

SOCIAL-SECURITY-NUMBERS

And other telling information: _____

Do NOT write in this space

- 1) _____
- 2) _____

BY SIMSON GARFINKEL

Signature _____

Date _____

MEG POWERS is a victim of credit fraud. It all started one day when Powers got a telephone call from a jewelry store saying that somebody with her name and her social security number had applied for a store credit card. The store had rejected the application because the address and telephone number on the credit application didn't match those on the credit report they had obtained.

A second store wasn't as thorough and let the woman claiming to be Meg Powers open an account and purchase \$1500 worth of jewelry. The store said that "as long as you get a good credit rating" . . . they don't verify all the information on the credit form," the real Meg Powers reported.

A few weeks later, Powers received in the mail a charge card for Bailey, Banks, and Biddle, what she describes as "a very, very elite jewelry store." Apparently the woman had tried to get another charge plate: fortunately Bailey, Banks, and Biddle had sent the credit card to the address on Powers' credit report, rather than the address on the credit application. As a result of the experience, Powers had to take a day off from work, check with the Department of Motor Vehicles to make sure that nobody had requested a duplicate driver's license in her name, and spend several nights writing letters. Six months later, with copies of police reports, an affidavit from her lawyer, and more than a dozen letters exchanged between her and TRW, one of the nation's largest consumer reporting companies, Meg Powers' credit report still tells of the \$1,500 debt to the second jewelry store. The whole thing happened, Powers now believes, because another woman living in the same city discovered Powers' name and social security number and decided to use them as her

own. "It's a nightmare that I wish I could forget," Powers says.

Millions of people throughout the country place themselves at risk for similar problems every day by writing their social security number on most checks they pass at retail stores. Merchants nearly always require that a credit card number and driver's license number be written on the check. In most states, a person's driver's license number is their SSN.

The Social Security number is rapidly becoming a de facto national identification number. Credit records are indexed by SSN; some banks and credit unions even use it as an individual's account number. Many universities use it for both student and faculty ID numbers, and many health plans use it to identify their subscribers.

At first, it might seem convenient to have a single number for all of a person's disparate records. One number means just one thing that has to be memorized — a boon in this world, where we are constantly being asked to provide strings of digits for everything from making long-distance telephone calls to getting money out of bank machines.

The danger is that instead of using Social Security numbers as identifiers (or in the place of people's names), businesses in this country are increasingly using them for identification — or proof of identity. Banks, credit-card companies, insurance firms, and healthcare organizations will frequently divulge reams of "confidential" information over the telephone to any voice that speaks a name and Social Security number. If you know somebody's Social Security number, you can effectively invade their privacy or make their life very difficult.

There's a mild level of paranoia being advocated here that once would have put me off but, now that computers have become so cozy, seems like admirable prudence. Simson Garfinkel is a freelance science writer with several degrees in science from MIT, who did his master's thesis in journalism on computerized tenant blacklisting by landlords.

—Kevin Kelly

It is relatively easy to find out a person's Social Security number. Many businesses contract with credit-reporting agencies that can look up a person's SSN given only that person's name and town of residence. Some reporting firms claim up to an 82-percent "hit rate." In 28 states a person's social security number is frequently or always a part of their driver's license; the records of the Department of Motor Vehicles are public, and in most states an individual can be looked up for less than five dollars.

The first, most obvious thing to do with a person's Social Security number is to get their credit history, which can contain information on their bank accounts, credit cards, bankruptcies, and other kinds of information.

"It bothers me that credit reports are being sold by businesses and persons who don't give a damn about the legality of their doing so," says E. A. Fleming, President of Super Bureau, a Californian consumer-reporting firm. "It also bothers me that the right connection can secure personal banking information, unlisted telephone numbers, medical records and numerous other personal records."

Indeed, Fleming's company has access to all kinds of information about consumers, including address verification, driver records, judgment records,

change-of-address files, names of neighbors, property records, returned-check registration, Social Security number tracing, telephone number tracing, vehicle records and Californian voter-registration information.

Although the ability to perform a credit check used to be the province of credit-card companies and department stores with their own charge cards, this increasingly competitive industry is now marketing its consumer reports to small businesses and even individuals who extend credit, such as landlords.

Practically anybody with a computer modem and \$498 can sign up with the National Credit Information Network, Inc., in Cincinnati, Ohio, which allows instant access to more than 200 million on-line consumer credit reports, as well as driver's license records from 49 states, and a nationwide telephone and address directory that includes unlisted telephone numbers.

When Michael Grant, a computer specialist in Washington, D.C., decided to purchase a new car, he refused to provide the dealer with his Social Security number because he was paying for the car in cash and felt the information wasn't necessary. Withholding his SSN didn't matter: when Grant visited the dealer to close the sale, he was shown a faxed printout listing all of his credit cards, with

Decoding the Social Security Number

THE FIRST THREE DIGITS of a person's Social Security Number indicate the state that the person was living in at the time that the number was assigned (see table). The exceptions to this rule are numbers in the 700-729 range, which were issued by the Railroad Retirement agency, the only such retirement plan to have its own block of SSNs.

The fourth and fifth digits indicate the group number. The sequence is reported to be odd numbers from 01-09, then even numbers from 10-98, then even numbers 02-08, and finally odd numbers 11-99. All numbers issued before 1965 are either odd numbers between 01 and 09, or even numbers between 10 and 98. The last four digits are the "serial number," and run from 0001 to 9999. The last digit of the Canadian Social Insurance Number (their equivalent of our SSN) is a check digit, determined by a mathematical function applied to the first eight digits. This check digit

001-003 New Hampshire	318-361 Illinois	520 Wyoming
004-007 Maine	362-386 Michigan	521-524 Colorado
008-009 Vermont	387-399 Wisconsin	525 New Mexico
010-034 Massachusetts	400-407 Kentucky	585 New Mexico
035-039 Rhode Island	408-415 Tennessee	526-527 Arizona
040-049 Connecticut	416-424 Alabama	528-529 Utah
050-134 New York	425-428 Mississippi	530 Nevada
135-158 New Jersey	587-588 Mississippi	531-539 Washington
159-211 Pennsylvania	429-432 Arkansas	540-544 Oregon
212-220 Maryland	433-439 Louisiana	545-573 California
221-222 Delaware	440-448 Oklahoma	574 Alaska
223-231 Virginia	449-467 Texas	575-576 Hawaii
232-236 West Virginia	468-477 Minnesota	577-579 Washington, DC
232 N. Carolina ¹	478-485 Iowa	580 Virgin Islands
237-246 N. Carolina	486-500 Missouri	580-584 Puerto Rico
247-251 S. Carolina	501-502 N. Dakota	586 Guam
252-260 Georgia	503-504 S. Dakota	586 American Samoa
261-267 Florida	505-508 Nebraska	586 Philippine Islands
589-595 Florida	509-515 Kansas	700-729 Railroad Retirement
268-302 Ohio	516-517 Montana	
303-317 Indiana	518-519 Idaho	

¹Number 232, with middle digits 30, has been allocated to North Carolina from West Virginia.

is primarily designed to detect clerical errors such as transposing two digits or mistaking a "5" for a "6." The American SSN has no such check provisions, and it is for this reason that many observers of

the issue of privacy (and at least one federal commission) have declared that the SSN would make a bad choice for a standard universal identifying number in this country.

their individual limits; at the top of the page was his SSN. "I thought it was pretty interesting that he got all that info on just my name and address," Grant said.

In California, Great Western Savings and Loan allows its customers to telephone the bank's computer and gain access to all sorts of account information, including balances, deposits and checks, by merely entering a person's account number and the first five digits of their SSN.

Many local credit bureaus now offer two services, called Atlas and Trace, which together can provide a person's address and the names of up to five neighbors, all from a name or telephone number. "Basically, what they are doing is taking all this information from credit applications and mailing lists," explains Glen Roberts, who publishes *Full Disclosure*, a newspaper about police activity and citizen's rights. "They are restricted by the Fair Credit Reporting Act from giving out credit information, but they are not restricted from giving out other information, such as telephone numbers and addresses." Roberts says he intends to use such services to verify the identity of people who telephone his newspaper with tips.

Indeed, data banks of personal information, indexed by Social Security number, are increasingly being used for things that have nothing to do with credit or finances — and thus are not covered by what protection the Fair Credit Reporting Act provides (see sidebar).

The Industrial Foundation of America maintains a list of over one million workers, primarily in the South, who have filed Worker's Compensation claims or been injured on the job. For a few dollars, an employer can check a prospective employee against IFA's database. Effectively, the database is a blacklist that keeps workers who have filed claims from finding future employment.

There are now more than a dozen companies who are doing the same thing for landlords. One of the largest, the U.D. Registry, in Van Nuys, CA, has over 2 million tenant records on file, information gleaned from housing-court records and provided by irate landlords. For less than \$15, UDR reports to any landlord any eviction proceedings, or statements from former landlords against a given tenant. The effect of UDR has been to blacklist tenants who attempt to exercise their rights; a lawsuit attacking UDR has been pending in California courts for more than two years.

UDR's clients control 90 percent of the rental market in southern California, and the company performs over 250,000 searches per year, according to Harvey Saltz, the company's owner. Saltz says he lets tenants place statements in their files explaining "their side" of the story, but many of UDR's victims aren't even aware of the company's existence. Indeed, some

of UDR's most-publicized victims have been people who just happened to match "bad tenants" with similar-sounding names that were in UDR's database.

The Registry, another tenant screening service, has a database of a million records for the Washington, D.C. area. Other services operate in Arizona, Colorado, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Texas and Washington. RentCheck, a division of TeleCheck, has files on renters across the country.

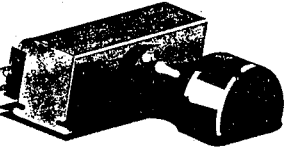
Knowing a person's Social Security number gives you control over their life. Since credit-reporting agencies monitor failed applications, simply by filing a spate of bogus credit card applications using that person's name and SSN will make it very difficult for that person to obtain credit in the future. In the event that the credit applications are accepted, you now have a credit card in somebody else's name, which will destroy their credit rating if you use it and do not pay the bill. The Internal Revenue Service will send your refund to anybody who sends in your tax return with your name and your Social Security number. In 1977, an imprisoned felon who was assigned the task of sorting discarded military uniforms took advantage of this fact, and diverted more than 200 refund checks to addresses of his choosing. (The uniforms were labeled with the officers' names and military identification number, which since 1967 have been Social Security numbers, according to *The Privacy Journal*, a newsletter which follows such exploits.)

In another case, a woman in Philadelphia got a letter from the IRS saying that she owed \$6,000 in taxes, interest and penalties for an inheritance she had received. The inheritance had actually gone to somebody else who had made up a random Social Security number to avoid paying taxes. "After about six months of hassle, to say the least, she finally convinced the IRS that she did not inherit anything. She was able to do this only because the name did not match the SSN, and the address was in New York instead of her actual address near Philadelphia," says a person familiar with the case.

In California, Florida and New York it is common for illegal aliens to provide made up Social Security numbers when they seek employment. The scrambled earnings records promise to create a nightmare for the number's rightful owner, but sometimes problems show up long before retirement: there is at least one documented case of a woman's unemployment compensation claim being rejected because somebody else was already collecting unemployment on her SSN.

Many companies — utility companies, in particular — will accept knowledge of a person's Social Security number as proof of identity. In Denver, Colorado, a person whose driver's license was stolen received a bill several months later for \$400 worth

REJECTED



Fair Credit Reporting

If you've ever applied for a charge account, a personal loan, insurance, or a job, someone is probably keeping a file on you. This file might contain information on how you pay your bills, or whether you've been sued, arrested, or have filed for bankruptcy.

The companies that gather and sell this information are called "Consumer Reporting Agencies," or "CRAs." The most common type of CRA is the credit bureau. The information sold by CRAs to creditors, employers, insurers, and other businesses is called a "consumer report." This generally contains information about where you work and live and about your bill-paying habits.

In 1970, Congress passed the Fair Credit Reporting Act to give consumers specific rights in dealing with CRAs. The Act protects you by requiring credit bureaus to furnish correct and complete information to businesses to use in evaluating your applications for credit, insurance, or a job.

The Federal Trade Commission enforces the Fair Credit Reporting Act. Here are answers to some questions about consumer reports and CRAs:

How do I locate the CRA that has my file?
If your application was denied because of information supplied by a CRA, that agency's name and address must be supplied to you by the company you applied to. Otherwise, you can find the CRA has your file by calling those listed in the Yellow Pages under "credit" or "credit rating and report." Since more than one CRA may have a file about you, call each one listed until you locate all agencies maintaining this report.

Do I have the right to see my file?
Yes, if you request it in writing. In most cases, you can have a copy of your report, although you may be charged a fee for this information.

What can I do if I find an error in my report?
Notify the CRA in writing within 30 days of the date you received the report. The CRA must investigate and correct any errors.

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FED

In 1970 the U.S. Congress passed the Fair Credit Reporting Act, which gave consumers a number of specific rights when dealing with consumer reporting agencies. Key points of the FCRA include these:

- The consumer has a right to know of the existence of any personal files.
- The right to be told the file's contents and the source of the information.
- The right to be told who has received a consumer report within the past six months.
- If the consumer disagrees with any information in the file, he or she may force the consumer report-

ing agency to reinvestigate any information in the file.

- If disagreements remain, the consumer may insert a 100-word statement in the file, which must be reported by the reporting agency along with the rest of the file's information.

Under the FCRA, credit reports can be requested without permission of the person under scrutiny, provided that the request arises out of a credit transaction, a job application, or one for insurance, for a license, or for a "legitimate business need."

The Federal Trade Commission has the responsibility for enforcing the FCRA. The FTC will advise a consumer if it thinks the FCRA has been violated, but it won't take on a case against a credit agency unless it suspects a systematic violation of the law. Basically, says David Grimes, a staff attorney at the FTC, the act gives the consumer the right to sue for violations; the successful outcome of a suit could include attorney's fees, court costs, and punitive damages. Complaints against businesses or questions concerning the FCRA can be sent to the Federal Trade Commission, Washington, D.C. 20580.

Names, addresses and numbers

Super Bureau: 2100 S. Bascom Ave, Suite 5/P. O. Box 368, Campbell, CA 95009; 408-372/6169, 800/541-6821.

National Credit Information Network: 7721 Hamilton Avenue, Cincinnati, OH 45231; 800/242-6246.

The UD Registry: Van Nuys, CA; 213/873-5014.

The Privacy Journal is a monthly newsletter that follows issues of privacy in the computer age. Annual subscription is \$98 per year, although student rates are available.

The Privacy Journal also has published a number of special reports, including *Privacy: How to Protect What's Left of it*, a 338-page paperback with specific guidance for citizens (\$7).

The Privacy Journal: P. O. Box 15300, Washington, DC 20003; 202/547-2865.

of utility payments, according to Glen Roberts. The thief had used the stolen SSN to obtain service and, when the bills went unpaid, the utility company had traced the name and the number to find another address to send the bill.

Imagine a clerk at a record store who has had his telephone disconnected for non-payment of bills. All he needs to do is copy the name and SSN from one of the numerous checks that he collects during the day, and he can tell the telephone company that a new person has moved into the apartment. In Massachusetts — as in most other states — a person's name and SSN constitute the only information that the telephone company wants when establishing new service.

Many universities now have computerized registration processes. It's hailed as a boon that lets students dial a telephone number and punch in their SSN and the courses they want to add or drop, all without human intervention. A student whose SSN is public knowledge (perhaps because she passed a check in the student union and somebody works there who doesn't like her) might discover the last day of the semester that all of her courses had been dropped.

INFORMATION collected for one purpose is frequently used for another. Nevertheless, laws proposed to outlaw the use of information for purposes other than which it was provided have never been passed. All indications are that such laws would be unenforceable. Database marketing is currently a \$50-billion-a-year industry, with over 20,000 firms in the business, according to a recent article in *U.S. News & World Report*.

To make matters worse, information that is wrong or misleading is often repeated, reinforced and sold from vendor to vendor. Even if the original mistake is tracked down and corrected, it can be nearly impossible to find all the copies — and to persuade the new "owners" of the information to change their records.

The laws and regulatory environment have simply not kept pace with the computer revolution. Information that has traditionally been open to the public — such as eviction filings — takes on a new power when it is gathered in one place and marketed to a specific group of individuals, such as landlords. The Fair Credit Reporting Act was written in a day when consumer reporting agencies were few in number and easily policed: how can its terms be

enforced when credit reports are available to any individual with a personal computer?

Furthermore, it no longer takes a million-dollar computer to run a consumer reporting agency. Landlord Credit Data Services, a Rhode Island tenant-screening service, has a tabletop computer costing less than \$20,000 with the names of every person in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut whose name has appeared in a newspaper in connection with a violent crime. Although newspaper accounts are frequently incomplete or inaccurate, no law on any book regulates how LCDS may distribute its information.

What You Can Do

For starters, you don't have to give your Social Security number to everybody who asks you for it. Although certain government agencies are empowered by law to demand your SSN, they are required to state the specific law that grants them that power when they ask you for your number. Private businesses may ask you for your SSN but they cannot legally compel you to provide the number (although, as the Social Security Administration says, private firms are not required to do business with you, either.)

The one exception to this rule is in Virginia, where it is unlawful for businesses to require their customers to provide Social Security numbers or to refuse service if the number is not provided, although the impact of this law is lessened by the fact that Virginians' Social Security numbers appear on their driver's licenses.

Although an employer needs to know your Social Security number in order to pay you, you should be suspicious of employers who ask your SSN before you have started working for them. (It should be noted, however, that credit reporting companies are increasingly marketing their services to employers for pre-employment screening.)

Here are a few simple steps that most people can take to protect their privacy and limit their risks of fraud and harassment:

1. *Keep your social security number off your driver's license if possible.* Several states do not give you a choice about this. In the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Mississippi, Nevada and Virginia, a person's Social Security number is the same as their driver's license number. Further, in Alabama, Indiana, Missouri, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Dakota, West Virginia and Wyoming, the SSN is included on the driver's license in

addition to the driver's license number.

In the other states and Puerto Rico, however, the SSN is either optional or does not appear — although some of these other states will happily use your SSN as your driver's license number if you provide it.

In Massachusetts, for example, people have the choice of having their license number be their SSN or a state-assigned "S" number. Although many people in the state do not exercise this option (many don't know about it), an estimated 15 percent of the drivers in the state do. "Basically, people don't want their private information easily available . . . when you are paying with a check," says Diane Turner, a spokeswoman for the Massachusetts Department of Motor Vehicles.

2. *Request a statement of your earnings from the Social Security Administration every three years.* Misfiled or misreported earnings can be corrected up to three years, three months and fifteen days after the mistake is made, saving you lots of trouble at retirement. Furthermore, getting an earnings statement tells you if somebody else is reporting earnings under your SSN.

To get your statement, you need to fill out a "Request For Earnings and Benefit Estimate Statement" card, which can be ordered by telephone from the Social Security Administration's toll free number, 800-234-5772.

3. *If you are rejected for credit, an apartment, a job or insurance because of a credit report, get a copy of that report. If there is invalid information on it, correct it.*

If you have been denied credit within the last 30 days, the credit reporting agency is obligated under the FCRA to provide you with a copy of your credit report for free. Otherwise, you will be required to pay \$15 for the report. (Three states set the fee lower by law: The credit report costs Maryland residents only \$5; \$8 for California, and \$10 in Connecticut.) The report will include the names of all the businesses that have asked for your report within the past two years and the reason they gave for looking at your file.

Since different consumer reporting agencies keep their own files, you may wish to check with several of them. Two of the largest are TRW (which recently acquired Chilton) and Equifax (formerly Credit Bureau Inc., or CBI.) Their addresses are:

TRW: P. O. Box 5450, Orange, CA 92667;
714/991-5100.

Equifax: 5505 Peachtree Dunwoody, suite 600,
Atlanta, GA 30358; 404/252-1134.

If you disagree with anything in your report, the FCRA requires that the credit bureau reinvestigate the facts in dispute. If there is still disagreement after the bureau reinvestigates, you have the right to

insert a statement in your report with your version of the story.

For three years, TRW has been marketing a service that sends consumers a monthly statement of all the businesses that have asked for their credit reports. Called "Credentials," this \$35-per-year service also gives individuals access to their own credit report without the \$15 charge. According to Jennifer Neu, a TRW spokeswoman, more than 500,000 people have signed up for this service. However, since Credentials gives a consumer no more access to their files than they have under the FCRA, the only reason that a person should subscribe to this service is if they anticipate asking for their credit reports more than twice per year. Make use of your rights: they are your best protection.

4. *Be cagey with your Social Security number.* While some people, like banks and employers, have a legitimate reason to know your SSN, many other businesses that ask for it haven't. Agencies that collect blood often ask for SSNs from donors, although blood is almost always accepted even if the SSN is not provided. Since blood in this country is screened for HIV and other diseases, the possibility exists that the SSNs of pints that test positive (either rightly or due to false positives) may turn up in databases, either legitimate or clandestine ones.

"Many police departments sponsor burglary-prevention programs by which citizens may label their belongings. Virtually all police departments advise citizens to use their Social Security numbers as identifiers, even though house burglars are precisely the persons one would not want to have one's SSN," writes Robert Smith in *The Privacy Journal's Report on the Collection and Use of Social Security Numbers* (sidebar, preceding page).

A record store in Rockville, Maryland, had a raffle for free tickets to a movie. In addition to asking for people's name and address, the entry form asked for their SSN. Likewise, some hotel chains ask for SSNs, presumably to track customers and remember their preferences for special services.

5. *Lastly, request that companies not use your SSN for account numbers, and when asked for SSN, leave the request blank, if at all possible.* When my health-insurance company assigned me my SSN as my account number, I asked them to change it, and they did. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, entering students are given the choice of having either their SSN or a randomly assigned number as their student ID. Every organization that uses a different number to keep track of you makes it that much harder for somebody else to use those numbers to gain access to your files or otherwise complicate your life. ■

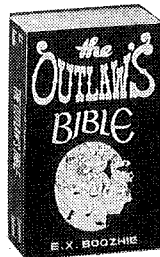
The Outlaw's Bible

It doesn't take a paranoid personality to see that our freedoms are being nibbled away little by little. What happens when YOU are the nibbled-upon? Hey, you're too pious and upright a citizen to be in that position, right? Never been searched at the border? Never been audited? Never had a traffic ticket? Of course not. But for the non-angels among us, this "jailhouse lawyer" manual can be a handy reference and eye-opener. Even discounting the author's adversarial tone, it's clear that things are not quite as tidy as they seem. Interesting, tasty, and scary. —J. Baldwin

The Outlaw's Bible

E. X. Boozhie, 1988; 323 pp.

\$14.95 (\$17.95 postpaid) from Loompanics Unlimited, P. O. Box 1197, Port Townsend, WA 98368 (or Whole Earth Access).



• Avoid evoking attention or suspicion in general. For example:

1. *Don't be a walking social statement.* If you're proud to be a member of some special interest or minority group, that's terrific, but leave the costume, song and dance at home. Bikers, cholos, players, gays, nazis, and other such groups all have outspoken enemies who occasionally want to start something. Ordinary, dull, everyday people have no such problems. Look ordinary, and do yourself a favor.

• *Don't talk to police.* In the words of Justice Jackson, "any lawyer worth his salt will tell the suspect in no uncertain terms to make no statement to police under any circumstances." Be rude, if necessary. Let them think whatever they want, but no matter what they do or say, don't provide them with your words; they'll find a way to use them against you. The kinds of volunteered statements which must especially be guarded against include:

- pleasantries and chit-chat.
- admissions of one's knowledge about facts in a crime.
- admissions of one's awareness of his rights and responsibilities.

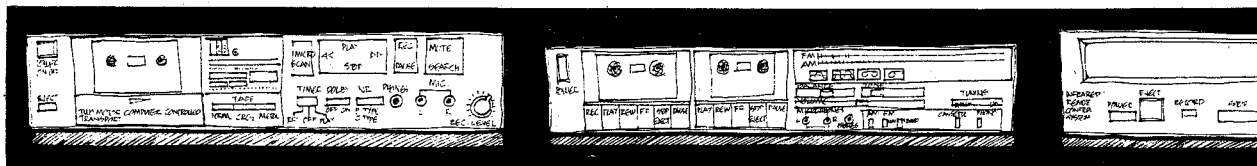
d. remarks which are prompted by ego or emotion.

• You should have legal counsel if you're subpoenaed as a witness before a grand jury, even though you aren't charged with anything. There's a good possibility that you soon might be.

• The easiest way for the police to break through a citizen's expectation of privacy is to get his consent. Once he invites them into his home, his car, or his pockets, he has given them carte blanche to use whatever they may find against him. Once he willingly goes along with them he has voluntarily placed himself under arrest and relieved them of the burden of justifying it. He may not even realize the illegality of items in his possession, or things that he does in the privacy of his home. He might well overlook the insignificant traces left from previous activities that he does know are illegal. In either case, however, the police won't be inhibited from seizing upon such evidence to convict him of a crime; a pistol that he innocently keeps in his glove compartment, or some marijuana seeds in the pile of the carpet, might thus become the unexpected means for a rather harsh lesson in how the system works.

W

E HAVE FIVE THINGS IN OUR HOUSE that look something like this:



Our Five Things

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY MALCOLM WELLS

One or two are VCRs, the others play cassettes, or discs, or some damned things. All I know is they're hooked up to loudspeakers. I can't tell one box from another.

Our kids gave us most of them so I hate to bad-mouth them but, to tell you the truth, I haven't even touched them. I leave their operation to my wife. She's twice as smart — and twice as patient — as I.

I have a thing against those boxes. It's not for what they do but for what they do for me. If prizes were awarded for arrogance and sadism in design, their designers would get them, as would almost everyone else producing audio-video-computeo devices. Trying to read the tiny words and numbers on their faces is bad enough; trying to understand the words and numbers is worse. What the hell does "gain" mean? Or "tracking?" Or "CD-aux?"

When you unpack one of these boxes do you know what you have to do next? *Read an instruction booklet!* I'm serious. Can you imagine that? And it's not a simple booklet, either. The instructions get worse all the time, and this is said to be the age of information. Useless information, I'd say. Who has time to memorize all that garbage? Has it never occurred to the idiots who produce those things that there's a better way? I think it has. I think they know perfectly well what they're doing, and I don't like what it says about their opinion of me.

I know that the things sell like hotcakes. I know that the people (mostly kids) who use them have no trouble making them work. But I'll be damned if I'll lift a finger to go along with designers whose contempt for me and my time are as great as their designs suggest.

Imagine how nice it would be if instead of having to follow encyclopedic instructions, you opened a

carton, pulled out one of those boxes, and found nothing else in the package but a little card on which, in bold letters, were the words **PUSH THIS INTO SLOT, THIS END FIRST.** The card would not only cause a full course of instructions in glorious sound and color to appear, it would have its own power source so you wouldn't even have to plug the damned thing in first. Too much for a little card-battery, you say? OK, then let the wafer say 1) Plug unit into wall outlet, then 2) **PUSH THIS CARD INTO SLOT, THIS END FIRST.** And of course, on the box, at the slot, there'd be a big label saying **THIS IS THE SLOT.** (You'd pull the label off later.) Then the animated show would begin, with instructions so graphic, with explanations so simple and appealing, you'd enjoy it as much as a good movie, and remember it as easily.

If that were the only improvement, of course, you'd still have to deal with the unreadable and incomprehensible graphics on the face of the box. But if a new instruction procedure can be imagined, then so can a new operating procedure. Instead of tiny buttons and knobs saying such dumb things as **SEARCH** and **MEMORY**, there would be just one big bright button and a loudness knob. Above the big bright button would be the word **OFF.** Above the knob: **LOUDNESS.** When the button was pushed, **OFF** would change to **ON**, and a few other big bright words would suddenly appear, each one a choice, each one simply needing a touch in order to be activated. Then, instead of my wife saying, "I wish you knew how to tape 'Roseanne' for me while I'm out. I hate to miss it," she'd say, "Please tape 'Roseanne.' Nine o'clock. OK? Thanks, honey." She'd know I'd finally agreed to join the audiovideocomputeo club.

All I'd have to do would be hit a couple of the big bright words on the boxface, and a recording of "Roseanne" would be as certain as Sunday. **TAPE A SHOW?**, it would say. (Touch.) **TIME?** 7:00 7:30 8:00 8:30 9:00 (Touch.) **CHANNEL?** 5 6 7 (Touch.)

Perhaps the only thing worse than the lack of compassionate architecture in buildings is the woeful absence of architecture in information design, suggests radical architect (the pioneer of underground houses), and troublemaker, Malcolm Wells.

—Kevin Kelly