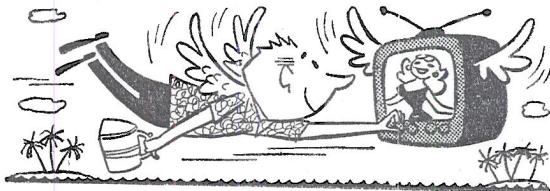


Terrence O'Flaherty



A Not-So-Private Eye Is on You

IT IS THE GREATEST horror story of our time, and you can see it on television tonight. It has no ghosts or were-wolves or dead vampires with stakes driven through their hearts. Instead it is the chilling story of the end of personal privacy for every American citizen and the creation of a powerful new secret police who may soon hold the keys to the most intimate secrets of every American family.

The program is "The Invasion of Privacy," (Channel 9 at 9 o'clock tonight with a rerun Saturday, October 14 at 7 p.m. Sacramento Channel 6; Redding Channel 9).

Everyone reading these words has a personal file of facts — some of them false — in any number of government agencies, credit bureaus and the private offices of insurance companies and banks. They have been obtained through private detectives, random questioning of neighbors, polygraph tests and gossip, as well as the usual questionnaires, applications, tax statements, and the prejudices of insensitive public employees.

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TONIGHT'S ENLIGHTENING TV REPORT is triggered by a Budget Department proposal that all of this information be pooled in one central source — the National Data Center, a computerized Rogue's Gallery where every citizen's private secrets are available at the push of a button (gossip, falsehoods and all) to anyone who has the proper political connections. Even now it is an Administration practice to trade such files between agencies and open them to outsiders for vicious misuse.

Tonight's program tells of a prototype of such a bank now being created in New Haven, Conn., by IBM with the enthusiastic approval of its mayor. In less than two years the private records of each of its 151,000 residents will be instantaneously available to "authorized officials." Philip Sterling, the show's narrator, observes that these officials could prove to be "the New Elite, the men who know everything about everybody in New Haven." The thought of a similar group in San Francisco's city hall staggers the mind.

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STERLING STATES THAT THERE is already a fund of documentary evidence in every county

clerk's office on any person who has ever lived in the area and you don't have to pose as a private detective or government agent to get copies of anyone's records from Army discharges to the purchase price on his home or lurid transcripts from his divorce proceedings.

Examples of the misuse of this information are cited as well as the infamous harassment inflicted by General Motors, on a private citizen who dared to question the safety of its cars.

An episode shows how one "private" organization, the Retail Credit Association, compiles information through its 8000 back-fence investigators. "They rely heavily on what neighbors have to say," states Sterling. "So your personal file with the credit company often is based on what they tell the investigator about you . . . and they ask questions about health, sex life and drinking habits with the detachment of a doctor giving a medical examination . . . Those who are questioned seldom ask for credentials and just fall all over one another to tell the stranger the latest gossip."

Sterling continues: "Then this collection of facts, hearsay and gossip is typed up and sent to the insurance company or merchant who has paid for it. Once your file has been started it is impossible to get rid of because there is an association of credit bureaus covering every inch of the U.S. — a giant network of private opinion and public information available to those who buy it with little safeguard to limit its ultimate use."

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A FINAL THOUGHT on the National Data Bank is voiced by a man who says that it may be built with the best of intentions and limitations but these may dissolve overnight and the information that was originally compiled for a different purpose may be used to determine who is loyal and who is disloyal . . .

Vance Packard once sounded this warning: "If Big Brother ever comes to the United States it's my own hunch that this may turn out to be, not a greedy power seeker, but a relentless bureaucrat obsessed with efficiency. He, more than a simple power seeker, could lead us to that ultimate of horrors — a humanity in chains of plastic tape."