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TOP STORY

US Anti-Spyware Bills Pass; Hackers Take Hostages

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May 25, 2005

The US House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly for two bills which clamp down on spyware programs. The I-SPY Prevention Act of 2005 and the SPY Act carry multi-million dollar fines and prison sentences. The two bills now go to the Senate for further consideration. President Bush is expected to sign the bills as soon as they pass.

Consumer groups welcome the impending legislation to eliminate a nuisance, but big corporations see the much-needed relief effort as crucial to protect business interests.

"We could really use the government's help in catching and punishing the people who produce spyware, viruses, spam and the like. Right now that stuff can take down a huge corporation but the penalty is only a few hundred dollars and a slap on the wrist," says Home Depot's Executive Vice President and CIO, Bob DeRodes

The I-SPY Prevention Act of 2005 makes it a criminal offence to access a computer via spyware programs without permission from the computer owner(s). The punishment includes sentences of up to five years in prison. The SPY Act requires firms to obtain a user's permission before installing such programs onto their computers.

The bills also bring harsher penalties for those behind phishing scams.

"Consumers have a right to know and have a right to decide who has access to their highly personal information that spyware can collect," said Californian representative Mary Bono, who introduced one of the bills.

Even if the bills become law, there are still obstacles to preventing criminal use of spyware, such as lack of global enforcement policies, as well as problems with distinguishing between the different types of spyware.

Spyware programs cause a nuisance when they redirect web searches, install unwanted bookmarks or bombard a computer user with pop-up ads tailored to other search terms. It can also make computers slower and crash machines. Malicious spyware steals confidential information and was highlighted as a major threat recently after criminals attempted to rob Sumitomo Mitsui bank using keylogging software to gather confidential data from the financial institution.

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The problem for many countries, however, is tracking down the culprits. Only two have been sued so far in the US.

It is also unclear whether the bills carry enough punch to knock out the latest threat dubbed "ransom-ware."

Hackers use ransom-ware to lock up the electronic documents on a computer and then demand \$200 over the internet from the computer user to get the files back.

Websense security researchers reported what is believed to be the first such attack when a corporate customer they would not identify fell victim to the infection recently. The ransom-ware encrypted files that included documents, photographs and spreadsheets.

A ransom note left behind included an e-mail address and a demand for \$200 for the digital keys to unlock the files.

The FBI said the scheme appears isolated and is unlike other internet extortion crimes in several ways thus leading to confusion over the new bills' potential effect on the problem. Leading security and antivirus firms this week were updating protective software for companies and consumers to guard against this type of attack.

"There are some good software programs out there for individuals but corporate network protection still has quite ways to go," says DeRodes.

Experts urge computer users to scan their machines with more than one anti-spyware program since no one program recognizes all possible spyware and ransom-ware infections. Spybot, AdAware, Webroot and Symantec anti-spyware programs are examples of popular protection programs.

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