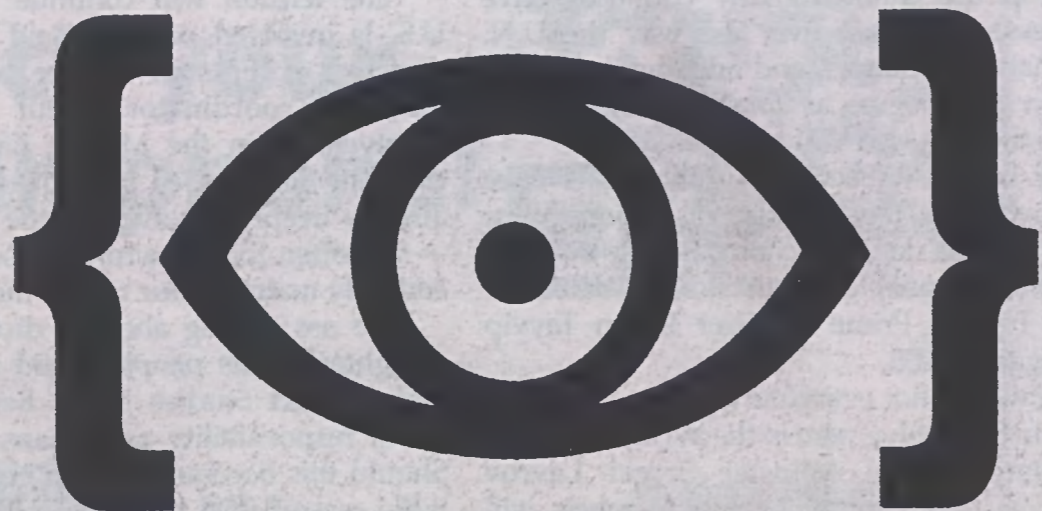# The UK has got your number
new legislation to watch Web use

THIS KIND OF MONITORING CAPABILITY IS UNPRECEDENTED IN A WESTERN DEMOCRACY... IT IS >NOT< (THE DUTY OF) INNOCENT PEOPLE TO JUSTIFY WHY GOVERNMENT SHOULD NOT BE ABLE TO SPY (ON) THEM.

-NICK PICKLES, DIRECTOR OF BIG BROTHER WATCH

By Justyn Melrose
STAFF WRITER

Do you ever get the feeling that someone is watching you?

Soon, a new law in the U.K. will allow the government to monitor citizens' internet use.

"There's two parts," said Nick Pickles, director of Big Brother Watch to The Guilfordian in an email interview. "Firstly, it involves asking service providers who currently don't record the details of how you use communications tools (to do so). Phone companies are covered at present but not Facebook, for example. Secondly, the proposal is for the government to have physical devices at strategic points on the U.K.'s communications network to allow real-time access."

Essentially, this means that the U.K. government will have greater access to the Internet communication of its citizenry and be able to monitor communication as it is happening.

One major question is whether this legislation would be effective in thwarting possible national attacks. Some argue in favor of the law, justifying it in the hypothetical event that the government is able to stop a massive attack thanks to this legislation. Oppositely, however, in the case that this legislation does nothing to effectively protect the people, some would say that the law needlessly encroaches on the people's right to privacy.

Big Brother Watch, as well as other groups and individuals, stand against this legislation.

"The vast majority of communications between individuals in any society are not in any way, shape or form hazardous to the society as a whole, but the (exposing) of a number of those communications could be hazardous to the individual in ways that no such society should tolerate," said Rob Whitnell, chair of computing and information technology and professor of chemistry.

Whitnell also brought up the matter of feasibility.

As the ability to encrypt data advances, it is difficult to keep up. The ability to encrypt is likely to always be one step ahead of the ability to break encryption.

"I think there's a host of problems," said Pickles. "Firstly the enormous privacy issues — this kind of monitoring capability is unprecedented in a Western democracy. Then there are broader questions of feasibility, cost and the impact on businesses — none of which have yet been addressed by the government. There's also a broad principle at stake — that it is not (the duty of) innocent people to justify why government should not be able to spy at them."

Robert Duncan, visiting assistant professor of political science, provides further perspective on the realities involved in this debate.

"You have a better chance of being run over by a herd of buffalo on a Wednesday of a full moon than being attacked by terrorists in this country," said Duncan.

However, Duncan also explained that in the event that something online resulted in an attack, the respective

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government would "jump on that like a chicken after a June bug and stop it for public safety. The government has a right to protect the public."

The U.S. government had taken similar action post-9/11. Internet use was monitored and wire tapping was used in hopes of finding some kind of connection to terrorist activity.

In a way, the U.S. monitoring was more in-depth than the upcoming U.K. legislation as the U.K. intends only to monitor the Internet.

The U.S. government has since announced they closed the program down, although — according to Duncan — this is probably not the whole truth.

"If you believe that, I've got some swampland in Florida I will sell you," said Duncan.

Duncan added, "There should be some kind of standards put in place, but to have the government be big brother and censor and monitor and look at all this stuff, I don't think that's good either, right?

"So which way do you lean? Only time will tell."