Laidler's book is a valuable point of reference and a poignant reminder of what is potentially at stake as multiple technologies of surveillance are increasingly interwoven and integrated into mega databases.