

FORUM

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Letters to Forum Editor

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Stop criminalising the young over Wi-Fi 'theft'

I HAVE been watching with growing concern the prosecution of individuals for Wi-Fi theft. The premise of such a prosecution shows a lack of understanding of the underlying technology and the regulatory framework under which it was launched.

Wi-Fi is a standard for data transmission over unlicensed radio spectrum. The rules governing this usage were set in the United States by the Federal Communications Commission. As the protocol and equipment gained popularity, demand forced other governments to allow the same usage.

The key here is that the radio spectrum being used is unlicensed. Like citizens' band radio in the 1970s and 80s, anyone is allowed to transmit and receive on this spectrum. There are no guarantees of privacy or private property.

Once Wi-Fi became widely available, people quickly realised that their data was at risk if they transmitted without some sort of encryption. Equipment manufacturers, not governments, responded by offering, first, Wireless Equivalency Privacy (WEP), then stronger forms of encryption when WEP was shown to be hackable.

Wi-Fi transmitters are designed to broadcast their availability, and Wi-Fi receivers, to search for all available networks. Any laptop will automatically list all available networks that can be "seen". In my flat, I can see at least 12 networks, at least half of which are not encrypted.

One analogy proposed tries to equate Wi-Fi mooching with physical entry into someone's house: "Just because I leave my door unlocked, does not mean you are free to enter." This analogy is inappropriate. Wi-Fi is designed to send a welcome message to anyone operating with Wi-Fi-compliant hardware.

The proper analogy is "You are welcome to come into my house unless the door

is locked". Silence, or inaction, on the part of the network owner is consent.

The real culprit in this sad state of affairs is the person who attaches a Wi-Fi transmitter to his home wired network, and knowingly fails to turn on basic encryption. Such individuals are breaking the terms of their agreements with the Internet service providers which prevent further distribution or access by individuals other than the subscriber.

It is time we stop ruining the lives of children by giving them inappropriate criminal records, and start going after the real problem, those who are too lazy to use equipment properly.

Waleed Hanafi