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True anonymity is difficult to keep online

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The name of your dog. Your favorite rock band spelled backward. However you identify yourself on the Internet, anonymity isn't guaranteed.

That's the realization hitting Web users after Wichita police on Wednesday sent a subpoena to Knight Ridder Digital -- a subsidiary of The Eagle's parent company -- for information on six people who posted comments or logged into The Eagle's online discussion board on the BTK serial killer.

Police have not said why the six are being investigated, but new messages posted Thursday on Kansas.com illustrate visitors' uncertainty about what may have been said and, more specifically, who might be reading.

"Creating an alias (on the Internet) is an awesome way to protect yourself, but please know it doesn't shield you from the law in any way," said Lena West, a technology strategist and chief executive of New York-based xynoMedia Technology.

"If you're using any kind of service like AOL or MSN, where you're using your credit card information to log in and sign up, you are going to be able to be traced. It does not matter what name you give yourself on a discussion board."

And even if you opt for a lesser-known Internet connector, or use a public computer at a library or college campus, every user is attached to hidden coding called an IP address, a series of numbers that serves as a computer's identification. The string of numbers is logged by every Web site -- or message board -- a user visits, creating a path authorities can trace.

More and more law enforcement outlets are turning to cyberspace for clues to crimes, and courts are requiring more cooperation from Internet sites like Yahoo and AOL.

About two years ago, police in St. Louis used such a trail to track down a serial killer who had sent the city's newspaper a computer-generated map. Last year, a judge demanded that Yahoo reveal the name of an online chatter who had made disparaging remarks about a California investment firm.

"You'd be surprised how people can find you," West said. "Even if you don't directly reveal who you are, everything is cataloged."

"And it doesn't matter whether you're on a dial-up or on broadband. You will always have an IP address to trace."

Internet service providers -- the companies that assign IP addresses to their customers' computers -- are complying more and more with legal requests for information, experts said, especially if they are served a subpoena. Knight Ridder Digital has begun turning over to Wichita police the material that was requested.

"As we move further on, it's going to be absolutely necessary for any type of law enforcement agency or even defense attorney to be able to do this type of investigating," said Zack Odell, network manager for Kansas-based Internet provider SC Telcom.

"In a totally hypothetical situation, if a user posts a threat or some type of harmful message on a bulletin board and they trace that back to us, we would be able to track that user down and provide that information."

Odell said SC Telcom in the past two years has been asked to provide information to law enforcement. He would not give specifics on the cases but said users should be aware that true anonymity is difficult to keep online.

That goes for home computers as well as large computer labs like those at Wichita State University and the Wichita Public Library.

During the day, public-access computers at the WSU library stay 90 percent full, according to Mark Eby, director of interactive marketing for WSU. The stations offer free access but will still attach traceable IP addresses to anyone logging on to the Internet.

In general, however, the university does not keep tabs on its users, Eby said.

"We reserve the right to refuse services, but that's a rarity," he said. "The university's about openness and freedom."

The case is similar at the Wichita Public Library, but some effort is made to shield users' identities from each other.

Director of libraries Cynthia Berner-Harris said the library system tries to treat its use of public computers in much the same way it treats the use of its books and videos. The library system has about 60 computers, at least one in every branch. Internet access has been available at the libraries since January 1997.

Computer users are required to have a library card, but the library system does not keep records that match individual users to individual computers, Harris said. Each workstation has identification, she said, but users are not recorded.

Experts say that might add an extra step toward uncovering a particular message board poster, but it's not impossible for authorities to track that person down.

"It's kind of scary," West said. "I've been in this industry for over 10 years, and I've met only one person in 12 years of doing this who has been able to cover his tracks really well. He now works for the government."

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