



# Don't bug me, I'm snooping: Being a busybody holds allure for many

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By TRICIA JONES, Columbian staff writer

Even the duller of topics radiates intrigue when attached to four simple words: None of your business.

Spoken or implied, it's the phrase that has launched a thousand snoops.

Privacy often operates under a double standard. We want to maintain ours, but we're rather offended when others insist on keeping theirs. And given the opportunity to get a secret glimpse at anything confidential, many allow themselves to be led by the nose.

Such impulses may not be admirable, but they are natural, according to Vancouver psychiatrist Michael Bernstein, medical director of behavioral health services at Southwest Washington Medical Center.

"Information that's gotten covertly is inherently more interesting than what is provided voluntarily," Bernstein said. "Paranoid people feel it's self-protective to snoop or check out other people. We all have a little paranoia."

Also a taste for spying.

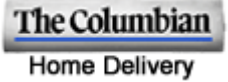
Gary Crowe, a private investigator with Alan H. Crowe and Associates of Portland, said that given the chance to test sophisticated equipment that allows eavesdropping on neighbors, most people would agree to try it out.

"It's like driving by a humongous traffic accident," Crowe said. "Everyone has to turn and look."

Bernstein said curiosity gave evolutionary advantages to early humans, minimizing surprises about their environment and maximizing the ability to adapt. Children become capable of developing curiosity about others around age 3 or 4.

Even while we deplore the idea of rummaging through a co-worker's desk or reading a friend's journal, the enterprise can take on a James Bondian glamour.

That fact hasn't been lost on entrepreneurs selling snoop



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software on the Internet. Eager to help customers gather the dirt, such outfits are less interested in sharing any facts about the business. Marketers of Net Detective and Cyber Detective provide e-mail addresses (no phone numbers) only for people with sales or support questions, and a spokesman for Investigate Anyone Online, a site offering tips on information-gathering, declined to be interviewed.

Crowe didn't identify any by name, but said the problem with "rogue brokers" on the Internet is that they'll sell information to anyone.

"People are able to freely obtain Social Security numbers ... it's very dangerous," Crowe said.

Crowe admitted the job of gathering information can provide a pleasurable sense of cat-and-mouse. He believes collecting data on an unsuspecting person, consulting public records, for example, is only harmful if the knowledge is used for illegal purposes, such as creating a false identity. Others take a more restrictive view of the practice in daily life.

"What ends up happening is that when people find things out, they don't keep it to themselves," said Corinne Gregory, president and founder of The PoliteChild. The Woodinville-based program aims to teach good behavior and character through classroom training to young children, tweens and teens.

For Gregory, it all goes back to the Golden Rule. She says training children not to snoop is a natural part of teaching boundaries of any sort.

"We're big on treating others as how you'd like to be treated," Gregory said. "Think in practical terms: What would you feel uncomfortable with people finding out about you?"

Yet Gregory admits parental snooping is a dicey area. Although adults have an obligation to know what their children are up to, children have a right to expect a certain amount of privacy. And regardless of what's discovered, covert digging probably will have a negative effect on the parent-child relationship.

Gregory said she was cured of snooping in childhood after finding her Christmas presents in the house.

"The disappointment on my mother's face was very, very hard on me," she said. "It's the old 'Be careful what you wish for.' Do you really want to know the answer to the question?"

Well, yes and no. Robert Thompson, professor of media and culture at New York's Syracuse University, says snooping is rarely justified, but rarely resisted, either.

"There is so much information out there that can only be

gathered by a quick peek here or a cocked ear there," he said.

It's no surprise to Thompson that the reality television show has become what he calls one of the fastest-spreading cultural viruses of the past half-century.

"It provides a legitimized way to be voyeurs," Thompson said. "You don't need to hide in the bushes to look in the window. The window is brought right to our living rooms."

Still, much of the allure is lost in the delivery. Sneaking around is what gives snooping that delicious tinge of espionage. And rarely seems to provoke any lasting guilt.

"I always think people are sorry only because they were caught," said private investigator Crowe.

### Business setting complicates privacy issues

Having a neighbor peeping over the backyard fence is an intrusion, but not one that's likely to affect anyone's job.

A competitor rifling through computer files is a different matter.

Snooping in the business world may not always be tied to illegal practices, but it creates problems nonetheless for all parties involved, according to Jerry Goodstein, professor of business administration at Washington State University Vancouver.

Goodstein teaches classes and does research in the area of business ethics and management studies. When it comes to gathering confidential data, Goodstein said a distinction should be made between information that can protect others drug testing for air traffic controllers, for example and making off with a formula for developing semiconductor chips.

Companies who make a practice of spying on each other to get a competitive edge produce an atmosphere Goodstein likens to a nuclear arms race.

"One of the implications is that the cost of business increases," Goodstein said. "And if a company is going down a path of crossing that line of moving unethically or putting the firm at risk, it's not a practice that's sustainable over time."

While he admits it's easier said than done, Goodstein said companies need to stop "playing the game of escalation, draw a line and simply say, 'We're not going to practice business this way.' "

But even if business leaders opt to abandon snooping, don't expect the same courtesy on the road.

According to a study commissioned last summer by diversified manufacturing company 3M, 32 percent of Americans traveling on business admit to looking over someone's shoulder in a public place, such as an airport or train station, to see what's on the person's laptop. (One in five travelers in general confessed to the same.)

Sharon Middendorf, a 3M optics engineer based in St. Paul, Minn., said computer screens tend to catch the eye of people in public transportation settings, as do paper documents. She said she once read an entire pathology report being reviewed by a traveler sitting beside her.

"I think business travelers have a different kind of curiosity," said Middendorf, whose company markets privacy filters that work like mini-blinds on computers. "I think a lot of people do the idle look, but ... if you put yourself in that position, you really don't want anyone else seeing what you have, even if it's not state secrets or the person sitting next to you isn't an industrial spy."

Or a government spy. Snooping is going into high gear in post-Sept. 11 America, with the so-called Patriot Act allowing information-sharing between intelligence agencies and law enforcement unlike anything seen before in this country. Some believe the act sets chilling precedents eroding civil liberties, others argue such legislation is necessary to protect citizens from terrorism.

However it's viewed, the trend shows that snooping in our culture is ahead by a nose.

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