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A Bugging Epidemic

If the Watergate affair has done anything, it has reminded us forcibly that bugging, however unacceptable as part of public and private life, is still very much alive and flourishing.

In Italy 25 private detectives and a number of telephone engineers have been arrested in a scandal involving the tapping of 1,000 phones, including those of politicians, businessmen and prostitutes.

In France, newspaper reports have alleged that at least 1,500 Paris phones are being listened to by, among others, "police, espionage and counter-espionage services" and that the national figure could be as high as 5,000.

In Eire every government minister and senior official has recently had a telephone scrambling device wired into his phone. Government offices in Britain have ordered a new scrambler which this month came on to the retail market for worried businessmen to buy.

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And in London last week, the European capital which is said to be least threatened by the fear of "bugging," the chairman of a security firm specializing in de-bugging investigations said that checks on 100 British firms had turned up "three or four conclusive cases of bugging." And suggestive evidence had been found that bugging had taken place sometime in the past at several other companies. At least one major public company had approached him recently and asked him to find out the secrets of a rival.

Because bug making and planting is so easy, no one, not even the security firms who combat them, really know who the spies are, though they point to the plethora of new private detective agencies who no longer take traditional work like matrimonial proceedings, process serving, and hire purchase status inquiries.

Culprits are rarely caught and bugging rarely detected. The last of the tiny handful of cases that have ever come before the British courts was in October 1971. Then, the head of a private detective agency and his girl assistant were found guilty and heavily fined for spying on the chemical processes evolved by a Grimsby company.

Col. Alan Pemberton, chairman of Diversified Corporate Services Ltd, a highly discreet "security consultancy" set up three years ago and operated from offices in a quiet street behind Westminster Abbey, is one of the men who know how to track down a bugging operation.

Companies are worried and Pemberton's firm has checked over 100 cases. "The sort of companies concerned are generally fairly big ones," says the colonel. "If not big in size, big in value of business. Like an advertising agency, or it may be an industrial concern about to produce a new product. But we have had some positive finds of equipment. Three to 4 per cent of our activity in this field produces something positive, a device physically put on someone's premises."

The danger is, that the better detective you become, the more you get into demand from the "other side." Pemberton himself says: "If one is not careful one can get into a rather 'gray' area." His two cardinal rules are: never do anything which even taken out of context might be classed as "offensive action." ("We do have people who come to us and say: 'We want to know what is going on within our own company,' and suggest setting up some form of eavesdropping in offices. Once you do this it gets out of context, you get the reputation that 'This fellow is good at setting up listening posts.' ") And never reveal a client's name.

Pemberton sticks firmly to the rules and tries to stay out of the limelight: most of his business is done by personal recommendation. "But I was quite surprised even then to have had a number of approaches, quite clearly to use our knowledge for offensive purposes. All quite blatant," he said.

Security firms take it as a matter of course that there will always be people who think they are on the other side of the fence. Pemberton says: "A man came to me who ran a little wine business. His employees were helping themselves to the stock and he asked us if we could stop it. What he was really trying to get from us was a recorder and a small microphone.

"I told him there were a lot of people who had to have small microphones and told him to call the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds to see if they would lend him one. He certainly did not need us . . . anyone who wants to use them can get hold of an effective bug. It's very elementary stuff, really."

But will it ever get as bad in Britain as in other countries? Diversified Corporate Services has not waited to find out: it has already set up shop in Rome, where a columnist for the daily Il Messaggero says: "To have your phone tapped in Rome today has become a matter of prestige."

Surely not as bad as the United States where last week in New York, John Meyner of Sonic Devices Inc., another firm selling bug-finding skills, says he cannot drive through downtown Manhattan without picking up a flood of illegal eavesdropping signals on his sensitive detectors.

Indeed, so sophisticated is the equipment nowadays, it is pointed out, the conspirators need never have gone into the Watergate building at all: just bounced a laser beam off the window glass from the Howard Johnson across the street, and picked up the vibrations of the glass caused by conversation in the room.