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TECHNOLOGY

How Safe is Your Cell Phone?

Column: The Bleeding Edge An Online Exclusive Column

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Your cell phone is vulnerable.

Using inexpensive, off-the-shelf software akin to what the federal government uses against terrorists and the Mafia, people can listen to your calls, read your text messages, track your location and even listen to what you say while your phone is off.

How is this possible? Law Enforcement agencies can work with the cell phone companies under a court order to change the “firmware” on the phone. Obviously, most accountants won't be under suspicion of a federal crime. In fact, as it stands today the odds are greatly in your favor in terms of cell phone security.

That was one of the major selling points for cell phones in the first place — the ability to encrypt the signal so it could not be intercepted over the network. But three things have happened since the introduction of the cell phone that makes the system less secure:

- **Consumers got careless.** Cell phones are so much a part of our lives — and so universal — that we take them for granted. If I have access to you, chances are good that I have access to your cell phone — at least for long enough to slip in an SD card loaded with a

cell phone spy program.

- **Cell phones got smarter.** With each successive generation of phones, the operating system has gotten smarter and capable of running programs, including viruses that can alter the operating system of the cell phone.
- **Bluetooth got universal.** Bluetooth is the communication technology that allows you to use a wireless headset or listen to your phone through a car radio. Sadly, most people have their phones set to automatically connect to any nearby Bluetooth device. This makes it easy to connect to your phone and plant the software on it without even coming near you.

So how much trouble is this? Plenty, as it turns out. It is bad enough that phone conversations and SMS text can be recorded. But by activating the internal microphone of the cell handset, a person can actually listen in to conversations and record them. If the phone has a video camera built in, they can actually record video, hold it in memory and then send the video to someone else when the meeting is over.

Merger and acquisition discussions. Tax consulting with clients. Audits and their findings.

And the technology isn't limited to law enforcement. It can be used by litigating parties, by vengeful ex-spouses and by competitors. Not legally, perhaps, but that is of little comfort considering the cell phone can be tapped in ways that are virtually impossible to discover.

Turning the cell phone off isn't enough to protect client confidentiality. The battery must be taken out of the phone — an action that could erase data from the phone or require re-synchronization. Removing the battery isn't all that hard. But it is irritating enough that I'm willing to bet that most people won't do it.

I'm not willing to get all paranoid about my cell phone being tapped. Frankly, anyone who listened in to my phone would be bored to tears, and I never use SMS text messages for business.

Nevertheless, I am paranoid enough to insist that substantive business meetings will require that cell phones be left outside with the receptionist or that the batteries be visibly removed before the discussions begin.



REALITY CHECK

A compendium of ideas, products, rants and raves from the viewpoint of the author.

The author has no financial interests in any of the products mentioned.

Feel free to disagree, or to share your ideas by sending them to davemcclure@cpata.com.

Internet Site of the Month:

KeepVid (www.keepvid.com)

I don't watch a lot of [YouTube](#) videos, but sometimes I want to keep a copy of something relevant I watch. For that, I use KeepVid, a conversion tool that will save the video from almost any site and convert it to a format I can use, including iPod and AVI. Quick, clean and free.

– **Long Term Evolution (LTE)**. No, not the Darwin thing. Rather, a new format for Fourth Generation data over cell phones that promises faster speeds, better phone reliability and more services from cellular systems. LTE systems are in testing, with the first field deployments scheduled for this fall. Should be coming to a cell tower near you in the next two years.

– **Attacks on P2P**. I'm not a particular fan of peer-to-peer networks, and don't use them because of the high number of viruses and bogus files. Plus, I believe in paying for the songs and videos I use. Nonetheless, the recent efforts of the entertainment industry to portray Limewire as a pawn of international terrorists or as a tool for hacking top secret documents (all phony allegations debunked by

serious

news organizations) are shameful. We can only hope that Congress is wise

enough to do a little research before passing laws banning P2P.

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Online sales taxes. Any day now, state legislatures will come to the startling realization that if they just simplify their sales tax processes, they can make billions of dollars in new taxes for things purchased

online. Depending on how you view state sales taxes, that may be either

good or bad. But one thing is certain: It is inevitable. Now would be a good time to help small business clients begin to prepare.

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Windows 7. By all accounts and my own experience, Windows 7 (now

in public beta) should be an excellent operating system – slimmer, faster and more secure than Vista, with a host of new features. But even

though it uses the same driver architecture as Vista, those still using XP are going to have to bite the bullet and buy new peripherals. It's the way many hardware vendors (notably, in my experience, Hewlett Packard)

force you to buy new hardware. They simply don't produce new drivers.

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Nuclear Fusion. Fusion is a method of creating energy from matter that doesn't have the same problems (safety, leftover radioactive materials, etc.) as today's fission reactors. It is the force that powers the sun, and now dozens of research labs around the world are working

to produce the first in-home cold fusion reactors. How close are they?

Close enough to have produced sustained energy production in the laboratory.

Next up: powering an entire house.

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