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# The 'Mysterious' Computer Will Not Abet Witch-Hunts

THE COMPUTER ranks with writing and the printing press as a major extension of the human brain. Like its forerunners, it also stands at the crux of a social crisis expressed in terms like "the death of privacy." The first written records must have evoked a reaction of superstitious awe and exultation similar to that now inspired by computer management of data.

If people today still have an exaggerated belief in what they see in print, they often place an even higher credibility on computer printouts. The data may be worthless or even intentionally manipulated, but so long as the machine remains so mysterious, its products will be improperly and uncritically judged simply for having come from a computer.

An unfortunate by-product of this aura of mystery is a tendency to make the computer a scapegoat for social ills that stem from human venality. In fact, no tangible evidence supports the fear that the processing of personal data by computers makes political witch-hunts more likely. The only help that Hitler could have had from computers would have been to reduce the administrative costs of butchery. It is our social and political traditions, and our system of freedom under law, that need our attention more than any particular piece of technology available to a government.

FOR EXAMPLE, Gov. Ronald Reagan has just vetoed a bill to extend the privilege of legal confidence to professions like marriage counseling and psychiatric social work. His grounds were that law enforcement in California might be impeded if, say, a marriage

counselor could refuse to testify in court about information he had received from his clients. Legal protection for the privacy of the most intimate communications deserves a much higher priority than the potential abuses of more efficient statistical services.

Many citizens harbor a barely conscious resentment of computer systems that make it harder to cheat on income tax returns. This resentment will not survive reflection on fair taxation in a democratic society. However, we do have real cause for concern about the extent to which our compulsory tax returns (computerized or not) can be made available to other investigative bodies without our knowledge and for purposes unrelated to tax administration. If there are social merits in an annual registration that goes beyond the collection of taxes, let this be freely and openly discussed—and let us

all know the rules of the game.

Meanwhile, the covert exchange of data on individuals has generated wide unease about the collection of vital statistical information for the census and other operations. This is in the face of the historical evidence that the Census Bureau has a spotless record in following its legal mandate of protecting the confidence of individual data even against strong pressures from other government agencies.

THESE TRADITIONS of the Census Bureau are the strongest assurance that the law of confidence will continue to be upheld despite the more dubious history of wiretapping and similar intrusions by other executive agencies.

One further step might be to remove the Bureau from the Executive Branch, where it is theoretically subject to presidential orders that are beyond the reach of the courts. The census could be delegated to a public corporation whose policies and practices in collecting, protecting and collating information could be governed by a law that would give individuals a standing they do not now have in potential grievances about abuse of privacy by the central government.

Such a corporation would also be governed by a board of private citizens who could give a unique assurance of integrity and impartiality in its operations. Within such a legal framework, we might justify the confidence of individual citizens in the degree of centralization of statistical data that we badly need for assessing and planning our complex society.