

VAWA Brings CallerID to the Internet:
Back to the Future
by Anthony M. Rutkowski¹

Congress' recent extension of criminal tools to fight cyber-stalking and harassing use of the Internet marks another step in the direction of full integration of the Internet into the mainstream fabric of telecommunications requirements implemented two decades ago.

In the mid-1980s, telecom operators worked together with the FCC to create a new kind of telephone "internet" and some of the public's most valuable national services - national Directory Assistance and callerID. Twenty years later, the newly enacted Anti-Cyberstalking provisions in the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) should drive the creation of the same capability for entire public Internet.

CallerID came about because the FCC mandated secure reciprocal access among telecom subscriber databases; and providers were incented to maintain accurate subscriber directories using micro-charges for automatic lookups. The result was a shared nationwide resource of distributed trusted subscriber directory information.

CallerID was only one of many commercial and public interest offerings that became possible. 800 numbers, number portability, and DoNotCall were enabled. 911 operators could see information about emergency callers. Hearing impaired subscribers could obtain special features. Calling priority during national emergencies could be implemented. Law enforcement could prosecute criminal conduct. Stalking and annoying behavior was reduced. In general, a more stable nationwide network was created.

The Internet - born as a closed government research network - had none of these capabilities. They weren't needed. Then in the mid-1990s, the Internet began expanding to become a national public infrastructure and integrating with the existing telephone network. Without the kind of trusted, shared directory capability built by the telecom industry, the newly public Internet became exploitable by countless miscreants intent on visiting harm or criminal conduct others, including hacking the network and people's computers.

VAWA attacks cyber-stalking by defining the Internet and its applications as "telecommunication devices" under the FCC - thus extending existing law making it a federal crime to send communications for the purpose of annoying or harassing without identifying oneself. The identification requirements are similar to recent actions in the European and Canadian Parliaments to provide trusted Internet user identification.

It'll remain for the FCC and DOJ collaborating with industry to work out the details for VAWA's identification mandate. Providers will also be anxious to develop solutions that minimize their liability. Recently adopted secure industry standards and platforms now exist to implement trusted directory capabilities for the Internet.

Although Internet purists may lament, consumers are sure to be pleased, innovative services will be enabled, and the nation will benefit from a more robust infrastructure that meets public expectations.

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