

Is neighbor's Wi-Fi signal free for me to use?

November 11 2009, By Craig Crossman

Q. The other day, my Internet service went down as it does from time to time. But this particular time, I needed to check my e-mail for an important reply I was expecting. After some frustrating time passed, I happened to notice that there was a Wi-Fi signal available. I have no idea to whom the service belonged but I suspected it belonged to one of my neighbors. It had a generic name of "NETGEAR" and it was unlocked. I decided to see if it was accessible and it was. I was able to check my e-mail and download the important document that was attached to it. Now my question to you is if I did anything wrong by using my neighbor's unlocked Wi-Fi signal to get my email and do a little web surfing afterward.

A. If you want the direct and simple answer, it's illegal to use your neighbor's Internet service without their consent, period. Your neighbor is paying for the service and if you are using it without their knowledge, it's stealing.

Now you will find a wide range of arguments and reasons that you could use to try to justify/rationalize your using your neighbor's service. Here are a couple:

- "The average person will not know you are using their Internet service when you access it via an unlocked [Wi-Fi](#) signal." That's pretty much true. The only way they might suspect something is wrong is if you begin doing something that eats into their bandwidth such as downloading a large file or begin streaming audio or video. That will cause their access to become sluggish which they may notice. Then again if your neighbor

subscribes to a large amount of bandwidth via a DSL or cable modem, your downloading usage may still go unnoticed. And even if they do notice it, they may just chalk it up to how flaky the Internet can be from time to time and choose not to do anything about it.

- "Your neighbors are just asking for it because they didn't take the time to protect their Wi-Fi signal by using encryption." If you go down that path, the argument continues by saying if they are using the more easily broken 64-bit WEP protection, they deserve to have their signal taken. Using that same logic, then it's OK to enter into your neighbor's home if they don't bother to lock their front door or lock it using an inferior lock? I think not. Just because something is there doesn't necessarily mean you have a legal right to take it.

There's something else you need to consider before you decide to use that Wi-Fi connection. It could be a trap. There's a way to steal information by setting up seemingly open Wi-Fi connections. These Wi-Fi traps are better known as "Honey Pots." The unsuspecting person is lured into using the seemingly free, unlocked Wi-Fi service. They access their banking websites, make credit card purchases, etc. With a Honey Pot, every single thing you type is being recorded by those who want to steal from you. Your account information, passwords and anything else you type to gain access has now become compromised. So that free Internet access you thought you were getting actually comes with a very heavy price.

Now chances are the Wi-Fi signal you stumbled upon from your home isn't a Honey Pot. Those are typically set up in public places such as airports, restaurants and other venues where the thieves have access to literally hundreds of computers every day. Your situation is probably just some neighbor who didn't know enough to protect their [Internet service](#). Chances are they may never know you're using their service and your using it probably won't even cost them anything unless they are

using one of those tiered services that charge extra if they go over a certain amount of usage. But whether they notice it or not, or whether it's locked or unlocked really isn't the point. The bottom line is that unless you have their permission, you're taking something that doesn't belong to you. That's stealing. Don't do it.

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