

Online Privacy: Send the Spies Packing

Written by Terrence O'Hanlon, ReliabilityWeb.com
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Do you ever get the feeling someone is watching you? If you spend much time surfing the Internet, it is quite possible that someone is watching you, or at least watching your online behavior.

Some companies secretly install software on your computer system that tracks what Web sites you go to under the theory they can guess what you might like to purchase in the future. That information is deemed very valuable by marketers. Depending on your browser and firewall security settings, you may unknowingly let this tracking software get installed by visiting a Web site or by downloading some type of file-sharing software. Almost all free file-sharing software downloads include tracking software. This software is sometimes referred to as spyware.

According to Steve Gibson of Gibson Research Corp., spyware is any software which employs a user's Internet connection in the background (the so-called "backchannel") without his knowledge or explicit permission. Silent background use of an Internet backchannel connection must be preceded by a complete and truthful disclosure of proposed backchannel usage, followed by the receipt of explicit, informed consent for such use. Any software communicating across the Internet absent these elements is guilty of information theft and is properly and rightfully termed spyware.

How do you know if your PC is spying on you? If you have a teenager at home and you have heard him or her talk about downloading music, you have spyware on your PC.

Luckily there are plenty of good software programs to scan for any spyware that may be on your computer. These programs also can help you eliminate spyware from your system and prevent it from returning. The most popular is a free download (premium versions are also available) called Ad-aware from [LavaSoft](http://LavaSoft.com). With over 45 million downloads and rave reviews from all the PC magazines, it seems to be the clear favorite.

Another way to avoid spyware is to check the software that you are about to download against the list of known spyware carriers at Spyware-Guide.com

How big is the spyware problem? So big that the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC)

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hosted a one-day public workshop on spyware issues in Washington, DC, in April. The issues the FTC deals with touch on the economic lives of most Americans, where the FTC works to ensure that U.S. markets are free of restrictions that harm consumers and enforces federal consumer protection laws that prevent fraud, deception, and unfair business practices.

Before you panic, some cookies (that track your return visits) can actually be considered spyware, but most companies state that they do not collect individually identifiable information about a Web surfer. The factors that enter into a decision to trust that company and its privacy policy are the same as you would use in the physical world. Certainly avoid filling out forms on Web sites that do not publish a privacy policy.

In addition, our privacy is slowly eroding in the real world also as more and more video surveillance cameras are being installed. The United Kingdom already has placed more than 2 million cameras throughout its countries. This model has caught the attention of almost all major metropolitan police departments that are beginning similar programs throughout the U.S. No antispyware I know of will remove those privacy invaders.

You can learn much more about all kinds of online and offline privacy issues at the [Electronic Privacy Information Center](#).

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