

# Police look to hack citizens' home PCs

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'Very intrusive powers – as intrusive as someone busting down your door'

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Police and state intelligence agencies from several countries may soon be working together to secretly hack into private citizens' personal computers without their knowledge and without a warrant.

According to a London Times report, the police hacking process, called "remote searching," enables law enforcement to gather information from e-mails, instant messages and Web browsers, even while hundreds of miles away.

Furthermore, the Times reports, a new edict by the European Union's council of ministers in Brussels has paved the way for international law enforcement agencies to begin remote searching and sharing the information with each other. According to the Times, the United Kingdom's Home Office, the nation's lead government department for immigration, drugs and counter-terrorism enforcement, has already quietly adopted a plan that would enable French, German and other European Union police forces to request remote searching be done on UK citizens' computers.

The Home Office's plan has drawn immediate protest.

"These are very intrusive powers – as intrusive as someone busting down your door and coming into your home," said Shami Chakrabarti, director of Liberty, a British civil liberties and human rights group.

"The public will want this to be controlled by new legislation and judicial authorization," Chakrabarti told the Times. "Without those safeguards it's a devastating blow to any notion of personal privacy."

According to the report, a remote search can be granted if a senior police officer believes it is necessary to detect a serious crime, and unlike searching a suspect's home, a remote search does not require a warrant under Home Office policy.

Richard Clayton, a researcher at the University of Cambridge's Computer Laboratory, told the Times that remote searches had been possible since 1994, but usually involved covertly breaking into a suspect's home to access the computer. By installing a key-logging device on the computer, police could track the suspect's every keystroke.

"It's just like putting a secret camera in someone's living room," Clayton said.

A spokesperson for the UK's Association of Chief Police Officers told the Times that hacking into private citizens' computers is sometimes necessary in investigating cybercrimes such as child pornography, identity theft and terrorism.

Further, the ACPO spokesperson said, the surveillance is directed under the UK's Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act, a law passed in 2000 governing the interception and disclosure of communications.

To authorize remote searching, the ACPO spokesperson said, "The officer giving it must believe that when it is given it is necessary to prevent or detect serious crime and [the] action is proportionate to what it seeks to achieve."

