

secrets of GCHQ

80 jobs to go at Midlands college after funding cuts



It is a great relief to have finished the book so I can leave alone the lead box I have been carrying my phone around in for the last eight years

covered by these applications for “call content”, as applications may refer to organisations rather than individuals. “We think there are 2,000 or 3,000 applications a year, but that might cover more than 2,000 or 3,000 people,” says Aldrich.

Tellingly, he points out that government agents do not need high-level authorisation to amass details about who suspects are calling. Getting hold of so-called call data, as opposed to call content, is relatively straight-forward – if you know the right people.

Aldrich explains: “They don’t need a warrant to get a list of everybody you have telephoned. What we are seeing is a shift from looking at the content of telephone calls to finding out who you are telephoning. They only have to fill out a little form to get at the call data.

“Local authorities can do this as well. It only needs a middle manager to fill out a form. Government made 500,000 requests for this sort of call data in 2008 and a lot of that was from local authorities who were trying to find people who were abusing their wheelie bins or double domiciling to get their kids into particular schools.”

This, says Aldrich, is retail surveillance at its most insidious.

But one day, of course, it might unmask a terror cell.

And, as Aldrich argues, we only get the electronic listening agency we deserve. GCHQ did not invent the “wired world” of the internet, email and electronic information storage. We are happy to use these services as part of our daily lives and there is a price to pay for that.

GCHQ, The uncensored story of Britain's most secret intelligence agency, by Richard J Aldrich, is published by Harper Press, priced £30



More than 80 staff at a Midland college are set to lose their jobs in a major redundancy and restructuring programme.

It is believed that catering courses could be among the many areas hit at Sandwell College, where bosses are finalising a package of cuts to cope with slashed public services funding.

Principal Val Bailey said the “difficult” measures were needed to “ensure its ongoing security”.

But a spokesman for University College Union, which has around 150 members at Sandwell College, described the situation as “shocking” and said a meeting had already been called to discuss “resistance” to the measures.

About 20 per cent of England’s colleges and universities are taking similar measures as they face £1.4 billion in cuts. At Birmingham’s City College, 78 redundancies are planned along with course closures and at Birmingham Metropolitan College there are plans to make around 100 staff redundant.

The package of cuts at Sandwell College, which has campuses in Oldbury, Smethwick and West Bromwich, means around 11 per cent of its workforce face redundancy. However, a college spokesman said she couldn’t specify which departments would be hit.

Ms Bailey said: “The new Government has committed to tackle the public sector deficit and secure economic recovery. The scale of the savings that will need to be made to bring the public finances back under control means that further education has not been excluded from those changes.

“A very difficult decision has had to be taken to make some significant changes within the college to ensure its ongoing security. It is anticipated that 85 positions are likely to be redundant or leave the college through the restructuring process. Voluntary redundancies will be considered based on business needs. This route is the most favourable and may assist the college in avoiding the need for compulsory redundancies.

“We endeavour to have finalised the restructuring and redundancy process by the end of July. This is a difficult position for us all and we do understand the feelings of our staff. The intention is to make the process as fair as possible to everyone.”

It is the fifth round of job cuts in five years at the college, according to UCU regional official Nick Varney.

“We have suffered redundancies at other colleges due to reductions in the funding of adult learners announced at the beginning of this year,” he said.

Ms Bailey said that construction of the college’s new £77 million campus in Spon Lane, West Bromwich, would not be affected by the cuts.

“Financing of the new college is separate from the funding for courses at the existing college,” she said.

degree. We are moving from a private society to a transparent society and what matters is the balance of power.

“Who is going to own all this information? Is it going to be us? Is it going to be the Government? Is it going to be Tesco? Is it going to be Google?”

Data-mining by governments and their intelligence agencies, like GCHQ, is as powerful as it is dangerous, warns Aldrich. “It is powerful because it allows the sifting of titanic amounts of private information and it is dangerous because it often throws up ‘false positives’. In other words, some people will look suspicious because a number of chance activities have coalesced to generate something which a computer thinks is a problem.”

He adds: “The problem is finding the bad guys among all the good guys. The world sends 2.8 million emails a second. No government can listen in to all that stuff. In fact, they are going deaf with the volume of material.

“The problem is finding the

small amounts of communication from the bad guys amongst all the normal communication. How do you find the single email that ought to be on the Prime Minister’s or the President’s desk tomorrow?”

Globalisation has muddied the waters on intelligence gathering and blurred not only national borders but the investigative remit of the security agencies. “We have got global terrorism. We have international organised crime. The distinction between foreign and domestic is breaking down,” says Aldrich.



GCHQ’S wartime predecessor, Bletchley Park, broke thousands of coded German and Japanese messages

“GCHQ always used to portray itself as a foreign intelligence organisation, which worked abroad, broke the codes of foreign countries and brought us intelligence on the bad guys. But now the main enemy for the last ten years have been terrorists and they are moving seamlessly between locations in the UK, Pakistan, Afghanistan. GCHQ are picking up the same voices, people with Birmingham and Bradford accents, in Afghanistan.

“If I send you a hotmail message tomorrow, it might go straight to your house. It might be broken into 16 bits and travel through America and come back together before it reaches your house. Is that a domestic message or an international message?”

Whether they are hunting terrorists or international crime lords, GCHQ and allied organisations in the British intelligence community still require a warrant, usually authorised by the Home Secretary, before they can access the content of telephone calls. It is difficult to determine how many suspects are