



## Book Review

Clark, Ross. 2009. *The Road to Big Brother: One Man's Struggle Against the Surveillance Society*. London: Encounter Books.  
140 pp, Hardcover, \$21.95 (US), ISBN: 978-1-59403-248-6.

### Zachary McDowell

Ph.D. Student, Department of Communication, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA. [zmcowell@comm.umass.edu](mailto:zmcowell@comm.umass.edu)

In *The Road to Big Brother: One Man's Struggle Against the Surveillance Society*, journalist Ross Clark mixes personal narrative, historical representation, and investigative inquiry to question the effectiveness of the massive surveillance systems that supposedly monitor our every move. Incredibly straightforward in its intent, the book might as well as used as its title: "The Surveillance Society, not the Competence Society," which is how he titles the introduction. Broken in sections relating to how people are watched and tracked, ignored and databased, Clark presents mounds of data on the numerous instances of surveillance within everyday life. While many of the examples are specific to Great Britain, the author has assembled an easily digestible quick read that exposes much in a short period of time for those uninitiated to the realities of surveillance. Additionally, the majority of the topics he covers have become more universal than not, making this book relevant to a majority of people irrespective of their location.

Each chapter follows a typical pattern of introduction of topic, presentation of the data, details of the technology being discussed, and then a brief investigation into the actuality of the topic (what it seems to mean in "real life"). Not surprisingly, the actuality of each instance of surveillance is often far less effective than is commonly believed.

Although struggle is mentioned in the title, Clark seems to focus less on struggle, and more on awareness of a myriad of surveillance techniques and technologies, such as Closed Circuit Television (CCTV), DNA databasing, satellite imagery, Radio Frequency Indicators (RFIDs), and those grocery store discount cards that every store seems to use now. Lighthearted and even cheeky at times, Clark moves between presentation of frightening factoids about how we are watched, and then nearly laughing the entire notion off when confronted with the reality of how the system actually works.

Any topics contained within each approximately eight-page chapter (there are nineteen chapters within the 140 page book) could easily be elongated to at least an article, if not a book in itself. Clark wades in the theoretical pool, introducing the reader to some of the questions that arise in the area of surveillance but does not explore them enough to satisfy academic curiosities (in all fairness, the book is not aimed at academics, but would serve well as an introduction for students).

The myriad of colloquialisms and continuous references to British surveillance practices and media suggests Clark intended *The Road to Big Brother* for a British audience. The English-speaking world outside of Great Britain may scratch their heads for a moment or two while deciphering some of the language (such as "trouser your tenner") or references to less-common technologies (such as the talking lamp post) that are not yet in the headlines outside of the UK.

McDowell, Zachary. 2010. Review of Clark's *The Road to Big Brother*. *Surveillance & Society* 8(1): 101-102.

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

© McDowell, 2010 | Licensed to the Surveillance Studies Network under a [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

*The Road To Big Brother* presents two compelling arguments. On the one hand, notwithstanding all the technology and diverse ways that we are watched, categorized, cataloged, and databased, that surveillance does not seem to see much of anything. On the other hand, the growth of surveillance is often matched with increased difficulty in access to this data for ordinary citizens, ensuring that surveillance increasingly benefits only the elite. This could be a dangerous combination if left unchecked.

Clark does not suggest that there are not levels of surveillance we should aware of, or even resist, but it seems that he is not incredibly concerned, yet, about the current state of affairs. He does, however, point to a not-too-distant future where surveillance will most definitely cross the line (for many this has already happened). Suited well for the uninitiated, especially students, *The Road To Big Brother* remains a solid piece of investigative journalism, elaborating on the contemporary reality of surveillance.