

## The New Creeping Crud

### Beware of Spyware, the Latest Predator on the Internet



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Spyware, the Internet slang for “advertising supported software,” is nothing but a deceptive means to monitor your Internet surfing activity in order to gather data about you. Almost unheard of a year ago, it is now the new SPAM, plaguing Internet users in record numbers around the globe. Through this invasive program interlopers can secretly monitor your keystrokes, scan files on your hard drive, install yet more spyware, hijack your browser settings, and read your Internet cookies. It can also surreptitiously collect sensitive personal information such as your e-mail addresses and passwords and, worse yet, steal credit card numbers. Also known as “junkware” and “malware,” the term spyware is used interchangeably with “adware,” a pesky software that displays advertisements usually through pop-ups.

You as the user often unwittingly install insidious spyware when you are busy downloading free software and do not notice the clause regarding spyware installation in the fine print of the software’s licensing agreement. Sometimes spyware pushers covertly trick the user into clicking on a link that installs it in a pop-up browser window, even via a deceptive button labeled “cancel.” Install a free pop-up blocker, and then you won’t be tempted to click those links to make those annoying pop-ups go away. Be discriminating about what you choose to download and install, and make sure to check the licensing agreement and privacy agreement carefully for a spyware disclosure. In addition, be careful with e-mail attachments since many have spyware attached to them.

The data that the unwanted spyware gathers is most often used for advertising/marketing purposes or for sale to a third party for their own advertising or marketing strategies. Companies then target you by sending unsolicited advertisements your way based upon the data collected about you. Several large media companies place banner ads in their products in exchange for part of the sales generated by the banner. In addition to invading your privacy, spyware is a parasite that saps your computer’s of its vital energy – it uses up your computer’s memory and resources to run its own separate application, even eating up some of your bandwidth. As a result, it can slow your computer down tremendously or, worse yet, cause it to crash completely over and over again. You may

also see pop-up ads constantly, even when you are not on the Internet, sometimes to the point at which you are unable to use your computer at all.

Whether you know it or not, chances are that your computer is infected with some spyware right now. In October 2004, America Online (AOL) and the National Cyber Security Alliance stated that 80 percent of home computers were plagued with spyware to some extent. If so, you can remove any suspicious files from your computer, but it is often a difficult and frustrating task. Some companies, such as Spybot, Lavasoft, Webroot, and Yahoo, offer free and inexpensive software that you can download easily. These programs will detect and remove spyware for you. Often though you will be discouraged to find the spyware still persistently lodged on your computer even after you have gone through the appropriate steps to un-install it and reboot your computer.

Keep in mind that removing the spyware may mean you cannot use the free program that caused you to download the unwanted spyware in the first place. And beware -- sometimes spyware pushers present their programs as anti-spyware tools. If in doubt, check with your Internet service provider or someone you trust. As a last resort you may need to wipe your hard drive clean of all programs and start from scratch reloading the programs that you do want on your hard drive. Once you manage to wrestle the spyware off your computer, make sure to keep your anti-virus and anti-spyware software as current as possible to prevent its return.

Historically old anti-virus programs don't prevent spyware since it is neither a virus nor a worm. Other than destroying your computer's performance, spyware does not damage the computer itself. However, things are definitely looking up on the spyware front. Today most popular anti-virus products such as McAfee, Norton and Trend Micro-PCCillin also scan for spyware. In addition, some Internet service providers such as AOL and Earthlink now provide spyware protection.

In the most recent development in the war against spyware, Microsoft has offered its own free download to combat spyware on Windows available as of Tuesday, January 11, 2005. Named "Microsoft WindowsAntiSpyware," you can download it at [www.microsoft.com/athome/security](http://www.microsoft.com/athome/security) with free monthly updates. This foray is an indicator that Microsoft may soon enter the ring to provide computer security software. This software will not prevent infections, so consumers will still need to use traditional anti-virus software as well.

Unlike the SPAM kingpins who are often overseas, reputable U.S. companies champion the spyware/adware industry. Recognizing the rampant spyware problem, the Federal Trade Commission recently sued the operator of a website for sneaking spyware onto consumers' computers. Congress plans to introduce a bill requiring companies to clearly inform consumers that spyware is attached to a software download and tell them how to remove it. As a result many companies involved in pop-up advertising are trying to improve their business practices. With any luck, the spyware industry may soon be brought to its knees.

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