BSSi2
Review twice, implement once
Doing IT right the first time

Member Article - July 2015

What? Google, the king of content and search, admits it can snoop on our private conversations? That is correct, they can if they want to. This was a recent discovery by a software developer of voice recognition software. And Google's corporate motto is: "Don't Be Evil".

What is it
Google has speech recognition built into their website for Chrome to use when you go to www.google.com or open a tab for a new search (remember that you can search straight in the address bar in Chrome). By default you must enable and accept this behavior from Google.

The problem: It was found that a website could be encode so that it will execute code that can activate the microphone option within Chrome without user's permissions and therefore record any sound it hears while it's on.

The exploit is a "serious security breach" that has compromised the privacy of millions of Google Chrome users, according to the programmer, who warns, "as long as Chrome is still running, nothing said next to your computer is private."

The programmer reported the exploit to Google on September 19 last year and was met with assurances that it would be quickly fixed. However, despite apparently fixing the bug within two weeks, the update was never released to Chrome users, with Google telling the programmer, "Nothing is decided yet."

Others are doing it
Keep in mind Google is not the only one to do this. Facebook's terms of agreement allow them to record your phone calls, read your phone's call log and "read data about contacts stored on your phone, including the frequency with which you've called, emailed or communicated in other ways with specific individuals."

The vulnerability highlights a growing privacy concern. Internet and cellphone users readily grant permission to apps and sites for access to personal information like contacts or location, as well as tools like the microphone. Yet they often do not realize that these apps and sites continue to collect information in the background, even if it is irrelevant to the service being offered, according to recent research from Carnegie Mellon.

Do I have it?
You can check to see if this feature is enabled on your computer if you have Chrome. Open Chrome, click on the three horizontal bars in the upper right hand corner and select Settings. Scroll down to the Search section. You will see the option with a check box: Enable "Ok Google" to start a voice search. This box needs to be checked to turn on this feature.

If it is enabled, you will want to see what sites have requested this access. To do this:

• Scroll down to the bottom of the Settings page and click "Show advanced settings …"

• Go to the Privacy section and click on "Content settings ..."

• Scroll down to the Media section and click on "Manage exceptions …"

• See if there are any entries in the list. Remove those you did not give permission to

Google had a response but it seems quite cavalier to me.

• **Yes, we're downloading and installing a wiretapping black-box** (referred to as hotwording component) to your computer. But we're not actually activating it.

• **Yes, we deliberately hid this listening module from the users**, but that's because we consider this behavior to be part of the basic Google Chrome experience. We don't want to show all modules that we install ourselves. We give users control over extensions they install themselves.

What to do?
As of June 23rd, Google has decided to remove the hotwording component from Chrome. From v45 and forward, hotwording will be disabled and no module will be downloaded. Be sure to update your version of Chrome.

What are the ramifications?
There are so many issues with this. First and foremost, this capability is turned off by default. You have to opt in to allow it. So some would say "What is the big deal?" But the mere fact that Google has silently and without asking for permission, put this capability in place is a concern. Who is to say a cyber-criminal will not take advantage of this and activate it without your knowledge? This was the exact point that Snowden was making about the NSA. If you give them the option, they will take it. Google says "Trust us." Remember, if you have a free Gmail account, they also read your email for ways to provide advertising to you.

Big brother is watching because there is money to be made, and we as consumers of Internet information, allow it. **Don't you just love being connected?!**