

Deter IM invaders

E-mail is no longer the fastest way to communicate over the Internet. Free instant messengers such as [ICQ](#), [AOL Instant Messenger](#), and [MSN Messenger](#) are extremely popular. You do pay a price for IM ease: spam, spam, and more spam, unless you're diligent.

The problem: IP address exposed!

The most serious instant-messaging security threat: ICQ allows your IM correspondents to discover your IP address. Many instant-messaging programs work by connecting two computers directly to one another, and, as a result, each computer can determine the other's IP address, but ICQ uses direct connections for nearly everything. Though an inexperienced hacker may have trouble figuring out your IP address on his own, many free tools make it easy to ferret out your address. Such tools monitor Windows' network connections to get a list of all the IP addresses the computer connects to. (Even DOS commands such as **netstat** can display the addresses of other computers when they're connected.)

Once malicious surfers know your IP address, they can launch attacks against your machine to crash the system or slow your Internet service to a crawl. Using free, easy-to-obtain programs, these unfriendly folks can also flood your PC with so much data that the Internet connection can't get a message out; occasionally these programs exploit a weakness inherent in Windows and make the operating system freeze up.

The solution: protect your IP address

- **In ICQ 2000** - Click the ICQ button and pick Security and Privacy. Choose the General tab and make sure the Web Aware check box is unchecked. Choose the Direct Connection tab and select the radio button labeled "Allow direct connection with any user upon your authorization." ICQ [lists](#) the parts of its program that could allow others to see your IP address.
- **In AOL Instant Messenger** - In the AIM Preferences window, select the Privacy tab. Uncheck the box labeled "Allow users to see how long I've been idle" and select the radio button labeled "Nothing about me" in the section titled "Allow users who know my email address to find..."
- **In MSN Messenger** - In the Options dialog under the Preferences tab, uncheck the three options that appear under the General header.

The problem: log files on display

All instant-messaging programs let you log the conversations you have with others; in fact, ICQ logs your conversations by default. Just in case hackers ever break in to your PC, you may not want to keep records of your conversations, and you may want to eliminate the logs you already have.

The solution: delete your log files

- **In ICQ 2000** - When you install ICQ, it brings along a second program called dbconvert.exe, which is stored in the same folder as ICQ itself (the Windows default is C:\Program files\ICQ). To eliminate your existing log files, close ICQ and run dbconvert. Pick your ICQ account from the top drop-down list, choose "No history (contact list only)" from the bottom drop-down, and click Next. When the program clears the ICQ database of logs, click Next one more time, then Done to close the program. You can also prevent ICQ from logging conversations with specific individuals on your contact list: right-click the name in the contact list, choose Alert/Accept Modes, open the Accept tab, and check the box labeled "Do not log event history." To stop logging altogether, click the ICQ button and choose Preferences, pick the Events item from the left pane, and fill in the check box next to "Do not log event history," then click Apply.
- **In AOL Instant Messenger** - All of AIM's logs reside in the folder located in C:\Windows\AIM95*your username*. While the program doesn't log conversations (unless you choose File > Save in the message window), it does keep a log of your buddy list and any file transfers you may have made using AIM. Delete the contents of

that folder to eliminate the logs.

- **In MSN Messenger** - MSN Messenger doesn't log chats automatically, although you can save individual threads by clicking File > Save in the chat message window. You can later delete any conversation logs you save by dropping the icon in the Recycle Bin.

The problem: instant spam

Instant messengers sometimes deliver a flood of spam in the form of annoying "forward me to everyone you know" chain messages or links to pornographic Web sites. Instant-messenger spam is often even more annoying than its e-mail cousin because most programs by default alert you with a flashing icon or a sound the second you receive any messages, even the unwanted ones.

The solution: block spam

- **In ICQ 2000** - Click the ICQ button and pick Security And Privacy. In the resulting dialog box, select the Ignore tab and fill in all the check boxes. Select the "Users not on my contact list" option from the drop-down menu. Next, choose the General tab, select the radio button marked "My authorization is required before users add me to their contact list," and click Save.
- **In AOL Instant Messenger** - To tell the AOL Instant Messenger client to block messages from people not on your buddy list, click My AIM > Edit Options> Edit Preferences. Select the Privacy tab, then select "Allow only users on my Buddy list."
- **In MSN Messenger** - Click the Tools menu and select Options. Select the Privacy tab, then add the usernames you would like to be able to receive messages from or block certain people by moving their usernames between the two fields using the arrow buttons (located in the center of the dialog box).