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# Sensing Absence: How to See What Isn't There in the Study of Science and Security

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What is not of concern in social and political life is the ever-shifting shadow to what is of concern.<sup>1</sup> At any one time only certain topics will garner the limelight in public discussions. Yet, what remains off the agenda can be judged to be equally, if not more, important than what is so. This is perhaps most obviously evident in the manner priorities change over time and across locations. Swine flu, human trafficking, animal experimentation, HIV/AIDS, and Ebola outbreaks are just some instances of topics that have waxed and waned as matters of apprehension.

Much the same can be said about how any topics come to be understood. While issues or events could be described in almost any number of ways, only certain framings are likely to be prevalent at a given time and place. Yet which ones are widespread can be highly consequential in suggesting what is at stake. As, for instance, James Revill and Brett Edwards note in their chapter in this volume, disfiguring acid attacks frequently perpetuated around the world are rarely described as chemical weapon attacks within the parlance of international diplomacy. Through the connections made and not, ways of seeing can obscure or sideline considerations. In this sense, presence and absence come bundled together in what is concealed within what is revealed.

With any newfound heightened awareness, regard can be cast on the reasons for past indifference or apathy. For instance, some have argued that ethical, legal, and social analysis of science has often been reactive to scandals, catastrophes, experiments, and so on (rather than proactive in setting out a positive future agenda), and has tended to focus on new technologies (rather than the major public health problems measured in terms of burden of disease).<sup>2</sup> Likewise, avoiding “strategic surprise” by learning from the past has long led to soul-searching about

disciplinary preoccupations in areas concerned with national security (see Walker's chapter on technological surprise).

With any level of attention, regard can be given to the consequences of that attention. Individuals, organizations, professions, and publics can be blind to an issue because of the lack of concern, can be blinded to aspects of an issue because of how attention gets selectively focused,<sup>3</sup> or can be blinded by an issue because it detracts regard from other matters.

Within the study of social and political life then, regard for what is being attended to needs to be combined with what is not: what issues are not considered, what is not said, what matters are rendered hidden, what grievances never get formed, what paths are never pursued. That might be because some questions never get asked, pertinent information is never shared, forums for collective discussion do not exist, some individuals actively work against others knowing, and so on. All such social processes characterized by absence are—at least in principal—open to empirical and theoretical investigation.

*Absence in Science, Security and Policy* poses a basic question: How can those examining the ethical, legal, and social implications of science become more mindful about the implications they are *not* addressing? A starting point for this proposal is the contention that key challenges for the examination of modern science, technology, and medicine include: (i) how issues are identified as matters of concern; and (ii) how they become formulated as problems in need of redress. The basic move proposed in this volume is a shift, in a sense, backward. The aim is one of attending to the whys and hows associated with what is *not*: for who, when, and under what circumstances are matters not treated as significant. A number of sub-questions that address themes of ethical blindness, taken-for-granted assumptions, and the social construction of reasoning will be central, including:

- How have some ethical, legal, and social implications of science become rendered (and not) issues of concern?
- What are the everyday routines, practices, social structures that shape whether and how topics become (dis-)regarded?
- How have scientists and others fostered attention to or distanced themselves from the questionable applications of their work?

While the central aim of *Absence in Science, Security and Policy* is simple in its formulation, addressing it is not. A starting assumption of this volume is that questioning taken for granted activities is indispensable