

Improved snooping hasn't brought **Orwell's nightmare** any closer, says **Michael Hewitt**.

Vacancy in Room 101



I see that a Professor at Reading University has recently made history by having a dedicated microchip surgically implanted into his body [see this month's interview, page 120]. Whenever he arrives home from work,

sensors will detect his presence, and then, automatically, boil a kettle for him, run a bath, put the cooker on, or whatever. You'd have thought it would have been far less hassle just to hire a live-in au pair (especially as he wouldn't then need a team of anaesthetists for every upgrade). Yet there is, apparently, a serious side to the Professor's silicon implant. He says that he's actually making a statement about the potential downside of such technology; that, not only will his kettle know he's home, but so, conceivably, will anyone else who cares to tune in.

It could be argued, I suppose, that if you're going to have a silicon chip embedded in yourself that broadcasts your personal details, via radio, to the rest of the world, then such lack of privacy goes with the territory. The same as if, say, you strip naked and sit in Woolworth's window. But I think the point that's trying to be made here is that, in the future, everyone is going to have similar technology implanted in themselves as a matter of course, therefore everyone risks being spied upon. To an extent, it's already happening. Mobile-phone companies can apparently track your movements across the globe without you even having to make a call. So long as the phone is switched on, the nearest cell will detect its presence and unique ID, which it then relays to a central computer. So if you're going to murder someone in, say, Glasgow, but are going to claim to have been in London at the time, switch off your mobile before you set off. Yet, disturbing though this scenario no doubt is to cellphone-equipped hitmen, it's still a very long way from being actively "spied" on, 24 hours a day, by some shadowy Big Brother. Not that this is practical, anyway.

Let's consider the logistics of that 1984 scenario, where every house in the land is equipped with a two-way television. There are about 20 million homes in Britain. One member of the Thought Police could, at a push, monitor maybe five simultaneously. Even then, unless there was some particularly exotic scenario going

on in the living room or bedroom, he could only do it efficiently for about eight hours, without nodding off. So to monitor five households over 24 hours, you'd need three members of the Thought Police, each working an eight-hour shift. Which, in total, would require a staff of around 12 million. And, of course, Big Brother would have to be watching them too, so you'd have to add a couple more million in order to take that into account.

Now on to maintenance. George Orwell never really considered equipment failure in his novel, but television sets, especially the two-way variety, will inevitably go on the blink occasionally. And Sod's Law says that when it happens Big Time, it's going to happen when all your repair men are away celebrating Hate Week. Obviously, the Thought Police couldn't risk having Big Brother not watching you for upwards of seven days, so they themselves would have to be qualified to repair the sets in times of emergency. It therefore follows that the only way you could train men to be multi-skilled in both Ingsoc totalitarianism and TV repair would be to have the engine of state repression run by either DER or Radio Rentals.

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The parallel in the microchip world of the near future, where everyone's supposedly got a micro-Big Brother watching him, would be to have the apparatus of state repression set up by the likes of PC World and Dixon's. I've only ever had the briefest of dealings with the aforementioned, but they were enough to convince me that, were their staff ever to unite and try to impose a repressive dictatorship upon me, I wouldn't need to worry unduly.

So, yes, technically, you could spy upon everyone in the land and watch their every movement. But who'd have the time, patience and, more particularly, the qualifications to do so? And what would be the point of such an exercise in tedium and futility, where largely useless information is gathered for information's sake?

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