

Editorial

John Mitchell

What goes around comes around. When I announced last year that I would be hanging up my editorial pen I pledged to find a successor before doing so. Since its inception in the last century (late nineteen eighties) the Journal has had only three editors: Ginny Bryant, Rob Melville and myself. Finding another to take the Journal into its second decade was not easy, but lady luck stepped in and Rob Melville, who is now Director of MSc in Management at Cass Business School, has volunteered to again take on the role in conjunction with Mike Lavine of the John Hopkins University in the USA. This is exceptionally good news and I could not have asked for a better team to take the Journal forward.. I wish them every success and I look forward to being on the reading end of the next edition.

The government again faced condemnation after it emerged that 600 staff at Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs (HMRC) have been disciplined for misuse of personal data. The revelation that 192 staff had been disciplined last year, 180 in 2006 and 238 in 2005. was coupled with a report that HMRC has also discussed 11 data security incidents involving customer information with the Information Commissioner's Office since April 2005. No information was provided on the type of disciplinary action that was taken. If we assume that this is the proverbial tip of the iceberg, where only fifteen percent is visible above sea level, then we can extrapolate that perhaps 4,000 staff are regularly misusing our data without being caught. This is about five percent of HMRC's staffing. Taking this dodgy extrapolation further we can guesstimate that when the proposed NHS central patients database goes live up to 15,000 of the 390,000 anticipated users will be using our data illegally. Going even further, if the Government gets its universal identity database, then perhaps one and a half million users may be accessing our data for nefarious purposes. The one good thing to consider is that as the data is likely to be woefully incorrect, then any conclusions they draw are likely to be incorrect too. 'Want some dodgy data mate? I've got the full identity database on these DVDs'. 'No thanks mate. If I want accurate data I'll use the Tesco database'.

The government is also pushing for the retention of all electronic communications for at least twelve months to help in its fight against terrorism and organised crime. How out of date can they be? The big boys either use couriers or meet in virtual worlds such as Second Life where their avatars do not look like them at all. 'What have you been doing today John?'. 'I've been tracking this Bin Laden lookalike in Second Life'. 'The one with the green beard?'. 'Yep, that's the one'. 'Idiot! That's me in deep cover'. The Information Commissioner says that we are sleep walking into a surveillance society where each one of us is currently caught on camera some three hundred times a day. Link this with the misuse of the RIPA legislation which is enabling councils (our obedient civil servants) to snoop on people who leave their bin lids open and it is apparent that we are not sleep

walking into this surveillance society, but are being dragged into it by our elected representatives. The London congestion charge was meant to reduce traffic in the capital, but the cameras are routinely used by the police to track individual vehicles. The law of unintended consequences marches on with the Transport for London Oyster card, which is meant to make public transport cheaper and more convenient to use, but also enables an individual card, and by default its registered owner, to be tracked across London.

Recent TV adverts urging people to pay for their TV licences conclude with the words 'its all in the database'. If only they could ensure that it will remain there. If the government are serious about protecting our personal data they would separate key items over several separate databases so that a single hacker would only be able to retrieve part of the information: a name, but not the address; a sort code, but not the account number; a gender, but not the age; etc. Each database would have its own security and logging mechanisms which would be policed by suitable expert systems on a continuous monitoring basis. It would be expensive and require excellent development skills, but it is the only way to safeguard our data from unauthorised access and disclosure.

In this edition you will find a useful article on legal updates from Dr A Abimbola, a farewell column from our outgoing chairman Ross Palmer, a financial statement from Jean Morgan our treasurer, a down-under column from Bob Ashton and the usual list of member benefits from Mark Smith who has also sadly resigned from the Management Committee. You will notice from the financial statement that we have notional reserves of over £23,000. The reason that these are notional is that they have been sequestered by the Society into its central reserves. Under the new accounting rules we no longer have access to these carefully husbanded resources, but I consider it essential that we account on a going concern basis, even if the Society has removed any incentive for us to do so.

Finally, to paraphrase John F Kennedy, a previous president of the USA, 'the torch has been handed to a new generation'. May its flame burn brightly into the future.