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Your Conversations Are Being Intercepted: The Truth About Project ECHELON

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Featured

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Menwith Hill Aerial Photo: [Yorkshire CND](#)

Man has climbed the highest mountains; he has penetrated the densest forests, crossed the greatest deserts and descended miles below to the murky depths of the ocean floor. He has conquered the skies, the land and the sea, but there is one battle he has not won – yet – the battle to conquer the mind.

In a sleepy suburb on the outskirts of Las Vegas, Margaret Newsham is attempting to lead a normal life away from the days where she worked at a giant listening station at RAF base Menwith Hill in Yorkshire, England. Despite this, she is unable to escape her past.

She sleeps with a loaded gun under her bed and is protected by her 120-pound German shepherd, who is trained to guard and attack. At any time, certain factions in the NSA and the CIA may attempt to [silence](#) her for her role in the most extensive espionage network on earth, capable of tapping into millions of phone calls an hour: project ECHELON.



Las Vegas Photo: [Donar Reiskoffer](#)

Mrs. Newsham was an employee for Lockheed Martin, the largest munitions suppliers to the US military and intelligence agencies, the NSA and CIA. Newsham says:

“It is almost impossible to tell the difference between NSA agents and civilians employed by Lockheed Martin, Ford and [IBM](#). The borderlines are very vague. I had one of the highest [security](#) classifications which required the approval of the CIA, the NSA, the Navy and the Air Force. The approval included both a lie detector test, and an expanded personal history test in which my family and acquaintances were discretely checked by the security agency.”

For her part, Newsham was regretful for the part she played in spying on politicians and ordinary people:

“On the day at Menwith Hill when I realized in earnest how utterly wrong it was, I was sitting with one of the many ‘translators’. He was an expert in languages like Russian, Chinese and Japanese. Suddenly he asked me if I wanted to listen in on a conversation taking place in the US at an office in the US Senate Building. Then I clearly heard a southern American dialect I thought I had heard before.”

“Who is that?” I asked the translator who told me that it was Republican senator Strom Thurmond. ‘Oh my gosh!’ I thought. We’re not only spying on other countries, but also on our own citizens. That’s when I realized in earnest that what we were doing had nothing to do with national security interests of the US.”

And US Senator Thurmond is just the tip of the iceberg. In 1983, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher asked that government ministers who had challenged her on policy issues be placed under electronic surveillance, although it wasn’t until 2000 that former Canadian secret service insider Mike Frost blew the whistle: “[Thatcher] had two ministers that she said ‘...weren’t onside,’” says Frost. “[She] wanted to find out, not what these ministers were saying, but what they were thinking.”

President Ronald Reagan with Senator Strom Thurmond



Photo: [Darth Kalwejt](#)

Spy chief and spied upon: PM Margaret Thatcher meets Senator Strom Thurmond



Photo: [White House Photographic Office](#)

Ever since investigative journalist Duncan Campbell first exposed ECHELON's existence in 1988, various other ex-intelligence service employees have broken their silence on the network's activities. Former NSA man Wayne Madsen claimed his former employers held hundreds of pages of information on Princess

Diana. The surveillance network was also involved in international economic espionage and could well spy on NGO's like Amnesty International and Greenpeace.

All these informants seem to agree on one thing. This was electronic spying for the 21st Century, capable of listening in on the most confidential contents of people's lives.

ECHELON

At least ten ECHELON stations operate around the world, and the network has the capacity to [monitor](#) huge volumes of international fax, phone and Internet communications. It operates on behalf of five states signed up to the UK-USA Security Agreement: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the US.

No phone call you've made or text message you've sent is ultimately safe from their electronic eavesdropping. ECHELON is able to intercept and inspect the contents of communications via a global network of satellite stations and monitoring centres that capture radio, satellite, microwave, cellular and [fibre optic](#) traffic. It can automatically sift out flagged keywords and flagged addresses from masses of sent information.

Spying centre: Menwith Hill communications and intelligence station



Photo 1: [E Asterion](#) Photo2: [Imran](#)

Says Margaret Newsham: "Even then, ECHELON was very big and sophisticated. As early as 1979 we could track a specific person and zoom in on his phone conversation while he was communicating. Since our satellites could in 1984 film a postage stamp lying on the ground, it is almost impossible to imagine how all-encompassing the system must be today."

“I just think of ECHELON as a great vacuum cleaner in the sky which sucks everything up,” says ex-Canadian intelligence insider Mike Frost. “We just get to look at the goodies.”

Beneath the surface: Undersea cable tapping pod laid by US submarine

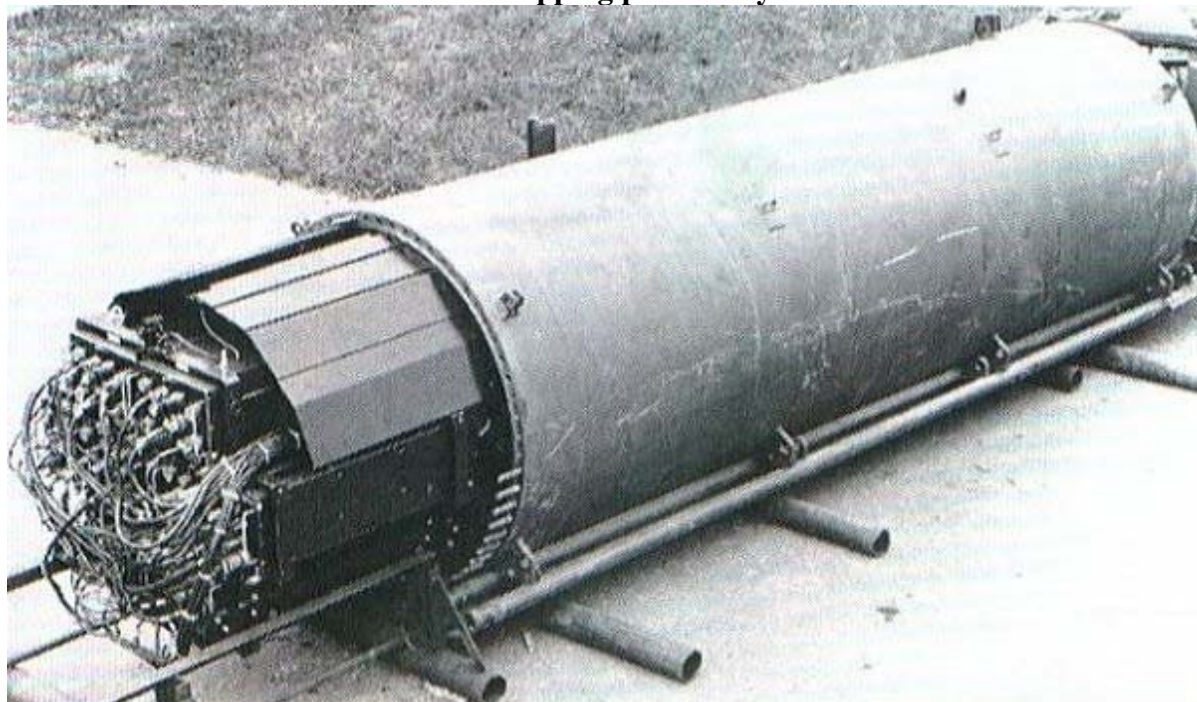


Photo via: [Cyber Rights](#)

Southern Cross Subsea Cable Route

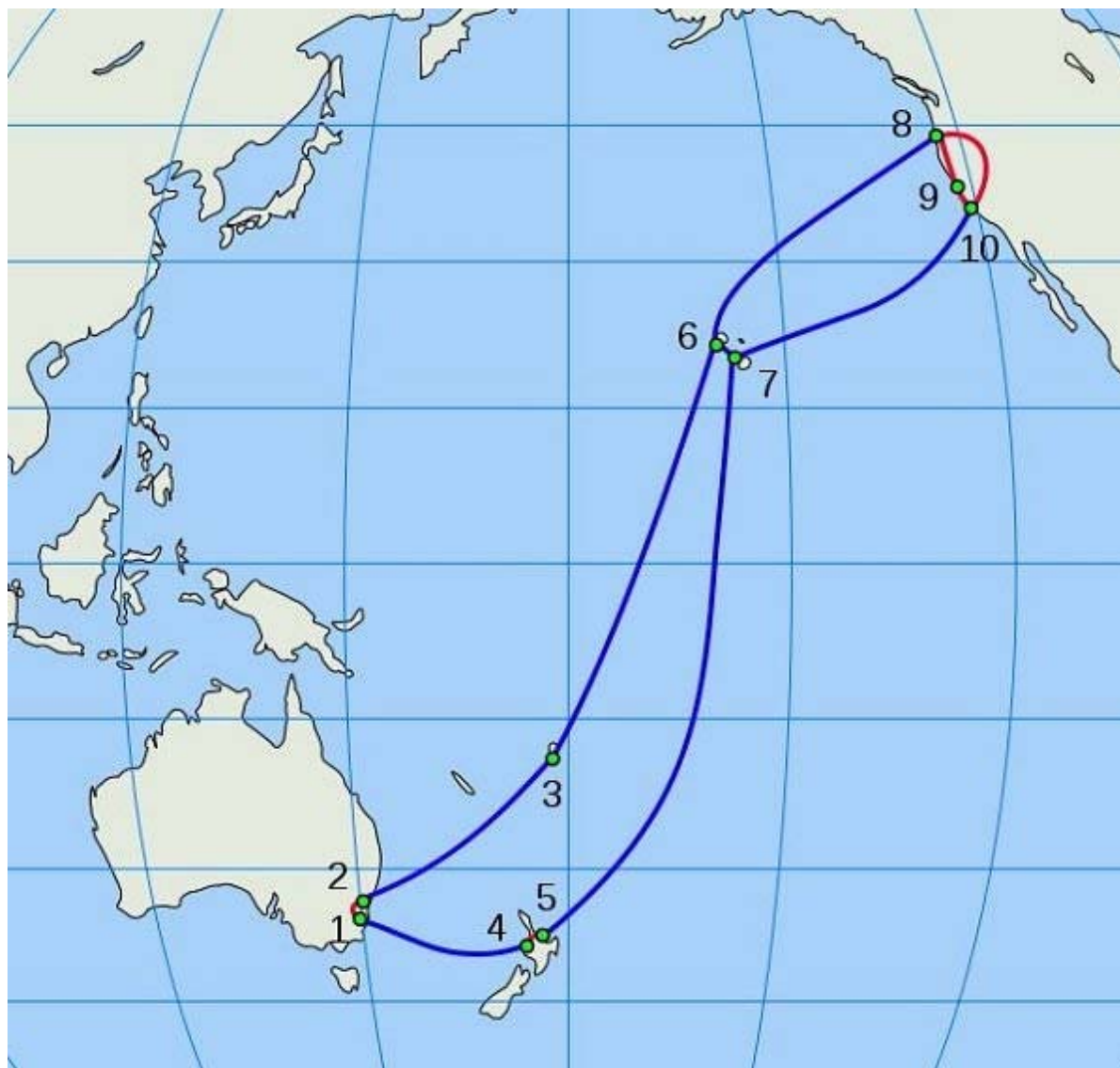


Image: [J.P.Lon, Mysid](#)

Mass surveillance is nothing new. After the interception of short-wave radio communications from great distances during WWII came new opportunities afforded by satellite [technology](#). Now, of course, we live in an age of fibre optics, with over 99 percent of voice and data traffic transmitted via this medium. Yet while fibre optics appear harder to access, they're far from failsafe. Long-distance cables can be tapped even at submarine levels and intercept equipment placed where fibre optic communications are switched between networks, meaning emails could easily be hijacked.

Ascension Island

In 1996 Nicky Hager, in his book *Secret Power*, claimed that a remote location in the South Atlantic, Ascension Island, was the secret location for a station that represented a missing piece in the ECHELON puzzle. Installing a station on this volcanic outcrop would have completed the international intelligence 1990s network – a lucky seventh station to help intercept communications in the southern hemisphere, alongside newly added stations in New Zealand and Australia.

Satellite tracking station: Pine Gap, near Alice Springs, Australia



Photo: [Unknown Photographer](#)

Unlocated spying station: Ascension Island

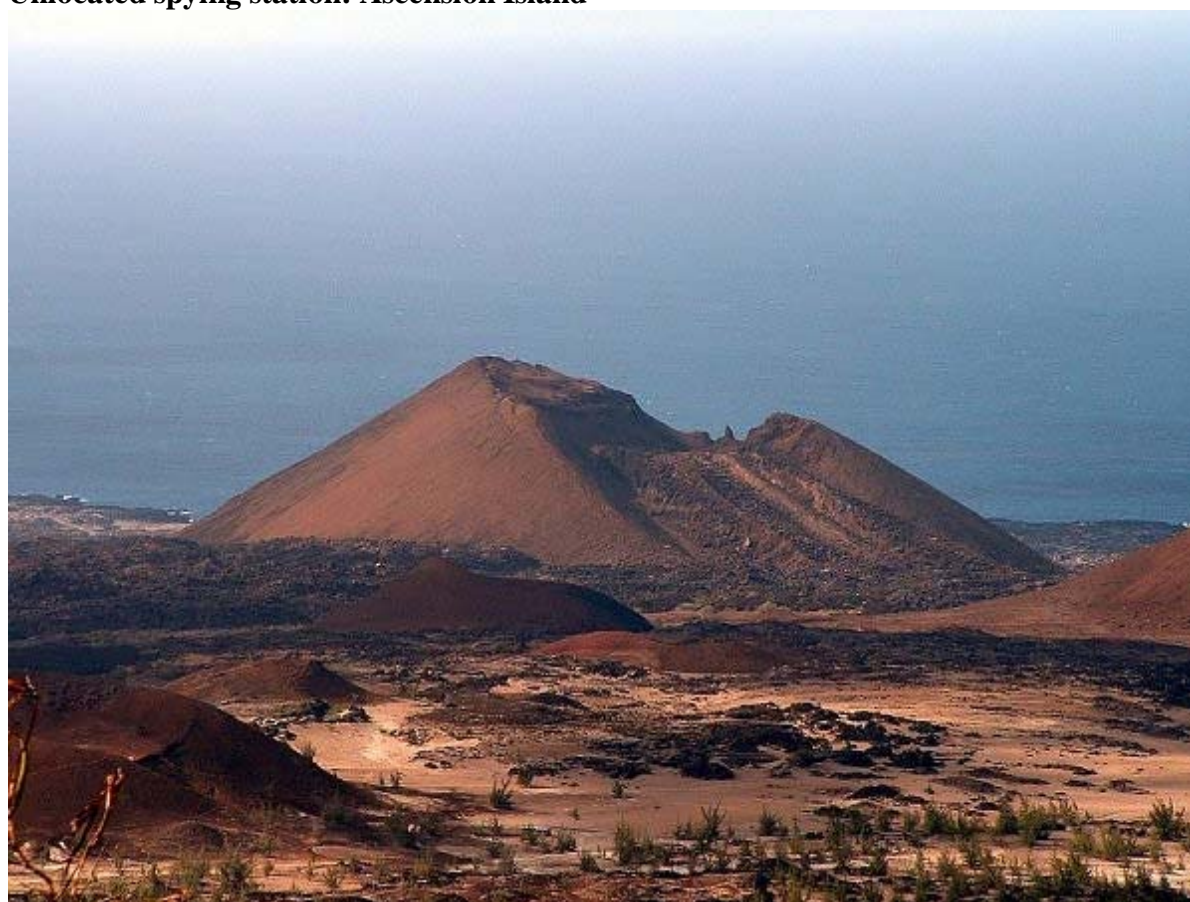


Photo: [startedrabbitt III](#)

Several ground stations are key to ECHELON's global communications network, among them Menwith Hill, Sugar Hill government communications station in West Virginia, Pine Gap in Australia, and New Zealand's communications bureau GCSB Waihopai. Canada, Japan, the UK, Australia and various states in the US are also known sites for other stations. Then of course there is less known likelihood of a station on Ascension Island. Perhaps it's worth a mission to that far-flung outpost to find out what's going on

there. You only live twice.

Sources: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#), [8](#), [9](#), [10](#), [12](#), [13](#)

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This post was written by:

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Karl was raised in Wales and currently lives in Bristol, though his family tree branches to both sides of the Atlantic. Besides holding an English MA, he's made a documentary on grassroots boxing, played drums in punk rock bands, and traveled some lush parts of the globe. Back from copywriting in Dubai's desert, he's thirsty to get scribbling about things worth scribbling about – especially the environment.

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