

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

Telephone lines

A recent announcement that BT are to provide customers with itemised phone bills has caused consternation amongst voluntary groups who operate the 0800 services. They feel, that if records of calls appear on bills, people will be discouraged from using such services as Childline (what will Daddy say?), the Aids Helpline (who else have you been sleeping with?) and crimestoppers. As such calls are free there is no need for them to be billed at all.

Employers and parents of lovesick teenagers may be grateful. The rest of us should be alarmed. But so far hardly a squeak of protest has been forthcoming from the usually vocal civil liberties lobby. The fact that it is now possible (theoretically at any rate) for British Telecom to record the destination of every call made in the UK should give every half awake citizen nightmares.

If such information is available to BT it is of course available to the government. Such is the efficiency of the present generation of computers that any call made at any particular time could be matched against every other. By careful screening calls made to specific numbers - IRA sympathisers, known or suspected drug dealers, trade unionists... - could be detailed and, on the merest suspicion of criminal or "dissident" activity, taps could be authorised.

The stock reply of totalitarian apologists is: so what? If you've done nothing wrong, you've nothing to hide. Only the guilty need privacy and that anything which increases the security of the state and the insecurity of the criminal is not only justifiable but desirable.

The points so often missed are that the most secure place anyone can live is a prison, and that the most ruthless and dangerous criminal throughout history has been the state. Far better our citizens are plagued by normal criminals than molly coddled by Big Brother.

More frightening still will be when it is possible not just to itemise, but to tap and tape every phone call made from anywhere in the country round the clock. If that sounds absurdly futuristic, think again. The technology and the means to do it, is probably realisable this century. The will to do it has been here for some time.

