



Control of Unclassified Information

LAST 5 November the Secretary of Commerce announced the establishment of an Office of Strategic Information. The new office was created at the direction of the President and on the recommendation of the National Security Council. In his announcement, Secretary of Commerce Sinclair Weeks explained that

This office will provide a central location within the Government which will work with the business community in voluntary efforts to prevent unclassified strategic data from being made available to those foreign nations which might use such data in a manner harmful to the defense interests of the United States. . . . Such watchfulness would not take the form of censorship. It would instead be a matter of exercising intelligent, reasonable precaution to make sure that in the necessarily free exchange of scientific information we do not provide nations whose interests are inimical to our own with material which they could some day use against us.

Editors and publishers have in some cases accepted the new office with a "wait-and-see" attitude in order to allow time for the public announcement of operating policies and of classes of information to be affected. Such clarification has not yet appeared. Others have been quick to point out faults in the scheme, for it has reminded them unpleasantly of their censorship problems during World War II. At that time editors were at first required to submit for official clearance galley proofs of almost all unclassified technical articles. For lack of qualified people to evaluate these papers, this program was soon succeeded by a "voluntary" one that placed responsibility for publication on the editor. Since editors could, and did, get competent assistance from their editorial advisers, this second system was reasonably satisfactory.

However, in 1951, following a study by the Interdepartmental Committee on Internal Security, a committee of the National Security Council, a service was

established in the Department of Commerce's Office of Technical Service that was to provide a central organization to which businessmen, scientists, public officials, and private citizens might write for guidance on whether or not specific unclassified technologic information should be released. Applicants were under no obligation to follow the advice given. After an initial 100 to 150 inquiries, the number dwindled to only 10 to 12 a year—hardly a successful program! And yet, the new Office of Strategic Information seems to have objectives that are identical with those of the earlier agency.

The major critic of the Office of Strategic Information has been the Freedom of Information Committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Chairman J. R. Wiggins has pointed out that there is no definition of what information is both unclassified and of strategic importance; that the office constitutes a serious threat to the freedom of information; that Director Honaman's suggestion that important information could be withheld from general publication but given privately to the relatively small number of people to whom its possession would be valuable would open the way to flagrant discrimination in giving technical information to one industrial company and not to another; that guidance directives, whatever their legal force, will quickly acquire the practical force of regulations and rules; that no publisher will wish to deny requests for "cooperation"; that the project will lead to a "species of censorship of the most offensive kind."

Chief purpose of the office seems to be to screen technical and industrial know-how rather than basic scientific findings. Yet scientists will want to watch developments closely, as editors have been doing, because the types of information affected have not yet been described and because the adoption of the principle involved might serve as a precedent for enlarged efforts to control the publication of scientific and technical information.—D. W., B. P.

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