

No comment.

Only in Dreams and Nightmares © Harry Cutts 2013

Another day, another morning. Seth entered his place of work, known as "HQ" for short, and sat down at his desk in front of the black rectangle which greeted him every morning, its pointing device and button array surrounded by paperwork. A computer, like millions of others, only rather more personal than most. Seth sat up straight, pressed the power switch, and began to watch.

That was his job at HQ: watching. It was like watching a soap opera, or, occasionally, the beginning of a thriller. Instead of arguments in the kitchen there were salvos of text messages; instead of meetings of smartly dressed men, email threads of business-like discussions; instead of everyday, intimate, fictional scenes there were real recordings from phones, webcams, and smart spectacles. Instead of protagonists there were potential Enemies of the State.

And if ordinary people were the actors, PINHOLE was the director and channel scheduler. It chose the actors, skimmed the scripts for keywords, and finally chose what, and who, Seth and his colleagues should observe if they were to do their job; that is, to protect the people.

This particular case was quite interesting, unlike the many similar cases of open-minded students to be guided on the Right Path, and such like. It involved a man named Paul Watson, who was young (23 and a half years old, according to his birth record), and possessed an insatiable curiosity (evidenced by his school reports and more recent routine activity logs). Recently, he had taken an interest in psychology, and one of his communications had matched a keyword in PINHOLE's ever-expanding list of warning signs. (Seth could not know which one; he was part of PINHOLE's conscience, and conscience was context-free.)

So far, so ordinary. When closer monitoring began, however, a more extraordinary thing was noticed. Frequently, at night, connections were made from Paul's computer to another. These connections did not appear to be encrypted, simply unintelligible.

A bug was sent to acquire more information, but found his webcam covered by a piece of paper. Another was sent, this time to the machine on the other end of the connections. Seth was now inspecting its report.

The woman's email signature proclaimed her to be a Professor of Sleep Studies at a major university. Notable events in her life included a court case in which she had successfully claimed back her job after being dismissed on the grounds of her sexuality. She had been sitting with her laptop in her bedroom the night before when one of the strange connections was initiated. Seth watched as she put on a pair of headphones, stuck a number of pads on the ends of wires to her forehead, and lay back, as if to sleep.

His heart thumped as the traffic on the connection skyrocketed, millions of bytes rushing across thousands of miles between these two machines. He tried to calm his body. If PINHOLE noticed an unusual heart rate but a negative conclusion, it might suspect treachery and pass the case on for review.

Seth did not want this case to be reviewed. He wanted PINHOLE to forget about it. While what he had just seen would have puzzled his colleagues, it was mostly familiar to him.

In the past he had sounded the alarm on issues which, he admitted, were distinctly borderline. Journalists about to publish leaks may have opened the public's eyes, but HQ's Monitoring Handbook pointed out the danger of their little bit of turmoil snowballing into a dangerous threat to freedom. Plans for protest may have seemed innocent enough. "But look at Syria, at Libya," the Handbook said. "Do we really want that?" Each time, Seth had marked the subject as "Threat: escalation required". Another department had blackmailed, manipulated, or taken action. But, thinking back, Seth could not recall a time when he had been so decided as he was now.

Now, he was sure. This professor and her accomplice both had potentially dangerous personalities. They were obviously using an unmonitored communication channel of some sort. The Handbook clearly stated that "Monitoring of communications is essential in protecting freedom, and evasion of monitoring is a first step along the path of extremism." The case was clear.

Muscles tense to still his shaking hand, Seth chose the option, "Safe: no action necessary".

*

That evening, Seth took some tape and covered his webcam, before disabling his network connection. He had learnt from Paul Watson and the professor.

He had an amateur interest in Sleep Studies himself. The professor, it seemed had reached a far higher understanding, but he had still recognised the headphones and EEG sensors. He used such things himself, as a lucidity trigger.

As he slept, his faithful computer observed his brain. When the signs of dreaming were detected, an audible stimulus reminded him that the dream was not real, giving him control. Control brought with it the ability to explore his dreams.

This professor, he realised, had gone further, somehow combining her dreams with those of others, all by transmitting some kind of data over the Internet. She had found the ultimate encryption method: one which was only known by the subconscious of the participants. If they were fast and brave, they could use it to change everything, to overturn the regime of censorship and spying that was so prevalent in the modern world. Good luck to them, Seth thought.

But Seth was not brave. He studied his dreams because they were the only liberty to be had in the modern world. In one intense night, given enough preparation, he could experience months of freedom. It was how he kept himself sane. If the Paul Watson and the professor failed, his employers would ensure that that freedom, and its perpetrators, vanished quickly.

He consumed much media that evening, before lying back to sleep. As he drifted away and the images began to form, he wondered if it would ever be a crime to dream.