

Video revelations

Globe 3/17/88

A colleague reports that his local video rental shop - he is afraid that it may be called "Video-2-Go" - has recently been computerized and that he now has a plastic card that is used, like a credit card, whenever he rents a film.

While he is quite happy to tell his colleagues - sometimes too happy and at too great a length - about the old thriller or the '60s cult film he rented over the weekend, he is more than a little concerned about the plastic card.

And anyone who remembers last summer's Bork hearings will be every bit as concerned.

During the Senate hearings on the nomination of Robert Bork to the US Supreme Court, a reporter for City Paper, Washington's weekly tabloid, secured and published a list of the Bork family's rentals from the local video store.

There was nothing particularly embarrassing on the list - Hitchcock thrillers and Alec Guinness comedies seemed to be Bork favorites - but the incident pointed up an opportunity

for mischief and for serious violations of personal privacy.

Already, according to a report in The Economist, video rental records are routinely sought in child-custody suits. They are just the sort of information an enterprising reference-checking firm would find it profitable to peddle to prospective employers.

Now, a number of states are considering legislation - generically called "Bork bills" in what may be the would-be justice's major legal legacy - that would make it a crime for a video shop to release information about their customers' film rentals (without permission or a court order). Congress may also consider federal restrictions.

Any federal legislation should include provisions to bar the unauthorized release of library-borrowing records - already barred in 37 states, including Massachusetts. While a Czech novel may seem innocuous alongside its spicy film version, a taste for either can be dangerous in the hands of computerized Nosy Parkers.