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Cyberclinic: Flu outbreaks and traffic jams

By Rhodri Marsden

We're often told how valuable our personal data is, and how we ought to keep it all as close to our chest as possible in order to maintain our privacy, thus stopping people from stealing our identity, clearing our bank accounts and operating international drugs cartels under our name. But a couple of examples have surfaced this week of how anonymized data collection can be harnessed for the good of the general public. Researchers at UC Berkeley, along with Nokia, have just launched the [Mobile Millenium Project](#), a voluntary scheme where GPS data from the mobile phones of drivers is used to collate a real-time traffic map of the area. And Google – presumably anxious to deflect criticism for using our search data to sling advertising back at us – is using the same data to plot [outbreaks of flu](#) across the US.

The Mobile Millenium project isn't the first attempt to collate data from road users and traffic sensors to build up an accurate picture of traffic on our roads; indeed, a system called [CADRE](#) has been tested on the roads of Hampshire for some time now, with a possible launch at some point in the next 18 months. But the biggest challenge with any such system is getting enough people to use it to build up an accurate picture of traffic movement. If there's a tailback on the North Circular Road, and perhaps a quarter of the 200 cars in that tailback are sending data to a central server informing it they're barely reaching an average speed of 5mph, that's going to be incredibly useful information for all road users in the area. And I imagine that most drivers would be happy to participate in such a scheme, provided the data is anonymized. But while the technology is clearly emerging to make vague local radio traffic bulletins pretty redundant, the predominant method of getting information out of cars and back to drivers is currently monopolised by satnav manufacturers, who will no doubt attempt to keep control and charge a hefty whack per month for the privilege of using such a service. But with an increasing number of phones being equipped with GPS, Berkeley's research could lead to a way of bypassing satnavs and getting simple phone alerts to imminent snarl-ups.

Google, meanwhile, claim that their [Flu Trends](#) service can spot trends in outbreaks of flu in the US up to two weeks before the government can via their Centers for Disease Control. The system (analysing where in the country people are searching for terms such as "headache remedy" and "stopping runny nose") doesn't sound particularly scientific, but it's a good low-level indicator that someone isn't feeling too great. And again, when a huge amount of such data is amassed, its [significance starts to become apparent](#). Personally, I haven't searched for my symptoms on

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Google since a sleepless night in 1998 worrying whether I had throat cancer, but if hypochondriacs worldwide can help contain the spread of disease, that's got to be a good thing.

CONFUSED ABOUT TECHNOLOGY? SUBMIT YOUR QUERIES TO CYBERCLINIC USING THE COMMENT FORM BELOW, OR EMAIL QUESTIONS [HERE](#).

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In this article you mention how valuable our personal data is, and how we ought to keep it protected in order to maintain our privacy, thus stopping people from stealing our identity, wiping out our bank accounts and worse. Well, following along in that topic, last week a vulnerability in Internet Explorer was identified and reported on by Symantec, which is putting thousands of computer users at risk. See the exploit here (https://forums.symantec.com/t5/blogs/blogarticlepage/blog-id/vulnerabilities_exploits/article-id/180), Symantec has found that this is the Microsoft Security Advisory (961051) and has since been monitoring the vulnerability closely.

Once an infected site containing one of these iframes is visited, the IE Exploit (961051) is one of several vulnerabilities run against your computer. If your system is exploited, it drops various malicious code onto your computer. At present, Symantec has detection for this malicious code, but recommends that users keep their definitions up-to-date because the malicious code being served is changing on a regular basis.

To date, since the release of Symantec's antivirus signature for this vulnerability, the company has observed over 33,000 hits on its customers.

More information can be found by visiting Symantec's blog:

<https://forums.symantec.com/t5/Vulnerabilities-Exploits/Rise-of-IE-Zero-Day-Through-SQL-Injection/ba-p/372832#A182>

Posted by: Sally | [Tuesday, 16 December 2008 at 06:26 PM](#)

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