

Saturday, August 20, 2005

Corruption, not terrorism, is the true enemy of our time.

As I watch more of our rights being chisled away, such as random searches on subways in NYC or the impending "Lawful Access" here in Canada, I realize that like it or not, some form of surveillance society is probably inevitable. I also thought this long before 9/11 as this post of mine on the OpenFlows mailing list describes back on Sept/99.

In it I cite Damon Knight's short story I See You which describes a not-so-distant future society where everybody can monitor anything in both time and space. Crime becomes impossible and privacy extinguished. As David Brin once observed, "Everybody wants privacy for themselves and accountability for everybody else".

If we are headed where I think we are headed, I will trade some privacy if I get everybody else's accountability in exchange. That means I will not sit still for a "top down" Big-Brother type surveillance society where politicians and lawmakers confiscate our rights to enforce laws which benefit their backroom deals. But I will settle for a massively parallel "everybody-sees-everything" society or "somebody-sees-everything" society that would sufficiently impair the corrupt from operating at any level of society.

So if a cop wanted to search me as I enter the subway that's fine. I'll scan in his badge number with my PDA and if he finds something on me he doesn't like, then he better not have any unexplained cash deposits into his own or his family's bank accounts and he shouldn't be driving a Ferrari on a beat-cop's salary. My lawyer will be checking out all of his dirty laundry, not to mention the chief of police, the TTC commissioner and whoever passed the goddamn law in the first place.

In a massively parallel surveillance society, you look at mine means I'll look at yours. If the police can call my ISP and get my access logs, I'll agree to it if I (and everyone else) can look at the banking records of my political candidates. I'll sit still for something like "Lawful Access" as long as I can also call Irwin Cotler's ISP and get the logs of his internet activity. After all, if he's doing something "subversive" then he shouldn't be the Justice minister, should he? The higher up the food chain people get, the more responsibility they shoulder, then the more magnifying glasses they should be under. The stakeholders of a given situation should be able to monitor the activities of the rulemakers.

I'm being overly dramatic to illustrate a point. The point is this: we are being observed more and more. This tide may be impossible to reverse. It is also increasingly clear that our leadership is rampant with corruption. Wars have been started on based on lies. Funds are misappropriated. Backroom deals abound. If the state can monitor the citizens "for safety's sake" then the citizens must be able to monitor the state for the same reasons.

And then we need to get serious about corruption and have some real world consequences for breaches of the public trust, which I think is one of the highest crimes imaginable.

The sad state today is politicians and financiers can abuse their power, lie, employ the powers of the state for their private gain, and even when caught they get a walk or some token prison sentence and will be pardoned down the road once their fate fades from public memory.

China may not be a free an open society like ours is supposed to be. But over there white collar criminals and corrupt politicians get the same treatment as a common murderer: they are executed.

What kind of signal would it send if Kenneth Lay and Bernie Ebers were hanged? What about next politician who is found to have lied to his constituents with grave consequences?

People who hold office need to be scared to death (literally) of abusing that power. They shouldn't have to be, they're supposed to be there out of a sense of public service, but until that sentiment returns to the land, forget terrorism, we need to get tough on corruption. We need to have a War on Corruption, one that may not end in our lifetimes.

Posted by Mark Jeftovic in Armchair Analysis at 11:40