

## Business Plus Article – Nov 2004 Spyware – A silent menace watching your computer?

By now, you have probably come to realise that the Internet is a scary place, full of predatory baddies looking to spoil your day out in Cyberspace.

So you have your Antivirus software, diligently installed and updated, scanning each file you open to ensure it is not infected with a virus. You have your firewall, stood like a bouncer on the door, governing who can and can't come in or out of your network. And you have installed each and every security patch issued by Microsoft or your software vendor to close the holes in your security.

So all's well. Surf with impunity. Well, actually, no.

“Spyware” is a generic term for something which sits on your PC, and allows a 3<sup>rd</sup> party to gain information about your usage. This data might be as simple as which web sites you like to visit, or it might be something more dangerous like your bank details or passwords.

In its simplest form, a web site might use cookies to track your web activity. A cookie is a small text file written to your computer which might contain a number to uniquely identify you. Cookies are legitimately used by a lot of web sites to enable them to recognise you when you come back to them and have all your details ready. In theory, a cookie can only be read by the web site which placed it there. In other words, a cookie shouldn't reveal any information that you haven't already told that web site.

The trick comes with the banner ads that so many web sites put up. Because the banner adverts are web sites in their own right, they can build a log of all the web pages that they were called from, and hence see which other related sites you have visited, and what you did on them.

Ok, so now they know all the related sites you have been to, but only the ones that call that particular banner. Not the end of the world?

The next level of spyware is called a “Browser Hijack”. This can be done by installing software such as “Peer to Peer” download tools such as Kazaa, or by installing “Advertising supported Freeware”. Because these are genuine programs, which you might want to use, they are not detected as viruses or Trojans by your Virus scanner.

Once these are in place, they can redirect every web site you visit to their own, which in turn forwards you on to the site you were looking for, logging where you are going as they do it. They can then direct marketing towards you, based on what they know you are interested in.

Some might consider this benign, and others might see it as a major invasion of privacy. You choose.

There are more advanced and malicious forms of spyware too. These can do more serious invasions of privacy, such as logging keystrokes to gain your passwords etc, or in some cases store and serve adverts or illegal files to other people.

So what can you do about it? Well, just like Anti-Virus tools, there are Anti-Spyware tools. As with virus checkers, there are free ones such as Adaware SE from Lavasoft, for personal use, and there are more advanced, manageable ones for business users which can be controlled centrally by the IT department, such as Pest Patrol from Computer Associates.

Spyware is comparatively new, and looks set to be the next major menace to computer networks. It is widely thought that in a year or two, Anti-Spyware protection will become as commonplace as Anti-Virus software is today, as people become aware of the problem, which may already be hiding in the shadows of your network.

**Useful links:**

Adaware SE [www.lavasoft.nl](http://www.lavasoft.nl)  
Spybot [www.safer-networking.org](http://www.safer-networking.org)  
Pest Patrol <http://ca.com/products/pestpatrol>