Privacy-law-computers

Aside from all its other implications, the Rockefeller Commission's report on illegal activities by the Central Intelligence Agency has given new urgency to the "privacy issue."

This is something that concerns every citizen, for few of us do not have our names, ranks (income, education, etc.) and serial numbers (Social Security, driver's license, etc.) stored in a myriad government and private files.

So far, the only major legislation in this area, the Privacy Act of 1974, deals solely with government-compiled information. However, a broad-coverage bill has been introduced in the House of Representatives that would do for the private sector what the Privacy Act did for the public sector.

Commenting on the proposed legislation, Dale H. Learn, president of Information Science, Inc., which claims to be the nation's leading designer of "human resources systems," notes that legislation is clearly required to insure that the privacy of the individual is not transgressed and to prevent the unauthorized and unwarranted use or dissemination of employe data. He suggests two ways this could be done:

1) By setting up tight security systems for keeping files under lock and key, whether they are computerized or manual.

2) By permitting employes to see the information in their files so that they may review, question and correct it if need be.

But as for the widespread impression — or fear — that a lot of the personal information contained in corporate and business files is unnecessary and irrelevant, if not downright false, Learn's experience has been that this is not so.

In the 10 years his company has been designing employe information systems for many of the nation's largest corporations, it has never, he says, been asked to include such data as political activities, standing with the Internal Revenue Service, credit ratings or the like. On the contrary, the information kept on employes is relevant to the jobs they hold and is "employe orginated" for the most part.

The computer, Learn contends, may actually be the key to the "repersonalization" of society. "The computer will enable the movement away from treating citizens and employes in impersonal mass groups and back toward the individual assessment on the basis of qualifications, capabilities and preferences."

There is a need to prevent erroneous information from being immortalized in the computer, he admits, but the collection and use of employe information have little if anything to do with the right to privacy as long as appropriate security measures are observed.