

# No-one knows you are a dog...

Or how to remain digitally anonymous



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There is a saying that '...on the internet no-one knows that you are a dog.' This is particularly so when sending e-mail, and it is becoming more common in IRC (Internet Relay Chat) sessions and when responding to web-based links. It is not only possible to conceal your own identity, but to forge the identity of someone else (spoofing). There are also varying degrees of forgery, from covertly using the machine of the person whose identity is being forged, through to blatantly sending messages from a machine that has no connection with the person at all, but purporting to originate from that source.

There are, in many instances, good reasons for remaining anonymous when communicating via e-mail. Indeed, there are also many good reasons for remaining anonymous when making all manner of transactions via the internet. It is also true — and a sad reflection of the prevailing attitude of some minorities who use the internet — that anonymity brings out the worst in people on occasion: from belligerent bullies to boorish maniacs.

## Where is it really coming from?

However, and following alarming reports in the media about the use and abuse of e-mail ('Man used Net to lure boy for sex, court told...' *Sydney Morning Herald* 18 October 2000), I am constantly surprised to hear of veteran netizens using their real e-mail address in communications where it is neither warranted or advisable to disclose such information. I am also surprised at the media's insistence that the tracking of anonymous e-mails is relatively easy given the sophisticated tools at our disposal.

Those who claim to have the forensic skills to determine exactly where e-mail messages originate are simply deluding

themselves, and those who use their services. In almost all cases, the tracking of e-mails is made possible by the information contained in the header that attaches itself to every message that is broadcast. There are no real safeguards to ensure that an e-mail message is coming from either who or where the transmitter says it is. The forgery of such information (in the header) is a trivial task for many, and indeed it is also possible to hijack e-mail en-route, thus modifying any component of the message itself.

That being so, one wonders why anyone would trust any message that arrives via e-mail to be sent by the purported sender. And as the swimmer Grant Hackett has just found out, one must be ever vigilant.

## On remaining anonymous

There is another side to the story too. An increasing number of websites — including some official government websites — only permit visitors who leave details such as their name and e-mail address — and sometimes more. Children, in particular, are caught out by this ('Concern as official site probes kids' *The Australian*, 17 October 2000).

My advice to both the parents and children is to avoid disclosing such personal information at all costs, even if the website concerned claims to have a privacy statement or policy covering the use of such data. It is increasingly difficult to decide if it is safe to transmit personal information that can be stored in a database for later use by marketing departments or for other nefarious means. How does one avoid disclosing personal information? Use a simple generic name, such as Jo Bloggs, and give an e-mail address that is either meaningless or points to the marketing team itself (such as marketing@xyz.com). I use this every time, and my junk-mail to real e-mail ratio has never looked better. ■

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