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Protecting Privacy JUN 24 1974

The American capacity to collect and to store information about individuals and the American tendency to express ineffectual alarm at that development have grown enormously in the last decade and a half. Unfortunately, Congress's ability to develop legislation safeguarding the individual's right to privacy has lagged far behind computer technology. The nation is left with a vague sense that information monsters inevitably threaten to transform the society in which we live.

The threat is real. The size and the extent of the data banks and information systems now in existence serving Federal, state, local and private organizations are staggering. A survey done for the Senate Judiciary Committee shows that there are 858 Federal data banks operated by 54 agencies of Government. At least 29 of those are primarily concerned with collecting derogatory information on individuals.

The initiation of new information-keeping systems is rarely inhibited by concern over their potential for invasion of privacy because they are usually established as aids to achievement of some private or governmental goal which is deemed desirable in itself. The massive \$100-million FEDNET system now being planned by the General Services Administration is a case in point. G.S.A. views it simply as part of its responsibility to establish efficient and economical computer services for the Government. The threat to privacy was apparently a minimal part of the programming decision, if it was ever considered at all.

As Congress has stood by bemused at such developments, its legislative plate has begun to overflow. It now has before it general legislation on privacy, covering such issues as providing individuals with access to the information being held about them, giving them the right to review and correct that information, and developing rules limiting access to and dissemination of such stored information. In addition to general privacy legislation, a number of specific bills are pending, including measures to curb army surveillance of civilians, limit police "no knock" authority, enlarge the civil rights of Government employes, define student and parental rights to school information and more carefully limiting the uses to which criminal justice data bank information may be put.

Perhaps because of Watergate, these issues that have languished for so long are receiving strong bipartisan attention. This is a hopeful sign, for if this latest round of legislative activity is to be more than an exercise in futility, national concern will have to be sustained. Heretofore, Congress has exuded the sense that the privacy problem has been too complex to handle. If it doesn't act now, that soon may be the case.