

# Watched from afar

Having all his correspondence monitored doesn't worry **Richard Barr** – he's returning to the lost art of letter writing



“**H**ow GCHQ watches your every move,” roared *The Guardian* headline. “Roared” is a slight misnomer as *The Guardian* was silent, apart from the rustle it made between what should have been my indignant hands.

The story is now well known: big brother is now watching us in a far more intrusive way than was ever dreamed of by George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Every telephone call, all our emails, all our late night web searches and all the silly comments we put on Facebook are being faithfully monitored and, if we fit the profile, examined by men and women crouched over screens in darkened rooms in deep bunkers in places like Bude and the Menwith Hills. According to the same report, up to 450 people in the USA and this country are analysing our every word. However, I know already that they are not (yet) tapping my phone.

Forty years ago, give or take, the Old Bailey was briefly titillated by the OZ obscenity trial, a prosecution brought by the then Obscene Publications Squad against a magazine – OZ – that was irritating the establishment through revelations of the undesirable practices of government, and discussions of subjects such as homosexuality and lesbianism. The defendants were charged with “conspiracy to corrupt public morals.” What they published was far less explicit than the magazines on the top shelves of many newsagents today.

The defence was led by John Mortimer and supported by evidence from the likes of Marty Feldman, George Melly and Edward de Bono. Nonetheless the editors were convicted and sent to prison. They were released on appeal on the ground that the judge had grossly misdirected the jury.

At the time I was an articled clerk in a firm that was involved on the margins of the case: the prosecution chose even to go after the printers of the publications – who were represented by the firm. This enabled me to gain one snippet of intelligence: the magazine had stopped paying its

telephone bills, but found that the phones remained connected, presumably so that the authorities could continue their salacious eavesdropping on what was going on.

It is difficult now to conceive it, but at the time of the OZ obscenity trial, there was no internet and there were no emails. Nobody had mobile phones. Even fax machines were a vision of the future.

## It's your imagination

In contrast the testy exchange I had last week, first with a computerised voice deployed by British Telecom, and then subsequently with one of their call centres would not have happened – because if I had wanted to report a fault I would have dialled a number and spoken at once to a human voice. As it was, I had considerable difficulty getting past the computerised Scottish lady who was asking me to say clearly what the problem was. Even she (it) was becoming impatient when I was not complying with her requirements to press the right buttons in the correct order.

Eventually I was connected to a call centre in a remote part of the world. Patiently I explained that an engineer had been to the house the previous day to repair our broadband but had disconnected our other line. “No he did not,” said the voice in the ether. “Nobody came to your house and you do not have broadband.”

There are certain trigger actions that cause my blood pressure to rise and bring on the red mist, one of which is to be told that I am imagining things: I knew for sure that a man in a BT Openreach van had spent several hours fiddling with our telephone wires – and that I had broadband.

I never did convince the disembodied call centre man, so we now have to wait the full week (or whatever) to have our telephone service restored.

## The old way

Inadvertently, BT may have paved the way to a solution to the problems highlighted by *The Guardian*: go back to writing letters. No

one, years from now, is going to publish our Facebook utterances, but they are likely to be very interested in little mildewed collections of 21st century correspondence between like minded people who grapple with the complexities of our daily lives and try to grow little pearls of wisdom from them.

Governments may try to confound such activity, but computers will find it very hard to steam open envelopes, scan the contents, reseal the letters and put them back into the postal system. It will therefore have to be done by hand by real human beings.

My suggestion will therefore benefit mankind. Instead of secret bunkers with computers whirring away intercepting everything we write (including this), there will have to be legions of men and women with kettles and paper knives opening, reading and analysing our missives. Unemployment will plummet. The economy will thrive as paper mills work over time and the post office becomes busier than it has ever been.

And of course we can get clever, changing language, writing in code, using invisible ink or microdots so as to keep one step ahead of those who want to snoop on us.

And, you never know, some of the people who intercept the letters might fall in love with those who send them, and steamy romance can begin to flourish among the steamy kettles. And all of a sudden we will be back to the sixties, with flowers in our hair and gently smoking pot – so laid back that we just do not care whether “they” are reading our letters or not.

But for this week I can relax because if our telephone was being tapped, we would have had an engineer round here in minutes to restore the service. And that just has not happened.



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