

How To Combat Spyware

by Panda Software - Wednesday, 29 September 2004.

The increasing -often commercial- interest in obtaining data that can identify and profile users is the root of the growing concern among the Internet community regarding protection of privacy. While most companies obtain data on potential clients transparently and legally, as with all things there are exceptions. There are still malicious users and businesses prepared to obtain confidential information with scant regard for ethics.

These unscrupulous practices have fuelled the use of spyware: applications designed to obtain information about users without their knowledge, or in some cases, consent. Some spyware programs can draw up a detailed profile of a computer user, including, for example, the persons Internet habits, the amount of time spent online, favorite football team, or even in extreme circumstances, the user's religion or sexual tendencies. There's no doubt that the presence of spyware on a computer is a serious intrusion of privacy that needs to be dealt with.

On many occasions the information gathered is sold -often for considerable sums- to third-parties, which will no doubt lead to a further increase in the proliferation of spyware.

Spyware is actually installed remarkably easily on computers and many users are shocked -on scanning their systems- to find their computers crawling with this kind of program.

These kinds of programs often enter computers hidden in programs that apparently pose no threat whatsoever, such as freeware, shareware or demos. Often, the source of the download is more of a factor than the file itself, as many well-known files are tampered with and spyware inserted in them, meaning that when a user installs the legitimate program, the spyware is installed as well.

How to protect against spyware

- Only download from trustworthy Internet sites, and take care to avoid dubious sites, regardless of how reliable the download file itself might appear.
- Pay attention to the messages that appear when installing programs. Some spyware programs display messages asking for your consent to install the application, although they are often mixed in among other messages and installation processes that have no relation to the spyware.
- Make sure you have antivirus software installed on your computer and that it can detect and eliminate spyware. There are also programs designed specifically to root out spy programs, although it is advisable to combine this with effective antivirus protection.
- Protect your Internet connections with a firewall (hardware or software). This will prevent spyware from sending information out to others even if it has managed to infiltrate your computer as it will need to use unprotected communication ports.

