



IP ITeaser 041:

Meters monitor murder

In the current climate of austerity, everyone is being encouraged to use smart meters, be they for electricity or water consumption. The idea behind the drive is that if consumers are alive to their usage in real time, then they will reduce that usage to lower their utility bills. In addition, for electricity, it is to encourage users to use the system at non-peak times, when the spot rate is cheaper. For water, the idea is also to be able to detect leaks in the system earlier, so that water can does not go to waste. All very laudable. Yet, in order to give the consumer a picture of their consumption in real time, it is necessary to monitor that consumption also in real time. Furthermore, the electricity and water companies collect that data in real time as well in order to be able charge the appropriate spot-rate or to be alerted to a leak. Surely, there is no harm in that? However, that data gives detailed information about the personal habits of the inhabitants of the house that is being monitored, and that raises privacy concerns. Surely, this is fanciful. No. In 2015, evidence of water usage was obtained without a warrant from the City of Bentoville Water Department, Arkansas, USA, and based upon the allegedly unusual use in the early hours, the resident was arrested for murder as it was claimed that the water was used to clean-up the crime scene. An extreme example, but indicative of the picture that others can glean from having your electricity and water usage monitored without any proper oversight over who may access that information.