

Inbox

Encryption programs worth a look

Security issues have recently moved to the front burner. Google refused to open its files to the government, a noble move that nevertheless notified us that nothing we do online is really secret.

That same government has decided it can spy on its citizens and examine their communications. Even those of us who aren't doing anything wrong are more than a little creeped out by the idea that someone may be watching or listening.

While civil libertarians enter protest mode, technologists respond with one big "duh." They tell us that e-mail has never been secure. We have sent documents, confidential information and credit-card numbers back and forth for years with no protection. It is amazing that identity theft and document pilfering isn't more common than the current frightening levels.

We are jumping out of airplanes without parachutes. Scuba diving without oxygen. Driving cars without an ignition switch. Choose your metaphor. The one favored by Echoworx, a software vendor that is marketing an easier-to-use encryption method, has to do with a comparison between e-mail and its analog counterpart.

"You wouldn't put your credit-card number on a postcard and mail it across country," said Echoworx Executive Vice President Chris Erickson. "But that's what we are doing. We are not protecting our information."

Erickson compares the encryption program, which has become part of Verizon's small-business offering, as the envelope that prevents interceptors from finding out what information is under the flaps. There are some differences. Someone can steam open a stolen credit-card bill, but they leave tracks. Mail intercepted between two secure points is indecipherable to anyone who may be sniffing around.

Encryption keys have been around for a while, but the instruction manual can make your head hurt. The Verizon/Echoworx version requires some extra effort and isn't quite ready for prime time. On the other hand, this is a service that will be worthwhile for many businesses and individuals who will pay for the extra protection.

It will take a while before such protection is a part of all consumer packages. Still, individuals can become early adopters. By signing on to www.business.verizon.net/securemail and agreeing to pay \$6.95 a month, you can send encrypted mail to any mailbox. Recipients need to supply a secret word in order to view the message, which needs to either be from shared knowledge or passed to them through another channel.

There are a few more limitations. Outlook or Outlook Express is required, which locks out Macintosh and Webmail users for the time being. This will change if the idea catches on. Notes to Mom won't require encryption, but any lawyer or salesman will appreciate the extra protection.

Echoworx's partnership with Verizon isn't exclusive, and this feature will turn up in other offerings soon enough.

Users will appreciate the option. It won't stop the government from confiscating your computer or "legally" invading your privacy, but it does add another level of safety that is worth its cost.

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