

# Instant Messaging Privacy

KEEP YOUR CHATS SAFE FROM  
THE CHEATS. BY RUSSELL SHAW

It's human nature to let your guard down when you're among friends. Who needs to worry about security when you're chatting with your best buddies? But if your chats are conducted with an online instant-messaging program, you could easily draw the unwanted attention of a privacy thief.

Fortunately, each of the major online chat programs—AOL Instant Messenger, its Web-based cousin AIM, MSN Messenger, and Yahoo Messenger—have pretty good privacy

icon (the orange wrench at the bottom of the AIM window) and then click on the Privacy category in the left-hand column. Although the wording is slightly different, the privacy controls in both flavors of AOL's chat program are virtually the same.

Spammers have found fertile ground among AOL Instant Message users, especially after an America Online employee allegedly stole and sold 92 million AOL subscriber IDs to a spammer. (The employee was fired and arrested, but the damage was done.)


AOL Instant Messenger also has an important security feature that will, if enabled, perform a virus check on any files you receive via an IM session. To enable it, reopen the Privacy and Security window and place a checkmark next to the item that reads "Virus-check files I receive through IM File Transfer." It's important to note that the Web-based AIM does not have a built-in virus-checker feature.

## MSN MESSENGER

Microsoft's MSN Messenger chat client has a robust set of security and privacy settings, lacking only a built-in virus-checker. Depending on how you configure the software, you can:

- Block others from seeing or contacting while you're on-line.
- Sign in with a different Microsoft .NET Passport than the one you usually use.
- Manage your contacts list.
- Alert you when other users add your user name to their contact list.
- Require your password should you attempt to access another MSN account, such as Hotmail.
- Disable sharing your address book.

To reach the privacy and security controls in MSN Messenger, click Tools and then Options. Once the Options dialog box opens, click on the Privacy tab. You'll see three check boxes, a



An America Online employee allegedly stole 92 million AOL subscriber IDs and sold them to a spammer early this year.

and security features. We'll show you how to use them to secure your conversations.

## AOL INSTANT MESSENGER

AOL Instant Messenger (a component of AOL's subscriber software) and AIM (a Web-based IM program) have very similar privacy controls. If you're an America Online subscriber, you can configure your privacy controls by clicking on the Safety tab and choosing IM Privacy Controls. The IM Settings window will open with the Privacy and Security tab presented by default.

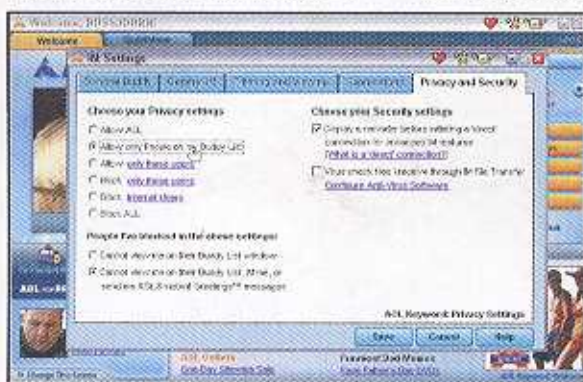
If you use AIM, click on the Prefs

Because of this, you should block users who are not already on your Buddy List from sending you instant messages. Here's how:

- 1 Open your chat client's privacy settings, as described above.
- 2 Click the button next to the item that reads "Allow only people on my Buddy List."
- 3 Click the button next to the item that reads "Cannot view me on their Buddy List, IM me, or send me AOL Instant Greetings Messages."
- 4 Click on the Save button.

My Allow List, and a My Block List. The Allow List Box shows users, including people you might not know, who can see your online status and send you instant messages. The My Block List shows the names of users you do not wish to extend these privileges to.

Notice the phrase "All other users" in one of these lists? If this entry appears in your My Allow List, it means that any other MSN Messenger user who's logged on, but not in your contact database, can tell when you're online and can send you instant messages. If "All other users" appears in your My Block List, then no one who isn't in



Both of America Online's instant-messaging programs can be configured so that only people on your Buddy List can see you online. This is a good way to ensure your privacy.

your My Allow List will be able to tell when you're online, and they won't be able to send you instant messages.

Unless you want to hear from spammers and complete strangers, either move "All other users" to your block list, or place a checkmark in the

## TIPS for Online Chats

- Block instant messages from people you don't know.
- Never give out personal information during an IM chat.
- Hide your online presence, if your software allows it.
- Keep your guard up, even if you're sure you know the person with whom you're chatting.

## IM ENCRYPTION

If you really want to keep your online conversations private, encrypt them. None of the instant-messenger programs discussed here offer built-in encryption, but you'll find a variety of third-party applications that will do the job.

JohnnyTech's Encrypted Messenger 3 (\$14.95) works with all the major IM programs, but of course both parties to the conversation need to install the software for it to work. The trial version is on the disc!

box next to the phrase "Only people on my Allow List can see my status and send me messages."

You can also manage your contacts on an individual basis. To move a single contact from your My Allow List to your My Block List, simply click on it and then click on the Block button. Reverse these steps to move them back to your My Allow List.

If you're using MSN Messenger at work, share your computer with several people at home, or if you're logging on at a public place (an Internet café or public library, for example), you can further enhance your privacy by placing a check mark next to the phrase "This is a shared computer so don't store my address book, display picture, or background on it."

## YAHOO MESSENGER

Yahoo Messenger's privacy and security controls are considerably less robust than its competitors, but they're still useful. To make changes to these settings, click on the Messenger menu, choose Preferences, and then select the Privacy category from the list in the left-hand column.

We recommend that you remove the checkmark next to "Allow Yahoo websites to show when I am online," so that spammers can't harvest your ID and send you junk messages or mail. For maximum privacy, you can place a checkmark next to "Always sign in as

invisible (Appear offline to all users)." The problem with this option, however, is that your friends won't know when you're online, either.

## SHUT THE DOOR!

As useful as these security and privacy controls are, they don't do you much good if you don't exercise a bit of common sense. Even after you configure your favorite chat client with its best privacy settings, you should never give out any personal information—even to people you know (or think you know).

It's all too easy for a criminal to impersonate your friends or family online, since you can't hear their voice or see their face.

By "personal" information, we mean your physical address, telephone number, credit-card number, and the like. What's the point of turning on all your software's privacy features if you're going to compromise your security in conversation? That would be akin to buying a burglar alarm, but not locking your front door. ■



Yahoo Messenger's privacy features are fairly weak in comparison with those of MSN Messenger or either of AOL's programs.