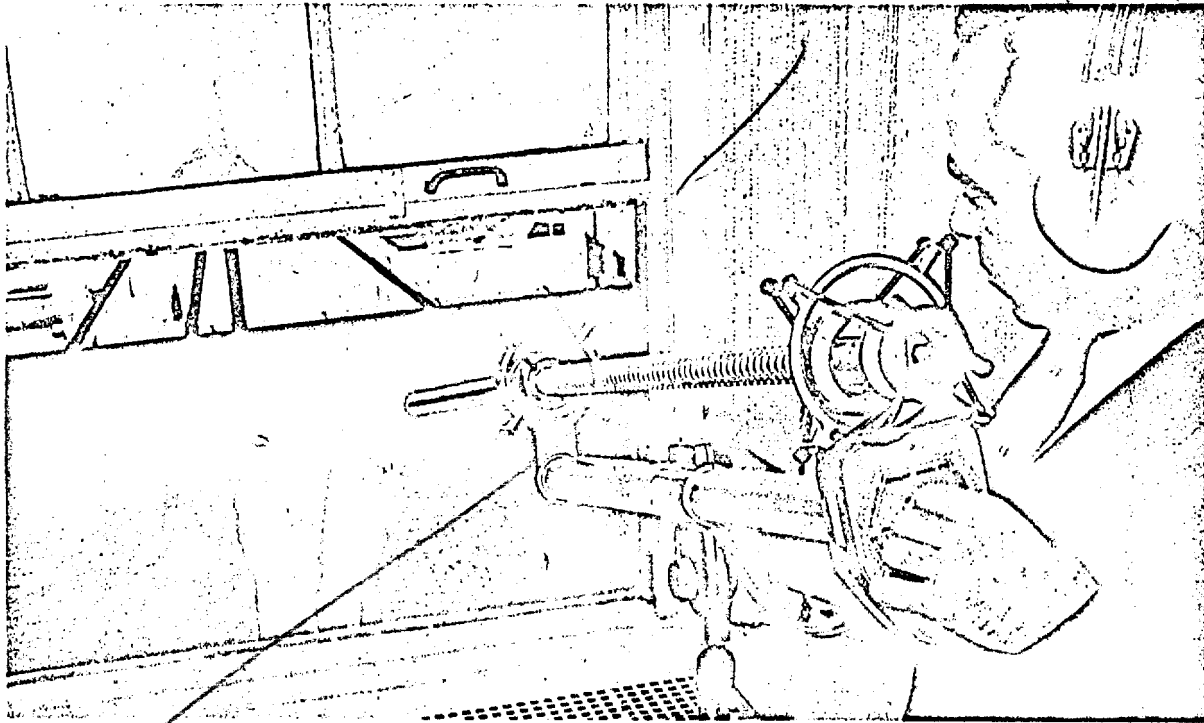


Wide World



Operator aims electronic-gun listening device at conversation in street below, picks up every word

NO SECRETS ANY MORE

Electronic gadgets have put everyone on stage, and privacy is becoming a rare luxury

BY THOMAS J. FLEMING

We are rapidly reaching the point where the company that hires a man knows too much about him," says E. A. Butler, one of America's foremost management consultants.

"The proliferation of snooping paraphernalia is increasingly placing the constitutional right of privacy of the individual citizen in peril," says Senator Edward V. Long of Missouri.

"The use of personality tests on job-seekers," says Thomas M. Garrett, S.J., of Scranton University, "poses a growing danger. Employers have no right to ask a man not merely to sell his labor, but the inner secrets of his being."

These three men are all worried about one thing: the terrifying loss of privacy in American life.

Sitting at home in your apartment or in your house, you may scoff: no one is invading my privacy. But as you loll in your assumed security, the neighbor next door may have, just for kicks, attached a small listening device to his side of your living room wall. Or if you are enjoying your suburban patio, another neighbor may be aiming a gadget called the "Big Ear" at

ing up every word you say from 500 feet away.

Either of these electronic snoopers can be obtained through the mail by any private citizen, for less than \$25. But let us assume your neighbors are not interested in you. Suppose, instead, you have applied for a job with a company that is security-conscious or believes devoutly in psychological testing, or both. There are three distinct threats to your privacy:

1. Private detectives may prowl your neighborhood, asking friends if they have ever seen you drunk, checking on your spending habits, asking the milkman and hairdresser if your wife is faithful, snapping telescopic-lens pictures of your whole family.

2. You will be invited to take a lie-detector test, in which you will have to dredge up and confess every petty dishonesty you ever committed.

3. Next may come a series of psychological tests which first assess your aptitudes, and then probe deeper, in search of personality problems. Depending on the vagaries and prejudices of the psychologist, you may

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introvert, a masochist, any of a hundred reputations wrecking terms — without a chance to defend yourself.

These tests are not reserved for executives. Would-be milkmen and clerks are taking them. Some 60 per cent of all American companies use them regularly. For the executive, of course, the prying is more intense. He must often submit to a face-to-face interview with the company psychologist, in which his sex life, his feelings about his wife, his political opinions are explored in detail. Meanwhile, more snoopers are asking former employers about him and interrogating his college and high-school teachers.

Wired washrooms

Once all these hurdles are cleared, can you relax and feel Big Brother is no longer watching? By no means. In company after company, and in almost every department of the government, electronic snooping is a favorite device of the insecure boss, who wants to find out who is "loyal." Offices are bugged, phones are tapped, even washrooms are wired for sound.

The bill for all this is an estimated one billion dollars a year.

The recent Senate investigation headed by Senator Long revealed that the Federal government was the largest single customer for electronic listening devices — and this did *not* include any equipment purchased by the CIA and FBI.

Long is especially perturbed by the growing sophistication of the bugging devices. Miniaturization has reached the point where microphones can be concealed by a tie clasp, cuff links, a fountain pen. One tiny electronic ear snuggles into the base of a standard office stapling machine. Even more alarming are gadgets that can be hidden in or near your phone.

A bugged hearing room

On the first day of his hearings, Senator Long dramatized the situation by hiring two private eyes, who bugged the hearing room. After a half hour of testimony, the witness opened his innocent-looking attaché case, pressed a button, and a concealed tape recorder played back everything that had been said.

Senator Long is worried about the possibility that our electronic ingenuity is moving us closer and closer to a 1984 police state. As a moral philosopher and author of "Ethics in Business," Father Garrett is concerned about the spiritual implications of privacy invasion. "We have tended to talk about privacy as a political right," Father Garrett says. "But it is also a natural right, something that flows from the nature of man. Take it away and you have violated a man's integrity."

One slip and you're through

Management consultant Butler is aroused in a more practical way. He is convinced that our mania for personal prying has reached a point of no return. "I have rarely met a creative executive, particularly in the sales end, who was not unconventional in some way."

"Today, if the company president finds out something a little out of the ordinary about a man during the pre-hiring investigation he won't hire him. Even if he's broadminded enough to give him a chance, knowing some secret of his new employee's private life makes the boss nervous and suspicious. If the man's job performance slips, for whatever reason, he is fired. I've seen more companies lose more men this way — good men they needed and really wanted to keep."

Another problem seldom considered by the higher-ups who read the reports is the reliability, not of the electronic devices, but of the human reporters.

Too many snoopers' reports are full of half-baked information. And under the present system, a vindictive neighbor or former business associate can drop a noose of vicious lies around your neck and you can only hope that the man reading the report will detect the odor of malice. In one study of such reports, one out of every four was derogatory in regard to a man's performance on a previous job — a grim indication of how often envy is substituted for truth.

All of these investigations — by private detective, electronic snoop and psychological tests — have one thing in common, and that is invasion of our privacy. Yet, there is an even greater danger to our civilization, aside from that posed to our civil liberties, the danger of the reduction of everyone and everything to mediocrity. Constant surveillance and psychological testing will inevitably tend to make people keep daring thoughts and ideas to themselves and stay in the safe, dull, middle of the road.

Down with daring

If this should happen, we would be turning our backs on some of our greatest industrial, technical and scientific geniuses, many of whom have been men with unorthodox opinions and ideas. No one really knows what makes a great executive, inventor or scientist, and the idea that investigation and invasion of privacy will find them certainly seems open to doubt. It's the imaginative individuals who can create new products, processes and technology.

The solution to the snooping plague must come from two directions. First, the federal government must pass laws limiting the sale and use of electronic bugs, lie detectors and similar privacy invaders to law-enforcement agencies. Even here, the courts must keep a watchful eye.

Second, businessmen must quit prying into the minds and pasts of their employees. They must realize the ultimate futility of this mania — and stop it voluntarily before damage to our national spirit becomes irreparable. (THE END)