

Whose Computer Is This?

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Like millions of other Americans, I sometimes struggle with pop-up ads and spy-ware. On an unprotected computer these small programs can bring even the fastest new computer to its knees. Luckily there is a cottage industry growing up around this problem and there is also a lot of free software available to help cleanse our computers from the worst effects of this class of software. But although this is a growth industry it is not one that advances the productivity of the average worker or enhances the gross domestic product.

In case you've been in Tibet for the last half decade, ad-ware and spy-ware are little programs that are surreptitiously downloaded to your computer when you visit a Web site. "Parasite-ware" (as I like to call it) vendors use these programs to track and understand your browsing and buying habits so that they can make just the right offer at just the right time for you to make a purchase or sell this "research" to other vendors. If you have a very liberal definition of Customer Relationship Management or CRM, these programs might qualify for inclusion.

Security software is no match

Although my computer is equipped with the latest security software including a firewall and anti-virus software, a few pop-ups still manage to get onto my computer from time to time and I am left to run one of several applications designed to remove them. The software does a pretty good job but there are a few pieces of ad- and spy-ware that still manage to find a home on my machine.

There are about a dozen of these programs that have taken up more or less permanent resi-

dence on my hard drive that even the security software won't remove. I suppose I could follow the laborious instructions provided by my security software vendor to manually remove them but something about starting my system in 'safe mode' tells me this might be above my pay grade. And I know lots of people who feel the same way.

So, the other day I decided to track down some of the developers of these programs to see if they had any advice about removing their "products". As it turns out it wasn't all that hard. My security software vendor has a lot of detail about the programs and their owners so I simply visited a few Web sites. Here's what I found out about the spy-ware and ad-ware that won't go away.

Some examples

HelpExpress is a program that is apparently supposed to help me in some way. It's produced by a company called Alset, Inc. (www.aset.com) aka Alset Research. At the Web site I learned that, "Alset Research gives you a complete picture of how your users actually use your – or your competitors' products. We collect actual user behavior from the fields (sampling up to one million users), avoiding the bias that can appear in focus groups and other directed research methods. Your most pressing questions about how a computing product is used can likely be answered."

Wow! With a product name like HelpExpress I really got the impression they wanted to help me so you'd think it wouldn't be too hard to contact them. But Guess what? Their phone number is toll-free but it's hooked up to a phone hell system and they require you to send

technical or support questions by email. Also, there's no hint of their physical location on the site. Literally, the only way to contact them is through a series of email addresses like "info", "sales", and "pr" @alsetresearch.com. HelpExpress doesn't really live up to the expectations it sets, does it?

Remove me, I dare you

Twain-tech (www.twain-tech.com) is another vendor of something on my hard drive that I didn't buy. I decided to contact them to see if I could get instructions about removing their software from my machine and believe it or not, the instructions were posted right on their Web site; here they are:

"If you want to uninstall, you can do so easily through the add/remove function in your control panel. You can access your control panel by going to:

- 1. Start (typically, the button in the bottom left of your screen)*
- 2. Choose SETTINGS*
- 3. Choose CONTROL PANEL*
- 4. Choose ADD/REMOVE PROGRAMS*
- 5. Select Twain-Tech*
- 6. Click on ADD/REMOVE*

Of course we encourage you to leave it on so that you can benefit from the occasional offers that it shows you. If you need more information, or experience any technical problems, please contact us at techsupport@Twain-Tech.com.

We look forward to hearing from you."

Well, not on my computer. It seems Twain-Tech's programs don't show up in the usual places in Windows Explorer or the above mentioned screen. If they did I wouldn't need help to remove them, would I? That holds true for all the other parasite-ware I tried to access — in some cases whole directories don't show up in the Windows system tools. If you ask me, that's a funny way to get people to use your

software, not letting them access it and all. Anyhow, I decided to send an email to the tech support address. I am waiting for an answer and I promise I will write another column when I hear back from them.

But wait! There's more!

My favorite "parasite-ware program didn't have a name but its company sure sounds righteous — stop-popup-ads-now.com — that's what they call themselves. I tried to visit their Web site but www.stop-popup-ads-now.com is "under construction". Imagine that, a software company without a Web site. For a software company, having a Web site is table stakes these days. What kind of programmers are these guys if they can't make a Web site?

Then there was an anonymous piece of code from a company called "DealHelper", it kind of reminds me of something you do with ground beef. But like Alset Research there was no address, just a bunch of email addresses and the Web site was rather puny.

How do these guys make money if we can't get in touch with them?

So, to be concise I struck out. These little programs and others have simply found a home on my computer and all I can say is I hope those vendors are gleaning valuable insight into how this analyst uses a computer.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but...

There's a whole industry being born here and it could come to occupy a legitimate place in the marketing and advertising arsenal as tastes change and we become adept at zapping TV ads. But this kind of unregulated spying and ad sliming that wrecks innocent people's computers is not the way to do it. If we tame this beast now it could become a valuable tool and a thriving industry. More importantly, if we don't, it will retard the development of the Internet as a reliable business platform.



For now, it seems to me that there ought to be a way to get an uninstall program for these things from the people who make them. We ought to be able to go to their Web sites and say, "Hey, time's up, get off my computer." After all, we paid for our computers and we ought to be able to say what runs on them. There are two bills in Congress right now -- the Internet Spyware Prevention Act and the Safeguard Against Privacy Invasions Act -- and both were passed by the

House in October. Now is the time to let your elected officials know this is important.

Let's start by sending them an email. Together. Today.



About the Author



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Denis Pombriant is a well known thought leader in CRM and he is the founder and managing principal of the Beagle Research Group, a CRM market research firm and consultancy. In 2003, CRM Magazine named Pombriant one of the most influential executives in the CRM industry. Pombriant's latest white paper, "The New Garage" discusses the emerging new enterprise software industry business model.

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