



~ What is Spyware?

By Scott Mielentz

Spyware is a general term used for software that performs certain behaviors such as advertising, collecting personal information, or changing the configuration of your computer, generally without appropriately obtaining your consent. Spyware is often associated with software that displays advertisements (called adware) or software that tracks personal or sensitive information.

That does not mean all software which provides ads or tracks your online activities is bad. For example, you might sign up for a free music service, but "pay" for the service by agreeing to receive targeted ads. If you understand the terms and agree to them, you may have decided that it is a fair tradeoff. You might also agree to let the company track your online activities to determine which ads to show you.

Other kinds of spyware make changes to your computer that can be annoying and can cause your computer slow down or crash. These programs can change your Web browser's home page or search page, or add additional components to your browser you don't need or want. These programs also make it very difficult for you to change your settings back to the way you originally had them.

The key in all cases is whether or not you (or someone who uses your computer) understand what the software will do and have agreed to install the software on your computer. {As referenced from Microsoft.com}

There are a number of ways spyware or other unwanted software can get on your system. A common trick is to covertly install the software during the installation of other software you want, such as a music or video file sharing program. Software spyware can record keystrokes, log electronic chat conversations and log the contents of emails. Some spyware will take periodic screenshots of what is being displayed on the computer monitor. Software spyware can be used to monitor communications sent to and from the computer, to steal passwords and monitor other computer activities.

In a world where we are all focused on privacy the use of spyware seems contradictory. Watch for next month's column for cautions and solutions when dealing with this problem.

Till next time happy computing!

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Editors Note: Thanks to Scott Mielentz, owner of Mac/PC TechOnCall for making this column possible. The above comments were in response to a question or problem encountered by one of our Heights residents. We hope you found the information useful and informative. If you have computer related questions you can email techoncall@adelphia.net. We welcome your comments.