Net anonymity service back-doored

Thomas C. Greene, The Register 2003-08-21

The popular Java Anonymous Proxy (JAP), used to anonymise one's comings and goings across the Internet, has been back-doored by court order. The service is currently logging access attempts to a particular, and unnamed, Web site and reporting the IP addys of those who attempt to contact it to the German police.

We know this because the JAP operators immediately warned users that their IP traffic might be going straight to Big Brother, right? Wrong. After taking the service down for a few days with the explanation that the interruption was "due to a hardware failure", the operators then required users to install an "upgraded version" (ie. a back-doored version) of the app to continue using the service.

"As soon as our service works again, an obligatory update (version 00.02.001) [will be] needed by all users," the public was told. Not a word about Feds or back doors.

Fortunately, a nosey troublemaker had a look at the 'upgrade' and noticed some unusual business in it, such as:

"CAMsg::printMsg(LOG_INFO,"Loading Crime Detection Data....\n");"
"CAMsg::printMsg(LOG_CRIT,"Crime detected - ID: %u - Content:

\n%s\n",id,crimeBuff,payLen);"

and posted it to alt.2600.

Soon the JAP team replied to the thread, admitting that there is now a "crime detection function" in the system mandated by the courts. But they defended their decision:

"What was the alternative? Shutting down the service? The security apparatchiks would have appreciated that - anonymity in the Internet and especially AN.ON are a thorn in their side anyway."

Sorry, the Feds undoubtedly appreciated the JAP team's willingness to back-door the app while saying nothing about it a lot more than they would have appreciated seeing the service shut down with a warning that JAP can no longer fulfill its stated obligation to protect anonymity due to police interference.

Admittedly, the JAP team makes some good points in its apology. For one, they say they're fighting the court order but that they must comply with it until a decision is reached on their appeal.

Jap is a collaborative effort of Dresden University of Technology, Free University Berlin and the Independent Centre for Privacy Protection Schleswig-Holstein, Germany (ICPP). A press release from ICPP assures users that JAP is safe to use because access to only one Web site is currently being disclosed, and only under court-ordered monitoring.

But that's not the point. Disclosure is the point. The JAP Web site still claims that anonymity is sacrosanct: "No one, not anyone from outside, not any of the other users, not even the provider of the intermediary service can determine which connection belongs to which user."

This is obviously no longer true, if it ever was. And that's a serious problem, that element of doubt. Anonymity services can flourish only if users trust providers to be straight with them at all times. This in turn means that providers must be absolutely punctilious and obsessive about disclosing every exception to their assurances of anonymity. One doesn't build confidence by letting the Feds plug in to the network, legally or otherwise, and saying nothing about it.

Justifying it after the fact, as the JAP team did, simply isn't good enough.

Telling us that they only did it to help catch criminals isn't good enough either. Sure, no normal person is against catching criminals - the more the merrier, I say. But what's criminal is highly relative, always subject to popular perception and state doctrine. If we accept Germany's definition of criminal activity that trumps the natural right to anonymity and privacy, then we must accept North Korea's, China's and Saudi Arabia's. They have laws too, after all. The entire purpose of anonymity services is to sidestep state regulation of what's said and what's read on the basis of natural law.

The JAP Web site has a motto: "Anonymity is not a crime." It's a fine one, even a profound one. But it's also a palpably political one. The JAP project inserted itself, uncalled, into the

turbulent confluence between natural law and state regulation, and signaled its allegiance to the former. It's tragic to see it bowing to the latter. ®

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