

## Waiting to Hear His Voice:

### How the Use of an At-Home Scanner Shaped the Lives of a Central Alberta Family

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Although we are acquainted with the home police scanner as a vigilante crime-solving tool in movies and television, for the Wareham family whose patriarch John Douglas Wareham is a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the home scanner is used as a reassurance of safety and a tool for planning out their daily lives. The Warehams purchased the scanner over twenty years ago and had kept it on and playing 24 hours a day, seven days a week, until the RCMP switched to an encrypted digital format for their communication in 2019. Radio scanners, also known as police scanners, regularly switch frequencies, searching for a channel with transmission and automatically playing the message. Scanners come in multiple forms, portable or stationary and can be put into vehicles or even found on mobile phones now. The scanner itself is the product of police shaping the broader medium of radio, originally a tool used by hobbyists that was later intended to connect and unite citizens, into a tool for organizing and deploying police officers. In this research paper, I will focus on the ability of the Wareham family to shape the use of the radio scanner medium to their daily lives, as well as the influence exerted onto them by the medium.

The emotional toll of being a spouse to a police officer is explored in the 1996 article “The perceived impact of police work on police officers’ spouses and families” by David Alexander and Leslie Walker. In this article, the authors explore the stress that long hours, abruptly cancelled vacations, and general shift work has on the family of police officers. They also highlighted that officers’ avoidance of “emotion-focused methods of coping” (Alexander & Walker, 1996, p. 244) that is the sharing and explaining of their trauma and stress, often leads to

officers' spouses feeling distanced and disconnected from their partners. Alexander and Walker (1996) also highlight that after particularly dangerous incidents, debriefing or providing support to spouses directly can often help the feelings of anxiety found in police spouses. However, much of the article focused on the non-police officer's perception of the officer's job induced stress and coping mechanisms rather than exploring the stress placed on an officers' spouse due to the dangerous nature of their partner's profession. This study also ignores the impact of police work on the children in a family; I was unable to find any other literature on this topic.

There is a fair amount of news coverage on the loss of scanners. In his article for CTV News, "Going Dark: Scanner silence means citizens in danger will wait for info," Jon Woodward (2018) explains the importance of scanner access to public safety. He describes the ability of news agencies and individual citizens to quickly understand and react to emergencies such as a fire in Port Coquitlam. Without access to the scanner, news agencies would have been forced to wait 35 minutes for official news about the incident, rather than allowing citizens to react and get to safety quickly. Woodward's (2018) article also explains the RCMP's reasons for encrypting the scanner system, specifically that there is often sensitive information being transmitted about police officers as well as emergency first responders. In another news article, this one from The Hamilton Spectator, an officer relays the experience of arriving at what was believed to be an active crime scene, only to discover that the perpetrators had been using a scanner and had fled upon hearing the officer's on the radio (Walters, 2012). Although these news articles do discuss the general public's use of police scanners, it is only in reference to committing crimes, or responding to emergencies, rather than its use and influence in daily life.

In order to fully understand the emotional influence of the scanner, it is important to first understand the unique characteristics of sound discussed in Walter Ong's book *Orality and*

*Literacy* (1982/2012). Overall, Ong's book discusses not only the psychodynamic effects of sound but also the characteristics of non-literate cultures. However, the topics pertaining most to my paper are the interiority of sound, its impermanence, and ability to familiarize people with concepts and people that would usually be seen as the "other."

Overall, it appears that little work has been done to discuss the importance of radio scanners to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and their families or the ways that individual use was able to shape the medium of the radio scanner. Even scholarly work surrounding the stress of acting as the spouse of a police officer does not focus on the complicated feelings of a spouse toward their partner's work, but rather the stress they feel is placed on their partner. The children of police officers are also often left out of scholarly work surrounding the stress and tension caused by police work. My research will instead focus on the family of a Central Alberta RCMP officer, specifically their ability to shape the police scanner medium, and how this influence affected the emotional lives of both the RCMP officers spouse and child. Thus my case study serves to partially fill this gap left in the literature.

Throughout my paper, I will be discussing the Wareham family from Ponoka Alberta, expressly, their use of an at-home police scanner henceforth referred to as "the scanner." I will be discussing the ability of the Wareham family to take the medium of the police radio scanner and shape it to their own purposes, as well as how the medium changed and shaped their daily life in turn. Due to the scope of this article, I have chosen to focus on the influence of the scanner in regards specifically to Constable John Douglas Wareham's spouse Anna-Lee Wareham and eldest son, John Robert Wareham. As the study of a family complicates the use of last names, and the men of the family all possess the same first name, I will be referring to each by their given nickname, that is, Doug, Robert, and Anna, respectively. Although Doug and Anna have

four children, Robert is the only one whose entire childhood had the scanner present from birth to leaving the family home. His experience also provides a unique perspective into the impact of police work on children who have left home, a topic that we have already seen is widely ignored by current literature. In contrast to Robert, whose childhood was moulded by the use of the scanner, Anna adapted to it as an adult and was the primary influence on how the scanner was used for the family's own purposes rather than its intended use. The following content was gathered through interviews with Anna and Robert Wareham.

During my research, I used in person as well as over the phone interviews. As the scanner has been present in the lives of the family for over 20 years, and interviews were all based on memory I can provide only approximate dates for events, and some stories may possess vague details. Due to the sensitive nature of personal information shared on the scanner any stories pertaining to specific RCMP members will be generalized, those discussed in scanner events shall only be referred to as officer or Constable, excluding Doug Wareham.

Although when they first purchased the scanner over 20 years ago, it was primarily due to a desire to be “nosey” and merely aware of emergency events in the area, its ability to make planning out the day easier soon became apparent. Anna was an EMT with the local ambulance service and Doug at the time was a volunteer firefighter, so when emergencies occurred both would often have to leave the home, creating a difficulty in terms of child care for their young daughter. The introduction of the scanner changed this. When Anna or Doug heard police chatter about an accident or emergency they had extra time to coordinate child care for their daughter, often taking her across the street to the neighbours before they were even called in to work. As their family grew from three to six people, the Wareham's developed incredibly busy schedules. Hockey and soccer tournaments, large family dinners, and holidays all prove a challenge to a

family with an RCMP member as a parent. Long hours, unexpectedly extended shifts, and having to remain on-call can create strain and confusion when attempting to plan these family moments. However, in this respect the scanner proved itself incredibly useful. If the family heard Doug being called to an accident they would know to simply proceed without him, or if they heard him sign off on the radio, they were able to know that Doug would be home within a few hours. Even for simple matters such as how to plan the best route for long drives, the scanner was an advantage. If she heard about large vehicle wrecks or blocked roadways, Anna could call her children and inform them of the safest routes and locations of accidents. This lack of uncertainty helped to alleviate stress and confusion for Anna and her children, which created a more comfortable work-life balance.

Unlike my original assumption, Anna stated that consistently listening to the radio did not cause anxiety but rather created a sense of relief. However, when I asked her if other spouses sought to follow their example, Anna stated that most other people she had talked to were “too nervous” about listening to the consistent chatter and instead preferred to simply call her and ask what she had heard on the scanner if they were unsure of their partners safety. Thus Anna acted as an intermediary for other spouses to also gain a sense of comfort without having to allow the medium to consistently influence their life. Other families had expressed surprise at their use of the scanner, and even suggested that Anna turn it off as they could not understand how she was able to calmly listen to the police chatter. However, the scanner was simply a part of the everyday life of the family. Each Monday night, a test page, a loud and drawn out tone would sound at approximately 8:00 pm. Rather than turning off the scanner for this time, the Wareham’s simply allowed the tone to play, not necessarily tuning it out, but allowing it to blend into their routine. Robert noted that babysitters and visiting friends would often be confused by

the sound of voices, whose origin they were unsure of, and some would even become frightened, believing an intruder was in the home. The Wareham's often forgot to warn visitors of the noise because for them the scanner was simply a part of the family, so ingrained into their home life that they would forget that others viewed it as abnormal.

The scanner also created a second language within the home. Robert and Anna both discussed their use of police codes in regular interactions with others, specifically the "10 codes," for example "10-4." The children would listen for specific codes that suggested there was going to be interesting activity on the line, and could use some of these codes to speak to each other as well. The phrase "10-33," which is meant to convey that the officer is in need of immediate assistance, would be used as a family joke if any of the siblings were in trouble. For Robert, the NATO Phonetic Alphabet (alpha, bravo, charlie) was memorized by the same time as the Standard English alphabet. However, this secondary alphabet was never intentionally taught to the family, instead hearing the words repeated on the scanner multiple times a day allowed them to easily adopt the phrases without much conscientious effort.

With the loss of the scanner, there appears to be an easy solution in our constantly connected world, just send a quick text message. Although this method may be useful for elements of family planning, it ignores the unique experience of radio listening.

As mentioned in my literature review, Ong discusses the interiority of sound and its ability to create a sense of unity. Unlike sight which must be perceived outside of the body, sound enters into the eardrum and ourselves (Ong, 1982/2012). Sound must also be presented as a unit, one cannot section off and only hear certain sounds, instead all sounds occurring must be taken in at once (Ong, 1982/2012). Due to the auditory nature of the scanner Anna was able to not only receive the information, but to also listen for Doug's tone of voice or phrasing. She

recalls a time at the beginning of Doug's service in Vermillion in which he used the phrase, "Constable, your presence is rather urgently requested" while out on a call. She goes on to clarify that he "didn't sound nervous, he didn't sound anxious, he didn't sound like he was out of breath"; however, by his phrasing she was able to understand that the situation was severe. Through the use of the scanner, all the aspects of sound from phrasing to tone and the rate of breathing can be taken in to understand the situation more fully. At another point Anna described the heightened feeling of suspense due to the unity of sound, "You hear them, you hear the sirens in the background, and I do remember waiting to hear his voice". The auditory experience brought the family into the situation, giving it context and background rather than the simple message. Robert also clearly stated that hearing his father's familiar voice over the scanner created a greater sense of relief and comfort than a simple text message of "I'm safe."

Ong also discusses the importance of the evanescence or fleeting nature of sound. We cannot capture or hold sound, and it must disappear as quickly as it appears (Ong, 1982/2012). This element of urgency created a unique culture around the Wareham scanner. Every time a pursuit happened, the radio dispatcher silences the line except for dispatch and the lead member of a pursuit, removing other distractions from the line and unintentionally creating a more exciting and cohesive narrative for the listening family. If Robert heard his father calling the code to initiate a pursuit, the entire family would run to huddle around the radio, listening intently to the action. The officer has to relay all information to dispatch over the radio, allowing the entire family to follow the pursuit minute by minute. Robert recalls abandoning one of his own birthday parties as a young boy to listen to a pursuit with his younger brother. These acts of communal listening were not rare within the Wareham household but occurred so often that they simply became a ritual of life. The disappearance of sound created a sense of excitement and

anticipation around the scanner in the household. If you missed out on listening to a pursuit, there was no way to physically go back and re-listen, creating a greater sense of nostalgia for those present for the listening parties.

Another characteristic of sound is its ability to familiarize concepts and people that would regularly be at a distance. Verbal culture does not allow for an abstract and distant list of people, but rather each event has the human context of a voice attached (Ong, 1982/2012). The scanner allowed for a deeper connection to ongoing police emergencies. Unlike a news report in which the viewer often has no connection to the reporter, Anna and Robert knew the faces behind the officers on the radio. Anna explained how they not only listened to the pursuits or emergency responses but also a small amount of police banter, such as officers swearing or reacting to situations in comical ways as they unfolded. The scanner humanized Doug's profession and allowed those who would typically be distanced from it, his family, to become uniquely connected and a part of it. It is also important to note that Robert felt an increased desire to informally participate in his father's job due to the presence of the scanner. After listening to officers exchange information regarding accidents, Robert would often drive out to the areas they referenced to examine the action for himself. The verbal nature of the radio created a sense of involvement and true familiarity in the family.

The scanner also played an essential role in helping the family understand the difficulties and harsh realities of their father's line of work. As noted in my literature review, Alexander & Walker's (1996) article titled, "The perceived impact of police work on police officers' spouses and families" discussed that a debrief could be helpful in decreasing the anxiety felt by police spouses, versus the common culture of police sugar-coating or completely hiding the actual dangers faced. Although the scanner brought them in on the action immediately, both Anna and



Robert agreed that being able to listen and fully understand the dangers Doug faced helped them to cope with their anxieties about his job more easily. Referencing the 2005 Meyerthorpe shooting, Robert explained that being able to listen in on the scanner allowed them to understand the incident better and develop their knowledge of it, lessening any sense of shock or terror they may have felt if they had heard about all the dangers of the event afterwards. He even clarified that when he moved out of the home and away from the scanner, he felt more shock and distress upon hearing about local incidents.

Upon moving out of the home, Robert expressed discomfort at the silence that now occurred in his new home, as well as discomfort over his lack of knowledge about his father's day to day life and work activities. He also noted that if given the opportunity, he would get his own scanner to help in his daily planning, such as in regards to traffic, but primarily to listen in for his father's voice again, and to keep tabs on him in his final years leading up to retirement. Robert found returning to his childhood home after the removal of the scanner even more difficult than leaving it behind. The scanner was not only a source of information or relief, but a part of the home, the family, and the nostalgia associated with them, its absence made Robert feel as though his home had changed. Anna also expressed feelings of sadness over having to remove the scanner and expressed that for the first few months after its removal, she had to play music continuously or have the television on during the day to fill the silence left behind. She still keeps the physical scanner in her home, despite its lack of use, showing the important emotional ties created between the family and the medium.

In this paper, I covered some of the scholarly work surrounding police culture, specifically that there is little research done on the stress placed on families of officers and their coping skills. There was also no literature available on the ability for everyday citizens to shape

the use of police scanners or the effect of losing the scanner on individuals, excluding those who used it for criminal purposes. I have demonstrated the emotional importance of the radio to the Wareham home, as well as their ability to shape the radio to their own purposes. The Wareham's were able to gain a sense of relief and connection to their father through using the scanner and could use the information heard on it to plan their daily lives. Listening to the scanner helped the family cope with the stress of RCMP life and adapt to it. Overall, the Wareham family displays not only the importance of communications technology in the home but also the multiple meanings and uses we can create out of technology designed for other purposes.

## References

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