

The spying we need worry about

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Try as I might, I cannot get excited by the Prince Andrew spying story. After all, if China really wanted hot gossip on the inner workings of the UK, was Prince Andrew really the best conduit to get it? I doubt it, very much.

More than that, I smell a rat. If you wanted to shove an embarrassing relative into the long grass for good wouldn't an alleged spy scandal seem like manna from heaven compared to the other options currently available? I have my suspicions.

But what really annoys me about this story are three things.

The first is its mindless escalation.

The second is the implicit pretence that we don't spy, when glaringly obviously we do, and have massive departments (MI6, GCHQ, etc) set up to do just that.

And third, is the also implicit denial that the state might spy on us, because of course it does.

The [Guardian has a story today](#) on spying by the Metropolitan Police and the Police Service of Northern Ireland on two journalists, Trevor Birney and Barry McCaffrey. That this happened has now been confirmed by a Tribunal hearing. The Tribunal found that the spying was sanctioned at the highest level in the PSNI. The aim was to discover the journalists' sources. The reason was they were investigating police corruption.

That, to me, is spying that does matter. This was spying to prevent the proper operation of the law.

It was spying to prevent journalists undertaking the proper role that they have as the fourth estate in a democracy, of holding those with power to account.

It was an anti-democratic act. And it was done, here in the UK, against people here in the UK.

That is spying to worry about.

And I do worry about such things. In my own way I am part of that fourth estate. I would also be surprised if the UK's security services have ignored me over the last twenty years. When I have negotiated on international issues at the OECD and worked on occasion with the likes of the IMF and World Bank, and all from, in effect, my spare bedroom, it would be weird if they had not noticed. But, finding out is one thing. Oppressing journalists is another, and that was happening in the case I note.

There will be more of this. It is now apparent that Trump really will be going for the media now. It will happen here as a result. That's the spying, and its consequences, that we need to worry about.