

these goals are beyond the reach of public scrutiny. . . . When the basic decisions that set the priorities for science are in the hands of powerful institutions, to rest on a claim of moral neutrality is to surrender our moral autonomy to these institutions".

But what seems to bother many members of the society is, first, how can the society, or for that matter anybody else, determine what is eventually going to benefit man; and second, how can the APS pinpoint and reject those areas of science which are judged to be harmful? To be sure, much of the specific criticism has been directed at the part of the amendment which March now wants to delete, but a number of letters printed in the same issue of *Physics Today* were openly hostile to any amendment, even the watered down version which March now hopes to propose.

March, however, says that he is not asking for a self-righteous committee to sit in judgment over members of the society, but simply for moral questions to be given a full public airing. That, he says, "would help members to face the moral and social implications of their work, matters it is often more comfortable to ignore.

If all that March and his colleagues want is a full discussion of issues relating to social responsibility, then the executive committee of the society believes that it has already provided a platform for airing such issues. Last year, on its own initiative, the executive committee set up a forum on physics and society as a formal part of the APS, through which all sorts of social questions could be discussed. But the controversy which surrounded its debut at the spring meeting this year suggests that the executive committee is already regretting its decision to establish the forum, and attempting to clip its wings.

A series of discussions of the role of physics and physicists in the Vietnam War was arranged for the forum's debut. But not surprisingly all the papers turned out to be highly political criticisms of the war, and Dr Havens, who edits the *Bulletin* of the APS, decided not to publish their abstracts alongside abstracts of all the other papers delivered at the APS spring meeting. His reason, he said, was that the papers dealt with physicists and not with physics, and therefore fell outside the scope of the society's constitution. They did, however, fit in with the by-laws of the forum on physics and society, a contradiction which suggests that the forum itself is in an ambiguous position with regard to the society's constitution. March therefore argues that his amendment will "add further legitimacy to the efforts of the forum, by acknowledging that its activities are an integral part of the

goals of the American Physical Society".

Underlying some of the pressure for change in the APS is the feeling that its original aim—to promote interchange between physicists—is being fulfilled by other channels of communication. Few scientists save up their cherished results for presentation at a meeting of the society, for example. (That being the case, it is not surprising that the vast majority of the APS's 28,000 members are unaware of, or unconcerned with, the debate about the society's constitution, since they are primarily concerned with getting the APS publications.) One of March's chief points, however, is that the APS is still the main professional society for physicists, and he suggests that "most other professions with as much social impact as physics have long since publicly acknowledged their moral responsibility. Some have not. The Cosa Nostra, for example, piously claims ethical neutrality. I would prefer to see my profession in better company."

TECHNOLOGY

Computer Control

by our Washington Correspondent

THE widespread belief that the use of computers to store information about individuals in the United States is rapidly eroding civil liberties and prematurely ushering in the nightmare world of Orwell's *1984* is, according to a report published last week*, highly misleading. The thesis of the report, which was nearly four years in the making, is that potential abuses of privacy and civil liberties were inherent in record-keeping by government, corporations and law enforcement agencies before the advent of computers, and have been carried over into the computer age. Computerization *per se* has not greatly increased the potential for abuse, nor does it offer a means for safeguarding personal liberties—that is up to the courts and legislators.

Those conclusions do not, however, lead the authors of the study to recommend that no fresh safeguards are needed to protect privacy and civil liberties—far from it. The authors of the report, Alan F. Westin, professor of public law at Columbia University, and Michael A. Baker, instructor of sociology, Brooklyn College, City of New York, recommend that individuals should have more right of access to the information contained on files of all kinds, and that the collection of unnecessary personal data should be curbed. They see the onus for these reforms falling chiefly on the shoulders of legislators.

Given the widespread use of files and

personal data in all facets of American life, the rapid growth of the civil liberties movement in the 1950s and 1960s and the disenchantment among young people with authority and corporate power in the late 60s and 70s, it is not surprising that there is widespread distrust of computerized databanks in the United States. A national survey of college students conducted in 1971, for example, found that 83% of the respondents agreed with the statement that "people's privacy is being destroyed", and in the population as a whole, 62% of respondents in a survey last year said that they are "very" or "fairly" concerned about the information that some organizations are keeping about people in their files.

What steps can usefully be taken to safeguard civil liberties in the use of computerized databanks? The first thing to be said is, according to the authors, that "no single law, constitutional amendment, or court decision can cope with the tremendous diversity of issues and settings, and the uneven readiness for corrective action that make up the current databank problem". They therefore reject the much touted suggestion that supervisory agencies should be set up in each layer of American government to oversee the creation of all computerization of databanks to ensure that civil liberties will be safeguarded. There is no guarantee, they say, that such an institution would be any more sensitive to issues of privacy than existing government agencies or legislative committees.

Westin and Baker believe that a more constructive approach should give the citizen more information about the type of data that is held on government files, and that he should have access to most of the files to make sure that they are correct. They believe that all those files used for administrative purposes should be open for inspection and only those used for intelligence should be closed.

As for data sharing brought about by computerization, Westin and Baker suggest that only some credit reporting firms are making extensive use of the potential for interconnecting databanks. They note that extensive information sharing could have important implications for civil liberties, however, and emphasize that although large interconnecting databanks have not yet emerged, "we are not saying that central databanks within single organizations or as jurisdictionwide systems are technologically impossible, or that they will never be built". Overall, however, they see problems of privacy connected with databanks as sociological in origin rather than technological.

**Databanks in a Free Society*, by Alan F. Westin and Michael A. Baker. Quadrangle Books, \$12.50. Conducted under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences.