

# The Myth of Privacy

**There is, of course, a notable difference between privacy and secrecy** despite their interchangeable usage. Privacy is that form of seclusion or retirement that ensures some measure of personal separation from outside intrusion. It is, frequently, a voluntarily chosen status. The word derives from the Latin, *privatus*, meaning apart from the state, deprived of public office or of belonging, not to the state, but to one's self. Privacy is a freedom which decries public exposure or disclosure. Secrecy, on the other hand, is that condition whereby something is hidden or concealed. It comes from the Latin, *secretus*, meaning to set apart, to separate, to hide.

Privacy pertains more to the individual person, and in some climates and cultures is valued as a fundamental human right. Secrecy pertains more to things such as documents or past events; secrets can exist independent of the persons bearing – or barring – them. And thus many of the immortal proclamations and declarations of human rights indicate the fundamental character, indeed necessity, of privacy; but never do these documents talk of secrecy as a natural or divinely ordained privilege.

Private things are intensely personal and human-oriented. Contractual affairs are more private than secret; while espionage and felonies are inevitably more secret than private. Private things are intensely, idiosyncratically personal; secret things are notable by the efficiency to which they are physically hidden. A private dinner party suggests a celebratory gathering; a secret dinner party, on the other hand, hints of clandestine planning.

Surely, there is much overlap in the meanings and uses of the two words, secrecy and privacy. And while these almost-synonyms possess shared meanings, can there also be occasions in which they are in conflict with each other? Can legislation pertaining to secrecy be a threat to the privacy of individuals? And further, have the tools and technical resources of the digital age reduced the illusion of privacy to a mere myth?

A decade ago, only banks routinely employed surveillance cameras. Now such devices are common in a wide variety of commercial settings as well as at urban street intersections, highways, bridges, tunnels and airports. Each telephone call, innocent or nefarious, now leaves a permanent trail in some indestructible computer. Indeed, each call routinely announces the identity of the caller before a word is uttered. The older cinematic scene of a sweating police officer exclaiming: "Can we trace that call?" elicits only laughter today. A generation ago, Americans feared an invasion by extra-terrestrial creatures, Martians perhaps. The intruders are no longer aliens: the trespassers are ourselves. Only an anchorite secluded in a Nepalese cave might now feel reasonably free of covert observation.

The means by which the integrity of individual privacy may be transgressed is fully developed, fully operative; and the illusion of continued privacy has therefore become dependent upon the benevolence, if not the intentional laxity, of one's government and its operative agencies.

The attack upon privacy is thought to arise principally from nameless and evil governmental operatives. But there is a human trait called curiosity which is more than mere innocent wonderment about the dynamics of nature. Certainly curiosity is one of the most indestructible characteristics of the human mind. Without curiosity, science would still be in its infancy. But there is another face of curiosity that demands information about the intimate lives of humans, an insatiable nosiness about the private affairs of others, particularly those others who have risen about the anonymous masses, people of notoriety or fame in government or the entertainment business.

And thus an entire industry has arisen fed by the collective human desire for intimate information about others. It has given rise to a transnational intellectual currency called informed gossip, a currency that underwrites a major segment of the newspaper and magazine industry. It respects no privacy, no privileged status, whether it be a budding actress from Missouri, a prime minister from Italy or even a presidential aspirant in the United States.

The Scriptures have informed us: "Be not curious in unnecessary matters: for more things are shewed unto thee than most men understand."

Dorothy Sayers (1893 – 1957), whose mystery stories always baffled us but, in their final chapters, never left us mystified, once said:

As I grow older and older,  
And totter towards the tomb,  
I find that I care less and less  
Who goes to bed with whom.

– STANLEY M. ARONSON, MD

*Stanley M. Aronson, MD is dean of medicine emeritus, Brown University.*

## Disclosure of Financial Interests

Stanley M. Aronson, MD, and spouse/significant other have no financial interests to disclose.

## CORRESPONDENCE

e-mail: SMAMD@cox.net

