

Do They Have a File

Arthur R. Miller is professor of law at the University of Michigan. His book "The Assault on Privacy — Computers, Data Banks, and Dossiers" will be published later this year.

By Arthur R. Miller
Times-Post Service

HAVE YOU applied for a credit card or life insurance, filed a tax return, traveled by airplane, rented a car, or stayed at a member of a national hotel chain recently?

Do you receive any governmental benefits such as Social Security or welfare payments? Are you a member of the American Civil Liberties Union, the Women's Strike for Peace or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People? Have you attended an antiwar meeting or demonstrated for increased benefits for the poor?

If the answer to at least one of these questions is "yes," then a dossier on you exists in somebody's data bank.

★ ★ ★

MOST AMERICANS are unaware of the extent to which governmental agencies and private companies are using computers and microfilm to collect, store, and exchange sensitive information about the activities of private citizens. These efforts typically go unnoticed because they are well intentioned and easily justified.

The law enforcement establishment claims file-building is necessary to fight organized crime and restore "law and order."

As to the information activities of credit grantors and insurance companies, which include considerable snooping into an individual's private life, it simply is good business to know as much as possible about a man before you lend him money or insure his life.

Potentially the most dangerous application of the new look in information collection is the Army's surveillance and storage of information on the lawful political activity of a wide range of groups and the preparation of "incident" reports and dossiers on individual citizens.

one in doubt as to what has actually been changed. The Army will continue to collect and distribute substantial quantities of data, albeit more discreetly.

Moreover:

- The existing data will not actually be destroyed — it will be turned over to the internal security division of the Justice Department.

- An entirely separate computer-aided data bank on civilian disturbances has been discovered at the counterintelligence analysis division at the Pentagon.

Work is continuing on a computerized master index of all investigation subjects, which will enable the quick assembling of an individual's files held by various Federal agencies.

★ ★ ★

THE SITUATION is made more ominous by the existence of an unregulated Secret Service computer containing dossiers on supposed "activists," "malcontents," and potential presidential assassins, as well as a data bank maintained by the Justice Department's civil disturbance group.

The U.S. Office of Education is supporting a migrant worker children data bank, the Department of Housing and Urban Development is sponsoring computerized municipal information systems and building files on housing loan applicants (with particular attention to those who are ineligible), and President Nixon's welfare reform proposal (the Family Assistance Act) will give the Department of Health, Education and Welfare authority to exchange individualized data with state welfare agencies. It would be foolish to ignore the ease with which each of these data stores could be made a part of the law enforcement and surveillance information flow.

★ ★ ★

AT PRESENT there are no effective restraints on these activities and no one is monitoring the mushrooming systems to in-