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Past Reviews

Six/Four: The Internet Under Cover

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Peer-to-peer technology from Hactivismo, which may become the Internet's next killer app, allows secure—and anonymous—Internet activity. eWEEK Labs assesses the potential and the threat. The Six/Four System is peer-to-peer technology that makes it possible to carry out almost any Internet activity securely and—more importantly, for all sorts of reasons—anonymously. The Hactivismo system, or anything based on it, just may become the Internet's next killer app.

Many who will be affected by Six/Four might use the term "killer" in another sense of the word—from record industry executives fearing a file sharing network where they can't see who's sharing what, to law enforcement personnel tracking illegal activity, to oppressive governments attempting to filter information to its citizens.

This last is the reason that Hactivismo created Six/Four. An offshoot of the Cult of the Dead Cow hacker group, Hactivismo is dedicated to preventing state-sponsored censorship of the Internet. It created the Six/Four System, which is named for the June 4, 1989, date of the Tiananmen Square massacre, to make it possible to access information anywhere on the Internet and put a big hole in things like China's Internet firewall.

eWEEK Labs evaluated a beta version of the developers edition of the Six/Four System, which became available this week, and found that Hactivismo hasn't quite achieved its goals. The peer-to-peer network, which relies on many node clients with some trusted peers that handle routing, is understandably very small right now. Also, the Six/Four System's capabilities are very raw.

The main application in the beta we tested was the Web proxy. Once we set up Six/Four on a Red Hat Linux system, we were able to define our local host as a proxy in our browser, then use the Six/Four network to anonymously go to Web sites. The process worked much like the old SafeWeb site.

This will be useful to those who want or, due to restrictive governments or ISPs, need to surf anonymously. However, in its current beta form, Six/Four will likely be too difficult for novices to install and use effectively.

Web surfing just scratches the surface of Six/Four's capabilities. It works with any TCP or UDP application, so a large number of applications could use it—all it would take is a simple system call to make use of Six/Four with messaging, collaboration, file sharing and other applications.

And that's exactly what will make Six/Four a security problem. Black-hat types could use Six/Four to break into networks and systems without fear of being tracked.

Six/Four does have some safeguards against such usage: Trusted peer administrators must apply to Hactivismo for a certificate that client peer nodes will use to identify legitimate trusted peers. At that point, trusted peers can block specific services and protocols that may be used maliciously.

The beta of the developers edition of the Six/Four System can be downloaded at www.hactivismo.com. Since the application includes munitions-level encryption to download the code, you must first state that you are not in or a citizen of Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan or Syria.

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Also, you must select the option that says you are not on the Commerce Departments Denied Persons list. Finally, you must select that you are a certified patriot, which basically means you selected "No" for all of the above.

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