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Electronically Monitored Punishment: International and critical perspectives

Mike Nellis, Kristel Beyens, and Dan Kaminski (eds) (2013), Oxon: Routledge. 279 pp. £90

This edited book focuses our attention to the electronic monitoring (EM) of offenders through a comparison of its development in nine countries. It explores the socio-technical conditions influencing the evolution of the various technologies used to supervise offenders in the community and its effect on their behaviour. It pays particular attention to the complex political machinations which surround its application in the historical contexts of the nine countries. The book is framed within the utopian and dystopian hopes underpinning the investment in EM technologies, which remain both empirically and ethically undertheorized around the world.

Part one of the book consists of nine chapters and is concerned with the international experiences of EM to provide a deep understanding of penal cultures and practices, together with the different approaches to punishment and control. In Chapter 1 Lilly and Nellis argue that the champions of EM in the US have created a discourse infused with ‘technological utopianism’ to denote an outlook on social progress through technologies advocated as a solution to sociopolitical problems. Despite these transformative claims, they demonstrate how EM is actually tempered by competing narratives that perceive it as an intermediate sanction held back by a commitment to mass incarceration.

In Chapter 2 Wallace-Capretta and Roberts consider the origins and gradual evolution of EM in Canada. They explore issues around EM programmes and the experiences of offenders subjected to it. They show how the federal nature of the country means that the application of EM technology varies significantly in different provinces, requiring a national debate on its use.

Chapter 3 by Mair and Nellis examines how EM technologies in England, Wales, and Scotland have had little effect on enduring punitive traditions of prison use. They argue that the use of EM technologies in parallel to governments’ deliberate fragmentation of the Probation Service into third (and private) sector offender management services is regressive modernisation.

The account by Smith and Gibbs, in Chapter 4, shows the eagerness of Australia and New Zealand to adopt crime control technology. They explore the controversies, advantages, and disadvantages of EM and suggest that technologies are embraced without evaluative research results, which leads to ethical issues about its application.

Chapter 5 by Cho and Bae Kim considers the development of EM technologies in South Korea. Their analysis indicates how first generation EM technology was largely ignored for second generation technology, demonstrating a different pattern of evolution compared to Western countries.

In Chapter 6 Wennerberg explores the Swedish model of EM which is a relatively uncontroversial political issue. She examines the views of offenders who are satisfied with their experience of being subjected to EM technology, as well as the often unheard perspective of crime victims who tend to be positive about intensive supervision with EM.

Chapter 7 by Lévy considers the evolution of EM in France to show how ‘tagging’ and ‘tracking’ became entrenched in society due to major pressures around prison populations and political competition. She reveals how in the first decade of its existence EM was used as an intensive community sentence, whereas today authorities insist that it is an effective substitute to imprisonment.

Chapter 8 by Beyens and Kaminski ask whether the sky is the limit for EM in Belgium. They show how EM was originally implemented without any evidence of its effects and without any legal provision for its regulation. In this sense, EM was ‘smuggled’ into the Belgian correctional system with a great political eagerness towards a ready-made and cheap solution to a rising prison population.

Chapter 9 by van Swaaningen and uit Beijerse outlines the legal and political justification of EM in the Netherlands. Through an analysis of panopticism, rehabilitation, risk management, and cost efficiency, they reveal that the main rationale for EM is reducing custodial capacity problems and cost efficiency.

The four chapters in part two of the book explore the controversial themes in EM to take forward the debate on ethics, evaluation, privatization, and offender perspectives. Chapter 10 by Nellis considers the ethical challenges of EM by drawing on moral and social philosophy to establish credible limits on technology that affects offenders. He suggests that many of the ethical arguments against EM are concerned with what it could entail in the future, leading to dystopian visions that inhibit the development of useful technologies.

Chapter 11 by Paterson focuses on the development of EM punishment through commercial crime control. He reveals how insecurity in the West and neoliberal notions of marketisation drive the commercialisation of incarceration and EM. His analysis reveals how this enables governments to expand crime control and meet the political demand for enhanced security, whilst avoiding financial restraints.

In Chapter 12 Hucklesby reviews the findings of an exploratory study examining the experience of EM from the perspective of offenders and the private sector staff supervising them. She concludes that the majority of offenders want to comply with their curfew orders because EM acts as a deterrent to those who fear going to prison. Focusing on compliance, Hucklesby found that incidents of non-compliance were often minor and resulted from offenders' chaotic lifestyles.

In the book's final chapter, Renzema evaluates the state of worldwide research on EM and its effects. He suggests that we have a limited understanding of the impact of EM and that future research should focus on a range of issues which he identifies as a useful starting point: the financial impact of EM on correctional systems, how offenders react to EM that extends into decades, whether EM has a significant impact on offender behaviour, and whether EM research influences policy.

There will be much in this edited book for readers interested in understanding the evolution and impact of EM technology from multiple international perspectives. Its main contribution lies in the detailed historical and critical accounts of the emergence of EM technologies, rather than advancing the theoretical horizon of EM punishment. This book will be welcomed by academics, policy makers, and practitioners who are concerned with understanding and addressing the challenges raised by EM.

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