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THE MONTH IN FOCUS

NEWS LEADER

Privacy is a hot topic following the European Parliament's recent directive regarding data retention, which allows ISPs and telecom providers to keep hold of your personal data for years. Campaigners are worried that this information could fall into the wrong hands or be used to start police investigations, rather than aid them.

The Parliament has defended itself, claiming that it has protected privacy by preventing member states from lifting data privacy except in criminal investigations or matters of national security. But after September 11 national security covers a lot more areas of life than it once did, making violation of our private data a real cause for concern.

IN THE NEWS

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After months of battling against the ever lengthening odds, PC manufacturer Dan has finally gone into receivership.

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Internet Explorer and Netscape have got competition as Mozilla launches.

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***PC Advisor* readers find terms and conditions too complicated to contemplate.**

Privacy plans slammed

European Parliament's long awaited data privacy and spam email policies are still regarded as inadequate on release

The European Parliament has reached a decision regarding data retention and spam email after four months of disagreement, though its pronouncement has still come in for heavy criticism.

Under the Electronic Communications Data Protection Directive, member states will only be able to 'lift the protection of data privacy' when conducting criminal investigations or as a safeguard to national security and when it is a 'necessary, appropriate and proportionate measure within a democratic society'.

But a clause in the directive will allow member states to force ISPs and telecom operators to retain data on all customers for years, rather than the one- or two-month period campaigners were lobbying for.

Although this information is meant to be used for billing purposes, privacy campaigners are concerned it may be passed on to third parties. For instance, it could be accessed and studied by police routinely trawling for suspicious activity, rather than being examined for case evidence as it is now.

The European Parliament admitted this clause was included as a compromise between all groups involved.

Joe McNamee, European affairs manager for the Association of European ISPs, said this decision was "unfortunate".

The Global Liberty Internet, an international coalition of non-governmental organisations from 15 countries, said the clause "let down the whole directive".

Desperate Dan calls in the receivers

Beleaguered PC firm Dan Technology has finally gone into administrative receivership. It had hoped to find a buyer to save it from going under, but the search proved fruitless. Accountancy firm BDO Stoy Hayward was called in to help the company assess the offers, and a spokesperson said that Dan is still seeking to sell the business to a buyer who would uphold customer warranties.

However, she added: "In the interim, the administrative receivers will be seeking to fulfil orders for customers who have been invoiced for goods, and will be honouring warranties on a case-by-case basis."

> The administrative receivers… will be honouring warranties on a case-by-case basis
>
> BDO Stoy Hayward spokesperson

Dan Technology has been in trouble for some months. Back in February it was granted a temporary reprieve when a management buyout injected £2.5m to keep it afloat. But clearly this was not enough to save it.

When we spoke to one possible purchaser about why his company had pulled out he said: "We were willing to put enough money into the company to sort out the problems, but we didn't want to put the money in as a lifeline."

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The European Parliament has also finally reached a decision on spam email. Internet users will now have to opt in to receive unsolicited email, which effectively means they will have to give companies permission to send them marketing mail.

But the so-called soft opt-in means companies with existing customer relationships will be able to operate an opt-out system.

As long as the company is marketing a similar product to one the client has already purchased, they will automatically receive emails unless they object to receiving them.

But campaigners have highlighted the limitations of this legislation. Around 90 percent of junk email originates from outside the EU and this will not be covered by the legislation.

Get connected or get fined

The government's plans to force people to file tax returns online took a humiliating blow recently. The Inland Revenue had to shut down its website because a flaw had left it revealing confidential information to users attempting to file self-assessment forms.

Under the new Finance Bill both companies and individuals will have to file tax returns online or else face a fine of up to £3,000. Large companies are already required to carry out so called 'e-filing', but this ruling will be expanded to cover individuals by 2010.

The bill has been criticised as hugely unfair for people who do not have internet access, such as elderly people and their carers, and will mean they will either have to get someone else to submit their form electronically or face a crippling fine.

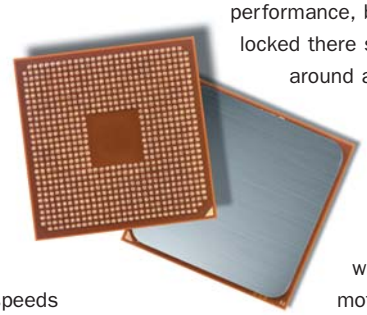
Both the CIOT (Chartered Institute of Taxation) and the ACCA (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) have criticised the proposed £3,000 fine as "underhand".

John Whiting, president of CIOT, said: "The systems should be made attractive [to people] so they want to use them, rather than being made compulsory with penalties for those unwilling to use them."

Encouraging people to file confidential financial information online could be even more difficult following the recent problems on the Inland Revenue site, where personal details were revealed to other users. The Inland Revenue declined to give details of the data revealed or how many people had confidential information made public. But did say the security breach was in an electronic form used for filing taxes online. At the time of writing it was still working to resolve the issue.

We're still waiting for AMD's Hammer to fall

AMD's latest 64bit processors, codenamed Hammer, were attracting plenty of interest at Computex 2002, the annual technology show in Taipei, not least because of the lengths AMD went to keep their speeds under wraps.



After reports of poor performance from the server and workstation version of the processor, the Opteron (codenamed Sledge Hammer), *PC Advisor* learnt that these results may have been due to a deliberate act by AMD, which had locked samples at a low clock speed. The logic behind this being that by making it impossible to judge the chip's true capability the company could avoid questions about its performance.

According to a *PC Advisor* source, "It was locked at 800[MHz] and that's why people are saying there's poor performance, but in actual fact it was locked there so people couldn't play around and get benchmarks out."

Equally strange happenings were afoot on motherboard manufacturer MSI's Computex stand. It was displaying two motherboards that support AMD's desktop Claw Hammer processor. At the start of the technology show these motherboards were accompanied by a list of specifications, which described them as designed to support a processor running at 1.6GHz.

But later in the show these lists were changed, and the clock speed was replaced by a 3000+ rating, which falls in line with AMD's True Performance Index, used to rate all its current processors.

Adding further to the mystery, a motherboard seen by *PC Advisor* and said to be designed for Claw Hammer touted a sticker stating '256K-800MHz',

> AMD officials refused to discuss the performance of the Hammer processors and speculation has varied on how quick the chips currently are

undoubtedly referring to the chip's clock speed. Markings on another board showed it was capable of running on a 200MHz bus, giving a 400MHz DDR (double data rate) bus speed.

AMD officials attending the show refused to discuss the performance characteristics of the Hammer processors and speculation has varied on how quick the chips currently are and how fast they will run when they finally ship.

"I'm not allowed to talk about the 'M' word," one AMD product manager said, referring to megahertz, the measure of processor clock speed.

Parents push for online learning

Nearly half the parents of school-age children (48 percent) feel the internet is just as important as traditional resources for their child's learning, according to a study by internet service provider BTopenworld.

"[Computers] are a very powerful and motivating tool for children," said the BBC's education executive, Karen Johnson. "[They provide the child with] certain independence while also making the learning very safe and tailored."

Almost half of the 549 parents questioned (45 percent) thought the internet was a better learning tool than television. But Johnson thinks they should be used in conjunction with one another. "TV can tell you stories, deal with conflicting viewpoints, personal and social issues and inspire you," said Johnson. "The web can give you feedback on your individual answers and can allow you [to work at] your own pace. An ideal situation is to have a teacher or a parent with all of the media at their disposal."

However, according to the DfES (Department for Education and Skills), in many cases computer learning is compromised by poorly trained staff and parents. The DfES website offers help for parents with specific questions relating to the National Curriculum – go to www.dfes.gov.uk/parents for more information.

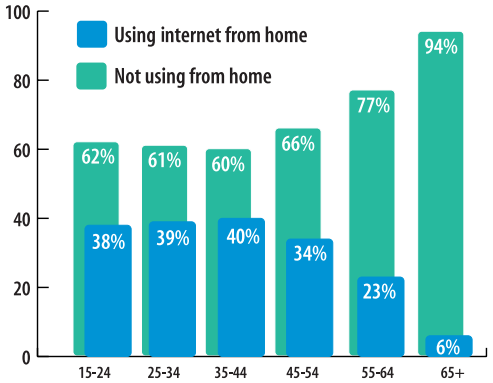
Whatever the argument, it certainly looks as though the web is becoming an important learning tool for children. Since 1998, £657m of government funding and around £230m of lottery cash has been invested in computers for schools, according to Ofsted (The Office for Standards in Education) See www.ofsted.gov.uk for more details.

OUR LIVES IN NUMBERS: home surfing

Despite the hype about 'silver surfers', it appears that the majority of older people in the UK are still not accessing the internet at home. While the total number of web users has increased from 11.8m to 17.9m between January 2000 and 2002, there are still far fewer surfers in the 55-65+ age group. The story is more positive for the younger generation with almost 40 percent of 15-44 year olds accessing the internet from home.

Source: Continental Research

Number of people in each age group using the internet from home



Dispatches from Computex

As we went to press the annual Computex show in Taiwan had just ended, and *PC Advisor* is assembling a report on all the new products and technology. While we will bring you more news and reviews in the coming months, for now we can give you a taste of what's to come. Perhaps the biggest buzz at the show surrounded AMD's new 64bit processors (see *We're still waiting for AMD's Hammer to fall* on page 23.)

But there were plenty of other products to attract our attention. Not least of which were the plethora of PDAs (personal digital assistants), including one running the Linux-based operating system, ECniw. It offers developers a modular system, which allows them to create the applications and devices users want. We were also impressed by Via's Envy24HT audio chip, with promises high-quality sound, offering sample rates up to 192kHz, 24bit resolution and support for 7.1 surround sound. At the moment we're unsure when we'll see cards using the new chip, but as soon as we do we'll get the reviews to you.

Benq showcased its new LCD (liquid crystal display) TVs. It profiled two models, with screens measuring 15in and 20in, yet the prototype 15in model weighed just 6kg. Each supports high-definition TV and SRS Surround Sound. They are due to ship later this year, but whether they reach our shores is another matter.

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Napster goes broke

Online music service Napster has filed for bankruptcy, just weeks after German media group Bertelsmann agreed to acquire the company. Bertelsmann is after Napster's brand, customer database and peer-to-peer technology, all of which it would use to help launch a subscriptions-based service. It has offered financial support to the company and its creditors, but a sale has yet to be approved.

Britain gets new 'e-minister'

Douglas Alexander, erstwhile e-commerce and competition minister, has been promoted to the Cabinet Office under Lord McDonald, despite having failed to realise the 'broadband Britain' he was tasked with achieving. Alexander's successor is Stephen Timms who has 15 years' experience in the telecomms and IT industry, working for IT group Logica and research analysts Ovum.

EMacs available to all

Apple has ditched its education-only sales policy for the eMac, making it available to retail customers, too. The three models in the range are all based on a 17in CRT (cathode ray tube) monitor. Prices start at £808 – a saving of over £250 on the entry-level iMac. The rest of the spec includes a 700MHz G4 processor, 40GB hard drive, GeForce2 MX graphics and CD-RW drive. RAM depends on the model.

Faster audio compression from NEC

NEC has developed software for faster more flexible audio compression. It claims the software can compress audio six times faster than existing technologies, enabling users to compress five minutes of music in just 15 seconds. The software is due out later this year and is Mpeg4-compatible for replay. Compression rates will be variable, allowing users to prioritise either storage space or sound quality.

Terms and conditions are too much bother, say PCA readers

Terms and conditions are often ambiguous, complicated and difficult to understand – which may be why many people agree to them without even reading them. Nearly a third (27 percent) of the 764 people who responded to *PC Advisor's* recent online poll admitted they never read terms and conditions before signing – 42 percent only read them 'sometimes'.

"It is imperative that people read them carefully," said Michael Clinch, partner and head of litigation at IT law firm Picton & Howell. "Once you sign up you are legally bound." But often terms and conditions span several pages, which can put the customer off reading and, in some cases, even understanding them.

"The problem arises when companies create complex terms for simple transactions. These are not considered commercially relevant and I would advise that people buy somewhere else," said Clinch.

General principles of contract law apply to what can be contained in terms and conditions. The rule is that terms must not be unreasonable, but this is a matter for the courts to decide. What customers should look out for are exclusion clauses.

"Many computer manufacturers' terms contain exclusion clauses, which limit or completely exclude their liability if something goes wrong with the product," said Clinch. "It is vital that customers read these carefully as this may be the difference between them receiving compensation or receiving nothing."

Terms and conditions must be negotiated and agreed before a transaction occurs, otherwise they are not legal. Once a contract has been signed terms and conditions cannot be changed and both parties will be liable for them.

Roar of Mozilla 1.0 heralds browser war

Open-source development group Mozilla.org has finally unleashed its long-awaited Mozilla 1.0 browser suite, after four years of toil and testing. Mozilla 1.0 boasts a web browser, an email reader and a chat client, as well as a cross-platform toolkit for developing internet-based applications. Mozilla's first major public release comes just over a month after the group released the beta version.

Mozilla 1.0 has been eagerly awaited by open-source fans who claim that the new browser could give big-name rivals such as Microsoft's Internet Explorer and Netscape's Navigator a run for their money.

The source code for the Mozilla project was initially released by Netscape in early 1998. Since then, thousands of programmers have worked on the project, incorporating features such as tabbed browsing, a chat client (dubbed ChatZilla) and the ability to turn off various JavaScript functions to reduce pop-up ads.

The browser software uses the Gecko layout engine, which enables it to work as well on handheld devices and set-top boxes as it does on PCs, the group said.

Mozilla 1.0 is a cross-platform product supporting Windows, Linux and Macintosh versions 8.0, 9.0 and OSX operating systems. It is now available free for download at www.mozilla.org.

BT figures don't add up

BT has been accused of fudging figures to slow the rollout of broadband services to rural areas.

Research by Broadband4Britain and Ovum show that applications from just 50 people were enough to justify the enabling of a local exchange for broadband – a figure, claims the study, far lower than that estimated by BTopenworld.

"BT has handed out figures on a piecemeal basis, but not a national one," said Andy Williams, campaign manager at Broadband for Britain.

But BTopenworld denies this. "We have never set a figure on this," said David Orr, spokesman for BTopenworld. "The decision to convert an exchange for broadband includes many factors."

Broadband4Britain is now petitioning the government to increase broadband coverage in rural areas by 20 percent within the next year.

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Double the memory in a Flash

Mobile phones should be able to hold twice as many rings, MP3 players twice as many songs and cameras twice as many photos at the same price, using new Flash memory chips from AMD. It has a new process for making Flash memory called MirrorBit technology, which it says doubles the amount of memory a chip can hold without extra cost. The first memory products were scheduled for release in June.

IBM develops 1TB tape cartridge

IBM has built a tape cartridge capable of storing one terabyte (one thousand gigabytes) of data. Such a capacity represents a tenfold increase on the capacity of today's tape devices. The company anticipates its new tape cartridge will cut the cost of storage media by around 99 percent. The bad news for the rest of us is that the new tape isn't due to ship for another three to five years.

Palm moves to ARM

Palm has promised that the final code for OS 5.0 will appear in early summer. This incarnation of the software is the first to come from the newly spun-off Palm Source software division. Palm OS 5.0 will support ARM processor-based devices for the first time, which the developers hope means it will soon be found on a wider range of devices – such as smartphones – in addition to PDAs (personal digital assistants).

Gentlemen, choose your browsers

Netscape has launched a preview of its new web browser, Netscape 7.0. The company is hoping to gain some ground from market leader, Internet Explorer, with its latest offering. It boasts new features such as tabbed browsing which allows users to keep track of a number of websites or pages in a single browser window. However, it remains to be seen whether Netscape 7.0 can take on the competition.

Quantum physics enters commercial IT

A Swiss company has announced what it says are the first IT products to exploit quantum physics effects to achieve their goals.

Geneva-based id Quantique is focusing on the field of cryptography with a quantum RNG (random number generator) and a QKD (quantum key distribution) system.

Quantum computing has the potential to revolutionise many areas of IT, once the difficult task of harnessing quantum effects on a large scale is overcome.

Standard cryptography has developed to the stage where encrypted messages are near-impossible to crack, requiring enormous amounts of computing power and time in a brute-force approach to finding the keys to unlock a message.

But mathematicians over the last 20 years have shown that quantum cryptography is completely unbreakable. Because of the bizarre characteristics of quantum interactions, there is no logical way to crack a quantum-encrypted message.

One touted application for quantum computing is in breaking conventional cryptographic systems. Instead of performing a long series of tests designed to unlock a 128bit key, researchers believe a quantum system could theoretically carry out all the necessary tests in parallel, unlocking the key instantly.

First notebooks from the all-new HP

HP has launched its first products following its merger with Compaq. The range consists of four notebooks, three under the OmniBook business brand and a Pavilion model aimed at the consumer and home office market. The first wave of products to come out of the merged company are branded HP, but the firm has pledged to continue offering the choice of HP- or Compaq-branded laptops.

Using only the HP name could be part of a strategy to not confuse customers so shortly after the merger, said Tim Scannell, an industry analyst at Shoreline Research. HP needs to avoid any possible brand confusion that might eat away at either its customer base or Compaq's, which is why the brandname remains unchanged, Scannell remarked.

The high-end OmniBook XE4500 features a Mobile Pentium 4 processor while the XE4400 uses a desktop P4. There's also a budget OmniBook model, the Celeron-based XE4100, and the line-up is completed by the P4-based Pavilion ZE5100. UK prices were unconfirmed as we went to press.

FLASHBACK

This time last year…

A landmark in processor clock speeds was reached when Intel released the first 2GHz Pentium 4. Intel chose the day of the launch to announce dramatic price cuts to some of the Pentium 4 range and on the entire Celeron range.

However, this wasn't entirely unexpected – Lehman Brothers analyst Dan Niles had predicted that Intel was "planning to drop a price bomb on AMD" nearly one month earlier. This was the second price cut Intel had made on its top-range processors in a matter of months and was prompted by both poor global sales of PCs and AMD's increasing prominence in the market.

Five years ago…

Microsoft bought $150m worth of shares in Apple. Apple was dogged by financial problems, and was suing Microsoft over similarities between Mac OS and Windows. On the condition that Apple drop the court case, Microsoft bought 100,000 non-voting shares.

This was a shrewd move by Gates, as David Coursey, editor of the Coursey.com newsletter, told *PC Advisor*. "If Apple goes down, then Windows becomes a monopoly. It's more efficient for Microsoft to keep Apple alive… and it comes out looking like the good guy."

20 years ago…

Home computing was revolutionised when the Dragon 32 hit the shelves, just one month after the release of Sinclair's ZX Spectrum system. Arguably just as popular for programming as they were for gaming, a Dragon 32 PC would have set you back £170 when it was released. Although the developers, Dragon Data, sold 40,000 units by the spring of 1983, it was dogged by financial problems and the receivers were called in June 1984.

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Nintendo gets its nose in

Nintendo has made an impact on the European games console market, selling 10,000 GameCube systems within the first two hours after it went on sale in the UK. Already industry experts are touting its launch as more successful than that of its Microsoft rival, Xbox. But this could be thanks to its lower price of £199, which is a good bit cheaper than Xbox or PlayStation 2.

MSN makes the new diceman

MSN user John Duncanson has sold his house, handed in his notice at work and abandoned the ex-girlfriend he was going to go back to after voters at MSN told him too. Mr Duncanson will head off for a new life in Gran Canaria, after a huge 300,000 people logged on to www.liveyourlife.msn.co.uk to vote him to victory in the 'Live your Life' competition, winning him a princely £10,000.

Virtual ID cards developed

With Europe keen to follow the US system for cross-border ID cards, Austrian company Voltom is developing a virtual online identity card. The 'virtual card', which costs just under £20, can be used to verify a user's age for purchasing goods, accessing certain sites or for more complex procedures, such as accessing networks and using bank accounts. Cards can be bought from www.voltom.com.

Robot dog seeks employment

Sick of being just a pet, Sony's Aibo is now looking to pay its way with gainful employment. Three Japanese companies have been working together to help Aibo out with a bit of work, adding extra features to beef up its CV. The Watson system allows a pack of Aibos to be controlled wirelessly, so they can be used to entertain visitors at reception desks or attract attention at an event.