Big Data

By Dr. Richard Kelley

The front pages of newspapers across the U.S. this week have focused on an attempt by the U.S. federal government to force Apple, Inc., to develop a program that will unlock the encrypted files in smashed iPhones used by Syed Farook and his wife, Tashfeen Malik, the couple who slaughtered 14 of Farook’s co-workers at a Christmas party in San Bernardino, Calif., last December 2.

The government wants access to those encrypted files so it can explore the terrorist couple’s connections and determine who among their acquaintances, if any, might also pose a threat to public safety. Apple opposes the government’s request to unlock files so heavily and deliberated encrypted by the iPhone’s designers that Apple itself cannot unlock them with any existing software. That is why the government is asking Apple to engineer a new program — a type of “key” — that will unlock something that was purposely designed never to be unlocked, even by Apple itself. Apple contends that if it is forced to create a key that unlocks these two iPhones, that key could then be used much more widely, and, if it falls into the wrong hands, could wreak untold havoc on, potentially, millions of innocent Americans. The government, on the other hand, apparently feels that without that key, many other lives might be lost to terrorist allies of Farook and Malik.

Can our government force Apple to do this? It is certainly not the vision of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness that I grew up with. But then, people opening fire on party-goers is not a vision I grew up with either.

The thought that the courts might rule that government does have that power makes me feel I am in a widely repeated scene set in World War II movies. Picture a couple on the dark streets of Nazi-occupied Paris. Suddenly, a Gestapo agent with a Luger pistol strapped to his belt confronts them. In a rough, heavily accented voice he demands, “Papers please.”

No matter the eventual outcome, the Apple iPhone case is a stark example of the importance of personal data in today’s world. It raises all sorts of ethical concerns and also leads me to focus on how important data has become, particularly in commerce, and even more so the Travel & Tourism industry.

When Roy and Estelle Kelley started their hotel business in 1947, almost all reservations were made by mail and confirmations were usually accompanied by a personal letter typed and signed by my mother, Estelle.
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Loyal travel agent Don Renshaw, founder and owner of Renshaw Travel, visited Dr. Chuck Kelley at the OHANA Waikiki East by Outrigger® this week. Now 92 years old, Mr. Renshaw is still active in the travel business. He vividly recalls Estelle Kelley's handwritten room confirmation letters and will send us a copy of one he still has on file in his Vancouver, B.C., office.

guest’s name, with arrival and departure dates, on a 4¼ x 5½-inch sheet of yellow paper and file it on a set of spindles arranged by hotel and date of arrival.

Room control? Simple! When the stack of reservations for any given day’s arrivals reached the second knuckle of her finger in height, she knew that hotel was almost sold out and would take no more bookings for that date.

By contrast, today, virtually all hotel reservations are made electronically, often through many different intermediaries around the world. Quite often the reservations include a package of items such as an airline reservation, activities at the destination, transfers, etc. The cost is charged to a credit card and often there is a link to a hotel company’s frequent guest program or an airline’s frequent flier club.

When jumbo jets started to fly in the 1960s and package tours became a large part of our business, we knew very little about our guests. In fact, tour operators really did not want anybody along the line to know much about their customers. At their request, only minimal information was recorded at check in.

Today, with information available through frequent guest programs, frequent flier clubs, credit cards, etc., we can learn an extraordinary amount of information about our guests including where they live, who their neighbors are, where they travel, what they like to buy, etc. The loss of privacy is frightening, but it also opens tremendous opportunities.

Big Data, as it is called, holds an immense amount of information. To the extent it is accessible, sellers of goods and services can learn a great deal about their customers and potential customers. Then advertising can be directed to people likely to be interested in a particular type of product or service. This serves the interests of sellers, certainly, but also, in many cases, of buyers who may be introduced to opportunities they might otherwise miss.

Personal information can be gleaned from a range of sources including social networks such as Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and Facebook; records from search engines like Google, Bing or Yahoo and browsers such as Chrome, Safari or Firefox; and from credit card data. The potential is enormous and very frightening to those who value their privacy. It is all being driven by businesses looking for customers and abetted by millennials who grew up using computers from the time they could barely walk and are comfortable with “sharing” information their parents and grandparents would often have guarded with their lives.

Like the Apple case, this raises a lot of questions about privacy and security versus liberty and opportunity.

Much of what is now happening was predicted years ago by authors such as H. G. Wells in The Time Machine (1895) and The War of the Worlds (1898) as well as Aldous Huxley in Brave New World (1932).

Hang onto your hats. We are in for a bumpy ride.