

Sunday December 15, 2013

The Peeping Toms who spy on our minds

By Jim Taylor

Let's take a purely hypothetical case. Suppose I hid in the bushes outside a neighbour's house, hoping to catch a glimpse of her disrobing in her bedroom.

I'd be what's commonly called a "peeping Tom." I could be, and probably should be, arrested, convicted, and punished.

Under the law, it makes no difference whether I do my spying from the bushes directly outside her bedroom, or set up a powerful telescope several kilometres away. I don't even have to be there. I'm just as guilty if I set up a hidden camera to take pictures that I can drool over later.

So why is it apparently legal for the state to do the same kind of surreptitious snooping?

Thanks to defector Edward Snowden, we know now that the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) has been tapping the private communications of not only its own citizens, but those of other countries as well.

And a CBC investigation found documents proving that Communications Security Establishment Canada (CSEC) has actively collaborated with the NSA. During the 2010 G-20 economic summit in Toronto, the two agencies worked together to intercept the communications of visiting diplomats. In about 20 countries where Canada is more welcome than the U.S., CSEC even did NSA's dirty work – peering into the lives of individuals and corporations.

Officially approved voyeurism

Voyeurism is considered a psychological disorder – mainly male, although not always – where the victim is usually unaware of being observed.

In the U.S., the laws against voyeurism (quoting Wikipedia) specifically refer to "surreptitious surveillance without consent, and unlawful recordings ... involving places and times when a person has a reasonable expectation of privacy..."

Voyeurism sounds to me like a perfect description of NSA's activities.

Pierre Trudeau once declared, "The state has no business in the bedrooms of the nation."

But does the state have any business peeping into the minds of the nation? The NSA/CSEC's voyeurism does not seek sexual titillation. Does that make it acceptable?

I suggest that a woman's thoughts have as much right to privacy as her body. Ditto for men. Electronic surveillance is utterly egalitarian; it ignores gender. And every other distinction, too.

The systems that NSA and CSEC use to gather information act like the gigantic trawl nets used by some fishing nations to scoop up everything in the sea, whether it's valuable or not, for later sorting and discarding. We condemn indiscriminate harvesting that destroys dolphins and tuna while attempting to gather scallops; we should be equally outraged at indiscriminate electronic harvesting.

Destroying security

National security and personal security are closely linked. A nation cannot be secure if it systematically undermines the security of its citizens. Citizens are not just a nation's means to an end; they are the nation.

Security comes from the unity of a shared vision, a common purpose. It does not come from lurking in the bushes, hoping to catch an indiscretion.

In previous columns, I have argued that in today's world, there is no such thing as privacy anymore. (Especially if you're the mayor of Toronto.) Surveillance cameras monitor your car in traffic. Closed circuit video records your passage in shopping malls and corporate offices. Airport security scanners examine you inside and out. Cell phones capture your actions when you least expect it.

But how much of yourself you choose to expose is still a matter of choice. You don't have to strip naked in front of a shopping mall cameras. You don't have to bare your political ideology before you go into a bank.

CSEC and NSA strip away that element of choice.

It's like a priest broadcasting your words from the confessional. Or a lawyer entering your privileged discussions as evidence against you.

More than privacy

But this is not just about privacy. It's about intrusion. What the spy agencies are doing is akin to a home invasion. It might even be considered intellectual rape. It's about busting into "places and times when a person has a reasonable expectation of privacy."

It seems to me that the NSA and CSEC may still believe in the divine right of kings. Once upon a time it was taken for granted that monarchs had absolute authority over their subjects. They could make laws, or break them. They could raise taxes, launch wars, seize property, and execute opponents, at their sole discretion.

When a woman married, the king or lord often had first rights to bed her.

Few would endorse such practices today. But the state still presumes it has a divine right to insert itself into its subjects' private lives.

As I write this, I hear that the Harper government in Ottawa has embedded new rules about snooping into an omnibus bill supposedly intended to protect young people from cyber-bullying. But only four of the bill's 70 pages deal with that subject. All the rest make it easier for the peeping Toms in government agencies to snoop on private conversations and e-mails.

I object.

Copyright © 2013 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups encouraged; links from other blogs welcomed; all other rights reserved.

Please encourage your friends to subscribe to these columns too.

To send comments, to subscribe, or to unsubscribe, write jimt@quixotic.ca

YOUR TURN

Perhaps we all have our own memories of the things we did (or didn't) do to bring apartheid to an end.

Wayne Irwin contributed this recollection: "I am reminded of my own visit with Johan Heyns, in 1991, in Johannesburg. He was the former moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK) who chose to work from within the church to change its stance on apartheid. Using his position and his intellect, he argued that there was no biblical basis for apartheid. His courageous effort was terminated in 1994 by an assassin's bullet -- but his work is said to have had a significant impact on the thinking of the Afrikaner government. Mandela called him 'a soldier of peace.'"

Ted Wilson called my social booboo, "the most normal of requests, for those of us in the post Rosa Parks world. It was also probably one more crack in the prejudices of your white Afrikaner missionary hosts' world. They all add up, until the wall crumbles. What we need to be focusing on is the prejudices that still exist in our world."

Cliff Boldt commented, "I have read how current world leaders had to bury their past attitudes and experiences with apartheid once Mandela became a head of state."

Cliff drew my attention to an article in the British Guardian paper
<<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/06/follow-nelson-mandela-laugh-rightwing-fawning>> which he called "A good read, poking fun at some of today's leaders and their history with Mandela."

Isabel Gibson wrote, "Thanks reminding us that every action we take makes a difference. We don't get to determine how much difference our actions make; we do get a good shot at determining what kind of difference they make."

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at the address above. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca. Similarly, you can un-subscribe at sharpedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca.

You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslieGod" page, www.seemsliegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <<http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
