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Gadget offers measure of privacy about Net activities

Monday, April 05, 2004

Linda Webb
 Special to the Plain Dealer

Who's watching your Internet activity? These days, virtually anyone with some PC savvy.

Saved Internet addresses, cookies and other files called "cache" all collect in various places on the computer. So it can be challenging to keep the history of your Internet activities confidential.

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While there are endless software programs that promise to perform surfing and browser cleanup tasks, often it takes a combination of several labor-intensive steps to clean up everything. And even then, traces of activity usually remain.

But a key-chain-sized device called StealthSurfer claims to keep your hard drive free of all that evidence by allowing you to surf the Internet anonymously, storing every trace of your Internet activity on a portable unit. A copy of the Netscape 7.0 browser and a storage chip are built in.

The unit is inserted into your computer's USB slot, where it is

recognized as a removable drive by the Windows 2000 or XP operating systems. (Windows 98 users must download a driver from the product Web site.) A tiny light blinks on the storage card to indicate connectivity.

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After establishing a personal password, you soon will be driving down the information highway with your virtual car doors locked and the windows rolled up.

When you're finished working, exit Netscape and remove the device by launching the "Safely Remove Hardware" icon on the Windows task bar.

The unit doubles as a USB storage device that can hold anywhere from 64 MB to 512 MB of data on a tiny removable card, depending upon the size purchased.

If someone else tries to use your StealthSurfer, the password protection should keep your data private and secure. For extra protection, however, you could even remove and stow the tiny storage card separately.

This product is billed as a way to hide personal surfing activity, but it could be of interest to business travelers looking to protect company or proprietary information while online. A home user who shops online might use it to keep personal information entered into online forms off the computer and away from intruders who might be mining the PC for data.

At some point, the storage card will fill up with saved files. Caution is in order when deleting files; all the files necessary for the unit to operate are mixed in with the files from your Internet activity, and inadvertent deletion could render StealthSurfer useless. The manufacturer intends to rectify this in a future edition.

StealthSurfer isn't foolproof. Software programs called key loggers can still record what's being entered at the keyboard. And even though traces of your browsing are being stored on an external device, the drive can be written to, so it is still vulnerable to downloaded spyware or adware - just as any other hard drive.

For individuals concerned about baseline privacy or proprietary information when online, StealthSurfer could offer a simple answer. But experienced users willing to do housekeeping tasks after Internet use might opt to save the cash for other gadgets.

Webb is a free-lance writer in Shaker Heights.

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