Shaw Wi-Fi plans raise fears

BY LEWIS KELLY, EDMONTON JOURNAL   JANUARY 17, 2012

Shaw Communications will launch its municipal Wi-Fi networks some-time this spring. The project, currently undergoing public pilot testing in Edmonton, Calgary and Vancouver, allows Shaw Internet customers to ac-cess the web through mobile devices like laptops and cellphones.

But according to Brad Haines, an Edmonton-based computer security expert and hacker, it also comes with an ineffective and potentially dangerous security feature.

"There just seems to me to be a huge oversight that I hope like hell they're not putting into the actual rollout," he said. "I do laud them for trying, but my main issue is that they're calling it secure when it isn't."

Most public wireless Internet net-works are "open" - anyone with a password can track the movement of anyone else using the same network. Shaw's networks, accessible to anyone with a Shaw-supplied email address, run "open" and "secure" versions. The company's website calls the latter "the safest option," since it encrypts data sent between a customer's device and a wireless access point.

But Haines says this encryption is easy to circumvent, allowing malicious users to see the traffic of others on the network who think their in-formation encrypted. That's because Shaw has to make the password to the secure network widely known to allow its customers access.

Cam Kernahan, the vice-president in charge of Shaw's Wi-Fi initiatives, acknowledged that the security on the network is not airtight. "We're adding an extra level of encryption, and just like anything else, there's ways that people can crack encrypted technology," he said. "For the average guy in the street we don't think it's that simple to do that.

"It's like your neighbourhood. If you have the alarm system and your neighbour doesn't, well, yes, people can bypass the alarm system some-times, if they're very good at it. But which place are they going to go first?"

The pilot project allows Shaw customers wireless Internet in over 20 locations throughout Edmonton, including Whyte Avenue, Millbourne Market Mall and the McCauley neighbourhood. Kernahan said the company will gradually add more access points leading up to the formal launch sometime this spring.

Haines said an Internet-savvy layperson could subvert the network in under an hour. He worries people will surf the Net with a false sense of security. "You've given me the password to this supposedly secure network," he said. "It's kind of like saying 'We're a bank. Here's the key.' "

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