

Hackers and Broadband

"There are people out there, there's no question about it, who go through (the Internet addresses) of Cable providers and DSL providers, looking for machines that are connected and seeing if they have any open doors that they can get into," says Milo Medin, chief technical officer of ExciteAtHome, which provides cable Internet service.

"I didn't know anything about security, and in the end I paid the price for it," says Bunks, who had to reinstall the operating system and all the software on his computer.

Unlike regular modems, DSLs and cable modems are connected to the Internet as long as the computer is turned on. This gives hackers a larger window of opportunity to access the computer.

"It's absolutely the case that an always-on network presents more opportunity for you to use the system as well as for other people to get to you," says Medin.

The high speed of a DSL or Cable modem connection also makes a target computer a better steppingstone to other computers. Experts believe that recent attacks against some of the most visited sites on the Web were launched not from a hacker's computer, but from computers taken over by a hacker.

"The home user is more susceptible to someone coming and stealing the information that is on their computer," says David Remnitz, chief executive of IFsec LLC, a New York network security firm.

"They could be monitoring messages that are sent in or out of that system, which could be things like bank routing numbers."

Ron Buxton of Seattle, who runs Windows 98, had a scare one month after he connected his home computer to a cable modem.

He came home to find a text file on his computer, put there by a stranger. It explained how easy it was to get access to Buxton's files via the cable modem.

"You really feel kind of violated," Buxton says.

Luckily, the visitor was only out to warn Buxton that his computer was wide open to others on the same cable modem network, and urged him to protect himself.

"I guess it was a Good Samaritan," says Buxton, who thinks the warning should have come in a less dramatic way from his service provider, AT&T's AtHome.

"When I connected with them, they didn't really let me know that this was a problem," he says.

Steve Kipp, a spokesman for AT&T AtHome, said installation instructions include warnings about the "File Sharing" option that opens up the files on a Windows computer to other computers.

Broadband service providers should do more to make broadband secure for home use, security expert Remnitz said, but the ultimate responsibility rests on the owner of the computer.

"Just as you protect business on the Internet, you have to protect your computer," he says.

He recommends home users to buy a "firewall" program that guards the Internet connection.

Despite his nasty surprise, Buxton is happy that he got the cable modem, which allows him to open up Web pages practically instantly, rather than waiting for them to download via his phone line.

"It's amazing! Once you try it, you never want to go back to the old-fashioned dial-up modem," he says.

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Revised 6/16/2009 JMM