

# Winston Smith, Call Your Office

"ONE FRIEND SAID MR. McVEIGH had returned [from the Persian Gulf War]

believing that the Army had implanted a computer chip in his buttocks in order to keep him under surveillance." —the *New York Times*, April 29, 1995

OUR PARAMILITARY friends in Michigan and Idaho will be annoyed to learn that they haven't quite cornered the market on paranoia in the heartland. It appears that a terrific number of tax-paying, government-abiding citizens who don't own bulletproof *anything* have also developed the nagging sensation that someone, somewhere is watching their every move. "It makes us all jumpy, apprehensive," says Marie, a bill collector in Pennsylvania. "We're sitting there eight hours a day and wondering, *are they listening to us?*" Olivia, a software specialist from Georgia, also can't shake the feeling that "Big Brother is counting us, listening to us, and filming us all the time."

In the '70s, Olivia and Marie would have been treated with substantial doses of Haldol or Thorazine. But in the '90s, since their worst fears are justified, they can only log off of their workstations and take a 90-second, software-regulated micro-break.

"Computer monitoring literally *controls* employees from the time they enter the work-place," says David LeGrand of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) union. "As soon as they sit down

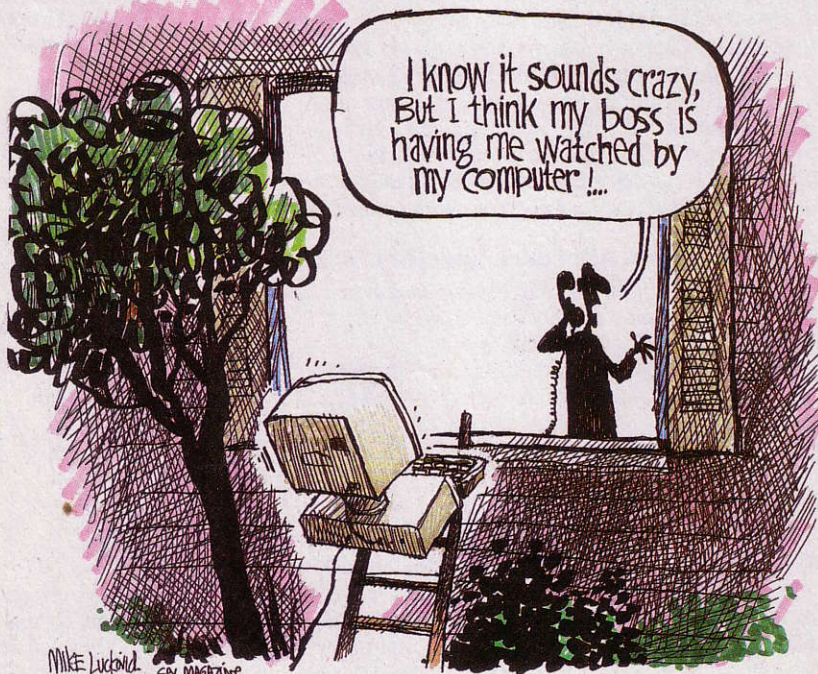
at the computer, turn the machine on, and plug in, everything they do throughout the entire work shift is monitored—time spent completing a service, time spent taking a break, time spent eating lunch."

LET'S NOT FORGET about potty breaks, which are also computer-timed and tabulated. Gayle says that her airline regularly posts the results for fellow reservation agents to compare bathroom efficiency. Some time before Rita was fired from her 29-year-old data processing job for getting up from her chair three times in one day, she had been reprimanded for taking too much time in the bathroom. "I had my period," she says. "I told them, 'You want to help me clean it up?'"

"It's not a Big Brother attitude," insists Ron Edens, founder of Electronic Banking systems, a direct-mail donation processor. "It's more of a calming attitude." Edens not only tracks his data-entry clerks by keystroke- and error-rate (a minimum of 8,500 correct strokes per hour—or the ax), he also controls eight video cameras from his office. "There's a little bit of Sneaky Pete to it," he told the *Wall Street Journal's* Tony Horwitz. "It's easier from behind, because they don't know you're watching."

The Michigan Militia can fret all they want about the ATF and Janet Reno. But if any of them has a day job involving data or word processing, telemarketing, customer service, insurance claims, or recruiting, the person who

signs their paychecks has electronic tabs on them that the Stasi would have slobbered over. More than 20 percent of the companies surveyed by *MacWorld* in July 1993 reported that they engage in searches of employee computer files, voice mail, electronic mail, or other networking communications. And labor experts now estimate that as many as 40 million American employees are zealously surveilled in their workplace.



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