

Level: advanced

# Big Brother is Watching You

## Introduction

The idea of Big Brother comes from a book called "1984" written by the English author George Orwell in 1948. The book describes a society where the government collects information about what everyone is doing and saying, and where people are continually anxious that they may be arrested by the Thought Police for saying something that the government doesn't agree with. If there is one person who's controlling this, his real identity is kept secret. People are only told that he is their Big Brother. When people discuss the latest forms of surveillance (i.e. the techniques used to monitor what people do and say) it is very common to refer back to this figure of Big Brother. Let's begin by looking at a way of using mobile phones to keep teenagers under surveillance.

## Reading

### Big Daddy

Harold is the father of a teenage daughter who likes to go out for a milkshake with her friends from time to time. They live in a densely populated urban area. Last week he heard that a boy had been stabbed in a park opposite his school. Stories like that leave him feeling more than a little anxious about how safe his daughter is on the city streets without an adult to take care of her.

He decides to subscribe to a mobile phone tracking service. His daughter always carries her mobile phone with her wherever she goes, so it seems sensible to pay the small monthly subscription to a company which will track his daughter's phone. Then, whenever she is out of the house, he can see a map on his computer screen which will indicate where in the city his daughter is. For a small extra fee he can let the tracking company know where he definitely doesn't want his daughter to go and the system will automatically alert him on his mobile phone as soon as his daughter enters one of the no-go areas.

One of these tracking companies, called "Trace A Mobile", claims that two thirds of British parents are interested in using a mobile phone tracking service. Their survey of 2,160 parents also revealed that safety-conscious parents are buying mobile phones for children as young as four. Fears about safety have left UK parents desperate to keep tabs on their kids.

The managing director of the company acknowledges that parents will find themselves faced with a dilemma, "On the one hand they don't want to be seen to be continually checking up on their kids, but on the other they want to keep an eye on their kids so that they know they are safe."

## Vocabulary

1. If the police are watching you, we often say that they are keeping you **under surveillance**. Can you find four words or phrases in the passage that mean "keep someone under surveillance" or "find out where someone is"?
2. Find the word **subscribe** in the first paragraph. Usually we say that you subscribe to a magazine. What does this mean?
3. We say that you are **in a dilemma** or **faced with a dilemma**. What does this mean?
4. What is meant at the end of the second paragraph when it says that the company **alerts** the father?

## Over to you

1. If you were Harold's daughter, how would you feel about having your movements tracked outside the house?
2. Is it just a question of safety or are there other values involved when parents like Harold start to use surveillance techniques like this?
3. Clearly Harold is worried about the safety of his daughter. What advice would you give him?

# Privacy

When people debate the pros and cons of the latest surveillance techniques it doesn't take long for someone to raise the issue of privacy. Don't we have a right to privacy? Don't some of these new surveillance techniques infringe our right to privacy? To find out what our rights are we need to look at what the law says. Let's read what Article 8 of the European Charter of Human Rights has to say.

- (1). Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.
- (2). There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right unless it is in the interests of national security, public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the economic well-being of the country, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

## Questions

1. Article 8 refers specifically to respecting a person's correspondence. In practice, if a government is to uphold this principle, what do you think it should not do?
2. According to the charter, under what circumstances can the principle of respect for privacy be overridden? (Note: if something overrides a principle, the principle is given less priority than the overriding consideration.)
3. Young people or students who don't have to share a bedroom might say they are glad to have a room to themselves because they value their privacy. We also talk in English about people invading our privacy. To help you clarify just what privacy is, try to describe a few things that you think would constitute an invasion of privacy.
4. How much importance do you think we should give to the value of privacy? Some people imply that it is insignificant. They argue that we only have a reason to complain about the latest surveillance techniques if we have something to hide. This implies that if we were good citizens we would have nothing to hide, and if we had nothing to hide we should have no objection to any form of surveillance. Does that sound reasonable?

## Language practice

Transform the following sentences using the word in bold. Do not change the form of that word.

1. The police are watching me all the time. **surveillance**  
The police are ..... 24 hours a day.
2. When parents hear stories of stabbings they feel anxious. **leave**  
Stories of stabbings ..... anxious.
3. The company will find out where the girl is. **trace**  
The company will ..... location.
4. They will let you know if she enters one of the no-go areas. **alerted**  
You ..... if she enters one of the no-go areas.
5. I want to know where my kids are. **eye**  
I want to ..... my kids.
6. Those in authority should respect our right to privacy. **infringe**  
Those in authority should ..... our right to privacy.
7. We are doing this for the benefit of the country's economy. **well-being**  
We are doing this ..... the country.
8. The value of public safety is more important than that of privacy. **overridden**  
The value of privacy ..... of public safety.
9. I would say these new measures invade our privacy. **constitute**  
I would say these new measures ..... privacy.
10. I don't mind having my movements monitored by the police. **objection**  
I ..... police monitoring my movements.