

bbc.co.uk

Home TV Radio Talk Where I Live A-Z Index

BBC NEWS

WATCH BBC NEWS

UK version International version About the versions | Low graphics | Help | Contact us

Last Updated: Friday, 12 May 2006, 01:52 GMT 02:52 UK

E-mail this to a friend

Printable version

- News Front Page
- World
- UK
- England
- Northern Ireland
- Scotland
- Wales
- Business
- Politics
- Health
- Education
- Science/Nature
- Technology
- Entertainment

- Have Your Say
- Magazine
- In Pictures
- Country Profiles
- In Depth
- Programmes



What is RSS?

RELATED BBC SITES

- SPORT
- WEATHER
- CBBC NEWSROUND
- ON THIS DAY
- NEWSWATCH

Privacy traders 'must be jailed'

Jail sentences of up to two years are needed to combat the huge black market trade in details about people's private lives, says a government watchdog.



Richard Thomas says he is horrified at the scale of the problem

Information Commissioner Richard Thomas says there is a "pernicious" illegal trade in addresses, phone bills, bank statements and health records.

Celebrities are backing the campaign, but Mr Thomas said the trade posed a threat to "every citizen".

The government said it would review the current penalties in place.

The information commissioner is so horrified that he has used his special powers under the Data Protection Act for the first time to deliver a report to Parliament on the problem.

Currently the penalty for illegally buying or selling personal information is only a fine - up to £5,000 in magistrates courts or unlimited in crown courts.

INFORMATION PRICE LIST

- Obtaining or checking an address: £17.50
- Tracing addresses from a telephone number: £75
- Vehicle check at DVLA: £150-200
- Licence check: £250
- Criminal records check: £500
- Finding a person across a wide area: £60
- Ex-directory search: £65-75
- Mobile telephone account enquiries: £750

Source: Information commissioner's report case study

Mr Thomas said there is widespread abuse of the laws.

Journalists, financial institutions and local council debt collectors are among those paying private investigators and tracing agents for data, he said.

'Everybody vulnerable'

In one case, an agent working for finance houses and local councils was invoicing £120,000 a month to trace people.

BBC NEWS:VIDEO A The information cc calls for stronger p

VIDEO

SEE ALSO:

Patients 'back perso 28 Apr 06 | Health

RELATED INTERNET Department for Cor Affairs

Information Commi The BBC is not respo content of external i

TOP POLITICS STOP

Brown and Blair in Reid: Bombers nev Lords debate assist Privacy traders 'mu

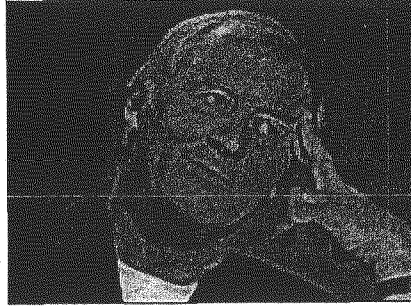


| What is RS

And one Sunday newspaper journalist was billed more than £700 in a week for a range of searches.

Mr Thomas said people cared about their privacy and their personal details should remain secure.

"Every citizen in this country is vulnerable to this, it's not just celebrities and sports stars and politicians," he told the BBC News website.



Intrusions into privacy could blight people's lives, he said.

"If you are a battered wife and have had to flee your home and go underground with a new address and an aggressive man comes after you, it's incredibly threatening and very distressing," he said.

Broadcaster Chris Tarrant is backing tougher penalties

Mr Thomas said it was "dispiriting" when prosecutions ended with a conditional discharge or a token fine.

There was a precedent in recently passed laws for introducing identity cards, which include a two-year prison term for people accessing information without permission.

He wants the government to replicate those penalties for people trading information from other sources.

“ My family has experienced... strangers making nuisance calls to our supposedly ex-directory telephone number ”

And he is asking professional bodies in journalism, the security industry and private investigations to take action.

Chris Tarrant
Broadcaster

The move could stifle demand and tackle suppliers, he said.

His report, *What Price Privacy?*, gives a price list for black market sales of information, ranging from £17.50 for obtaining or checking an address to £750 for mobile phone account details.

It also details some of the ways the information is gleaned, with "blaggers" impersonating people to access their files.


Public confidence


Who Wants To Be A Millionaire? quiz show host Chris Tarrant welcomed the report, saying too many people's private lives were being invaded.

"My family has experienced intrusions into our daily life with strangers making nuisance calls to our supposedly ex-directory telephone number," he said.

The Department for Constitutional Affairs said it would work with the watchdog to review the current penalties.

A spokesman said: "As the government moves to an era of greater data sharing in a range of public services, it is essential for people to be confident that, where their personal data is shared, it will be secure and will not be wilfully or recklessly abused."

 [E-mail this to a friend](#)

 [Printable version](#)

[News Alerts](#) | [E-mail services](#) | [Mobiles/PDAs](#) | [Headlines for your site](#)

[Help](#) | [Privacy and Cookies Policy](#) | [News sources](#) | [About the BBC](#) | [Contact us](#)