
June 19, 2005

Qualassurepurp

By WILLIAM SAFIRE

Your perusal of this column "may be monitored *for quality-assurance purposes.*"

That's from the recorded announcement we hear over the phone more often than any other. The frequency of the transmission of those bland-sounding words is greater than the ever-maddening "please hold" or the plaintive message from college, "Send money." Who coined this oleaginous and misleading monitoring message, and when?

According to Brad Cleveland, boss of Incoming Calls Management Institute, "The first use of *for quality-assurance purposes* was likely AT&T ('Ma Bell') in the early 1980's." He adds, "There are 75,000 to 100,000 call centers in the U.S., handling around 32 billion calls annually, so these announcements are getting a lot of air time."

Eran Gorev, president of NICE Systems, which claims to be the leading supplier of computer systems for call monitoring, agrees that what he calls "quality recording" began about 20 years ago. He says it was a response to the needs of business "to be responsive with customer service," but he's frank about an underlying purpose: "From a legal standpoint, if you accept the disclaimer by staying on the line, you are forfeiting your privacy rights. The recorded conversation then becomes the property of the service provider."

But just what is a *quality-assurance purpose*? That omnipresent phrase has a happy, upbeat ring, as if the recorded disclaimer is protecting the caller from snarling employees or static on the line. Who could object to an assurance of quality? In reality, I think it means "We're spying on our workers so we can have legal grounds to fire them if they make any wild promises" or "We're recording your call to use your words against you in court if you dare to sue us, claiming you said 'buy' instead of 'sell.' "

A key inside phrase in the booming monitoring business is *emotion detection*. "This does a calibration average of the customer's emotional level at the beginning of the call," explains Gorev, the man from NICE. "Then when the level gets higher than this base line, we know that there has been a variation in the emotional level of the caller."

I take this to mean that customer frustration is audible and measurable. I often find myself afflicted with

"recording rage" or "monitormania," and it is good to know it is not going unregistered. (Please hold.)

Before "*quality-assurance purposes*," or *qualassurepurp*, as we say at Naughty Systems, was the device known as the *dead key*. This was a silent button on an aide's telephone (now called a *land line*, for pre-e-mail people with only a *ground address*) that enabled a secretary to take notes without the caller knowing the conversation with the executive was being overheard and noted. I inveighed against this practice in the White House, labeling the transcripts "the Dead Key Scrolls," and it was curtailed for a while.

In today's computer terminology, the *dead keys* have a new meaning: these are keys that do nothing unless another key is pressed as well. (The shift key is a *dead key*, coming to capitalization life when a letter key is pressed. I suspect that the control key, also dead, rises zombielike, too.)

Other old words and phrases are being adopted by information technologists too young to be aware that the sultry silent-screen siren Clara Bow was known as "the IT girl." The hottest English word in that wired/wireless world, I am informed by the *knowbies*, was first recorded in 1375, rooted in the Latin *solvere: solution*. Everybody, from Microsoft on down, is pushing *solutions*: "Funk Software, a leading provider of network access security *solutions*," goes a press release, announces the coming availability of its "open *solution* architecture" and "TNC-based *solutions* . . . both *solutions* . . . working with *solutions* from Check Point Software Technologies. . . ." (Five *solutions* in search of a problem.)

Another ancient word has been taken up by a digital-mapping company, which is said to maintain "a multiterabyte database of digital images of geographic locations" enabling it "to deliver a 3-D digital model of the entire earth via the Internet." The on-the-cusp company has just been bought by Google for "an undisclosed sum" (which usually means "an embarrassingly large bundle") and its ultramodern name is "Keyhole."

The word *keyhole* means "the hole in a door through which a key is inserted into a lock." It was invented sometime during the Dark Ages and first referred to during the Renaissance by Christopher Marlowe in his 1589 play, "The Jew of Malta," with a sinister overtone: "Yet through the *key-hole* will he talk to her." The small opening afforded eavesdroppers and peeping Toms an opportunity to surreptitiously listen and look. The symbolism led to its adoption in English slang, defined by Farmer and Henley in 1896 as "the female pudendum," and later by Rudyard Kipling as the oblong mark made by a bullet's ricochet. In the second half of the 20th century, however, the slots into which keys were inserted were no longer peekable-through. Modern hotels have replaced keys with electronic cards, ostensibly for security and privacy, but also to keep track of a guest's entrances and exits.

Now stop to consider: how many digital geeks have ever peered lasciviously at an *IT* girl through a *keyhole*? I venture to say: not one. That's because a *keyhole* -- the kind you could peep through -- is an artifact, a fond memory without current meaning, a word evoking only a metaphor of entry like "a *keyhole* in space." Yet here it is, seized upon by a hyperdigitized company gobbled up by Google for undisclosed digits.

I implanted the noun *knowbie* earlier, which Paul McFedries's Web site, Word Spy, defines as "a knowledgeable and experienced Internet user." It is based on *newbie*, a neophyte "ignorant of Netiquette and other online proprieties," and already being replaced, according to netlingo.com, by *debbie*, "someone newer than a *newbie*."

Neither *newbie* or *knowbie*, I count myself among the *silver surfers*, those geezers in Dickensian nightshirts who preceded the blogging *guys in pajamas*.

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