# SURVEILLANCE

*The word on the street.*

**BY JULIAN TANG**

"The problem with running a country of 80 million people is that it's difficult to know what people are thinking — I mean, really thinking," said the Prime Minister, thoughtfully.

Henry Irvin cleared his throat. "If I may make a suggestion, Sir?" he started, smoothing his tie and sitting up a little straighter. "We know that what people say in public, particularly when asked to express their views specifically, may not represent what they really think or feel. This is not necessarily a deliberate intent to lie or mislead, but, more often than not, it is an attempt to comply with their current peer-group beliefs or teachings — like being with your friends at school or your colleagues at work. Except for a few outstanding individuals, this seems to be the norm."

The PM listened intently.

"However," Henry continued, "when they believe that they are really anonymous, such as in Internet chat rooms, their real beliefs are often expressed — particularly in response to key questions. These might be about anything from the current state of the economy, their favourite football team, their friends, colleagues, et cetera, et cetera …"

"So what are you proposing, Henry?" asked the PM, cautiously.

"Well, if you really want to know what the people are thinking, Sir, you could set up your own Internet chat rooms to encourage individuals to express themselves, anonymously, about various topics of specific interest to you and monitor their responses to key questions."

The PM sighed, disappointed. "This is nothing new Henry — this has been tried before and nothing really serious is ever discussed by serious people in these chat rooms."
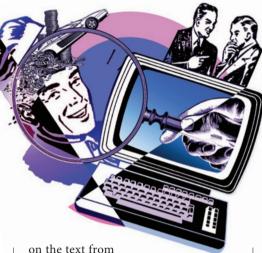
Henry paused for a few seconds before replying. "I've been talking to some people at GCHQ and they have an interesting idea. You've heard of genomics, proteomics and metabolomics, right, Sir?"

The PM nodded.

"Well, the smart guys there have come up with a new speciality, 'grammaromics', consisting of verbomics, nounomics, adjectivomics and other subspecialities."

"Are you pulling my leg, Henry?" asked the PM, only half-jokingly.

Henry shook his head. "Not at all, Sir. In fact, they've tried some of their algorithms on the text from some of these Internet chat rooms already. They've found that as long as these individuals stay online for a while and type a minimum number of diverse words and responses, they can reliably recognize any particular individual by the way they use their English constructs. Of course, they cannot identify the individuals themselves by this method alone, but …"

Henry paused again, for he knew that what he was about to say would not make the PM particularly happy.

"… well, they hacked into a limited number of e-mail servers to see if they could identify these chat room users by matching these 'grammaromes' to any particular e-mail text — just like trying to match fingerprints or DNA sequences. They then back-traced these individuals' IP addresses from their chat rooms and their e-mails to see if they were one and the same individual."

"You mean that GCHQ invaded their privacy to test a hypothesis?" the PM demanded, severely. Then, more curiously, he asked: "Did it work?"

Henry breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes Sir. Remarkably well, in fact. It seems that individuals develop their own unique way of expressing themselves in writing that remains more or less unchanged for life — just like their fingerprints or DNA."

"That's amazing!" exclaimed the PM, genuinely surprised. "If we know that people express themselves more truly in Internet chat rooms and on e-mail, when they think they're anonymous, and if we can monitor these 'genuine' communications then … Henry, if this works, you truly are a genius!"

Over the next few years of his first term, the PM's popularity soared. His policies were adopted in record time and it seemed that he could do nothing wrong. Even the typically cynical British media were lost for words.

Then one morning, there was a soft knock on his office door. "Come in Henry!" he yelled cheerfully, waving his pen.

Henry entered, looking concerned. "Sir," he began without ceremony. "My colleagues at GCHQ have noticed some unusual patterns of Internet chat room and corresponding e-mail activity."

The PM motioned Henry to the seat in front of him. "What is it, Henry?" he asked, now serious.

"We think that someone, possibly via a leak from either GCHQ or this office, may have got wind of our clandestine Internet public-opinion surveillance strategy."

"Why would they think that, Henry?" retorted the PM, impatiently. "How would anyone outside our inner circle know or suspect anything? There's been no publication in that popular science journal — what's its name — *Nature*, yet has there?"

"Not as far as I know, but that doesn't mean that no one has figured this out by themselves. After all, you are doing remarkably well in the opinion polls, Sir — just about the most popular PM in British history."

"So, what evidence do they have to make them think that anyone out there is trying to manipulate this Internet surveillance system?"

"Well, it seems that an online consensus is building that we should consider abolishing VAT and income tax, as well as providing a Jaguar or Aston Martin to everyone passing their driving test, starting from the next tax year …"

The PM digested this information for a moment then sat back in his chair, chuckling. "I guess it was too good to last, eh, Henry?"

Henry allowed himself a rare smile. "So, back to business as usual then, Sir?"

"You read my mind, Henry," said the PM, still chuckling and picking up his pen again as Henry closed the office door quietly behind him. ∎

**Julian Tang** *is a clinical/academic virologist who has had several stories in Futures. Some that didn't make the final cut can be found in an anthology, soon to be available at amazon.com.*