

## The list and private information

In early July, a list of supposed illegal immigrants was anonymously sent to various newspapers, television stations and law enforcement agencies around the state. The list contained names and personal information for approximately 1,300 people; most were from the Hispanic community.

Those on opposing sides of the immigration issue were quick to come forward and voice opinions. Governor Hebert arranged an open meeting to discuss the issue. This meeting was followed by other discussion forums which revealed the depth of Utahns' passions surrounding the topic of immigration.

Given the strong feelings surrounding immigration it is understandable that other important concerns relating to the distribution of a list of government records have been relegated to the background. Nevertheless, some of these issues deserve attention. Chief among these should be a concern for the privacy of all citizens.

Most of us are aware that we live in a world where our personal information is collected and used. Consider online retailing. When I purchase a book from Amazon, the company collects various pieces of personal information: my name, address and credit card information. Perhaps my pattern of purchases is scrutinized to determine my buying preferences.

I realize that Amazon will use the information to entice me to make future purchases. I regularly receive email messages from them. When I visit the Amazon site, I am prompted to look at specific merchandise the retailer believes that I am likely to buy.

Despite this, I provide my personal information voluntarily. The reason I do so is that I know that it is in Amazon's self-interest to exercise some restraint in using the information I have given them. If Amazon abuses my personal information I will stop doing business with them. Other customers would act in a similar fashion. This fact provides a small safeguard against abuse of the information provided.

The information I provide to the state

and federal government is a bit different. First, I don't provide this information voluntarily. Although I don't typically fret over the matter, I am required to supply the government with specific pieces of personal information.

Second, self-interest does not come into play. Governmental agencies are not concerned that I will take my business elsewhere. Whether the agencies act responsibly or irresponsibly, I, and other citizens, will still be compelled to deal with them. I simply hope that the government employees who have access to my personal information will act ethically and responsibly. The

recent compilation and distribution of the immigration list proves that government employees will not always act responsibly.

Most of us don't need to be concerned that our names will show up on a list of illegal immigrants. Yet, consider what could happen if a government employee or agency entrusted with your personal information were motivated by greed rather than ideology.

Your credit card information could be sold to organized criminals. Your health records could be shared with potential employers. Tax records which contain information on your earnings and investments could be sold to retailers or investment companies. If you think this is scaremongering, you should know that there have been several recent cases of state governments selling drivers license information to insurance companies, country clubs, collection agencies, and driving schools. Thankfully, Utah was not one of these states.

Incidents such as the distribution of the immigration list prompt the question: "Should we be doing anything differently?" Many are considering whether we should modify existing immigration policy. It is also worth considering the steps we should take to protect the vast amount of private information entrusted to various state and federal agencies. The recent distribution of the immigration list proves that necessary protections are sorely lacking.

### Top of Utah Voices



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**Commentary**

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