

Checking Big Brother

By Tom Wicker

IN THE NATION

STOCKHOLM, May 16—If Richard Nixon lived in Sweden, the truth about his tax deductions and payments would have been known as soon as he filed his return. By tradition and law, just about every public document here is open to anyone who wants to see it, whether it concerns him or not. That is one reason why the Swedish Government is pushing ahead with a unique plan to control computer data banks.

The tapes, discs and other exotic equipment by which data can be stored in computers are now considered "documents" by Swedish courts. Computers, moreover, are as common as aquavit and almost as powerful in this country of skilled technology and vast social programs. Imagine what a godsend the computer revolution must have been to the health service agency that has to keep records on sick pay and other benefits for virtually every one of the 8.1 million Swedes. And since aggressive Swedish businessmen can get these "documents" from the Government just for the asking, private computer registers have proliferated, too.

Sweden and the computer were made for each other in another way—the personal number that every Swede acquires at birth and which thereafter identifies him on everything from signed dinner tabs to his most important transactions. These numbers make it a simple matter to cross reference any number of computer registers and compile a mass of detail on any Swede—in fact, on practically all Swedes.

Nobody seemed to be paying much attention until 1970—the year the national census was fully computerized and the Government announced that the taped records would be sold to anyone who wanted to buy. That created something of an uproar, just as proposals were being made in Parliament for the Big Brother of them all—a single national computer register to compile and keep updated all available data on every citizen. Parliament finally backed away from that one—although the computers were on order for \$1.5 million—and created, instead, a commission to look into the matter of personal registers and the threat to privacy.

The situation was already desperate. The mother of a newborn baby would find herself receiving, two or three days after the birth, a computer letter hailing the happy event and touting a brand of baby food. From the baby's personal number, the advertiser even knew whether a boy or a girl had been born. Similarly, lucky or shrewd taxpayers who got big refunds in a given year, promptly re-

ceived computer mailings suggesting how the money might well be spent for certain consumer goods. Such supernatural inside knowledge failed to amuse many Swedes, and frightened some others.

A bank combination called Sibol was even working on a scheme for a sort of "cashless society," which would tie shops to banks and banks to other banks through computers, eliminating money transactions as well as—so the banks expected—robbery. This scheme eventually fell apart of its own complexity, but it suggested whither affairs were trending in Sweden's otherwise civil and restrained society.

The best estimates today are that there may already be as many as 5,000 to 10,000 personal registers, public and private, in operation in Sweden. Some estimates run up to 50,000, taking into account, say, every businessman's payroll that may be handled by computer. That, of course, is a form of data register or data bank; so is a newspaper's circulation list, if it is stored in a computer. Most such registers, by themselves, are not a threat to anyone, or even a nuisance; but if all the data on them all were combined in a master register, no one can be sure what consequences might follow. The idea of privacy might well disappear.

Some of the Swedish registers already are massive, and not just those of the Government social agencies. The tax authority has a mass of data on every Swede's income and wealth. Direct mail advertisers can flood the country with a mailing or pinpoint widowers without dependents, or pubescent girls, or people with hearing problems or flat feet. Some officials worry that a foreign power could make shrewd use of a computer list of, say, returned military men with heavy divorce payments to make.

Last July, as the first result of the parliamentary committee's report, a Data Inspection Board was created. On July 1 of this year, it will assume sweeping powers over privately owned personal registers and strong advisory responsibilities to Government registers. The board will administer what is believed here to be the first national law governing the application of automatic data-processing to personal information.

This Swedish response to one of the most threatening by-products of exploding technology will be examined in another article. In some respects, it could provide a model for the commission headed by Gerald Ford that now is looking into the somewhat different American computer problem.