

Smile, you're on candid camera!

by SHERALYN ROMAN

In our house, if there is a positive to have come from this current pandemic we're wallowing in, it's this: the opportunity to have some really good conversations around the dinner table about what else is happening in our world these days. Yes ? believe it or not, there are other things happening besides CoVid19! In Caledon for example, you may have recently read about the installation of red light cameras across various locations in Town, specifically, close to some schools. This turned in to a debate on the use of surveillance cameras in general (think CCTV in the UK and facial recognition technology in China) and whether such technology serves the greater good. Smile folks, you just never know when you might be on camera.

The Town of Caledon recently announced the use of ASE ? Automated Speed Enforcement cameras, in six identified school zones to ?help protect our most vulnerable residents and help them feel comfortable while walking, running, playing, cycling and generally enjoying their community.? The first of these locations will be near Robert F. Hall Secondary School, planned to be in operation by August of 2020. Other locations include elementary schools throughout Caledon including Alton and Palgrave. Critics argue that because the fine for an offense is issued to the permit holder of the vehicle (not necessarily the person driving at the time) the system is unfair. But is it? If I have given permission to someone to drive my vehicle, I do so with a reasonable expectation they will obey all traffic regulations. If I am concerned about that individual's ability to do so, I'm probably not going to let them borrow my car. Perhaps then, I should also be held accountable for my poor judgement if in fact I do allow them to drive and a ticket for speeding ensues. After all, these traffic cameras are being installed for the greater good ? the protection of children and the adults who walk them to school. Is a fine (which does not result in demerit points since no driver is identified) a reasonable price to pay to help ensure the safety of all? In our house, opinion was divided. Some felt strongly that ASE serves community and we all must play a role despite the potential consequences, while others saw it as a slippery slope toward an Orwellian existence.

So began a second conversation about the role of surveillance in general. If indeed ASE is the first step toward the constant monitoring of citizens, what then are the consequences of that? In the UK, the use of CCTV is extensive. It has been shown to enable the quick identification and capture of suspects committing crimes that range from shoplifting to significantly worse. The UK is considered a democracy, with the assumption being that its citizens have willingly (or implicitly) agreed to this continuous oversight for the protection of all. On the other hand, you have a communist country where it's alleged they are using facial technology to identify, ticket and withdraw payment of the fine from an individual's bank account (for such serious crimes as jaywalking!) all before the person even arrives home from having committed the offense. At what point have we crossed the line from ?for the greater good? to ?for the control of all??

Some weeks ago my daughter wrote an essay for school about 1984, the seminal work by George Orwell. In it, she wrote that people, ?in Orwell's world understand they are being watched and live accordingly. By contrast, society today blissfully enjoys a life they believe they have set to ?private mode' while in actuality they are paying to give away pieces of themselves?? Further, ?we have already allowed ourselves, through social media, mapping, gaming and googling, to give the government (and companies) .?. power? over us. They use the information we provide to shape and form our purchasing decisions and more ? potentially even shaping a society that resembles that found in Orwell's novel. I find her argument valid. We are already giving away pieces of ourselves daily, through our online social media interactions, so at what point do we demand privacy and/or that the government has no ?right? to surveillance? Many homeowners now rely on doorbell cameras or security cameras to protect their property (and regularly post footage on social media of potential ?offenders?) and ?dashcams? are increasing in popularity for our ?protection? in the event of an accident. Both of these options have led to offenders being captured and brought to justice. Are these methods of surveillance any more, or less, acceptable than those managed by the state? These are slippery slopes indeed. Perhaps it will make for some good conversation around your dinner table. Smile folks, like it or not, you're on candid camera.