

A third hazard inherent in the central data banks is that they will greatly increase the likelihood that the life chances of many citizens will be unfairly affected. A central file can absorb large batches of data about people but it is ill equipped to correct errors, allow for extenuating circumstances, or bring facts up to date. An acquaintance related to me his wrath when he discovered, quite by accident, that his local credit bureau, in a litigation report on him, listed him as having been the target of three lawsuits for failure to meet commitments. On the record he obviously was a person to beware.

The facts were that the first was a \$5 scare suit back in the 1930's over a magazine subscription he had never ordered. Nothing came of it. The second involved a disagreement over a \$200 lawyer's fee. It was later compromised amicably and withdrawn. The third involved a disagreement with a client over a fee he had charged, for services rendered. This was the only one of the three that actually got to court and he had won it. It took the man 2 days of digging to clear his record by proving to the bureau's filekeepers the disposition of the three suits.

Many employers including the Federal Government require a job applicant to note if he has ever been held by a law-enforcement agency for investigation. In recent years hundreds of thousands of citizens have been held momentarily for investigation and then released with no charges made. It is hard to explain to a computer feeder the innocent circumstances.

Even more serious in affecting one's life chances is the fact that the computer is incapable of making allowances for early errors or indiscretions. It has no capacity to recognize that people indeed often do change and become more responsible as they grow up. The son of a friend in a Midwestern city applied at several department stores in the area for a job when he was graduated from high school at the age of 18. He had recommendations from his minister, Scoutmaster, high school principal, and chief of police. But no store would even give his application serious consideration. It turned out that his name was in a central file maintained for the stores, possibly a computerized one, of known lawbreakers. Five years earlier, at the age of 13, the boy, while still figuratively in short pants, had been caught snitching \$2 worth of fishline from a store.

America's frontiers were largely settled by people seeking to make a fresh start. They were often seeking to get away from something unpleasant in their past, either painful episodes, misdemeanors, poverty, or oppression. Today with episodes of our past increasingly being recorded in central files and computers the possibility of the fresh start is becoming increasingly difficult. The Christian notion of the possibility of redemption is incomprehensible to the computer.

Finally there is the hazard of permitting so much power to rest in the hands of the people in a position to push computer buttons. When the details of our lives are fed into the central computer where they are instantly retrievable, we all to some extent fall under the control of the machine's managers. Public figures running for office in opposition to allies of the machine's managers possibly could be smeared with information from the computer at a point where there is inadequate time to set the record straight. In recent years we have seen at least one notable case in Washington where information from