

The New York Times

Founded in 1851

ADOLPH S. OCHS, *Publisher 1896-1935*
ARTHUR HAYS SULZBERGER, *Publisher 1935-1961*
ORVIL E. DRYFOOS, *Publisher 1961-1963*
ARTHUR OCHS SULZBERGER, *Publisher 1963-1992*

ARTHUR OCHS SULZBERGER JR., *Publisher*

BILL KELLER, *Executive Editor*
JILL ABRAMSON, *Managing Editor*
JOHN M. GEDDES, *Managing Editor*

Assistant Managing Editors
SOMA GOLDEN BEHR ADAM MOSS
TOM BODKIN MICHAEL ORESKES
JONATHAN LANDMAN ALLAN M. SIEGAL
CRAIG R. WHITNEY

GAIL COLLINS, *Editorial Page Editor*
ANDREW ROSENTHAL, *Deputy Editorial Page Editor*

JANET L. ROBINSON, *President, General Manager*
SCOTT H. HEekin-CANEDY, *Senior VP, Circulation*
JYLL F. HOLZMAN, *Senior VP, Advertising*
MARC Z. KRAMER, *Senior VP, Production*
DENISE F. WARREN, *Senior VP, Planning*
LIAM J. CARLOS, *VP, Chief Financial Officer*
ALYSE MYERS, *VP, Marketing Services*
JAY I. SABIN, *VP, Labor Relations*
DENNIS L. STERN, *VP, Human Resources*
MICHAEL G. WILLIAMS, *VP, Chief Information Officer*

THOMAS K. CARLEY, *President, News Services*

Buyer Beware

The Senate is on the brink of making it easier for businesses to share private financial information submitted by customers. That would be a blow to consumer rights. The measure being considered is a renewal of the Fair Credit Reporting Act, a mainstay of the consumer economy. The bill adds a few positive features like free annual e-mails of credit reports. But it will do far greater damage by establishing a permanent ban on stronger state measures, particularly in the critical area of unauthorized sharing of consumer information.

This is a dark and unmapped universe in which banks, credit card companies and insurers have free rein to share detailed records among thousands of affiliates, with customers largely powerless and unknowing. Bank balances, buying habits, investment profiles and more can be tapped into in ways that invite fraud, marketing assaults, identity theft and unfair credit decisions. It is no coincidence that

the Senate bill and a similar House version, propelled onward by heavy lobbying by the financial industry, would pre-empt a worthy law just passed in California that finally gives consumers power to limit the sharing to necessary questions. State-rooted consumer movements are often closer to the people and have better ideas about how to protect them. Their ideas should be incorporated — not permanently barred — in federal law.

The Senate measure contains no real solution for indiscriminate data sharing. Far preferable is an amendment to be offered by Senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer of California that would require advance notice from businesses so consumers would have a chance to block planned sharings that reached beyond relevant credit issues. Rejection of this amendment would only compound businesses' temptation to be marketers rather than protectors of the privacy of the American consumer.