

Paul Smith isn't paranoid. He knows that **someone is watching** his every move on the net.

Keeping a low profile



I think I may have stumbled on a global conspiracy of such devastating importance that it threatens the whole new communications system and, by extension, civilisation as we know it. Either that, or I'm exaggerating a bit. Still, I'll tell

you what's going on and you can decide whether this is some savvy yet fun little innocence or some Mandelsonian plot to subvert basic human rights.

I've been editing a web site recently that I forbid you to visit except under certain, specific conditions. It is called Jamba <www.jamba.co.uk> and so that no-one mistakes me for a cabinet minister, I shall reveal my interests here — I have none, save for a straight day-rate freelance fee. So, I have no motivation but the concerns of the reader when I say that you may *not* visit this site during working hours, except lunchtime and after work. The site, devoted as it is to fun, games and various prizes, is of a decidedly distracting lilt and its use can in no way be justified to one's employers. And there's no (anti-) "Boss" key. For those too young to know, the Boss key (Alt+Tab) was a feature of older games that allowed you to bring up a mock spreadsheet on your screen if your boss walked by.

Anyway, while working on this site I uncovered a dastardly plot. It turns out that the site uses a system, provided by Engage, to track you wherever you go on the web. In a recent press release, Paul Schaut, CEO and president of Engage Technologies, explains it like this: "By leveraging visitor profiling to drive dynamic content decisions, we are raising to new heights the level of visitor interaction available today." The press release, filled as it is with Random Capitalisations For Added Import, goes about those joining "a growing list of industry leaders embracing Engage precision profile-enabled online marketing solutions by becoming a member of its Precision Partner Program — A New Way of Looking at the World!"

Now, I have no idea what any of that means. I don't know what it is about Americans in general and policeman in particular that makes them feel that by using long words, nouns instead of verbs and the passive voice, authority will be added to their statements. I recall an accident investigator looking into the Air India

disaster describing why an exploding bomb had caused the plane to crash. The reason, it turned out, was that the detonation "compromised the structural integrity of the aircraft". As in "it fell apart", right? So, when the CEO (and president) of Engage, The Man With Much To Schaut About, says "[twaddle twaddle twaddle]", what I now know he means is that he's building up a global web-wide system that tracks everywhere you've been and every site you go to. Then, when you visit any "Precision Platform Program Member Site" (PPPMS) you will, via "anonymous visitor profiling" combined with "dynamic content management", get advertisements tailored to your very specific interests.

Let's set aside the fundamental moral issues of integrity, propriety and privacy for now (because they're just so darned tricky) and look at some of the more simplistic ones. I can imagine how this service can cause all sorts of problems. It is based on cookies, those tasty little morsels crumbled all over your hard disk. What happens is that the first time you visit a PPPMS you get a cookie. Thereafter, every PPPMS you visit logs your passing. A profile is built up in some anonymous server

While working on this site I UNCOVERED A DASTARDLY PLOT. It turns out that the site uses a system to track you wherever you go on the web

owned by a shady Middle Eastern concern and buried under a mountain near Wichita, in the United States. Actually, I just made that bit up. But a profile is built which any PPPMS can access, revealing your specific "interests".

Imagine then, that you're showing off some new site — in your lunch break, of course — and up pops a whole series of "tailored" banners, revealing those "interests" to all who sit at your desk. All of a sudden your carefully honed image around the office is in tatters, as your shocked colleagues watch aghast at the succession of banners entreating them to enjoy the "Literary Evening this Wednesday at www.fineclaret.com" or to sample the latest releases from www.cyndilauper.com. Where is "Bouncy Bertha's Big Bad Titty Bar" banner when you need it most?

www.paulsmith.com