



Fight back against spyware

Last issue we looked at how easy it is for nosy parkers to monitor every aspect of your PC behaviour. But don't sling your system into the nearest river just yet. Here Guy Dixon shows you how to reclaim your privacy from the snoopers.

Editor's choice cuts

The following security utilities are all available from our Downloads section at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/downloads. You will need to join the Registered Users Area but this is free and only takes a few minutes to set up.

Ad-aware 6.0 Build 0162

Ad-aware scans your system, including removable drives, for the most common types of advertising spyware and safely removes offending software. This free tool works through intuitively designed wizards and the improved version 6.0 also features a redesigned user interface. It detects small ad programs including those from Adware, Aureate/Radiate, OnFlow, Comet-Cursor, Cydoor, DoubleClick, EverAd, Flyswat, OnFlow and TimeSink 5.0.

Because many ad-supported programs won't function if you delete their ad modules, you may occasionally want to overrule an earlier decision to remove one of these components. Ad-aware 6.0 addresses this problem in two ways. It stores adware components in your Recycle Bin, where you can later retrieve them, and it also provides a backup archive viewer for reviewing and restoring deleted components.

SpyBlocker 4.6

Free programs often come at the price of hidden spyware, which send back information to the software company and other third parties. This usually results in annoying pop-up banner ads cluttering your screen while you try to surf in peace. SpyBlocker monitors the activity of cookies and single-pixel web bugs and also prevents software from transmitting personal information. Version 4.6 is compatible with all firewall and local proxy-filtering software and works with all browsers.

Spychecker 1.1

Spychecker helps you detect almost 1,000 spyware products. Simply enter the name in the Spychecker box and press Check. Spychecker accesses its constantly updated online database and displays the results in your browser, complete with a link to the privacy policy of the ad company.

Sygate Personal Firewall 5.0 Build 1175

You can adjust Sygate Personal Firewall's settings in terms of applications, trusted IP addresses, ports, protocols and scheduling. Its online tools check your system and locate security vulnerabilities. These active scans report the number, nature and severity of system-security risks. You can then adjust the security status of your PC at any time and audit the effectiveness of your entire security policy.

Features new to version 5.0 include Windows XP support, a message console to display security alerts and system information, and the ability to configure global settings such as trusted IP addresses.

ZoneAlarm 3.7.143

If you have DSL or a cable modem then a firewall is not just a desirable add-on, it's a necessity. ZoneAlarm is a top choice and, best of all, the basic version is free. You can block uninitiated and unwanted traffic even while your PC is unattended or when you're not using your connection, as well as limiting your exposure to attack by specifying which applications can access the internet. ZoneAlarm stops email-borne Visual Basic Script worms, while AlertAdvisor offers instant security advice.

The spread of spyware – software that monitors and passes on details of your PC usage to third parties – is reaching epidemic proportions. A recent study in the US by the National Cyber Security Alliance, a coalition dedicated to online computer safety, revealed that an astonishing 91 percent of broadband users had spyware on their home computers – often placed surreptitiously by file-sharing programs.

In the course of downloading one of the more popular fileswapping networks – such as Kazaa – users are also encouraged to download accompanying spyware as a means of making ends meet for the peer-to-peer service. In most cases the threat to privacy is benign, serving merely to gather demographic information on your surfing habits in the hope of offering up advertising more in tune with your tastes.

The privacy policies that accompany spyware products promise anonymity. But the fact remains that if you have active spyware on your hard disk you effectively have a 'live' server sitting on your PC. What's more, that live server is sending information about your surfing habits to a third party.

Big Brother

In last month's issue we showed just how easy it was to use off-the-shelf packages costing little more than £50 to remotely monitor people's PC behaviour.

We looked at SpectorSoft's eBlaster, which the company promotes as a way to keep track of what your spouse or children are up to online. Operating in Stealth mode, the software tracks every single keystroke entered into a PC from instant messages to passwords. It also records emails sent and received as well as all accessed websites. It then sends the data to an IP address where it is anonymously relayed to whoever has installed the software.

Douglas Boudreau, a 21-year-old Boston College student, gave us a taste

of the future back in February when a grand jury indicted him for secretly installing keystroke monitoring software on campus computers.

He used the software to steal personal data from more than 4,000 individuals who operated the machines. Information was forwarded from the compromised computers to a remote system accessed by Boudreau.

Using this gleaned information he proceeded to compile a database containing personal facts about thousands of students, employees and staff. Computer passwords, confidential access codes to Boston College buildings, social security info and credit card numbers were all on file.

Watch your back

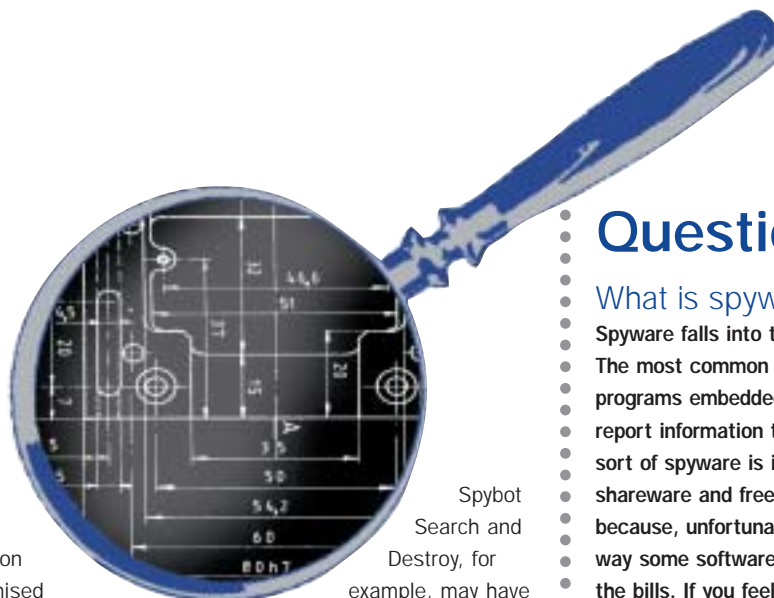
Reading the fine print is the first step toward avoiding many types of spyware. Never click Yes to a 'Do you want to download and install?' prompt unless you're 100 percent sure the people who made it are trustworthy.

It's not in the spyware company's interest to have its software removed, so it's unlikely that you'll find an entry for the app in Add/Remove Programs. Indeed you might not even find a folder within Program Files on your hard disk.

If the software is already on your hard drive then your best defence is to run a program that scans your hard disk for known spyware files, folders, Registry entries and tracking cookies.

The software will then give you the option to remove unwanted spyware. Several antispyware utilities scan your PC's memory in real time to keep unwanted programs from installing and running in the first place.

Spyware is still a relatively recent phenomenon – as yet there are no products from the major security brands – so the available antispyware packages are crude to say the least, each with their own strengths and weaknesses.



Spybot Search and Destroy, for example, may have

a clumsy interface but it excels at scanning disks and removing the benign spyware products that are attached to fileswapping networks. Your best bet is to combine at least two leading products (see *Editor's choice cuts*, opposite, for more information).

Sniffing out keystroke logging software – such as WinWhatWhere's Investigator or Spectorsoft's Spector – is more of a challenge. The apps deliberately use cryptic names, sending logs of your keystrokes secretly over the web to a snooper.

To prevent keystroke logging software from reporting on you via the web, install a personal firewall such as ZoneAlarm. If you already use a firewall, check the list of programs permitted to send information over the internet. If you see an application you don't recognise, alter the settings so the program must ask for permission before sending a message. ■



Question time

What is spyware?

Spyware falls into two categories. The most common type is hidden programs embedded in larger apps that report information to advertisers. This sort of spyware is included in some shareware and freeware packages because, unfortunately, that's the only way some software developers can pay the bills. If you feel that these hidden programs invade your privacy consider downloading some, or all, of the utilities from *Editor's choice cuts*, opposite.

More insidious types of spyware fall under the realm of PC surveillance tools. Users can monitor all sorts of activity on a PC, capturing keystrokes, taking periodic snapshots, logging email and chat, as well as making a record of all visited websites. These tools have their rightful place in a virtual world that exploits the vulnerable. However, such tools can seriously violate your privacy if they fall into the wrong hands.

How does spyware work?

Spyware sits on your hard disk and continuously 'calls home' via your internet connection, transmitting your surfing habits back to a third-party 'mothership'. If you read the privacy policies of the companies involved, they will usually guarantee anonymity. It's up to you whether you trust such declarations. We think it's just a matter of time before widespread privacy abuse is uncovered. The key point is that spyware is theoretically capable of sending much more than basic surfing statistics.

Is surveillance spyware illegal in any way?

In the workplace employers have been warned to tread carefully to ensure they remain within the law when monitoring staff emails and web use, according to recent advice from the Information Commissioner. In the home, for obvious reasons, no such jurisdiction exists.