Net Privacy Essay, Research Paper

The internet has brought mixed blessings to the people who use it. It is a fantastic information source but the relative lack of privacy has brought forth a major problem. Anyone with even little hacking knowledge can track every move that you make while using internet services and/or view private or confidential information. It is now possible for some internet sites can actually find information such as e-mail addresses or the name of the person/people viewing the site without authorisation. This problem can affect everyone who uses any internet services and ultimately can lead to very confidential information(such as credit card numbers) getting into the hands of criminals.

Internet services and facilities are now used and provided by many companies and individuals worldwide. Each web site that is visited could have the capability of finding out your name and/or e-mail address and sending junk e-mail or cataloguing this information and then selling it to other companies. The ISP that you connect to the internet also has a record of every bit of information you upload or download, and must keep records for official purposes. Any sites that ask for your credit card number for “pay by use” or restricted services could, in fact, sell or use such information for illegal purposes such as fraud.

The actual hardware requirements for using the internet are minimal, only an internet service provider(a company that allows a connection to the internet), modem(to send and receive data transmissions through a phone line), phone line(to dial up the I.S.P,) and a reasonably fast computer(to run the hardware and software) are needed to get onto the internet. This allows almost anyone with a computer to access the internet. Software is needed to browse or view the internet is a browser(such as Netscape Navigator, MS Internet Explorer) and for e-mail services, programs such as Eudora, Netscape Navigator or MS Internet Explorer are needed to send or receive e-mail.

Nearly everyone will at some stage in their lives use the Internet. Very minimal skills are needed to use the Internet, and it allows people to access an immense amount of information at the touch of a button. All a person with a little hacking knowledge needs to do to get such information is to use a Trojan horse type program and he or she can follow you around and view the information you are uploading or downloading.

The fact that there is minimal internet privacy has led to people becoming weary of what they actually do on the internet. The people that actually provide the Internet services to uses, ISP’s, keep records for up to two months on all user data transactions. This means that someone could possibly get confidential information such as a credit card number and sell the information or use it themselves for purchasing goods or services. This has raised some concern and there have been propositions made in many governments worldwide to ensure that acts such as these are prevented from happening, but, anyone who has access to the actual server could find such information. This practice, however, could never be totally eradicated as there are already statutes in place that demand these records to be kept.

Another factor in this privacy issue are the “cookies” sent to you when viewing certain web sites. A cookie is a piece of information that is sent to you by a web site and in return, it takes a piece of information from the user. People can actually stop “cookies” from being received but it prevents vital information from being sent to them. Some times, all the cookie does is record, on the users computer, without consent, information such as the number of times that the site has been accessed by the user. More sophisticated versions can access information from the user such as e-mail addresses or the real name of the user. Such information should not be allowed to be accessed without consent and such practices should be stopped. Finally, something is being done about the practice of sending “cookies” to receive personal information such as the real name and e-mail addresses being sold to companies for the us of sending junk mail. In a recent law case in America, has filed a !

lawsuit against a company that sent him junk mail by e-mail by using “cookies” to get his information. A Virginia resident has filed suit in state court against US News & World Report, challenging the right of the magazine to sell or rent his name to another publication without his express written consent. Ram Avrahami claims that USN&WR has benefited commercially from his name, thus violating the Virginia Code which protects every person from having his/her name being used for commercial purpose without consent. The outcome of this case could set the precedent\* for any such future claims and invite class actions against many companies that use the same practices.

E-mail viewing without consent is another occurrence of privacy infringement that has led to actual court cases being held to sue people and organisations. The “screening” of e-mail was a large problem before the advent of laws that prevented this from occurring. It was found that one ISP administrator in the United States of America would “get his kicks” out of reading the e-mail sent and received by users of the ISP. His unlawful actions set another precedent and since then this problem, although not altogether gone, has been greatly reduced.

A new method of gaining information used by some high level technology sites rely on the ISP of the user accessing their site. The site sends a signal to the ISP which returns information such as the country the user is from, the E-mail address of the user and in certain cases the address of the user. This information is freely available from the ISP with the right technology and allows web sites to gain information that it could rent or sell to other companies to sent traditional (snail mail) Junk Mail to the user.

With the release of Microsoft’s Windows 97?, a new era of unauthorised data retrieval has arisen. When a user with Windows 97? logs onto The Microsoft Network? the user’s computer sends information on all software actually on the user’s computer and if it has been registered with the company or not. A Microsoft? spokesperson said that it was “a bid to stop increasing software piracy”. This step really forces people to send in registration forms for any software that they own as Microsoft? can sue people who use the service without having registered products. It is a problem because many people who do by the product and not pirate it, do send in registration forms because they do not want their information used for the purpose of sending junk mail to them. It should be up to the user whether they want the registration forms sent in, not the software company’s.

The cost to many businesses that do not infringe the privacy of individuals is quite great. Many sites providing “pay for use” by credit cards services are avoided because there aren’t stricter privacy regulations. Although secure links with high level cryptography techniques have been created for “pay for use” services, there are still doubts in the minds of many people of the authenticity of such services. The benefits that increased privacy would clearly make it the only option for the internet. Increased use of credit card services and a wider band of people would be willing to visit sites and enter confidential information without any fear of misuse. It must be the future of the Internet.

Computer Privacy is a major issue and it does effect anyone who uses any internet service. Something must be done to stop the crimes committed against the privacy of people and people should be allowed to control their personal or confidential information, whether they want it freely available or not. Only through consumer pressure will the internet become more secure as has happened in America. Already people can join up to ISP’s with totally secure services with total anonymity. This must be the future of the internet.

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