
The Press

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Computers and privacy

An Englishman's home may still be his castle; but in modern societies men's actions and assets, even their thoughts and dreams, are increasingly explored and recorded. The new pressures on privacy from private and governmental organisations are the result of what has been called the "information processing revolution"; at the heart of the "revolution" is the computer. The complex ramifications of having large quantities of personal information stored in computer memory banks and open to use—and misuse—by other persons have, as yet, barely been noticed by the law. Attempts at legislative control in the United States and Britain have had little success. Mr A. L. C. Humphreys, managing director of International Computers, Ltd, suggested a solution in Christchurch this week: a code of ethics devised and applied by the computer industry to protect individual privacy against unwarranted intrusions.

Much of the personal information collected is, of course, useful, and even necessary, to the functioning of society. Security, crime detection, welfare, education, taxation, even credit worthiness, require that individuals be prepared to make details about themselves available. So long as the information remained stored on files and not centrally collected and collated the system was little open to abuse. But in the United States in particular the development of systems which allow computers to be linked by telephone so that very large amounts of personal information may quickly be made available to those who ask for it has raised serious questions about the limits which should be placed on personal documentation.

"Evidence at Congressional hearings has drawn attention to the dangers of a system in which, for bureaucratic convenience, every citizen tends to become a number. The result is a loss of individuality; a number cannot command the dignity and respect of a name. Data stored in a machine

tend to be invested with a possibly misleading aura of authority and accuracy; computer records take no account of subtle differences between people, or of changes in their beliefs and outlook. Even worse, once people know that information about themselves is being stored—especially if they have no knowledge of when, or by whom, it will be used—they are bound to feel that they must constantly be on their guard; they will tend to act out their lives “for the record” rather than risk having unfavourable information recorded against them. This is the style of life already familiar under totalitarian regimes.

In New Zealand this process has not advanced very far. The relatively small population is conducive to more personal relationships between individuals, business firms, and government agencies. There is no cause to fear that some sort of “Big Brother” system of personal records is being built up, even inadvertently; it would be unwise to assume that such a system would be inconceivable here in the future. The needs of society must be balanced against the right of individuals to keep their private lives private. Little attempt has yet been made to draw a line between information which is essential for particular purposes and that which is not. Any self-imposed system of “ethics” within the computer industry would face these uncertainties of definition, even if it were extended to control not only manufacturers but also those who use or have access to computers.

Some safeguards may be built into the computers. They may be programmed to supply information only to approved persons, or to record only certain information and to refuse items which have been defined as unwarranted intrusions on privacy. The computer is ethically neutral. It is an aid to the human memory in storing and organising information; the abuses come from those who misuse it. The time may be near when persons who have access to computer memory banks will need to be bound by the same professional code of ethics as doctors and lawyers—with legal sanctions to enforce the professionalism.

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