

Web users tangle with privacy issue

Debate ensues as the Internet evolves into a commercial marketplace.

NEW YORK (AP) — A survey released on the eve of important government hearings on Web privacy suggests computer users are extremely vulnerable to cyberspace spying and other personal intrusions by Internet businesses.

The results could help frame one of the most fundamental debates in the evolution of the Internet as a commercial marketplace: whether the industry can police itself or the government must step in to protect millions of personal-computer users.

Starting Tuesday, the Federal Trade Commission will hold unusually broad hearings in response to complaints by privacy advocates that personal information is gathered and used by online operators without user consent or knowledge.

The Electronic Privacy Information Center, a nonprofit consumer group participating in the talks, released its survey in a preemptive volley ahead of the Washington hearings. The group provided the results to The Associated Press Sunday in advance of a planned release Monday.

The survey found that of the Internet's 100 most popular Web sites, about half collect personal information from users who click on their sites or through mailing lists and other means.

Only 17 sites even mention the privacy issue, and most of those fell far short of what the group considered adequate disclosure — explaining why information is collected, how it will be used, and what steps will be taken to limit improper use.

"The industry is urging self-policing, but there is no indication that Web sites today are doing anything toward that," said David Sobel, the center's legal counsel.

Some of the surveyed sites explain privacy policies in ambiguous

language. For example, Amazon.com, a major online seller of books, tells users it does not rent or sell its mailing list. But it adds that users should send an e-mail to make sure this doesn't happen, the surveyors said.

Of the 100 sites, only eight gave users some control over whether the Web site could share the personal information with others.

On the positive side, the surveyors noted that some sites, such as CNN's online service, don't collect any information about Web users. This type of anonymity was touted by the group as a main way for the Internet to retain the privacy of surfers.

"There is a lot of anonymity ... which is the defacto way privacy is protected," said Marc Rotenberg, director of the privacy information center. "Some people who think they are surfing the Net are actually swimming in a fish bowl. It's a little uncomfortable once you realize that."

In another item of concern, 23 of the 100 Web sites enabled the creation of "cookies," which are nuggets of information that can be planted into a user's PC and used without their knowledge. None of the sites told the user about this intrusion.

When a user first visits a Web site and gives his or her name and other personal information, the Web-site computer can store the cookie in the user's hard-drive so that during the next visit to the site it will retrieve the cookie and greet the user by name.

The worry is that the same technology also can track which Web sites are visited, what pages are looked at, even a user's hobbies, then link the data to people's names and addresses. Site owners can sell the information to advertisers and other interested parties, without the consent or knowledge of users.

The survey was conducted by group members last Thursday by examining sites ranked as the most popular by a Web service, www.100hot.com.



PHOTOGRAPH: Tim Moog

Sign of the Times

Christina Borgstedte, a senior elementary education major, paints signs for the Aggie Orientation Leader program for the New Student Conferences starting today.

Minister says former Klansman confessed before execution

MOBILE, Ala. (AP) — After 16 years of proclaiming his innocence, a former Ku Klux Klansman confessed to killing a black teen-ager, according to a minister who met with the death row inmate before he was executed.

The Rev. Bob Smith mentioned the confession at Henry Francis Hays' funeral on Saturday, shocking friends and relatives. Hays, 42, was executed in Alabama's electric chair early Friday for the 1981 slaying.

Smith, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Mobile, met with Hays for the first time in prison on Wednesday. "He told me he was guilty," Smith said in an interview that appeared in Sunday editions of The Mobile Register. "He said, 'You're the only one who knows this.'"

The minister said he encouraged Hays to "take a bath in confession."

Then, Smith said, Hays reached over, grabbed his arms and began a tearful, detailed, 40-minute account of 19-year-old Michael Donald's abduction, beating and strangulation. Donald's body was later hanged in a tree as a way of showing Klan strength in Alabama.

The minister said he shared the story of the confession because Hays did not tell him to keep it private. Smith witnessed the execution and attended the funeral Saturday, along with about 40 others.

Smith said Hays told him the Alabama Ku Klux Klan ordered the killing of a black person in retaliation for the slaying of a white Birmingham policeman. A jury in Mobile deadlocked on charges against a black man in that slaying.

"It was their job to let the blacks know you couldn't get away with that," Smith said.

Hays' account was almost identical to that given by fellow Klansman James "Tiger" Knowles,

who testified against Hays and is serving a life sentence. Hays disputed Knowles' testimony that he slit Donald's throat three times to make sure he was dead. He said Knowles was responsible.

After making the confession, Hays asked Smith: "Am I guilty? What do you say?" Smith suggested that they pray, and Hays cried.

Hays asked Smith to relay the confession to Donald's brother, Stanley, but Smith refused and said he should tell him himself.

Stanley Donald was unimpressed with the confession. "If he actually wanted to tell somebody, our family is who he should have told," he said.

A friend, Chuck Blanton, said the minister told him about the confession but before he was executed, Hays wouldn't confirm it. "He did say he has confessed what he has to confess to man and he confessed what he had to confess to God," Blanton said.

NEWS BRIEFS

Students circulate Northgate petition

Students will be at the Recreation Center lobby from 1-10 p.m. today circulating a petition to get Northgate redevelopment put to a vote. The petition calls College Station residents to vote on whether to build a proposed hotel and convention center on Patricia Street.

American triumphs at piano competition

FORT WORTH (AP) — American Jon Nakamatsu, described as "everybody's sentimental favorite," won the gold medal Sunday in the 10th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition.

A graduate of Stanford University, the popular 23-year-old man from Sunnyvale, Calif., was probably the

only contestant who didn't go to a conservatory or even major in music. He majored in German and secondary education and teaches German at a high school in San Jose.

A crowd of some 3,000 applauded wildly and gave Nakamatsu a standing ovation as he joined Cliburn and other finalists on the stage. He's the third American to win the prize.

Murder suspect blames intruders

NEW YORK (AP) — The man accused of murdering his former teacher told police he was in Jonathan Levin's apartment the day he was killed but fled after two armed intruders burst in, according to the criminal complaint released Sunday.

Corey Arthur told police he went to Levin's Upper West side apartment on May 30, Arthur said two people came in — one brandishing a gun, the other a knife — and ordered him to bind Levin with duct tape, which he said he did, the complaint said.

Levin, a popular English teacher and son of Time Warner CEO Gerald

Levin, was bound with duct tape and tortured with a knife, apparently to get him to reveal the password for his bank card. He was then killed with a gunshot to the head.

Negotiators struggle to reach agreement

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's make-or-break time for a tobacco settlement, and it comes with a note of desperation.

The lead peacemakers are telling Congress to expect a deal with tobacco companies this week. But they're admitting they will have to get their own side to compromise and offer cigarette makers controversial last-minute protections against legal liability.

And Mississippi Attorney General Michael Moore, leading the anti-tobacco side, is pushing ahead without the crucial support of the public health establishment. The states suing tobacco companies are so fractured that Moore postponed plans to show them a final deal on Tuesday.

WEATHER OUTLOOK

WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
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Sketch

By Quatro



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