

# TANSTAAFL: Spyware

By Richard Lowe

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Internet Tips And Secrets <http://www.internet-tips.net>

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This column is about TANSTAAFL, which is a term from a book by Robert A. Heinlein (one of the best Science Fiction authors that ever lived) called "The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress". The term means "There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch". This concept is the basis of the plot of the book, which is about a Lunar penal colony and it's attempt to free itself from Earth domination.

Do you know that you are probably being spied upon at this very moment? In all likelihood, something on your computer system is watching you very intently, trying to learn something about you and your habits.

Every day many people install "free" programs on their systems which tell more about them to strangers than they would tell their wives, husbands or even ministers during confessional.

I know those "free" ad supported programs seem cheap, but they are actually very, very expensive. Remember that "There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch", and that holds doubly true for those "free" programs.

Let's take your average freeware, ad-supported download manager. It seems so great, so easy, so ... well, you get the idea. You get to use the program for free, and the only thing you have to do is look at some ads in the corner or across the bottom or whatever.

Well, guess what? Many of these programs are actually watching your every move. What are they trying to do? Build a very accurate picture of you so that they can deliver exactly the correct ads for you to look at. The theory is if you frequently visit, say, web sites about flowers, then showing you flower ads is a good idea.

Some of the things that are recorded include:

- Most spyware attempts to record every web site that you visit. This allows advertisers to obtain a profile of your interests and thus display ads specifically tailored to your likes.
- Sometimes spyware scans your system to determine what you have installed. This is often done to determine, for example, if you have purchased a competing program so that a manufacturer can send you an offer for a competitive upgrade.
- Other spyware scans your system to ensure that you have legally purchased copies of all of their software. A list might be sent to the company.
- Some spyware sends a complete hardware and software inventory to their company.

What's wrong with this practice? Well, first of all, you almost certainly didn't understand that it was happening. Yes, many of the spyware programs will point out it is "clearly written in the terms and conditions", but those documents are rarely read, more rarely understood and often changed at will.

For example, I know that when I installed Gator I didn't have a clue that it would be watching the sites that I visited constantly. It took me a while to figure out that this annoying thing that kept popping up ads while I was visiting some site was somehow related to Gator. Once I figured out what was going on I became very alarmed - after all, Gator is used to store passwords, so what would prevent the product from sending my passwords over the internet? Now, admittedly this product does not do that - but the point is that easily could do so.

On top of that, do you really want to have ads targeted precisely to your lifestyle, wants and desires? Yeah, I know it sounds great to advertisers (it puts more money in their pockets), but how good is this whole concept for the general public?

To give you an example, suppose you let your kids use your computer. They surf to the toy sites and look around. In the meantime, the spyware programs watch their every key click and realize that your son loves toy soldiers. Suddenly advertisements for every kind of military toy appears on his screen. Is this really something that you as a parent would desire?

Now, to really add insult to injury, do you really want to have some strangers in several faceless corporations to build up massive profiles of what you like, dislike, purchase, own and want? How much do you want the rest of the world to know about you, after all?

So what can you do about it?

- Be very cautious about installing any "freeware" which is ad-supported. The odds are high (although there are some exceptions) that the program is spyware.
- When you do find some freeware that you like, remember "There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch". Spend a minute to try and understand what the company or person who is giving this away gains from the exchange. For example, some excellent freeware is created to promote a person or company in some way - these are usually safe because the freeware itself is the ad. It serves as a "look what I/we can do" by actually giving something of value.
- Read and understand the terms and conditions of the product or service. This is very important in preventing spyware as the terms will almost always spell out exactly what they are doing.

- Check out the companies promotional materials as if you were an advertiser. For example, if you look around the Gator site from that point of view, you will quickly find press releases which explain to potential advertisers exactly what's going on.

- Install ZoneAlarm (the free or non-free versions) and be alert to any program which unexpectedly send data to the internet.

- If you do find out that something is spyware, uninstall it immediately (unless for some reason you want to be spied upon).

- Scan your system using a product called AdAware by Lavasoft. This is free and you can download it from <http://www.lavasoft.de/> - and yes, it really is free.

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