Internet service accused of privacy violations

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An Internet service that catalogs and indexes messages from electronic bulletin boards is drawing criticism for possibily violating the privacy of the network's users.

DejaNews Partners taps into the Usenet global electronic bulletin board network, makes a copy of every message, and stores and indexes them for easy public retrieval. The service has quickly become the fastest and most powerful way for savvy Internet users to find answers to questions, locate lost friends, or even take the pulse of the wired public.

Executives at San Antonio-based DejaNews seem perplexed at the near daily messages they receive from computer users who complain that what the company is doing amounts to an invasion of privacy.

"When you post to Usenet, it automatically gets propagated to tens of thousands of computers," said Steve madre, president of DejaNews Partners. "So anybody who posted something to Usenet and then later on has any kind of privacy concerns about it must have seriously misunderstood what they were doing."

But it's not just DejaNews' archival retrival system that has some cybersurfers worried. It is the fact people are unaware their messages are being archived and, perhaps even more insidious, the program's ability to form user profiles of people who post messages – grouping them by the specific subject matter on which they most frequently correspond.

"No one ever mentioned to me that it was possible to take a different program and run a search on what you've written," says Peter Crone, a local graphics designer who reads Usenet through his account with The Internet Access Co. of Bedford. "Maybe this is as obvious as the sky being blue to techies, but this is the first I've heard of it."

According to DejaNews, Crone posted three articles to the Usenet between July 27 and Sept. 2, to the user groups "rec.arts.startrek.current," "rec.arts.sf.tv" and "rec.arts.sf.starwars."

Thus, simply by looking up Crone's name on DejaNews, it is possible for anybody on the Internet to conclude that

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Crone is a science fiction buff, and that he likes Star Trek and Star Wars.

"It feels a little like a phone tap or something," says Crone.

The Usenet system is divided into more than 10,000 such special interest "groups," each with their own self-descriptive name, such as "rec.autos.makers.saturn," for Saturn car lovers, and "alt.politics.usa.republican," for devotees of the Republican National Party.

Unlike the World Wide Web, which uses the Internet to move pages of information when requested to do so by a user, the Usenet is based upon older technology which actually copies every message to tens of thousands of computers throughout the world. The typical Usenet server has a billion bytes of storage, holding hundreds of thousands of messages at a time. To keep up with the flood of new messages, organizations usually program their Usenet servers to delete old messages after a few weeks.

But DejaNews follows a different strategy: instead of deleting old messages, the company archives the messages, becoming a kind of Internet memory bank. The company hopes to support its free service by selling advertising space.

Using DejaNews, it is easy to search for every message posted on the net on a particular subject. For example, searching for the name "Warren Buffett" recently returned a list of 20,862 different messages, most from the Usenet group "misc.invest.stocks." You can locate an old friend by searching for all of the messages transmitted over the network that mention the friend's name.

But DejaNews also has a sophisticated system for retrieving "author profiles" of the individuals who have posted messages. Using this system, it's easy to retrieve a list of every group in which a particular person has posted a message – or even the messages themselves.

Amy Bruckman, who is a graduate student at the MIT Media Laboratory and sits on the MIT Presidential Advisory Committee on Privacy, says that her concern with DejaNews is that most people using Usenet are not aware of the service's existence.

But Usenet has actually been archived for a long time. Many schools, for example, have backup tapes containing Usenet messages dating back many years. Furthermore, says Madere, the National Security Agency and possibly other law enforcement or intelligence organizations have been cross-referencing and in-

dexing Usenet for quite some time. "I know for a fact that they do have a text retrieval database which contains Usenet," says Madere.

Creating a searchable index of Usenet "was already done for what people might consider to be sinister purposes," says Madere. "What we have done is made it searchable for useful purposes."

But Bruckman says that building comprehensive author profiles represents a further invasion beyond simply allowing searches by keyword. "There are different levels of invasiveness of technology. Being able to record data is one level. Being able to correlate it is another. That's why Social Security numbers are such a problem – because they make it easy to correlate large amounts of disparate data about a person."

More people might start feeling the same way later this year, when DajaNews starts indexing Usenet groups such as "talk.abortion," in which people exchange political opinions about abortion, and "alt.sex.incest," where people trade stories of sexual abuse. Currently, says Madere, DejaNews does not index any Usenet group whose name begins with the letters alt, talk or soc, although it plans to do so as soon in the near future. DejaNews can be reached at http://dejanews.com/.