

Privacy rights threatened by Intel's new computer chip

James Brookfield
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Electronic privacy advocates have filed a complaint with the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and launched a boycott campaign against Intel over the company's introduction of a new computer chip that threatens to compromise the privacy and democratic rights of computer users.

The company launched its new Pentium III chip on February 26 amidst growing protest over its decision to incorporate a processor serial number (PSN) into the device. (The chip is the central decision making component in a computer. Intel sells chips to the companies that build and sell computers.)

Each Pentium III chip is being shipped with its own unique PSN, which will act as an identification number for the particular computer. Intel claims that the PSN will protect users who make purchases over the Internet.

The PSN could, however, facilitate information gathering about Internet users on a large scale. Many Web sites would be inclined to collect the PSNs from visitors and keep a record of pages viewed, purchases made, and other data submitted. The site could then sell this information. Before long, electronic dossiers could be compiled by corporate or government information-gatherers. These records might include extensive lists of Web sites visited, items purchased online, and e-mail and mailing addresses.

Companies have previously sought to gather this type of information, but have until now been forced to use a rudimentary method that can be controlled by computer users. Many sites now have "cookies," i.e., small programs that leave an electronic marking on a computer's hard drive for identification purposes. Certain restrictions on cookies afforded a measure of protection. One company, for example, cannot access another's cookie. And computer users can erase all the

cookies stored on their computers. The PSN, on the other hand, will function as a permanent, indelible cookie.

Nor is this all. The PSN could be accessed and used by a number of computer applications, from spreadsheets to databases. It might become standard, for example, for word processors to embed the PSN into each document created, effectively forcing users to divulge their identity in order to carry out any significant task on their computers.

On February 26 privacy groups filed a complaint about the PSN with the FTC, asking the agency to require Intel to stop shipment of computers with PSNs, to require computer makers who already have chips with PSNs to turn them off securely before shipping them to customers, and to convene an inquiry into privacy issues raised by the chip. The signatories included the Center for Democracy and Technology, Consumer Action, Private Citizen, and Privacy Rights Clearinghouse. (Other groups involved in the boycott of the Pentium III include: the Center for Media Education, consumer.net, the Electronic Privacy Information Center, Junkbusters, Privacy International, and Privacy Times.)

The privacy groups have not yet heard from the FTC, but Ari Schwartz of the Center for Democracy and Technology told this reporter that a ruling on the PSN might come in the context of the FTC's ongoing investigation of Intel. The agency has been looking into allegations of anticompetitive behavior and abuse of monopoly power by Intel since last year.

Intel has been forced to make a small retreat. It informed computer makers last week that they could choose to ship new computers with the PSN "turned off." Consumers could then turn the PSN on if they wished. Those concerned about privacy could leave it

off. A computer security writer for the German magazine *c't*, however, demonstrated that this proposal was flawed. He was able to turn a computer's PSN on remotely, unbeknownst to the user.

The electronic privacy groups are asking for letters of protest to be written to Intel, computer makers and the FTC. They also ask shoppers to choose computers that use the competing chip, Advanced Micro Devices' K6-III. AMD's chip does not have a PSN, but the company has not ruled out incorporating one. Said AMD spokeswoman Gail Webb, "We certainly understand the motivation for improving security for web-based transactions and commerce [the reason given by Intel for using the PSN]. However, we are concerned about the potential of compromising the privacy of the individual and are evaluating the alternatives for addressing this issue."



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