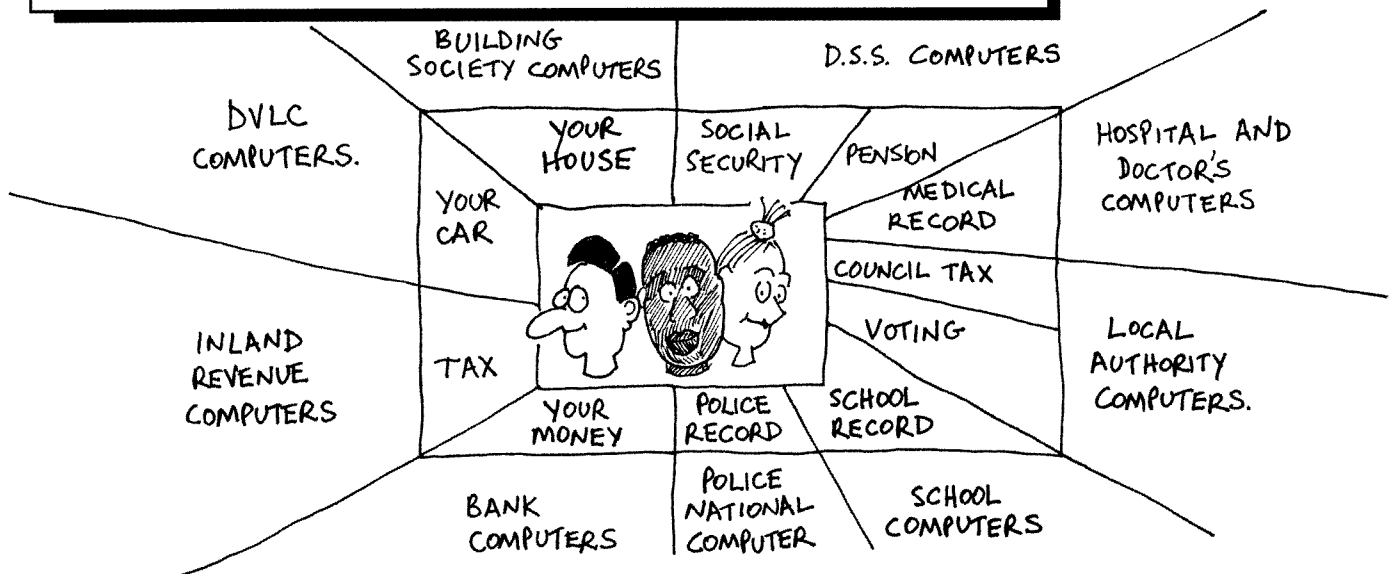


PERSONAL INFORMATION ON COMPUTER



Nowadays, many organisations store personal details about you and your family on their computers. This information includes such things as your date of birth, telephone number, address, income and health records. Doctors, hospitals, schools, the police, banks, gas, electricity and water companies, mail order firms and credit card organisations may all hold your details on computer. So do government departments such as the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Centre (DVLC), the Inland Revenue and the Department of Social Security.

This has both advantages and disadvantages. If your car was stolen the police computer system would call up details about the vehicle such as the make, model, year, engine and chassis number. This information would help the police to track it down and return it to you. However, you would not want these details passed on to companies selling new cars, car insurance and breakdown services. They might now pester you with 'phone calls and advertising letters called "junk mail" which you do not want to receive. This can happen. When you buy goods or subscribe to a magazine your name and address often goes on to a computer file. Lists of these names and addresses are then sold to other companies so that they can send you junk mail or try to sell you products over the 'phone.

Worse still, the information about you which is on computer may not be correct. Sometimes a person is muddled up with someone else. As a result, individuals have been wrongly accused of stealing their own cars or refused loans because they were incorrectly thought to be unlikely to repay the money. There is also the risk that a computer "hacker" may break into the system and find out personal details which you would rather keep private.

Laws have been passed to deal with these problems. The Data Protection Act of 1984 appointed someone called the Data Protection Registrar to regulate these matters. All organisations that hold information about you on computer must tell the Registrar what this information is and what they are using it for. This officer tries to make sure that this information is correct and is not passed on to others. In 1990 the Computer Misuse Act was passed which made hacking illegal.

Exercises

- Write a list of personal details that may be stored by organisations on their computers.
- Name 3 government departments which often hold information about individuals on computer.
- What did the 1984 Data Protection Act and the 1990 Computer Misuse Acts do?
- Explain what these words mean: junk mail, computer hacker.
- Describe the problems that can result from incorrect information about us being stored on computer.
- How do companies that want to send you junk mail get hold of your name and address?
- What advantage, mentioned in the passage, is there in all this personal information on computers? Can you think of any other advantages? Clues: speed, telephone shopping etc.
- Copy the diagram. Consider which of the organisations might have links between them e.g. the police often need to check a vehicle registration number so they have access to the DVLC computer.
- Do you think that this personal information should be stored by all these organisations? Write a letter to a newspaper stating your point of view.

