

*Sunday March 11, 2012*

## **Robocalls manipulate a gullible public**

By Jim Taylor

I get a lot of spam -- that unsolicited, unwanted, and often offensive stuff that shows up in your e-mail inbox overnight. Wikipedia says it “composes some 80 to 85% of all the e-mail in the world.”

I probably get more spam than most people, because I have an e-mail subscriber list for my musings. I have to give an address to potential subscribers; spam senders have search engines that find these addresses and exploit them.

Electronic spam filters attempt to identify and quarantine these unwanted e-mails. I’ve tried several. They all have limitations. So I make ample use of the “Delete” button.

I’m not interested in “boobs as big as balloons” or “awesome butts.” I don’t want to crack eggs on my, well, use your imagination. And since I don’t run a business, I don’t care how the Better Business Bureau (or the FBI, CIA, or IRS – pick any agency) deals with someone’s fictitious complaint.

Recently, software producer INTUIT (makers of the excellent QuickBooks and TurboTax programs) has fallen victim to spammers. When you call INTUIT’s number, a tired voice tells you, “If you received an e-mail about an order you didn’t place, we did not send it...”

## **Electoral spam**

The “robocalls” that have had our parliament in an uproar for several weeks seem to me to fall into the same category of unsolicited electronic messaging.

Elections Canada has received over 31,000 complaints about misleading or offensive telephone calls made during last May’s federal election. They come from 24 ridings across Canada – or maybe 34, or 57, depending on who cites the data.

The most serious offenses seem to have been pre-recorded calls, purporting to come from Elections Canada, advising people that their polling station has been changed to a new location. But when they get there, it hasn’t. At that point, many give up and don’t bother voting at all.

The calls did not, in fact, come from Elections Canada. They were fraudulent. And illegal.

## **Let the voter beware**

I didn’t get any such calls. But if I had, I would not have paid any attention to them.

I hang up on all pre-recorded calls. Also on all spiels that sound pre-recorded -- like Dean Del Mastro’s utterly predictable cookie-cutter denials of Tory involvement.

Humourist H.L. Mencken once cracked, “No one ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the public.”

Or the intelligence of voters, it would seem.

I don’t intend to trivialize the offence. Impersonating an Elections Canada officer is a criminal offence. I consider any attempt to thwart the electoral process both morally and legally repugnant.

As Malcolm Parry wrote in the Vancouver *Sun*, “This is no longer the hurly-burly of partisan roughhousing. It’s now about the integrity of the electoral process itself.”

But let’s not forget that robocalls are merely the latest weapon in an endless attempt to manipulate voters.

Not that long ago, candidates stood at the doors of polling stations buying votes with booze. In the U.S. – not so much in Canada -- gerrymandered boundaries squeeze out whole blocks of voters. Campaigns everywhere degenerate into an attempt to seduce voters with their own money. Or to destroy the credibility of an opponent, by any means available.

In that sense, robocalls simply exploit technologies that were not available to previous vote finaglers.

## Self-righteous denials

Given my own political prejudices, I doubt the government's denials. The calls were not made at random; they required inside knowledge of voter lists. As John Ivison speculated in the *National Post*, the most extensive collection of such information is "inside the Conservative Party's own computer system — specifically their Constituency Information Management System database."

Similarly, when Del Mastro refuses to open his party's phone records to Elections Canada, on the grounds that "we know we didn't do it," I hear an echo of Richard Nixon protesting, "I am not a crook."

But my prejudices may have led me astray. The robocalls were not limited to ridings where a few Conservative votes might make a difference.

I checked 36 ridings where robocalls had been reported. Many were, indeed, close races. A few were won indeed by mere handfuls of votes. But in others, the Tory candidate got up to four times as many votes as the nearest competitor. If I were a political strategist, it would not make sense to waste effort and risk criminal charges by attempting to influence a small number of those votes through robocalls.

Some writers speculate that – given the glacial speed at which electoral inquiries proceed – we will not get to the bottom of the robocall scandal before the next election. Maybe we never will.

But I can say, with reasonable confidence, is that by the next election, robocalls will be passé. Not because they're outlawed. But because someone will find some entirely new way, as yet unimagined, to deceive and hoodwink a gullible public.

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## YOUR TURN

Last week's blast against Rick Santorum and all that he stands for, as you might expect, generated some equally strong reactions.

Ned Hintzman, for example, wrote, "While I am not a supporter of Mr. Santorum, our characterization of him as Ayatolla Khomeini put you at an all-time low in my eyes."

On the other hand, old friend T.Z. Chu wrote, "Great article, Jim! Maybe because I agree with everything you wrote..."

And Ralph Milton asked, "Reading your column, one would almost think that you don't love Rick Santorum. Or am I reading too much into your outburst?"

Cliff Boldt apparently shares my prejudices (see column above): "Canada is going in the Sharia Santorum direction under the leadership of Harper and the likes of Vic Toews, John Baird and Rod Nicholson."

Jim McKean noted an apparent contradiction: "Your column today is titled 'battle' which says a great deal about the power of patriarchy. The emerging church is more about consensus and not battles, hence no creeds. It is a Church

which has finally released itself from the patriarchy of over 1800 years. It has become gender neutral with both feminine and masculine characteristics.”

Jim added, “As a former secondary school teacher, I was always worried when a trend failed in the United States, because it crept north after its run in that country. As a result I am glad you are writing about Santorum and his politics. Would we want a Republican North Party?”

My metaphor of an amoeba as an image of how society changes prompted Wayne Irwin to write, “A fellow student at Emmanuel College, in Toronto, many years ago (who later became a figure in the forefront of the movement to take congregations out of the United Church because of the policy decisions in 1988 regarding the church's refusal to discriminate based on sexual orientation) declared, while he was yet a theological undergraduate: ‘I'm going to be the guy who sits on the back of the wagon and drags my feet!’ All he needed was an issue to use to fulfill his sense of calling.”

Isobel Gibson added her usual insightful comments: “I fear Santorum less, perhaps, because I don't think this man will ever be the nominee; and, if nominated, will not be elected. At the moment, Santorum has the support of roughly half the committed Republicans -- not half the American population as your final paragraph suggests.

“That said, the American political amoeba is subject to extreme strain at the moment. Given that the country's geography doesn't align neatly with the different political views, a seamless and peaceful split doesn't seem possible. We'd better hope that they find a way to talk their way through their differences.”

Glenn Sinclair also questioned my assumption that half the U.S. population supported Santorum. I did have a process of reasoning to explain my comment, but it's too long to include here.

Glenn concluded, “Perhaps I am becoming more jaded in my appreciation of the press as I age, but it seems to me you could have tackled this subject in a much deeper, more helpful way by exploring the similarities you started out with, and then asking how each man [Santorum and Khomeini] would deal with an ethical dilemma...

“I think you should fear less for the future of the U.S. and more for the future of a thoughtful, educated press in Canada...”

Mary-Margaret Boone connected my comments about Santorum to news reports later in the week: “I could not believe the comments from Rush Limbaugh, calling a student a slut after she asked for a more comprehensive health care program that covered contraceptives. That was bad enough but to suggest that the public was paying for her sex life and then saying that she should post her sex life on line so that he and other colleagues could watch it? Is the American religious right really behind this, and if they support any part of Limbaugh's statement I cannot even begin to express my sympathy for the American people.”

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## **ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.**

I still have half a dozen copies of a book my father wrote exploring Christian theology through Christian art.

The problem with art, of course, is that it cannot put an abstract concept on canvas. An artist cannot paint an Incarnation or a Resurrection without putting real humans, in real situations, into the picture. The expression, therefore, has to be grounded in a particular culture and society; the infinite and universal has to be represented in finite terms.

My father – who once took art lessons from members of Canada's Group of Seven – spent much of his life after retiring as principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, seeking out the ways artists through the centuries had attempted to deal with this dilemma. I'm probably biased, but I think that in examining the ways art portrays theological concepts, he explained those concepts better than most theological texts.

The book is *Seeing the Mystery: Exploring Christian Faith through the Eyes of Artists*, by William S. Taylor, 94 pages. There are only about 20 copies left in the world. Most of the illustrations are in full colour.

If you would like a copy, write to me – Jim Taylor, 1300 6<sup>th</sup> Street, Lake Country, BC, Canada, V4V 2H7.  
Unfortunately, I can't send these out on the honour system, as I do with my biblical paraphrases. I will have to charge \$30 Canadian to include postage, paid in advance.

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## 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](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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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](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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## 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](mailto: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

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, [www.seemslikegod.org](http://www.seemslikegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- 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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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