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Letter from...



Letter from Norway

## Big Buddy is watching

**Joe Gorman**  
[Guardian Weekly](#)

Norway is a land of steep-sided fjords, deep lakes, high mountains, dense forests and vast tracts of wilderness. Distances are huge, roads are painfully slow and the weather is frequently severe. It has always been this way, and deep in the Norwegian character lies an acceptance that visiting even some of your closer neighbours may involve a long and perilous journey.

But these problems of physical communication may be the root cause of the country's love affair with mobile phones: it was love at first sight. Norwegians were among the most enthusiastic early adopters. And when a digital standard was first mooted, Telenor (Norway's telecom operator) and Sintef (its principal research institute) played a big role in defining the standard so that the system would work even in mountainous areas. These efforts resulted in GSM "the digital standard for mobile phones now in use throughout the world.

The number of mobile phones in active use is equal to 96% of the number of men, women, children and babies in the country. And people replace their phones at least once every two years.

With such a high level of mobile phone use, you might expect that the phone companies would be happy to sit back and count the kroner rolling into their bank accounts. But they want to increase their business yet further, and find new ways people can use their phones. So they introduced the "Buddy Service". It was StAle, a young friend at work, who first introduced me to it. On his office PC, he logged in to his personal web page and clicked "Find Dad". Within seconds, a map appeared on the screen showing the position of Stale's dad (or, rather, his dad's mobile phone). Stale could see that his dad was still at work. Stale's dad, meanwhile, knew nothing at all about the fact that we were following his movements.

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I decided to invite my friend Paul to be my "buddy". So he received a text message saying, "Do you want to be a buddy of Joe? If so, reply to this message. This will enable Joe to locate you." Could he really say no? From that moment he became my buddy for life. True, he can undo his buddy status if he wants. But only if he knows the correct cryptic text messages to send, or the right web page and password. And since he does not really know what being my "buddy" really means, he would not even know that he might not want to be my buddy any more. So my buddy he is, and my buddy he will remain.

Now I can find out where Paul is any time I want. I can either do so on the internet, and have his position displayed on a map, or by sending a text message. In the latter case, I get a text message not only telling me where Paul is, but where that is in relation to me (since, of course, the system knows where my phone is too). So I might get a message such as: "Paul is in the city centre, 1km northwest of you."

Maybe I'll be able to register my wife as a buddy, and we can use it to track each other down when we lose each other in the shopping centre.



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