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Internet privacy: They know who you are!

"My Corner of the Net" is a new column devoted to answering your questions about all aspects of computing, from using e-mail and surfing the Web to troubleshooting. It will alternate between article and question-and-answer format. All questions should be e-mailed to complete@bc.edu with the subject line "Corner of the Net."

It's late at night. Your

My Corner of the Net Anthony C. Tecce

room mate is sneezing peacefully behind you as you click away at your Macintosh, skillfully surfing from web site to web site. The Nine Inch Nails site was fun, and then there was a link to a Pearl Jam site.

Now you are two dozen pages away at a site for body piercing. Each click of the mouse takes you farther down the road into strangeness. Eventually, you end up at the Citizens for the Right to Mow their Pets page. Yet you don't care, because no one will know you've ever been there. Right? You wish.

Few people realize that before the Internet was a medium

for communication amongst millions of needs and college students, it was developed to be the ultimate human interaction tool for the rebuilding of the United States after a nuclear war. Hooked up to this system were universities and military installations, the centers of knowledge and therefore power after such a theoretical holocaust.

Programmed with the ability to route information around damaged computer sites, it was a system that was impossible to disrupt.

In usual military fashion, the creators of this system made sure that every computer had its own address, a 4 part code protocol that would identify it on the Internet. It is still used today and is called the Internet Protocol number.

Every machine at BC has an Internet Protocol number starting with 136.167. Whenever you surf to a web site, the site can take note of the IP address of your computer.

In fact, whenever you send e-mail, the IP address of the machine you are sending from is unavoidably stamped in the header of your message.

Any person off the street can go to the web site of Intrinsic,

the people who map out all the IP addresses, and find out what institution belongs to those IP numbers.

Intrinsic also allocates domain names, which are the name that you type into your web browser to visit a site, i.e. www.bc.edu.

The "www" part says that it's a web server, the "bc" stands for Boston College and "edu" stands for educational, just like "com" stands for commercial and "net" stands for Internet.

As Intrinsic, a person can go half way toward finding out who you are. The other half can be easily accomplished through IPS in the event you happened to do something really heinous, like changing the web site of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to read "Jell-O shooters forever!" Intrinsic would be able to trace the two remaining parts of your IP address, say 136.167.11.28, back to your dorm room.

There are ways around this. There's a web site run at <http://www.anonymizer.com> that allows you to surf the Net anonymously, for a price. You can use it for free, but it runs so slowly that you can't reach most of the really good sites.