

WiFi Security on the Road

by Jim Tetzlaff

In recent weeks, there has been much talk about how easy it is for various nefarious types to steal your personal information. I began to hear news of just how vulnerable your computer is when you are using unsecured WiFi networks such as those available at the many Internet cafes such as Panera Bread or Dunkin' Donuts.

I first became aware of the issue from a group of articles in the July, 2006 edition of MacWorld magazine. The articles delved into the various applications you can use to protect against viruses, e-mail spam and software firewalls that expand on the built-in firewall that comes with OS-X. But what was most intriguing was the topic of visiting Internet cafes.

There was also a follow-up to this article on Macworld Podcasts; hosted by Cyrus Farivar on June 21st. Cyrus interviewed the author of the articles, Glen Fleishman. He explained that you might have your Mac setup correctly to prevent someone from



The problem comes when you send something out of your computer. If you are using an open, unprotected WiFi service, such as what you do when you are at an Internet cafe, that data is sent out 'in the clear' and anyone using a sniffer program can intercept it. Now, not only is your e-mail message readable by one of these programs, but also your user name and e-mail account password! Well, that surprised the heck out of me.

Is this something that you should be concerned with at home? Yes and no. If you have your WiFi (or Ethernet) connection setup with encryption and a password, you are most likely safe from prying eyes. If you don't, well...you could be in trouble.

Mr. Fleishman went on to explain that since OS-X 10.3, you have the ability to set up a VPN, or Virtual Private Network, if you have enough savvy to do so. Once you set it up, it looks like another network connection on your computer. Already, for a plain old 'Joe User' like me, this got too deep. Yep, call me chicken. There's just that one problem...my wife

uses Internet cafes quite often in her job as a photojournalist. She often has to send photos into the office on a deadline and she is remote from the newspaper office and home. She normally uses an ftp transfer script, but it goes to a windows server that works at best half of the time and she is forced to use e-mail in the crowded cafe to send them as attachments. There goes the user ID and password!

Luckily, the Macworld interview steered me back to the magazine articles and the details on several providers of VPN services that do the set up for you, HotSpotVPN <<http://www.hotspotvpn.com/>>, personalVPN <<http://www.witopia.net/>> and PublicVPN <<http://www.publicvpn.com/>>. Salvation! I checked out each one of these providers' websites. This is where website presentation took over. While each site explained what a VPN does (basically creates a secure tunnel between your laptop and the provider's servers), I felt most comfortable with the way personalVPN, WiTopia, showed their wares. For 39.99 per year, you are provided with software (called Tunnelblick) and the connection to their servers via a specific IP address accessed

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invading your computer with the firewall you have enabled. (If you're not sure about this, go to your System Preferences/Sharing pane and click on the Firewall tab and verify that it is enabled. While you're at it, take a look at what is being allowed to be shared by perusing the 'Allow' list that is there.)

The next week, I listened to a BritishMac Podcast (Will Green is the host and I find him hysterical in that British humor way) and it addressed the same 'in the clear' issue. My wife and I became concerned because of our circumstance – she uses these unprotected WiFi networks.



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through a password you specify when you sign up. I did that a couple of weeks ago.

Back to the 'chicken' part. I did not want to immediately install the VPN onto my wife's computers without testing it on our iMac first as she really cannot afford to be without a remote connection with her

iBook. I was glad I did that. One of the things you need to do is specify a secure server, either your own, something most of us plain old users don't have, or theirs in the DNS Servers pane in the Network Preferences for Airport TCP/IP configuration. After I installed the software and made that change to the preference, I was able to connect with no problems. I used the IP widget (from basuu Software, <<http://cip.physik.uni-bonn.de/~maahn/>>) to see if the address changed and it did. Home free? Not quite.

When I went to send an e-mail using Entourage, it would not go out and I got a message about not being recognized by my ISP. Hmm...

Although Microsoft is not particularly revered for the intuitiveness of their software, it turns out that the fix was easy. I clicked on the Accounts option to edit it (and the other seven e-mail IDs.) For our Comcast accounts, I had to go into the Advanced mail sending options and click the 'SMTP server requires authentication' and select the 'Use same settings as receiving mail server' choice. If I had not done the testing prior to installing it on the iBook, I wonder about just how much trouble I would have gotten into.

Now there's just one more thing we need to do before we install on the iBook and that's update the OS to 10.4.7. When WiTopia contacted us, they wanted to know specifically what version of OS we are using as the software configuration is specific to the version. Okay, I'll buy that. So, very shortly, my wife and I will be able to relax a bit about our WiFi security. If you have the occasion to use the Internet cafes that are out there for you to use and enjoy without some jerk trying to snoop into your business and personal information, I believe using one of the VPN providers is the way to go. There really was nothing difficult about installing the personalVPN product and setting it up. It did take a couple of days to receive the e-mail from WiTopia with the zipped installation file attached. The e-mail sending is specific to the Mac platform. Windows users can get a direct download off of the site. Once you're protected out there, go ahead and enjoy the surfing! 🍌

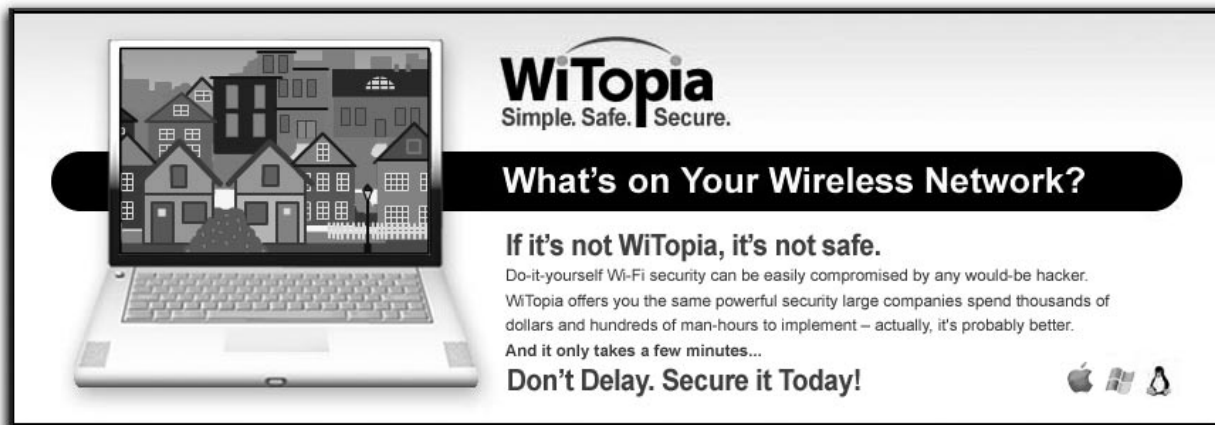


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