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Web dialer generates massive bill

PATRICK MALONEY, Free Press Reporter

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It's the latest wheel rut on the information superhighway -- and it has left one area Internet subscriber with a jaw-dropping phone bill. Dorchester resident Colleen Collier's April bill is for \$2,200, charges mostly racked up over 10 hours April 9, during which the newest threat in virus-like software -- known as a web dialer -- had her dial-up Internet connection make 40 calls to Sao Tome, a small island off the west coast of Africa.



Though Bell has lowered the long-distance rates for the calls, leaving the tab at \$1,100, Collier says other home Internet users, thousands of whom may already be victims, must be made aware of the potential risk.

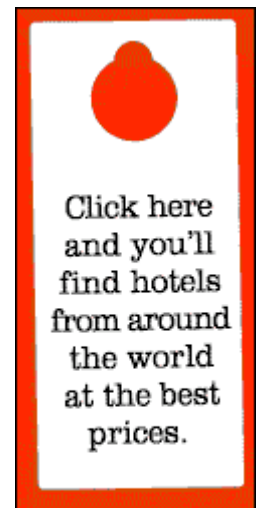
"This is a problem that's going to happen more and more," said Collier, who suspects the web dialer entered her computer on a spam e-mail.

"People don't become aware until they've (already) been victimized."

It's often called modem hijacking or Internet dumping, said Deborah Washburn, a security consultant at Digital Boundary Group in London. In many cases, unregulated entertainment sites will ask visitors to download software upgrades -- to enable better graphics, for example -- or to agree with terms of use.

The warning about web dialers is often there, Washburn said, but most users don't read them carefully.

"People are suspicious with the e-mail that they're getting now (but not)



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when they . . . hit a website with terms of condition," she said. "It is certainly one of the latest (risks)."

Phonebusters, the OPP's anti-telemarketing scam centre, calls web dialers "fraudulent" and Det. Sgt. Barry Elliott said money is being made not only by the scam artists but phone companies, too. Thousands of Canadians have been hit, Elliott estimates.

"It's our understanding phone companies make about 25 per cent off these calls," he said. "The phone company on the other end makes money and the guys that own the line make the rest.

"It's like a 900 number. (Companies like Bell) are collecting money from what appears to be a fraud. They could have been a lot more proactive."

Collier has lobbied Bell to wipe out her entire tab, but the company's stand is that users are responsible for any charges generated on their phone lines, a Bell spokesperson said.

"This is a situation of buyer beware," Mohammed Nakhouda said. "Internet users should be careful when downloading unfamiliar sites."

Sasktel, Saskatchewan's biggest telecommunications company, decided last week to pay half the inflated charges incurred by about 700 customers hit by web dialers, costing the company \$20,000.

Bell has posted a warning on its website, sympatico.ca, but Collier is frustrated they aren't doing more.

"They should put information about how people can protect themselves on their phone bills," she said.

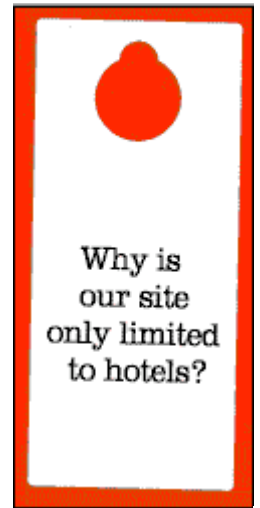
"(They) have an obligation to provide for the safety and comfort of their clients."

PROTECT YOURSELF

How to protect against web dialers

- Cable Internet subscribers can't be affected -- though Phonebusters has received complaints about similar scams from cable users lately.
- Have the phone company block any long-distance use, if the Internet is on a secondary phone line.
- Add a firewall to block viruses.
- Keep the computer's anti-virus software updated.

Source: Digital Boundary Group, a London computer security company



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