

NEWS & FEATURES

Info highway makes privacy unlikely Advancing technology fuels fear of totalitarian abuse

(CUP)

HAVE YOU EVER FILED A TAX RETURN? THEN you're in Revenue Canada's Taxpayer Master File. Applied for a passport? You're in the computer memory of External Affairs. Participated in a demonstration? You may be among the 54,000 countersubversion files in the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS).

Big Brother has arrived. And he's a microchip. From Statistics Canada to the Ministry of Human Resources, the estimated 2700 data banks of personal information run by 160 federal agencies contain approximately 12 dossiers on every Canadian man, woman, and child, raising the concerns that in the computer age, the individual's right to privacy has become a thing of the past.

"These files contain your address, telephone number, Social Insurance Number, where you work, how long you've been working there, how much you make, whether you're married or single, what charities you contribute to," said Shelley Jackson, Director of Public Affairs at the Privacy Commission in Ottawa. "If you start to look at the details contained in all the separate files, the government knows quite a bit about you."

Given that personal information has become a multibillion dollar global business, critics warn the right to privacy will be relegated to horse and buggy status on the coming superhighway.

"The next technology that we haven't got a hold of is the information superhighway, the convergence of all these systems," said Jackson. "The whole purpose of it is the transmission of information, and of course it will transport personal information. The problem is that it's going to be a shared network. Government has privacy legislation and business doesn't. It's basically a free-for-all."

Though the information highway is billed as a consumer's dream, its implications in terms of individual privacy are distinctly Orwellian.

"The main concerns are information manipulation, information being used for purposes about which you know nothing, or people assembling

profiles on you," said Jackson. "And because it's an electronic system, it's all done without your knowledge or consent."

One concern is the phenomenon of data matching, in which personal information in various two largest in Canada each possessing approximately 23 million files on Canadian citizens.

"The reports I have suggest credit bureau records are notoriously erroneous, cantoning incorrect information," said Foran. "This can lead to an inability to get a loan, a mortgage, a job. The possibilities in having an erroneous record, which is transferred to a number of other data bases, poses a risk for people."

Although the credit agencies guarantee the right of an individual to review his or her personal file, Foran identified two weaknesses in the system.

"The theory is that you can check the accuracy of the information on your file," he said. "But not a lot of people check their records, and if they do they would need an interpreter to decode their credit file. The other problem that occurs is that credit bureau information is information they've collected from other sources. They don't take any ownership responsibility for the records they keep."

Such "records" may range from comments on elementary school report cards to the reports of hired private investigators. But often, said Foran, we give up this information voluntarily.

"Look at a VISA application," he said. "You may not realize it, but you've signed a pretty broad waiver of any privacy rights. You've said to them, you can use this information for whatever purpose you want, and I can't control it. You have no idea what the uses and disclosures of such information are."

Another diligent record keeper is the RCMP, whose Canadian police Information Centre (CPIC) contains files on 10 per cent of the Canadian adult population. CPIC and its American counterpart, the NCIC system, have been criticized for recording

arrests as well as convictions, for occasionally omitting case developments (such as acquittals or dropped charges), and for not monitoring the further dissemination of the data they provide. In the case of Michael DuCross, a native Canadian, incorrect information on his computer file led to his wrongful arrest and detention in a U.S. Marine prison. He was released five months later after the error was discovered.

Police files also raise questions about trans-border data flow. Because of agreements with Interpol and the FBI (whose computer contains dossiers on eight million Americans, and is accessible to 64,000 police agencies nationally), detailed information on Canadian citizens is often transmitted internationally, thus falling outside of Canada's privacy jurisdictions.

Sizeable dossiers on individuals can also be accumulated by methods of surveillance. The National Security Agency in the US, for instance, has the computing ability to interpret and analyze 70 per cent of all the telephone, telex, data and radio transmission generated on the planet. The technological capabilities of the totalitarian government of George Orwell's 1984 are essentially already in effect.

ABUSING INFORMATION examination of privacy rights:

"The chilling effect of pervasive surveillance will inevitably destroy any society's capacity for dissent, non-conformity and heterodoxy. Subtract these elements from a libertarian democracy and you have totalitarianism."

A frightening picture was painted by George Fierheller, chairman of ITAC, an organization which recently held a conference in Toronto to discuss the ramifications of the information superhighway.

"The concerns are not as much about what is happening as about what may happen," he said. "When you run into huge computers, it opens up more and more possibilities for abuse."

Such abuse includes information being stolen, as in the 1986 theft of Revenue Canada microfiches, containing personal data on 17 million taxpayers; mishandled, as when the Canada Employment Centre in Sarnia Ont., mistakenly faxed detailed data on four individuals to the local newspaper; or studied, as in Sweden, where for 20 years sociologists examined 15,000 people without their consent, by probing government files.

Given these dangers, Fierheller says the handling of personal information should be guided by certain principles.

"People should be able to determine what information is there," he said. "Secondly, they should be able to check what is there, and thirdly there should be an ombudsman to go to if you think provisions to defeat them."


The Canadian situation is at least superior to that of the US, where the government possesses four billion files on citizens, and where 84 per cent of federal data banks have no legal mandate to collect the information in their possession. But, wrote Phillips, concerns about the efficacy of Canadian privacy protection remain.

"A society which casually accepts the existence of dossiers of unknown accuracy on millions of individuals, and with no right of access or correction, is a society which is recklessly indifferent to preserving that most basic privacy right: the right to some control over what others know about you. Yet this is the situation as it now stands."

The fear remains that with present computing abilities, the desires of business and government for personal information will go unchecked.

As the head of a New York City investigative firm said: "Privacy is an absolute myth. When you're born, the first thing they do is take a footprint and fill out a birth certificate. You go to a doctor, they keep medical records. You go to work, you buy a car or a house, there are more records. Your life is continuously open."

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