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Beware of Big Brother

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Прослушка: wiretapping

The day that I got my first personalized telemarketing call — when a marketer asked for me by name on my cell phone — I realized that I ought to be paying more attention to the surveillance issue. Or maybe I should be more careful when I hand out my business cards.

In any case, since surveillance is in the news and on my mind, I thought I'd put together a little primer of Russian terms for various Big Brother and Big Marketer activities.

Слежка (surveillance). This is a generic, albeit slangy, term for any kind of surveillance. It is derived from the verb следить (to follow, watch closely). Most of the time it refers to field surveillance — tailing people or stake outs — but sometimes it's used to refer to other ways of keeping track of a person. Они устанавливают специальную программу для слежки за пользователем (They install a special program that tracks the computer user's activities). Я

понял, что мой телефон находится под слежкой (I realized that my phone was being monitored).

Наблюдение (surveillance, monitoring). This is the Russian term for any kind of keen observation. It isn't exclusively a spook or cop word. For example, it can be used to describe attention paid to an experiment, processes in nature, or your best friend's behavior. По наблюдениям моих подруг, за этот год я стала резкой, нетерпимой и капризной. (My friends have observed that in the last year I've become short-tempered, intolerant, and unstable). Or it can be used to describe medical monitoring: Она была под наблюдением врача (She was under a doctor's care).

But in cop-speak, наблюдение is surveillance broadly defined — that is, watching your suspect. Наружное наблюдение (field surveillance), commonly called наружка, is tailing, following, watching through the windows and generally sticking to your subject like банный лист (a wet leaf in the bath house). За её квартирой было установлено наблюдение (Her apartment was under surveillance).

Прослушивание (wiretapping), colloquially прослушка. This is the creepy process during which guys in earphones drooling pizza grease on their shirts listen to you tell your best friend about your hot date. This is also called перехват телефонных разговоров (phone intercept). If you want to stop sleeping at night, type that into your search engine and see how easy it is for hackers and companies to do this.

Надзор (surveillance, supervision). Надзор is another generic word that describes any kind of supervision, oversight or surveillance. Some of the supervision is good, at least in theory, like парламентский надзор (parliamentary oversight) or санитарный надзор (public health and hygiene inspectorate). Some of it is good for some, annoying for others. На свободе, далеко от родительского надзора, долго ли молодому человеку испортиться? (When a young man is free and far from parental supervision, will it take long for him to fall into bad ways?)

But today надзор can be more than just annoying — it can mean having to check in with the cops. Он находился под надзором полиции (He was put on probation).

Контроль (monitoring, oversight). This is a tricky word for English-speakers, since контроль and control are sometimes cognates and sometimes false friends. Ситуация под контролем means "the situation is under control." But его действия были под контролем спецслужбы doesn't mean "his actions were controlled by the special service," but rather "his actions were monitored by the special service."

And now if you'll excuse me, I've got to pack up to move off the grid.

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