

Finnish post to open love letters, payslips in digital mail trial

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Volunteers will receive an e-mail or a mobile phone text message when their mail has been opened, scanned and sent as a PDF file to a secure digital mailbox, to which only the recipient has access, a post official told AFP.

"This (secure digital mailbox) is totally different from e-mail. It is comparable to web banking," said Tommi Tikka, development director

at state-owned Itella, which runs the Nordic country's postal system.

The "highly automated" conversion of letters into electronic documents would be conducted in "special, secured premises" where staff are bound by strict confidentiality obligations, Tikka said, insisting that the initiative was not an April Fools joke.

Love letters and other personal messages would not be spared in the experiment, which has generated lively online discussion in high-tech Finland, home to top mobile phone maker Nokia.

"Itella is doing in Finland what the KGB did in its time in the Soviet Union and the Stasi in East Germany. Itella is reading people's private mail," one commentator using the name "Itella agentti", or "Itella agent", said on a debate forum hosted by leading daily Helsingin Sanomat.

But Tikka insisted the service complied with correspondence secrecy laws and everyone who had volunteered for the trial had signed an agreement with Itella for their post to be opened and converted into an electronic format.

"Our workers do not read the mail. How could love letters be filtered out?" said Tikka, adding Itella would not keep copies of letters.

"We want to find out what kind of content clients want to start receiving electronically ... Are personal letters among those that are not wanted in a digital form? We will find out," he said.

The size and bulk of envelopes would be analysed to filter out mail not suited for scanning, and those obviously containing items such as bank cards or voting ballots would not be opened, Tikka said.

So far, 126 households and 20 businesses in Anttila, an area of scattered

settlement in the southern town of Porvoo, had volunteered to join the trial, which starts in the week of April 12 and runs until the end of the year.

And those who long for the scent and feel of stationery need not despair: once scanned, correspondence will be returned to its envelope and delivered in the normal fashion.

But the postman will only call twice a week at the homes of participating residents. Deliveries to mailboxes at a local store will be made three times a week.

"This is purely a trial. We don't know yet whether, at the end of the year, there will be aspects of this that could be applied more widely," Tikka said.

The Technical Research Centre of Finland (VTT) is working with Itella to evaluate the environmental impact of what Tikka called a "living lab experiment".

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