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Those Questionnaires Aren't Confidential

Chicago

Henry Gemmill, editor of the National Observer, is "stunned and angry" about what he calls "the invisible ink caper."

Gemmill has learned that his own newspaper and many other publications have been using "confidential questionnaires" coded with numbers in invisible ink. These could be used to identify the individual respondents.

The questionnaires, often sent to readers by research firms acting for the publications, may ask about such personal matters as income and drinking habits. Because the reader gives neither his name or address, he presumably answers with the assumption

that his anonymity will be protected.

Gemmill calls it "a piece of slick trickery."

His newspaper, the National Observer, is a respected weekly published by Dow Jones and Co. Inc., in Silver Springs, Md.

Other publications that told the Observer that they used the invisible coding technique include the Wall St. Journal and Barron's — plus the Reader's Digest, Time, Fortune, the Saturday Review, Scientific American and New York magazine. A Newsweek spokesman told the Observer that Newsweek had used invisible

coding until "we had a similar flap back in 1969."

U.S. News and World Report uses a visible printed code at the bottom of the last page of a questionnaire, the Observer said.

Speaking of invisible coding, a spokesman for Forbes Magazine told the Observer, "As far as I'm concerned, it's a fairly standard operating procedure."

A Business Week spokesman told the National Observer, "If you're smart, there are other ways of doing it."

The Observer found some of the other ways — printing the code under the flap of the return envelope, printing it under the postage stamp or cutting the

questionnaire paper in special ways to identify the person responding.

The purpose of the keyed mailing is to find out who had not answered the questionnaire so that a second mailing could be sent to them.

Questionnaires are often used by publications to provide information that is helpful to their advertising and circulation departments. The information may, for example, allow an advertising director to present a profile of a publication's readers to prospective advertisers.

The practice of invisible coding, which seems little known to the press and public, might have

remained obscure if an alert reader had not protested to Gemmill after receiving a questionnaire from the Observer.

James Weinman, a professor of optics at the University of Wisconsin, was in his laboratory one evening, thinking about the Observer questionnaire in his pocket "asked me an awful lot of questions." So "just for the heck of it" he exposed the questionnaire to ultraviolet light and saw "a four-cypher identification number stamped in invisible ink" in the upper lefthand corner of the form. He asked Gemmill for "a public explanation of these clandestine procedures."

Los Angeles Times