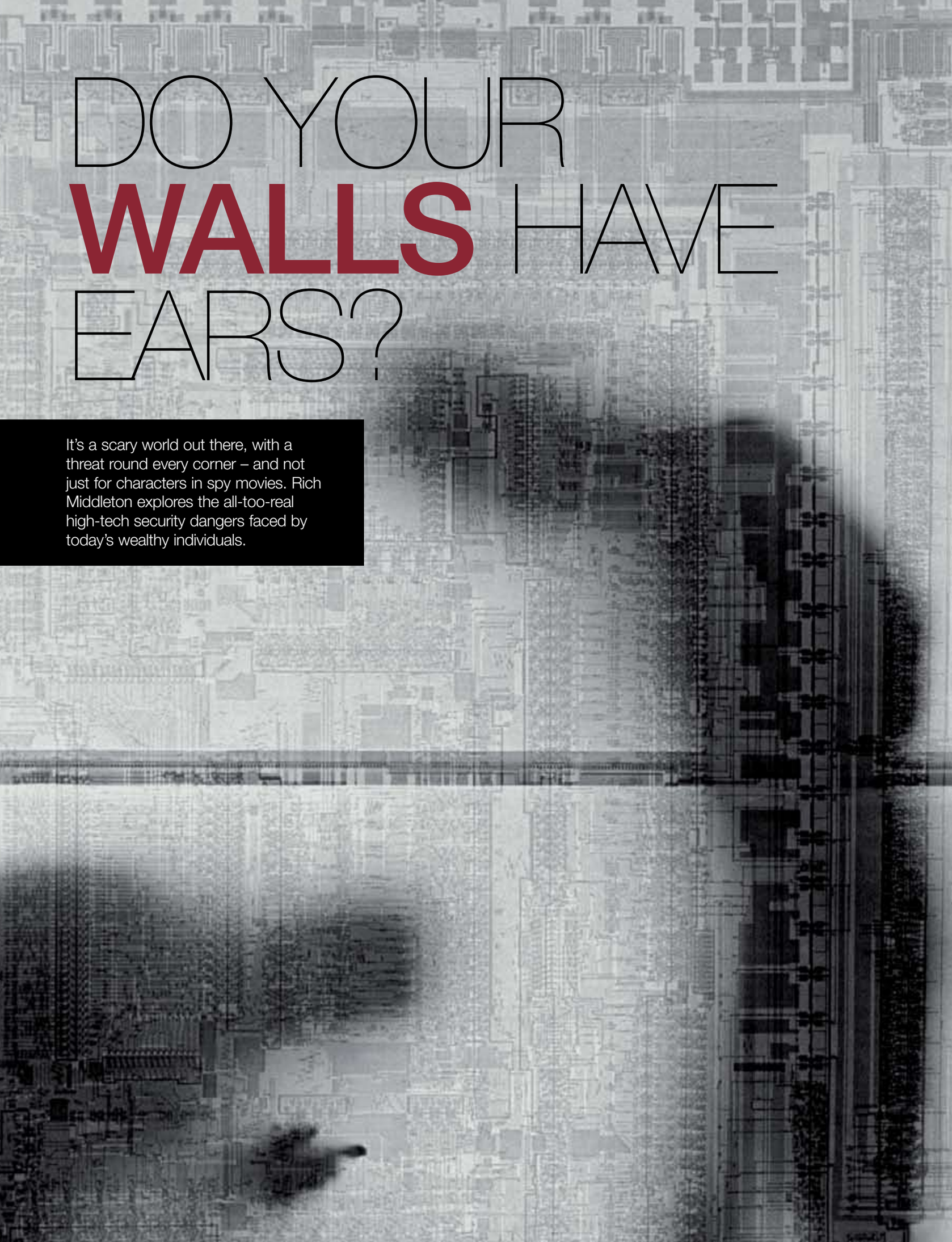
DO YOUR **WALLS** HAVE EARS?

It's a scary world out there, with a threat round every corner – and not just for characters in spy movies. Rich Middleton explores the all-too-real high-tech security dangers faced by today's wealthy individuals.



The world of bugs, phone taps and pinhole cameras hidden in picture frames may seem the stuff of international espionage but it is actually much closer to home than you may think. Security analysts recently estimated that espionage is costing global business around $200 billion a year.

And while companies also suffer, the wealthy individual poses a very attractive proposition for criminals with easy access to the technical equipment required to reach them. Indeed, when sales estimates for bugging devices recently topped £10 million, both the security industry and the corporate world took note.

Peter Heims, author of *Combatting Industrial Espionage*, is not surprised: 'I used to regularly sweep some of London's top hotels and I often found bugs in phones in the rooms. The planters were aware that many businessmen conduct both personal and company affairs while away from home. Tapping a phone is not difficult and can allow incredible information to be accessed very quickly.'

Justin King of C2i International confirms that bugging devices are common in his line of work. His firm, which conducts thorough sweeps of premises and private households, estimates that it finds bugs in 5% of properties searched.

Bugs are not only used to gather sensitive passwords and bank details, they can also record the movements of wealthy people and their families – invariably for kidnap attempts.

King explains: 'If you look back over the last ten, years there have been plenty of cases that demonstrate how prevalent these forms of attack are. We have definitely seen an increase in espionage involving medium-cost, internet-purchased devices over the last three years.'

Listening in

Modern bugs can be hidden within a telephone handset, wired into a wall-hanging or even hidden within mobile phone battery.

'How many of us look at the mobile phone batteries to check that the serial number is still the same?' asks King. 'We are seeing more of this type of attack, effectively bugging both sides of every call made.'

Placed under a table at a restaurant, an 'off the counter' bug can be as much of a threat, picking up conversations within a 10ft radius. Portal, the exclusive Portuguese restaurant in London popular with businessmen, stockbrokers, celebrities and Chelsea Football Club, recently admitted to finding a bug placed in a wall socket.

Expert help

However, there are simple steps you can take to avoid being ensnared by criminals, from lowering your voice in public places and ensuring you are aware of anyone entering your home, to employing a security firm to sweep your premises and looking at effective property security solutions.

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'The first thing we usually do is to conduct a threat assessment,' says C2i's King. 'From this, a threatscape is obtained and countermeasures are put in place.' While sweeping for high-tech devices is important, he advises wealthy individuals to use common sense – especially when it comes to disposing of confidential information and employing domestic staff.

'We routinely find that there are simple problems to be fixed first of all, such as using a good safe and a shredder, carrying out background checks on employees and holding meeting in hotels rather than at home,' he says.

'Of course, we also strongly suggest a regular series of technical surveillance countermeasures or sweeps for electronic surveillance,' he adds. 'This will include a physical security review and the sealing of all communication devices.'

US firm SAFE (Strategically Armored and Fortified Environments) has been employed by some of the wealthiest people on the planet to offer protection and peace of mind. Although its most comprehensive security solutions cost upwards of $1 million, the cover provided is immense. Sensitive sound and vision systems are placed across an estate to tactically detect intruders, while ballistic-grade doors, capable of blocking bullets and keeping out gas, can be incorporated to deter intruders when a property is empty.

Rest assured

A safe room, within a secure core, can provide peace of mind. SAFE's director, Al Corbi, explains. 'It takes seven to ten seconds to get from a break-in point to the master bedroom,' he says. 'There simply isn't enough time to get your family into a safe room. However, when used in conjunction with a Safe Core, the panic room becomes an effective part of a completely secure environment.'

Modern safe cores can be installed on any floor. Hidden cameras record the criminals, while direct phone lines ensure authorities can be contacted. Built of materials such as Kevlar, the safe room is often hidden, so only a handful of people will ever know it exists.

Safes are also important, and buying one appropriate to your worth is essential. German firm Dottling offers safes ranging from $55,000 to $160,000. Within this price bracket, safes become a hybrid of incredible security and good looks. Dottling's range offers extremely good technical protection, including fingerprint and retinal scanners, as well as comprehensive locking systems, all disguised as an antique piece of furniture.

Online crime

But it is the invisible threat from the internet which seems to cause the greatest concern. With information ranging from bank account details to records of shares held or financial securities, protection is vital.

Jim Norton, senior policy adviser for e-business and e-government for the UK Institute of Directors, says the threat from Trojan viruses must be taken on board. 'Trojans can pose a very serious threat,' he says. 'They can record key sequences, such as passwords, credit card numbers or bank details,'

And as the individual is often unaware of the presence of Trojan viruses, the criminal can work at his own pace. Once he has gathered information and confidential passwords, the damage can be extensive. 'To prevent Trojans accessing your computer, use effective antivirus software, supplemented with a firewall,' says Norton. 'There are also intrusion protection systems that identify unusual patterns of behaviour on a computer.'

It is also important to check the communication lines themselves, says Justin King, particularly for those whose wealth could make them a target. 'We use many computer analysers, who check modern communications such as ISDN, VoIP and ADSL as well as any wireless networks for access points,' he says.

Vigilance is key

As with all personal security issues, vigilance is essential. Keep an eye on those entering your home and workplaces, and limit those who access your communication devices.

'People need to be aware that they must not use foreign media without knowing what it is,' says Norton. 'For example, CDs were recently handed out to commuters in London and over half of the people who received the CDs put them straight into their computers. Luckily for them, the software on the CD simply sent a message back to the firm conducting the experiment, but it could easily have been a Trojan-style device. It is down to the individual to use their common sense to keep their computer systems, and their security, safe.' ■