

Comment

Who steals my identity steals trash

Gregory A Petsko

Address: Rosenstiel Basic Medical Sciences Research Center, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA 02454-9110, USA.
E-mail: petsko@brandeis.edu

Published: 2 December 2005

Genome Biology 2005, **6**:122 (doi:10.1186/gb-2005-6-12-122)

The electronic version of this article is the complete one and can be found online at <http://genomebiology.com/2005/6/12/122>

© 2005 BioMed Central Ltd

“Who steals my purse steals trash,” said my mother, a life-long Bardophile, using a favorite quote from *Othello* to make a point to her then-10-year-old son, “but if someone steals your good name...”

“Shouldn’t that be, ‘Who steals my purse steals cash?’” I said brightly, thereby earning myself yet another in my seemingly endless childhood trips to the woodshed. (Yes, I was a smart-aleck even then.) But her point stuck. I know that one’s good name is among the most precious of possessions. I also know that identity theft is no joke, and that those people to whom it has happened have often found it to be a prolonged nightmare. Nevertheless...

I’ve been thinking about this lately because, as the holiday season once again descends upon us with all the subtlety of a mudslide (in the US the Christmas shopping period now apparently starts in July, treating us to rather alarming pictures of Santa Claus in full winter regalia while the outside temperature has plunged to a frigid 94° F), I’ve been doing a lot of shopping online. It’s convenient, rapid, offers a wide range of choices, and seems natural since I spend about 23 hours a day at the computer terminal anyway. And of course, every online merchant has plastered the store website with reassurances of how secure the transaction is. “Don’t worry,” they say, just as I’m about to enter an increasingly worrisome amount of personal information, which doesn’t yet include sexual history but wait until next year, “this transaction is completely secure.” That’s supposed to alleviate all my anxieties.

You’ll note that they don’t tell you how it’s secure (except for some occasional techno-gobbledygook about WEP or LEAP encryption systems) - possibly because if they did, it would make it much easier for nefarious persons to breach that security, but equally possibly because they don’t know. But one thing seems clear: the more secure they try to make it seem, the more personal information they demand. Not just your name, address, telephone number and e-mail address

(which they swear on their father’s grave they will never divulge to anyone else, but where the hell is all that spam mail coming from then?), but also your favorite pet’s name (ostensibly in case you forget the password they also make you create, but possibly so that they can send that pet spam e-mail, as several companies now do to my dog) and of course your credit card number, the expiration date - I accidentally entered 2108 one time and the system just took it, never batted an eyelash - and lately, that mysterious, magical “security” number on the back of the card. I don’t consider myself a stupid person, but I really don’t understand this escalation of numbers. I mean, why is adding a third identifying number any better than just having the first two? If the identity thief has your credit card, he or she has that number too. And if the thief intercepts the transaction, he or she will also have intercepted that number. Yes, I realize that the additional number was probably introduced to foil people who steal credit card information from receipts at restaurants and other stores, where only the front of the card is copied. But I also realize that nearly everyone shreds such receipts these days, and that the receipts lack all the other personal information that the thief will need to make online purchases, which is the only place where the pesky third number is required anyway. Eventually the credit card companies and the online retailers must realize this too. No doubt they will respond by adding a fourth identifying number, presumably on the edge of the card.

But I digress (as usual). The point I’m trying to make is that I’ve thought about this identity theft issue, and I’ve decided not to worry about it. My cavalier attitude is not because I believe what the merchants tell me about security. (I never believe anything any merchant tells me, including “Going Out of Business Sale”. One oriental rug company in my neighborhood has been going out of business for twenty-two years. They just expanded their store last month.) No, my blasé feelings come from careful consideration of the consequences, not to me, but to the thief, of anyone who steals the identity of an academic scientist.

The first thing our thief will probably try to do is use my credit card to charge some outrageous number of expensive purchases. Of course, like all academic scientists, I'm constantly hovering around the credit limit of my card, which, as soon as the credit card company stopped laughing when I disclosed my salary to them, they set at \$11,500. So our first picture is of our thief, dazedly emerging from some posh retail outlet, holding the cut-up fragments of the credit card in his dishonest hands.

Now let's suppose the thief has decided to use the purloined information not just to steal my identity but to assume it - something that apparently happens more frequently than one might think. Armed with my background information, reputation and credentials, he is easily able to secure a low-paying job at a research university. In the first week, he has fifteen interminable committee meetings to attend, plus five hour-long classes and two evening recitation sections to teach. As he sits in his closet of an office, trying to ignore the inoperable climate control system while desperately writing lesson plans at his postage-stamp-sized desk, there's a knock on the door.

Identity Thief: "Come in."

Student: "Professor Petsko?"

IT: "No. I mean, yes. What do you want?"

Student: "I need these medical school recommendations filled out." (Deposits pile of fifty envelopes on desk).

IT: "Good god. Uh, when are these due?"

Student: "They're due tomorrow. Sorry for the short notice. Got to go to class. Thank you so much." (Students always say "thank you so much" now. "Thank you very much" seems to have gone the way of "roll" in rock-and-roll. Someday I must find out where old expressions go when they die.)

As our thief is sitting there, looking stunned at the mountain of papers, two more students enter in succession, each with even larger piles of envelopes, each with the same request.

An hour or so later, the identity thief is jerked out of his state of shock by the arrival of the day's mail, which brings with it two bits of news. The first is a letter from the editor of 'Nature Gerbil', stating that, regretfully, they are unable to publish Dr Petsko's submitted manuscript on the complete genome sequence of the common gerbil, because one of the six referees they have had review the paper dislikes the typeface that was used in the manuscript. The letter ends by saying that, as is their invariant policy, no appeal against this decision is possible.

The second letter is from a grants administrator at NIGMS - the National Institute of Gerbil Medical Sciences - stating that, regretfully, they will be unable to fund Dr Petsko's submitted application, 'Functional Gerbil Genomics', because it was only found to be in the top 3% of all submitted applications and this year the cutoff for funding is the 2% line. Reading the critique, the thief is stunned to find that the major criticism is that the application failed to give adequate details about how a particular set of experiments would be carried out. Because the identity thief has had to familiarize himself with my publications, he realizes that the technique in question was invented by me, fifteen years previously.

As he collapses back in his chair, the telephone rings, and an angry voice at the other end asks the thief why he has not yet submitted his required activity report. As soon as he hangs up, it rings again, and an even angrier voice demands to know why he is late with the referee's report he promised to write for that manuscript that was sent to him last week. Just then, a cheery 'You Have Mail' message pops up on his computer screen, announcing the arrival of a still angrier e-mail insisting that his overdue review article for 'Gerbil Cell' be submitted immediately.

So, I think we can all probably go about our holiday shopping with an easy mind. Because if someone wants to steal the identity of any academic, my response is: good luck to them. Inside of a week, I'm betting they'll be here, on their knees, begging us to take it back.