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Privacy

Science and technology have given man vastly enhanced powers to achieve socially desirable purposes, but the exercise of some options opens the way to dangerous abuses. A particularly worrisome development is the increasing use of science and technology in the invasion of privacy. The magnitude of the present problem and its future scope have been surveyed in a thoughtful volume* by Alan F. Westin, professor of public law and government at Columbia University.

The author begins by discussing the individual's basic need for a minimum of privacy. He links the human requirement to the well-known territorial behavior of many animals. He acknowledges the need for society to exert controls on individuals and groups. However, he points out that occasional privacy is essential to the health of individuals as well as to that of most organizations.

Many means for invading privacy are now available. These include new devices and techniques for physical surveillance, psychological surveillance, and data surveillance. These developments provide sophisticated help for the merely curious. They furnish technological assistance to modern peeping Toms. They can make life easier for a growing army of private detectives. The devices find wide application in business, both for legitimate surveillance and for industrial espionage. They are employed by many branches of government, sometimes in questionable ways. They provide governments with tools that one day may be used to bring about George Orwell's 1984.

Some of the techniques are old and familiar. They include wire-tapping and use of hidden microphones and cameras. These methods have been improved, however, as technology has advanced. Thus, solid-state electronics permits miniaturization. Microphones the size of a sugar cube (\$10) or the size of a pea (\$100) are available.

Photographic techniques also have been improved. Special screens can be installed in walls, which seem opaque to persons inside a room but permit an observer outside the room to see and photograph events within it. A more advanced method is to employ infrared light, in conjunction with appropriate panels and cameras. This permits photography in what appears to be total darkness. A possible future development is the use of computers to analyze telephone conversations. In principle, all such conversations could be monitored and recorded. Computers might be used to identify characteristics of a person's voice. Then the computer could search out all phone conversations in which that individual took part, even when the call originated from a pay station. In a day when so much of society's business is transacted by phone, a powerful tool for the invasion of privacy would be available.

The computer is a key to a related kind of invasion of privacy, in that it quickly makes available detailed information about a large number of individuals. All of us have filled out dozens of forms. What is new is the ability of a centralized bank of computers to store the massive amounts of data and quickly retrieve them.

The ultimate extent and consequences of erosion of privacy can be only dimly perceived. However, it is clearly desirable to seek technical and legal means of curtailing the use of what might otherwise become instruments for the destruction of our freedom.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

*A. F. Westin, *Privacy and Freedom* (Atheneum, New York, 1967).