Surveillance & Society

Book Review

Marks, Amber. 2008. *Headspace: On the Trail of Sniffer Dogs, Wasp Wardens and Other Dumb Friends in the Surveillance Industry*. London: Virgin Books.

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Over the past several months, I have been keenly aware of the presence of a police dog at the exit of the train station as I make my way to work. The dog and his handlers are not there everyday, and in fact not most days, but on the days in which I see him, his presence registers quite consciously in my brain. He (I assume, perhaps wrongly, that it is a male dog) is always attached to a couple of officers who are usually happily chatting away with each other and a few transit patrons. I, of course, 'have nothing to fear as I have nothing to hide' from these human and non-human agents of surveillance, but their impact on my consciousness and to some degree my behaviour has been altered a bit by reading Amber Marks' book *Head Space: On the trail of Sniffer Dogs, Wasp Wardens and other Dumb Friends in the Surveillance Industry*. Marks' text is not an academic text, nor is it intended to be, but it does point to an area that has largely gone unnoticed or underrepresented in the world of surveillance studies. While our readings of Foucault may have concentrated much of our energies toward a "field of visibility" (1977) which surveillance produces, Marks' story, given in a 'Hunter S. Thompson-like' form, shifts our focus on technologies of smell – these are the mostly living, breathing technologies known more commonly as dogs and, interestingly, bees.

The Hunter S. Thompson' reference here and on the back cover of the book is apropos, as Amber Marks leads us through her journey to come to grips with the world of "olfactory surveillance." It is a tale interwoven with her own personal exploits and struggles, complete with notes of drunken conversations, sexual desire, and the emotional highs and lows of her research. Through numerous encounters with dog handlers, their trainers, scientists and the defence contractors that form an intriguing subset of the post 9/11 military industrial complex, Marks begins to open up a world of security analysts, technicians and government officials that are normally obscured from view. By profession, Amber Marks is a lawyer, and her interest and work in the area of olfactory detection is based on the degree to which these methods of investigation are in line with legal intentions in a supposedly democratic society. This also becomes her point of access, travelling to various conferences and talking about the legal implications and problems in the use of these surveillance techniques. Along the way she exposes the aspirations and foibles of the inhabitants of this 'olfactory' world along with her own, humanizing the hopes and intentions of many whom are committed to goals of ensuring forms of national security. Simultaneously, she reveals characters whose intentions are far from virtuous, willing to make use of a culture of fear to their own profit, and others whose view maintains harsh distinctions between a clear cut 'us' and 'them,' separating out the good and the bad with little conception of the complexities inherent in trying to do this.

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Her book demonstrates the unwavering faith held on the part of many in law enforcement in the use of 'canine assets.' Despite countless faults, problems and issues with using dogs to search for explosive materials or drugs that her research and experiences indicate – at one point a handler complained loudly that sausages were being used as a distraction during an exhibition – the faith in the capabilities of these technological marvels of odour detection remain strong. While the nose of a dog is obviously described as far more sensitive than any human nose, they are also seen as far more reliable (and portable) than any electronic detection system. Dogs are the obvious image of olfactory surveillance, but Marks' journey leads to the use of specially trained bees that have – through forms of behaviourist conditioning – been trained to seek out various substances. While the thought of bees roaming an airport looking for terrorists might be counter productive, striking the very terror in people that they are intended to prevent, the intention for these bees is to detect explosive devices such as landmines or IEDs. The added benefit is that these bees are also able to detect the residue of these devices on the hands and clothing of their maker, serving to prevent these attacks and assist in a 'sting' operation to catch their perpetrators. "Bees are the future," claims the chairman of the Bee Alert Technology company, suggesting that this form of technology can be trained for other uses such as finding things like methamphetamine labs and dead bodies. In the case of both the dogs and the bees, along with the potential to use other creatures like birds, the fear and concern over an 'immanent militarization of biology' is abundantly evident in this book.

This book does have some strong hints of governmental paranoia and conspiracy theory, made both on the part of the author and found in the words of her interviewees. I am using the term 'hint' quite liberally here, but this seems to lessen a bit over time, and ends with a realization that we do indeed live in a surveillance society toward which we are increasingly acclimated. Toward the end of her book, Marks notes one particularly poignant discussion with one interviewee. He says: "People bang on a lot about Big Brother knowing everything. Big Brother isn't actually that clever." It is a conclusion that many researchers of surveillance have come to, but her response exposes a bit of her overarching concern; one rightly held, I think. "I'm learning that. But I don't find that very reassuring 'cos he might act on his information even though it's unreliable."

It is true that we are unable to predict what information security and intelligence or law enforcement agencies might act on. Unfortunately, while her remarks about the Stasi's desire to create the 'transparent citizen' and the numerable connections made with Huxley's Brave New World may hit her target book audience, it likely does not give us a great position from which to reform these practices from a policy or regulatory framework. This isn't her goal of course, but it likely should be ours. On the whole, the book draws our attention to a practice in the surveillance society that has not been looked at exclusively for its own merits. We are reminded of this in the text with each chapter punctuated by excerpts of recent news articles and bulletins describing the developments of olfactory and related surveillance techniques. Amber Marks believes that, as another of her interviewees suggests, "essentially the investigation of the olfactory is the investigation of everything else." If you believe, as I do, that we can often begin to see something of the larger picture of a surveillance society through the vantage of particular surveillance technologies, then we have much to learn and draw from these interspecies technologies of surveillance. While oriented more toward popular culture than academic research, Amber Marks' book gives just such a starting point to a realm that deserves more careful analysis, one in which our 'dumb friends' in the animal kingdom actually have much to say.