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National security and gossip

Phyllis Zagano | Jun. 19, 2013 Just Catholic

For a while, the world's eye was fixed on a luxury hotel in Hong Kong, where a 29-year-old American told the world that President Barack Obama is watching us. Edward Snowden is the latest political folk hero to stand up to "the man."

Give me a break. Obama has better things to do than read my email. So does the entire U.S. national security establishment. I am quite convinced that even if they snoop too much, they will catch the bad guys and leave the rest of us alone. If they want my pesto recipe, they can have it.

To me, the whole affair is a collision between naïveté and technology.

In the old days, security analysts were surrounded by paper. Live people read real letters, newspapers and reports from the field. The operating "computer" was an individual's brain, attuned to the country, area or region he -- and gradually, she -- knew best. Once electronics took over the information business, there was more to read, more to listen to, more to think about, more to write about. Computer searches help, but after all is coded and counted, nothing beats the thought processes of a live human being.

The problem of too much information has plagued security analysts for decades. Their task is to separate fact from fiction then determine if any given fact actually means something.

So now we are faced with information newly arrived from Hong Kong: The collectors are indiscriminate. Yikes, my pesto recipe is no longer sacrosanct!

I repeat: Give me a break.

I think it is time for the Edward Snowdens of the world to admit they are not in charge, and that maybe, just maybe, the system works. That requires a decent dose of humility because it means admitting there are things about which one does not have the complete untrammeled truth.

Only a particular personality can work within government security. Typically, the individual knows just part of the story. Understanding that requires a control of curiosity and both a humility and a meekness that accepts his or her level of access.

The tell-it-all is neither humble nor meek. He (or she) is largely just a simple gossip. When Pope Francis spoke about gossip [1] a while back, he said the first enemy of meekness is gossip. He is correct.

The pope's advice sits well in every sphere. "When we prefer to gossip, gossip about others ... these are the temptations of the evil one who does not want the Spirit to come to us and bring about peace."

So think about it. Folks on one end or the other of the political spectrum will lionize Edward Snowden. Next, there is Bradley Manning. Then there is Julian Assange. Each in his own way believes he knows better than the system that produced or collected the information he threw to the wind. It does not matter whom they

embarrass, endanger or enrage. Their single judgments rule.

You have your own views of the political particulars in each case. But ratchet the topic down to the personal level for a minute. There are plenty of people -- including people who should know better -- who cannot maintain confidences or who do not even understand what constitutes a confidence. There are too many others for whom the neighbor or the fellow worker or the schoolmate is simply a target for detraction and derision. There are just too many people whose own slightly built self-worth needs pillars of gossip to shore it up.

Taking information belonging to someone else and using it for one's own gain casts a shadow from which the gossip may never recover, not to mention the victim. The stakes are even higher when the victim is a national government because so many unknown innocents are at risk.

Will the temptation to gossip stop with the Snowdens, Mannings and Assanges of the world? "These struggles always exist," said the pope. Yes, sadly, they do -- and will.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic studies. She will speak Sept. 20-21 at Wisdom House in Litchfield, Conn.; Oct. 13 at Thomas More Chapel of Yale University; and Oct. 23 at Boston College. Her recent books include *Women & Catholicism* (Palgrave-Macmillan), *Women in Ministry: Emerging Questions about the Diaconate* (Paulist Press) and *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (with Gary Macy and William T. Ditewig, Paulist Press).]

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