

Book Review: *Hidden Cameras: Everything you need to know about covert recording, undercover cameras and secret filming*

Joe Plomin

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I like covert research. This is not because I have some eccentric voyeuristic tendencies that make a fetish of the power to observe social life without being noticed. It is rather because the unannounced observation of social life and interaction forms the core of what we, as human beings, engage in continuously at a quotidian level. We observe covertly as individuals planning and acting with others as we interpret the world around us; we do so as human service professionals observing the nuances of interpersonal communication that we could not overtly plan for in our work; and we do so as researchers however carefully our protocols have been designed. Of course there are dangers and ethical complications inherent in some forms of covert research and it is clear that, as researchers and professionals, we should be as open, honest and upfront as possible in our relations with people wherever this is possible. However, it is within the spirit of covert observation being an everyday human activity important to one's negotiation of the social world, and recognition that openness is not always possible where potential danger and abuses lurk beneath its aseptic veneer, that I approach Plomin's book. His book is not about covert research, of course, but undercover journalism engaged in practice realities, but some of the thinking, methods and ethical dilemmas are the same.

Like many I first came across Joe Plomin's work in the 2011 BBC documentary concerning Winterbourne View, the subsequent debates about it and his own discussion of the case in this journal. So it was good to see that he has developed the complexities of covert journalism as a means of exposing poor, dangerous and unethical practices into a full-length book. Given the changes in technology and its availability, of course, covert filming/recording is open to anyone and there is a need for understanding how fraught, complex and potential dangerous this area is for those involved on both sides of the lens or audio-recorder.

I was a little put off by the sub-title; not because of its length or its vague jocular reference to Woody Allen's 1970s comedy *Everything you always wanted to know about sex. But were too afraid to ask*, but rather because of the claim to comprehensive coverage. I always think there is more to know and it seems that covert journalism would agree. Exposure of the hidden, contested spaces of human life arise in context, environment and history. But this book is a great start and I should berate my pickiness here! Indeed, I would recommend the book on a number of levels. It is a potentially important tool that can be employed in uncovering and dealing with abuse and protection issues on social and health care. This, however, requires on-going and detailed debate because of the ethical questions that arise, the 'do you really have to?' question of chapter 4. Whilst it can expose the 'snake oil' purveyors (see the final chapter), made notorious earlier by John Diamond, it can also be used or edited, as can any film or media piece, into propaganda and control and to highlight things that may not

be there. It is also a means of enhancing self-monitoring, of developing a reflexive Foucauldian approach to governance of one's own social and health care behaviours. Whilst surveillance society is generally considered negatively, and self-monitoring our unspoken acceptance of it, a reflexive and, paradoxically, overt approach to its possibilities allows us to develop positively. Covert understandings, once exposed, can also lead us to see where change is needed and tell us something about how we really understand and approach our social lives and interactions.

The eight chapters cover a significant area of ground and locate covert recording in history returning to the birth of these technologies and building on covert investigations such as that of 'Nellie Bly' the pseudonymous US journalist who infiltrated a psychiatric institution for women to expose abuse in the nineteenth century. He does not skimp over the ethical dilemmas, questions and complications nor the dangers posed by secret filming or recording. This represents a strength of his work which is clearly grounded within a heartfelt desire to expose the abuses of power and to make a positive difference in the lives of people made vulnerable by some aspect of their environment and context.

Plomin's book utters a cry for considered, ethical approaches to a phenomenon that is here to stay: covert recording. The debate moves beyond 'no harm' and challenges the RCN's concerns against covert recording promoting a rationale for practices that actively 'do good'. This book represents an important beginning in this changing world of care technologies and practice ethics: highly recommended for all involved in protection and safeguarding.

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