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Canada's Pulse

Can we have some privacy?

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Privacy is arguably the most abused human right. From people looking over our shoulder on the bus all the way to identity theft, it's nearly impossible to live as secretly as we would like.

People assert they have the right to be left alone, yet opinion research shows Canadians would readily trade away privacy for a feeling of security.

In the weeks following 9/11, in October 2001, an Ipsos-Reid poll showed that by 80% to 19% Canadians would provide their fingerprints for a national identity card "that would be carried on your person at all times to show to police or security officials on request."

If the U.S. adopts national identity cards, Canada can't be far behind. Until 9/11 most Americans rejected requiring everyone to identify themselves. Now most favour national IDs.

In the war on terrorism, most people consider privacy to be collateral damage. Opinion is almost evenly split, but a majority supports security over privacy. In the Ipsos post-9/11 poll, by 52% to 46% Canadians agreed that "to curb terrorism in this country, it will be necessary for you to give up some of your civil liberties that are currently protected in law."

Three years later opinion split the same way. Just over half (53%) disagreed that the police and security forces are “going too far in using anti-terrorism powers” while 45% agreed.

However, in the 2004 poll three in four (75%) opposed granting the police and security forces more power to fight terrorism if it means the authorities might tap your phone, open your mail or read personal emails without your ever knowing it.

The public’s expressed concern over privacy may not seem to square with the public’s actual behaviour.

We readily reveal our credit card numbers on-line to buy stuff and offer our addresses and other personal data to get access to favourite internet sites. Credit rating agencies traffic in our financial records. We tell all to our insurance agents before they sell us a policy. At the airport we let strangers unpack our suitcases. We’re monitored on the job, and TV surveillance is ubiquitous in the mall. Pre-employment tests mean the boss knows our mental state and personality as well as we do.

Despite doubts about security, internet commerce is booming. In a 2004 Ipsos poll, 69% of frequent internet purchasers said they are concerned about giving their credit card number and other personal information to an e-tailer.

Among people who don’t shop on-line, 66% said they don’t because they are concerned about privacy when they release personal information, up from 52% in 2003.

In the end it may not be opinion that protects privacy but economics. Canada’s privacy commissioner estimates a national ID card system would cost \$3 billion to \$5 billion just to set up, so it’s probably off the federal government’s agenda.

If you don’t like the drift toward greater police powers in the name of security, the polls show the way to argue for your privacy. Frame your argument in first-person terms. Polls say Canadians are more leery of invasions of their own space than others’ drawers and closets.

- In the 2001 Ipsos poll, 61% opposed “allowing officials to monitor your personal credit card purchases and other financial transactions without you being told.”

- 71% opposed “allowing intelligence and law enforcement agents to monitor your personal, private telephone conversations and email without your knowledge.”
- 74% opposed “allowing police and intelligence officials to intercept your mail and to read it without first gaining your permission.”

The key word is opening “your” mail and tapping “your” phone.

We seldom worry about other people’s privacy. We love to learn the secrets of celebrities. The media routinely erase the boundary between private and public when they cover the personal lives of stars and politicians. Princess Diana and Bill Clinton fought and lost the information war to the public’s curiosity.

We are losing our privacy because we are not certain what privacy means. We have also dumbed down the very concept of privacy to equate nuisances with privacy breaches. That’s why Canada’s federal government has introduced legislation to establish a do-not-call list aimed at curbing telemarketers.

Telemarketers are as popular as crabgrass. In a 2000 POLLARA survey, only 30% across the country said they trust telemarketers, compared with 96% who trust nurses and 65% “the people who run banks.”

It’s inexpensive for the government to enact a do-not-call measure since the businesses and other organizations being regulated pick up most of the cost.

Passage of DNC legislation in America in 2003 made it inevitable that Canada would follow. Introducing the legislation in late 2004, industry minister David Emerson cited an Environics opinion poll showing eight in 10 adults support a national do-not-call list while 66% say they would sign up for it.

In America 57% of adults told a 2004 Harris Interactive poll they have joined the DNC list, but three quarters of them were still getting telemarketing calls (most said not as many as before).

When pollsters ask people what they feel are the big issues facing the country, privacy never turns up. When interviewers specifically mention privacy, however, the public jumps to its feet.

- An EKOS survey in 1992 found that 60% believed they had less privacy than a decade ago, but just 18% felt they had experienced a “serious privacy invasion.”
- 70% had received an uninvited phone call from someone selling or fund-raising
- A significant 29% minority were “extremely concerned” about telemarketers’ calls. The same percentage were “extremely concerned” about junk mail.

Supporters say do-not-call lists are a compromise between two freedoms: the right to communicate and the right to be left alone. But is telemarketing really as big a threat as wiretapping or mandatory ID cards? Unless you are under a restraining order, isn’t your right to phone someone part of your freedom of speech?

Some phone calls are unwelcome, but some callers might offer the chance to support causes you really want to endorse. Your phone may ring during dinner or your favourite TV show, but you don’t have to answer. Besides, the people calling are mostly from an economic class deserving more support and who benefit from raising the minimum wage.

With so little privacy remaining, the public has turned on telemarketers in frustration. We can’t control Big Brother or Sister, but we can try to inhibit the people who phone us to sell merchandise or raise money for their cause.

A phone call you don’t want is certainly a nuisance, but is it an invasion of privacy? Millions think so.

In the EKOS poll, not being disturbed at home was “extremely important” to 41% compared with 75% who said “not having someone watch you or listen to you without your permission.”

Canadians have inflated nuisance phone calls and junk mail to privacy issues because they are guarding their space. We are disconnecting from people who are not like us. Birds of a feather flock together, and thanks to digital technology, cell phones, blogs, iPods, text messaging and other personalized media we can delete parts of the world we don’t like.

The do-not-call list is a symptom of the ascension of personal interests over public values. It’s an emblem of the same trend that invented the gated community.

We feel we have less and less influence over politics and world events, so we grasp for more and more control over what remains, which is our time and attention.

Maybe hindering telemarketers will have happy if unintended consequences. In the EKOS poll, 62% said they “prefer to deal with people more on a face to face basis than over the telephone or by mail or fax.” So if you put your name on the do-not-call list, get ready to answer the doorbell.

Vector Research (www.vectorresearch.com) provides phone, mail and on-line polls and focus groups in Canada and the US.

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