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Home Voice Mail Doesn't Guarantee Privacy

To the Editor:

"Home Voice Mail: Privacy, but at a Price" (Consumer's World, Aug. 3), on home voice mail as offered by some regional phone companies, fails to probe. In some ways home voice mail may lessen privacy, and under appropriate conditions, answering machines can provide privacy.

First, since access is provided by an entry code (rather than by a biometric measure unique to the individual, such as a voice- or fingerprint), anyone with access to the line and the code can hear your messages. As part of this service, will the phone company provide an audit trail and regularly report to its customers all requests to hear messages?

Second, there is the issue of the phone company itself. It has access to the messages and will periodically check the system to see that it is working. However clear in principle the company may be about its employees' not listening to private conversations or messages, the temptation is there. In one case, telephone employees on the night shift kept a list of "hot" lines to listen to for their own late-night entertainment.

Third, the legal status of such messages is not clear, but it appears that an isolated answering machine offers greater legal protection for privacy. If law enforcement agents wish to listen to the messages on your answering machine, they need a warrant to search your house or to tap your phone.

But what standards will apply in the case of messages consensually handed over to a third party such as a phone company? Many consumers will no doubt feel they have greater privacy when their messages are stored at home and are not part of an unseen network. A related point: will it be possible for a hacker, using a list of the most common access passwords and other code-breaking devices, to gain access to messages on the same line or remotely?

You not only exaggerate the benefits of voice mail, but also minimize the benefits of answering machines. It is incorrect to state categorically that an answering machine "will not answer" when the phone is in use and that an answering machine provides "no privacy." Some answering machines, when used with a second line, permit a message to be left. Many answering machines have means of restricting remote access. Keeping the machine in a locked drawer or room will also protect privacy.

Voice mail does offer telephone privacy relative to other members of the same household. But a review of the public opinion data will show that for most Americans that is not seen as a major threat to telephone privacy.

The privacy that the voice mail system offers may come, ironically, with other "costs" beyond the financial. It is, for instance, easy to imagine situations in which a message on an answering machine that can be heard by anyone is superior to voice mail, which is restricted to those having the access code -- let us say, a message from a family member stranded because of an automobile breakdown or a message advising that an event has been canceled.

You might also have noted how voice mail, rather than protecting privacy, could be the instrument for new, inexpensive means of invading the privacy of others (including the subscriber to the service). This could occur through the system's ability to transmit the same message automatically to up to 25 other households.

There are advantages and disadvantages to any system, depending on one's needs and values, and privacy is not the only consideration. Claims about the advantages of voice mail over answering machines are understandable in a phone company brochure, but you should assess those claims critically. GARY T. MARX Cambridge, Mass., Aug. 8, 1991 The writer is professor of sociology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.