Chapter 14

The World Wide Web & Law Enforcement

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SUMMARY

The World Wide Web has exhibited the most explosive growth of any technology ever invented. Two events occurring in the 1992-93 period provided the foundation. First was the decision by Congress to open the Internet to commercial exploitation. The second was the adaptation of hypertext concepts to the Internet, which led to the Web.

Fueled by commercial exploitation, the Web grew in just 6 years, to over 40 million linked computers. Time to such maturity for older communication technologies was measured in decades. The growth has “left in the dust” the development of commercial, civil, and criminal law needed to secure the social benefits of Web technology. Similarly, “Law Enforcement” has been unable to adapt to the Web over such a short period.

While Congress struggles with a new “contract law” for Web commercial transactions, national awareness is growing about undesirable consequences of Web technology. Fraud, pornography, and violence, are exposing the threat potential of the Web. It is clear that “Law Enforcement” must plan for and take action to meet these potential threats.

Methods and procedures for countering threats require that law enforcement officials understand the mechanisms of the Web along all links from user to resource. These officials must also advise legislative bodies on their enforcement needs during “catch-up” with the Web.

Law enforcers may quickly acquire Web understanding through a Web Technology Laboratory (WTL). Such a laboratory would function as one of the 7000 Internet Service Providers (ISP) that are the interface between public users and the Web. Since communications between a public user and the Web flow through the ISP, law enforcement depends on understanding that interface.

Implementation of a WTL would require a modest investment of about $40,000. The social payoff in law enforcement officials’ abilities to do what legislative bodies will ask of them, and to advise those same bodies on what is possible is unlimited.

WEB PROBLEMS

Commercialization of the Web has brought with it problems in a broad spectrum of public and private concern. National and international agreements are needed to keep the Internet as a relatively open and free medium. Areas of concern fall into groups of market access/control, legal, and financial.

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Along with scramble for Web ownership and control, has come an empowerment of the individual as never envisioned. In an age when “freedom of the press” belongs to those that own a newspaper, “freedom of the Internet” belongs to those with Web access. The price of that access in many cases is close to zero, as libraries and schools rush to bring the benefits of Web access to the community. In the home, access begins with the price of a computer, already paid by over half the American families. While many are not connected, families paying the $15-20 monthly access fee are growing rapidly.

In the past, individual freedom has always been easy to champion since there was little chance for an individual to exercise that freedom in an influential manner. Web empowerment provides an individual the means to contact and influence on an individual and mass basis. Topic specific Web sites, chat rooms, and mass email provide mechanisms for individuals to express their opinions and exert influence. The Web has even become a weapon of war with governments on both sides liberally spreading their propaganda.

A WIDE SPECTRUM OF THREATS

Many in society have or can obtain the necessary skills and resources to cause substantial disruption in Web services or destruction of Web equipment.
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