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# Explainer: GCHQ monitoring

[Richard Norton-Taylor](#)

[The Guardian](#), Monday September 15 2008

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GCHQ, the government's Cheltenham-based electronic eavesdropping centre, has a special unit to monitor Northern Ireland and is understood to have the capacity to bug every mobile and landline there. But why might GCHQ not have passed on information about the recorded telephone conversations between the Omagh bombers?

GCHQ is extremely jealous of its phone-tapping technology and is sensitive about alerting anyone to what its electronic devices can do.

It is particularly sensitive about suggestions that it was bugging Irish citizens across the border, as it appeared to be doing in this case. Despite good relations between the police and MI5 and the Garda - the police in the Republic - Irish ministers responded angrily whenever evidence was produced that GCHQ was monitoring conversations in their country. This would have been compounded by distrust of other security and intelligence agencies operating in Northern Ireland.

Mutual suspicion between GCHQ, MI5, the Northern Ireland police special branch, the police criminal investigation division and army intelligence, was rife, intelligence sources have told the Guardian.

This was partly caused by allegations of collusion between the agencies and republican and loyalist paramilitaries, and partly because different agencies were handling different informants - the consequence of old-fashioned turf wars.

After the Omagh bombing, according to Panorama, the special branch in Northern Ireland asked GCHQ what happened and was told: "We missed it." It is possible relevant telephone numbers were automatically recorded and no individual was listening to the conversations "live".

Technology can lead to too much reliance on machines, intelligence officers point out. Intelligence gathering ultimately relies on the human factor.



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