

Are Your PDFs Spying on You?

A new metrics-gathering system may be smart business, but it opens the door to privacy concerns for PDFs.

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By Don Fluckinger

Like many people, I'm sick of giving up my phone number, my e-mail address, and DNA samples, and/or dragging around a "rewards card" just to see a lousy extra paragraph of an article on the Web, to get 10 percent off my car's oil change, or—and this one positively kills me—to get the uninflated, normal price for a grocery item at the supermarket. It seems as if every company wants a piece of us, a marker, in order to justify its marketing investment. For many companies, though, it stops there: It's enough to be able to sell something to us just that once, or to get us to look at one Web page with ads.

Other companies prefer to impose on our privacy, by watching us and then, at some future point, sending us paper junk mail or spam. Still others choose more benign—yet creepy—ways of keeping tabs on us. Ever try, say, to delete or close an Apple iTunes Music Store account? You can't. It's not possible. Don't believe it? Try.

Thank goodness the PDFs we download and pass around don't come impregnated with some tracking technology that is generating metrics information back at the server. At least, they didn't in the past. Toronto software company Remote Approach now offers Map-Bot, a tool to track PDF traffic, much as Web sites collect IP addresses and other data from visitors.

The screenshot shows the Remote Approach website interface. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links for INTRODUCTION, PRODUCTS, BENEFITS, RESOURCE CENTER, INQUIRES, PARTNERS, and COMPANY. The main content area features a central diagram titled "How many people are reading your PDF's?" with three steps: 1. Upload document, 2. Tag it, and 3. Download & distribute it. To the right of the diagram are links for "Login to your account", "Not an account holder? Register here.", "Send To A Friend", and "Submit A Sales Inquiry". Below the main content, there are three columns: "PRODUCTS & SERVICES", "BENEFITS", and "RESOURCE CENTRE". The "BENEFITS" column lists "ROI models and business solutions for a range of services and industries" and includes a list of user types: Publishers, Marketers, Corporate Users, and Small Businesses. The "RESOURCE CENTRE" column features a "White Paper: 'On Privacy'" and a link to "Read the white paper". A sidebar on the right contains a "Register and test Document Reach." banner with the text "Value in data." and "LEARN HOW REMOTE APPROACH FOCUSES ON RESULTS." At the bottom right, there is a "MEMBER" logo.

Like Adobe Policy Server, Map-Bot can force users to be connected to the Web in order to read the documents. It can track who's e-mailing PDFs to whom and what they're reading—in real time. Though other companies such as Adobe offer more expensive and elaborate tracking software, Remote Approach's tool alone has the power to spread among the masses, with its simple, low-cost (starting at \$9.95 a month) subscription-based service, administered over the Web.

Is it spyware? No. Map-Bot accesses no information from the user's computer and leaves no software behind. In fact, at its heart, this is a great idea. Remote Approach is just doing business by filling a market niche where it hopes one might exist.

Denizens of the PDF world, however, take note. We enjoy—and sell—the differences between PDFs, e-mail, and HTML, and a lot of the notable differences are in the realm of security and privacy. Map-Bot, however, is the beginning of a movement that could chip away at PDFs' sterling rep, one document at a time. Sure, PDF files will always look better printed on paper than HTML documents or e-mail, and granted, the chances of running into a Remote Approach PDF right now are pretty remote. But the potential for the technology to tarnish PDFs' image is staggering. Since Map-Bot can chase a PDF through e-mail forwarding, it enables more powerful data mining than that associated with Web pages, where the vital information gets thrown out when the user's cache is emptied.

If Remote Approach's idea takes off, competitors with less innocent designs—such as collecting e-mail addresses—could jump in beside them. All of a sudden, some PDFs we download could come with nasty little bots attached that can generate spam. Not all of them, just enough to give us pause—sort of the way we now look at e-mail attachments with a jaundiced eye, even when they come from well-meaning friends.

Too much of this stuff, and PDFs will become a lead-generation device for commercial interests, and not a viable publishing platform. In other words, they will be vulnerable to the same problems as Web pages and e-mail, and suddenly not such a great value proposition. Let's not go there.

Don Fluckinger is a freelance writer based in Nashua, New Hampshire. He has covered Acrobat and PDF technologies for PDFzone since 2000.

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