Networking for success

EU policymakers, legal experts and academics came together in Crete to discuss privacy and trust in a networked world. **Louise Tait** was there

Delegates at this year's network security conference were given plenty of food for thought over the course of the five-day event. Opening the show, European network and information security agency (Enisa) executive director Andrea Pirotti warned delegates that our increasingly connected world is facing a "digital 9/11". The theme of the conference, privacy and trust in a networked world, is particularly relevant today, with people the world over embracing the benefits of a rapidly expanding information society. But this comes with a warning: threats abound in cyberspace, ignore them at your peril.

Handing over the baton to German MEP Jorgo Chatzimarkakis, who delivered the keynote address, Pirotti said citizens "must not tolerate" governments jeopardising information security. However, Chatzimarkakis also pointed out that "the EU is investing significantly" in R&D in this field. He left it to his colleague from the commission, Dr Joao



Talk together, progress together

Let's go Dutch. Or at least, let's listen to what they have to say, because Simon van Merkom has a somewhat refreshing take on how to approach network security. Speaking on day two of the Enisa-Forth network security conference in Crete, van Merkom, senior policy advisor on information and communication security in the Dutch ministry of economics, gave delegates an insight into the approach his country has developed to shore up their networks against cybercrime. In his experience, the old adage 'two heads are better than one' really does ring true.

Speaking to the Parliament Magazine afterwards, he explained the importance of ensuring operators work together, for their own benefit and the benefit of the consumer. "Nowadays we have all kind of interconnected networks," he says. "The internet is 'the network of networks'. You are dependent on, and interconnect with, a lot of parties on different levels. You have to talk with each other on the things you can do. You should have a general strategic approach, but inside this you should work from the bottom up. It helps when you get people together talking about what is already there, what is their opinion, what is their strategy. And then you can build towards something that might be an agreement."

He believes that this bottom-up approach, where operators roll up their sleeves and discuss the issues together, can help increase security. "When they talk together they can increase quality and resilience and robustness in the industry," he says. That's not to say it has been easy for him to get the message across. He is, after all, asking competitors to confide in each other, and unsurprisingly things don't happen overnight. He also had to contend with the fact that these firms were sceptical of the government's intentions.

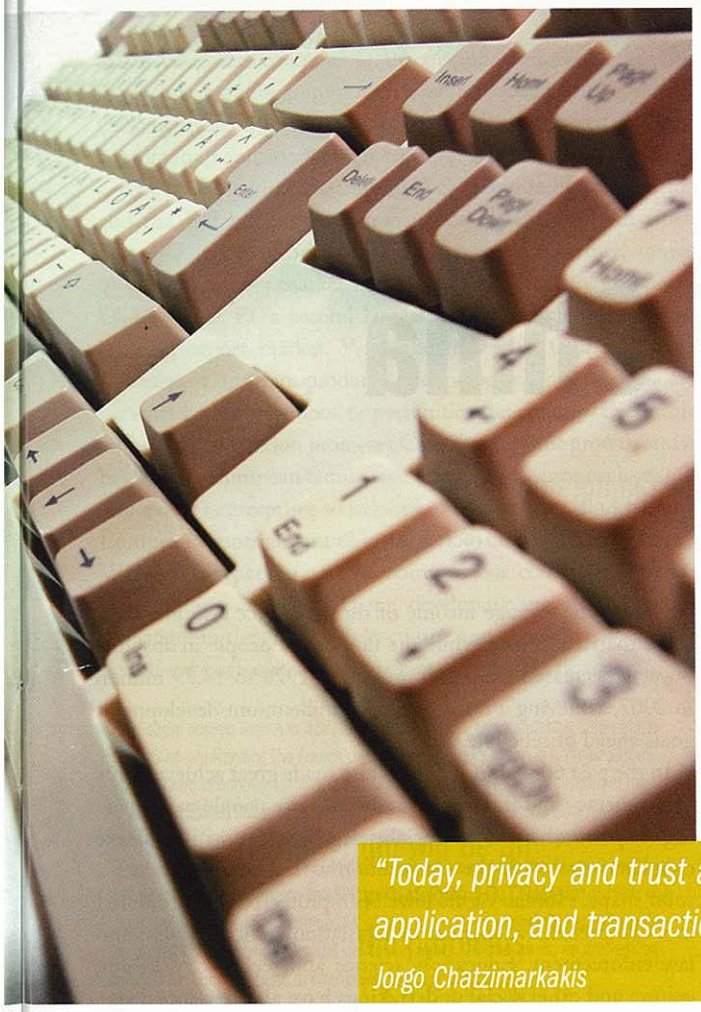
After initial reservations, van Merkom says the public-private partnership approach adopted in the Netherlands is blooming. In fact, operators and government have worked together to develop standards against which contingency measures and planning systems can be assessed. The reaction to the results of the subsequent audit was, to say the least, unexpected. "The results were produced in a confidential document. And a few of the companies, without any discussion, were willing to share this with the others. That's when I thought okay, this works." So, if it works at the national level, is it susceptible to cross-border implementation? Van Merkom certainly feels the approach has legs. "I think if you take our model... it could help. But I cannot guarantee – it depends on the culture and the relationship between the government and operators."

While such an approach may not have always been at the forefront of EU policymakers' minds, van Merkom believes they are now considering its advantages as they try to forge a new path towards their goals. But he warns that it will take time, and they must not overlook the long term objectives for short term success. He says, "In the past it was top down, like in every government. But slowly you see that they are trying to do something bottom up. It's difficult to find your new way. I think it will take a couple of years but in some sectors I think it will work." However, the Dutchman is not resting on his laurels. "Every now and then I should check with other countries to see what they are doing, to make sure I am still on the right path, to make sure it is still working," he insists. When van Merkom explains his approach, it seems refreshingly simple for such a technological topic: talk together, progress together. It's an idea EU policymakers could do well to emulate.

Da Silva, to provide the figures: €500m already on the table, a further €500m on the cards.

We know that the internet has grown at almost breakneck speed for personal and professional use. But for those who need to be convinced, Da Silva, the commission's head of converged networks and services, provided some figures. Google, once considered the little brother of Yahoo and askJeeves, today indexes 1.1 trillion pages, up from only 26 million in 1998. In February alone, US citizens despatched 210 billion e-mails and demanded 280 million internet searches. Social networking sites Facebook and MySpace have 280 and 128 million users respectively. Those 280 million Facebook users have managed to upload 30 billion photographs between them. In short, the internet is big.

But in this web of information in which we are merrily entwining ourselves, what of privacy and security? These issues are inescapable in the digital economy, as Chatzimarkakis pointed out. The ALDE deputy insisted that if policymakers are to fully support the EU's internal market, information security issues must be addressed. He said, "Today, privacy and trust are crucial concerns for any service, application, and transaction offered over public communication networks. Their importance is expected to increase even more with the future internet. Ensuring the integrity of information, protecting the source of information, and establishing trust are key challenges which must be addressed."



Information security is on the EU institutions' radar, with the commission announcing a strategy earlier this year. MEPs, for their part, were also keen to impress their commitment to the cause, with Silvia-Adriana Țicău, a former Romanian secretary of state for information technology, telling delegates that "the European parliament is ready to participate". The need to address network security is, according to Enisa, "vital" to the digital economy.

However, Dr Peter Freeman, professor at the Georgia technology institute, warned that privacy and security must not jeopardise innovation as he says it is fundamental that these are not stifled. Freeman said, "At the core of innovation in all fields is information, communication and tools that help the innovator explore new ideas and things. The internet does this to an extent that nothing before has ever done. That is now being threatened by overreaction to security problems. If we get things wrong with respect to privacy and security, the overreactions could kill, not just the future of the internet as we know it, but all kinds of innovation in our societies." Professor Freeman's parting shot was a reminder that we must not "diminish the great benefits of a networked world", telling the assembled cohort of policymakers, researchers and industry professionals that, "the future is up to you." ★

About Enisa

The European network and information security agency (Enisa) is mandated to assist the European commission and EU member states in ensuring higher levels of network and information security. The agency's tasks are focused on collecting and analysing data on security incidents and emerging risks, establishing public-private partnerships with industry, promoting risk assessment methods and best practice, raising awareness on network and information security and tracking the development of standards for products and services in the network and information society.

About Forth-ICS

The Institute of Computer Science (ICS) is one of the seven institutes of the Foundation for Research and Technology-Hellas (Forth), a major national research centre partly funded by the general secretariat for research and technology of the Hellenic development ministry. The mission of Forth-ICS is to perform high quality basic and applied research, to promote education and training, and to contribute to the development of the information society, at a regional, national and European level.

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