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Letters

National security, or self-interest?

I was glad to see that you gave the Office of Technology Assessment's workshop on press access to satellite surveillance such prominent coverage ("Newswatch From Space," SN: 7/11/87, p.28). The five areas of "possible national security or foreign policy concern" were mostly less than impressive. Most of the "concerns" were nothing more than complaints by those who profit from secrecy and an attempt to justify measures to restrict the use of such technology by the press.

Depriving U.S. troops of the element of surprise is only a matter of concern during times of war, when this information could legitimately be controlled anyway. Otherwise, it will simply help keep our government out of mischief. Indeed, the "element of surprise" is usually missing anyway. The example quoted in the article is a perfect illustration of this. There were press reports regarding the preparations for and the timing of a U.S. air strike on Libya for at least a week

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Cover: Computer graphics provides a striking new way of looking at mathematical equations. The cover image was generated by plotting the behavior of points governed by a particular set of differential equations. Each different starting point evolves into a colored line. Together, the lines become a kind of "portrait" of the equation. (Image: Pickover/IBM)

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before the raid actually happened. Libya hardly needed "network restraint" or an interception of unsecure press communications to have a very good idea what was going to happen and when it would occur.

The issue of press disclosures provoking retaliations from offended foreign powers is mostly a nonissue, except perhaps in the short term. These people will very quickly learn that these retaliations gain them nothing and that more effective ways of manipulating and restricting press coverage exist. Non-English-speaking countries will have better luck with this, but we can expect that all of them will have the same trouble that our domestic powers-that-be have: It's difficult to learn that no matter how good you are at this game of lead-the-press, it's impossible to win all the time.

The most blatantly self-serving complaint is the issue of third-party access to the information collected. The idea that we might have a mutual interest with a closed society like the Soviet Union is interesting, revealing

and alarming.

The only concerns that seemed to have any real merit involved the "reduction of the grace period" enjoyed by political leaders and the problems leading from the competitive pressures in the news business. These are mostly near-term problems. Political leaders will eventually learn how to deal with instant information. The press will eventually learn how to deal with this new technology.

The real difficulty here is the identification of "national interest" or of "national security" with a particular group of people and institutions in our country. The problem with this identification is that it makes it conveniently difficult to tell where "national interest/national security" ends and where the self-interests of the individuals and institutions involved begin. We'll never get away from this conflict, but measures to restrict access to information only pave the way to disaster and dictators.

Robert Roman
Chicago, Ill.

SEPTEMBER 19, 1987

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