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The Loss of Privacy

The technicians have it in their power to learn everything that anybody, anywhere knows about us—which is to say, virtually anything worth knowing.

And if it's true that anything that *can* be done sooner or later *will* be done, individual privacy will shortly be dead as a dodo.

For a good many of us, it may be dead already. NBC's Ford Rowan, in a recent series of television reports, told us that the files the military collected on demonstrators and dissenters, supposedly destroyed after their existence became known, in the late 60's were in fact copied and have been distributed to who-knows-how-many agencies.

And while what was copied and distributed may have been isolated bits of seemingly irrelevant data, government technicians also have it in their power to put it all together—to construct instant dossiers on, as Rowan put it, anyone who has ever paid taxes, used a credit card, driven a car, served in the military or been arrested.

What makes 1975 different from 1968, when the Congress was rejecting a proposal for a national data bank, or even last year, when Fednet—a plan to link up the computers of various federal agencies—was killed, is: Now it can be done. Quickly and easily.

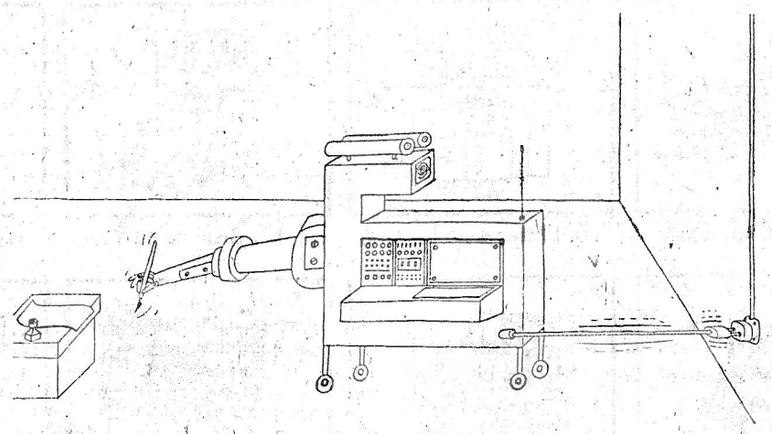
The key breakthrough is something called the interface message processor, or IMP. According to newsman Rowan:

"Different computers communicate in different computer languages. Before the IMP, it was enormously difficult, in many cases impossible, to link the various computers. The IMP, in effect, translates all computer messages into a common language; that makes it very, very easy to tie them into a network."

Rowan says such a network is in fact in operation, providing "the White House, the CIA and the Department of Defense with access to FBI and Treasury Department computer files on 5 million Americans."

Government officials deny the existence of the network. But if the technology exists, it's hard to believe that the network won't exist soon—if only in the name of efficiency.

One reason implementation will be close to irresistible is that too many of us won't see anything to get alarmed about. Some of us might even welcome the new efficiency.



By Maris Bishofs for The Washington Post

For instance, I have complained that no physician really knows me. I exist as a series of unconnected parts in the medical files of half a dozen specialists. One knows my insides, another my ears, nose and throat, another my left foot, another my eyes, and so on. Wouldn't it be nice to have one of these specialists assume the role of the general practitioner and put me all together? And if a computer would help him do that, is that so bad?

It would certainly be efficient. Just as it was efficient (until new legislation stopped them) for employers in Washington to send job applicants to police headquarters to obtain copies of their arrest records or a statement that they had none. It would have been even more efficient if the employer's computer could have been hooked up direct with the police department's (and with the former employer's and the government's too, for that matter).

Too much efficiency scares me. I recently had my driver's license renewed, and in place of the old serial number my new license identification is—what else?—my Social Security number. A lot of jurisdictions are going that way, I'm told.

I'm also told that a number of banks are using Social Security numbers to identify bank accounts. It's a safe bet that before long, they'll be using Social Security numbers for credit cards, employee identification numbers, and Lord knows what else, just as they already are doing with military service numbers. Bits and pieces of information. But hear Rowan:

"Setting up a computer network involving virtually any computer, government or private, is almost as easy as making a telephone call. Computers can be hooked together by phone. Once you know the codes for the computers involved, it's simply a matter of dialing in and getting the information you want.

"It doesn't take long. Modern computers copy information at the rate of thousands of pages in less than a second . . . Computers can be hooked together, your records collected in a matter of minutes, then the system can be disconnected, and there's no evidence left behind of what's happened."

And yet, knowing all that, millions of Americans will say: So what? Unless you're a crook, or have done something you're ashamed of, why should you care that computers can talk to each other?

The question presupposes that the information the computers have on us, without our knowledge, is accurate information. That's presupposing a lot.

But even if the data were accurate, clean and posed no threat of loss of reputation, isn't the loss of privacy itself something to get excited about?