Radio Days – 2009-01-24

Online Security: Introduction

Online security is a complex problem and, like all complex problems, there is always a simple solution which does not work. Many people think that if they have a firewall and an anti-virus program they will never get caught. Many others think that if they ignore the whole subject it will just go away. Neither idea is viable, especially in today's world where more and more criminals are making a very good living fleecing unwary people in ever more interesting ways.

Safety on the Road

I often compare computers and cars, and state that there is a significant difference between them: many people grew up with cars in the family so they know how to use them. Even today the vast majority of people grow up in households whose parents do not know how to use a computer.

Safety on the roads involves a number of factors:

- Knowing how to drive
- Keeping your car well maintained
- Keeping your tyre pressures correct
- Being fatigue-free when driving
- Looking-out for other road users when driving
- Ensure that you have no alcohol or other drugs in your system
- Ensuring that you are in control of yourself and your car at all times

Safety in your Computer

In a similar fashion, using a computer has similar needs if you are to keep both your data and your sanity intact. The sorts of data which can be lost include all the obvious stuff like photos and music, and the not-so-obvious stuff like bank account details and email addresses. For most people, the skills and techniques needed to do this seem like something from another planet whereas, in reality, they are little more than common sense.

This is similar to keeping your house clean and tidy and your garden in good shape. It needs both a little knowledge and the work to use that knowledge wisely.

Many people have the idea that, because they just write letters and emails and do a little browsing, their computer will be of no interest to the bad guys. One of my favourite war stories concerns an average family computer which started to do funny things. The reason was easy to find: it had been used to store, anonymously, both hard-core pornography and a number of recipes for making bombs. This was the sort of information which would interest the police of many countries. It appeared that the computer had been chosen at random because it was there, and the only thing to do was to re-install Windows to ensure that the intrusion software had been deleted. This was a costly exercise as all the family's music and photos had to be backed-up first. You have been warned!

Over the next few weeks I will be talking about the sorts of simple things which you can do, and the mostly free tools which you will need, to keep your computer reasonably secure. You will never achieve total security just as you can never guarantee that you will not have an accident on the roads. You can, however, by following the simple tips which apply to both driving and computer use, ensure that your time on the road and on the internet are as safe and as enjoyable as possible. Part of this will be your responsibility, as better-educated computer users, to ensure that your friends and relatives also practice responsible computing.

Here is a list of the subjects which I shall be covering over the next few weeks:

- Hardening your computer
- Programs which start with your computer
- Firewalls
- Anti-Virus
- Anti-Malware
- Browsers
- Link Checkers
- Rootkits
- Avoiding scams

Hardening your computer

Computer programs are more like jigsaw puzzles than pictures. If a part of a jigsaw puzzle becomes defective you can replace just that part. This is what happens when updates are downloaded to your computer. Windows downloads updates automatically, but all other programs need help to be updated. This is where a program like *Secunia Personal Software Inspector (PSI)* is such a great help. Download this program and run a scan. You will probably find that there are a number of programs which need to be updated to make them as hardened as possible. Just clicking on each link in turn will make your computer as resistant to compromise as possible.

Scams

An interesting way to part unwary consumers from their hard-earned readies is the ever-present scam. A scam is, often, a simple way to separate you and your money. It may be an email that tells you that you have won a lottery or which offers you the chance to keep 10% of the money which passes through your account (either from a Nigerian general's wife's estate or from the proceeds of another scam which defrauds other people and gets them to send money via your bank account).

Whichever way you view scams, they almost always injure your bank balance. If you are lucky, they will do this only once. Unlucky people will pay and pay again and again. If you are not sure about an email, phone call or letter, just delete it at once. My favourite program for deleting emails and bouncing them so that your address appears to be invalid is MailWasher. This program comes in two versions: free (for one address only) and full.

Websites

Personal Software Inspector	www.secunia.com
SCAMwatch	www.scamwatch.gov.au
MailWasher	www.mailwasher.net