

Expert Says Computers Pose A Growing Menace to Privacy

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 17—Intimate facts about the private lives of many Americans may soon be available to Government officials and private institutions at the touch of a computer button, an expert on privacy warned in a book published today.

Prof. Alan F. Westin of Columbia University said that "we are now in a last-minute position" to establish safeguards against indiscriminate use of data that will soon be made available by the rapid advance of computer technology.

The book, "Privacy and Freedom," is the product of a four-year study sponsored by the Association of the Bar of the City of New York and financed by the Carnegie Corporation. It is the most comprehensive study to date of the psychological, social, political and legal aspects of privacy.

Professor Westin, a lawyer and political scientist, said that Americans are pouring a stream of personal data about themselves—school records, credit ratings, birth and marriage records, medical and psychological reports and income tax returns—into files that are being computerized at an increasing rate.

But since there is at present no system for classifying the highly personal data as non-circulating, the computers may soon spew out an individual's most intimate secrets along with such public records as the date of his birth and marriage.

'Serious Threat to Privacy'

"The trend toward greatly increased collection of personal data, exchange of information among the collectors, and consolidation of such personal information into central data banks represents by far the most serious threat to privacy in the coming decade," Professor Westin concluded.

He urged that data retrieval systems be designed to reject some information, such as sexual records and wiretap information and that other data be classified according to sensitivity.

Further, the computer information should be "scrambled" to prevent curious computer operators from obtaining print-outs of juicy personal information, he said. Computers should also be locked so that highly sensitive data can be obtained only if two or three officials requested it together, he said.

No computer can be made completely secure by mechanical means, he said, so legal and ethical policies must be developed to avoid indiscriminate use of computerized data.

He said that the law should

recognize that each person has a property right to information about his private personality, so that such data could not be used or kept by others without consent.

Small Devices Cited

Professor Westin reported that electronic eavesdropping by private individuals, businessmen and law enforcement officials had been accelerated by the availability of small, low-cost devices.

Some of these are so tiny that a person can unwittingly be made a "walking radio transmitter," he said, citing one electronic bug that can be built into the button of a suit coat and sewn onto the victim's clothing without his knowledge. Another bug can be mounted in the victim's false teeth, Professor Westin said.

He urged the enactment of laws forbidding electronic eavesdropping by private persons and local and Federal officials. However, Professor Westin conceded that there was a need for limited court-controlled wiretapping and bugging by state and Federal law enforcement officials—a position that is opposed by the Johnson Administration.

President Johnson has called for enactment of a law to prohibit all wiretapping and bugging except in national security cases and with the permission of the president.