

[REVS] PCFriendly DVD Backchannel

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To: list@securiteam.com

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PCFriendly DVD Backchannel

SUMMARY

Various movie producers, including Universal, Elektra, DreamWorks, and Paramount, add ``advanced interactive features" to their DVD titles that allow for additional ``content" to be served to the client from the Internet. As the ``PCFriendly" application that enables this functionality is used, the user's activity is uniquely tagged and reported to the PCFriendly web site. Because each installation of PCFriendly is uniquely identified with a USERID token, it is also possible for InterActual Technologies to profile the PCFriendly system's users, which ``advanced feature" DVD titles are in their collections. (Notably, this token is passed from PCFriendly to an advertising service at NetFlix.com.) Depending on which DVD title installs the software, this will happen with no notice whatsoever, or with a reminder to read the PCFriendly privacy policy that has no link or posted URI.

Additionally, many of the sites that were checked collect personal information like name, address, and email address, but have no stated privacy policy. Others have varying levels of disclosure about the data collection and privacy-related practices of the sites and their operators. It is important to note that PCFriendly is an enabling technology, connecting the DVD content to Web content provided by the DVD producers. It is the DVD producers and Web content developers involved responsible for privacy erosion taking place.

DETAILS

Abstract:

Numerous DVD titles from major movie producers between 1996 and 2000 come enabled with ``PCFriendly," an application developed by InterActual Technologies that tracks DVD usage. The system is designed to identify users persistently, without using an HTTP cookie, thus bypassing any privacy-enhancing technologies like cookie management software or browser configurations. The identifying token is persistent through product registration and PCFriendly use.

Normal use of popular DVD titles on computers will result in users being identified uniquely, along with the DVDs that were used on the machine. Privacy problems for the user are significantly exacerbated by the DVD titles' links to Web sites, some of which have nonexistent privacy policies and in at least one case, send the user's email address to a third party.

This behavior conflicts directly with the PCFriendly posted privacy policy of December 2000. Further discussion with InterActual showed that the policy was written to apply to the newer InterActual Player, released to replace the PCFriendly player, for which no privacy policy existed.

PCFriendly appears to offer users granular control over which parts of the backchannel to enable, but the controls are not obvious, and are all enabled by default. Further, the software has been deprecated in favor of the newer InterActual Player, which includes additional features for user control over backchannel behavior.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The complete article can be downloaded from:

<<http://www.interhack.net/pubs/pcfriendly/>>
<http://www.interhack.net/pubs/pcfriendly/>

The information has been provided by <mailto:cmcurtin@interhack.net> Matt Curtin.

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