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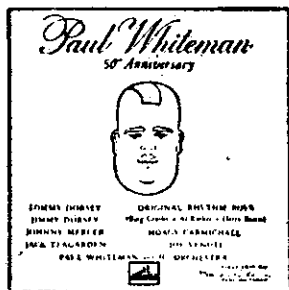
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The Sonic Snoopers

DISCLOSURES about the tapping of telephone wires caused surprise and dismay in Britain recently; but in the United States the techniques of eavesdropping have reached a stage where wires seem to be superfluous. To the rich vocabulary of our times must now be added "sonic snooper," a person who uses radio and electronic devices to pick up private conversations. A Senate Judiciary Committee in California has reported that it is possible to use tiny microphones which can detect whispers in a room of average size and transmit them to receivers or recorders in another room, or even in a car down the street. Microphones are concealed in wrist-watches; they may also be put into transmitters no larger than a packet of cigarettes. For the outdoor snooper a "shotgun" microphone is available which can be aimed at persons several hundred yards away.

These ingenious gadgets, and others like them, appear to be by-products from the manufacture of radio and electronic equipment. At first, perhaps, they were merely novelties, or intended for legitimate use in broadcasting and television studios. But now they have passed into the hands of private investigators, and *Time* alleges that some companies in California are using them to record the conversation of employees in dining and rest rooms. The committee has asked for legislation. If secret installations are made illegal, there may be some hope of checking bad practices; and sooner or later the same measures will be wanted in other countries. It will not be the first time that such controls have been needed. Violence spreads when guns can be bought without a licence, and the sale of drugs must be rigidly supervised in the public interest. A match-box microphone may seem a harmless toy in comparison with these older and more familiar dangers. Yet life in a city would soon have a jungle intensity if people had reason to suspect the presence of unknown eavesdroppers.

Social intercourse would be insupportable without some assurance of privacy. The mildest man has explosive thoughts, and must utter them to a friendly ear. If the friend is indiscreet, and hints a little at what he has been told, the words already have the vagueness of gossip, and will do no harm unless malice sharpens them for a flight to the target. And what could men do if at night they were afraid to give their wives that running commentary on the day's events which is among the solaces of marriage? Much that is said at the fireside or in the ultimate privacy of the bedroom is blown up a little from the truth; but a man must cut a good figure in the eyes of his loving spouse, and in his own, and nobody is hurt if he strays in his recital, and is bolder or shrewder in retrospect than he could afford to be in the shop or at the office. He would be sadly abashed and chapfallen if in the cooler mood of morning he were confronted with a recording of what had been said for his wife's ears alone.

The whole fabric of society is held together in a nice balance between candour and reticence. If all men spoke their thoughts continually they would soon be snarling instead of speaking; but it is true also that if they could not sometimes ease their minds in private conversation they would begin to walk with tight and shuttered faces into madness. No such extremity will overtake us. If microphones became as plentiful as cigarette lighters, protective devices would not be far behind. Indeed, it is hard to put aside a suspicion that a "free for all" could be the best and quickest treatment for a new folly: the whole apparatus of sonic snooping might then disappear in a gale of laughter. The danger at present to be seen like a small cloud on the horizon is a silent struggle between authority and illegal enterprise, for men who want money and power will not lightly surrender a useful toy; and the lurking microphone could be a new anxiety in an age which already has more than enough.

—M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, JULY 12, 1957.