

# Internet Privacy Issues

## **Spyware**

Spyware is software that uses the Internet to gather personal information from an unsuspecting user. Spyware is unknowingly downloaded and installed with another file, such as freeware or shareware programs.

## **IP Address**

An IP address is an identifier for a computer or device on a TCP/IP network.

## **Encryption**

Encryption is the process of translating data into a code that is not readable without the key to the code. Encryption prevents unauthorized access to the data. Data that is encrypted is referred to as cipher text.

The growth of the Internet has caused additional concerns about personal privacy. Searching for information on the Internet is not as anonymous as it might seem.

The collection of data about consumers visiting a website is a marketing technique known as *online profiling*. When a commercial website is visited, information about the user may be collected using various methods such as cookies or web beacons.

A *cookie* is a text file created by the server computer when a user enters information into a website. The cookie file is then stored on the user's computer and accessed each time the user visits that website. Cookies are often created when online purchases are made. Although cookies can only store information that the user has selected or entered, their use has raised concerns over privacy issues.

*Web beacons*, also called *web bugs* or *pixel tags*, are tiny, transparent graphics located on web pages or in e-mail messages that are used in combination with cookies to collect data about web page users or e-mail senders. Usually the monitoring is done by an outside advertising company. The information a web beacon collects includes the IP address of the computer, the URL being visited, the time the web page was viewed, the type of browser being used, and the cookie file.

Before providing a company with personal information through a website, check the site's privacy policy. A *privacy policy* is a legally binding document that explains how any personal information will be used.

The Internet has opened up access to many files that were previously inaccessible. To protect both the privacy of an individual and the accuracy of data stored about individuals, several laws have been passed:

- The **Electronic Communications Privacy Act of 1986 (ECPA)** makes it a crime to access electronic data without authorization. It also prohibits unauthorized release of such data.
- The **Electronic Freedom of Information Act of 1996 (E-FOIA)** requires federal government agencies to make certain agency information available for public inspection and is designed to improve public access to agency records by making more information available online.
- The **Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA)** requires commercial websites that collect personal information from children under the age of 13 to obtain parental consent.
- The **Safety and Freedom through Encryption Act of 1999 (SAFE)** gives Americans the freedom to use any type of encryption to protect their confidential information.

### ***NET Act***

The NET (No Electronic Theft) Act of 1997 closed a loophole in the law which allowed copyrighted material to be given away on the Internet without any legal penalty.

Other laws have been passed that may invade the privacy of some to protect the safety of others. For example, the **Provide Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (PATRIOT) Act of 2001** gives law enforcement the ability to monitor individual's e-mail and web activity.