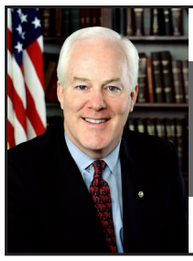

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John Cornyn

UNITED STATES SENATOR • TEXAS

Safeguarding Our Computer Networks

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

I still marvel at the change computer networks have brought to our lives. In the course of a single generation, some of us have gone from ignorance to near-dependency on the Internet, at home and at the office.

Today, more than 205 million Americans—including nearly 90 percent of teenagers—use the Internet regularly. Nearly all of our public schools in America have Internet access, and countless employers would go out of business without the increased efficiencies of computers.

As the price of powerful desktops and laptops has dropped, home computers are now as commonplace as televisions. We pay bills, research health information and buy Christmas presents online. Just as telephone calls have taken the place of posted letters, emails and instant messages and podcasts are making their mark as communication devices of choice in this fast-paced age.

There are numerous examples of how the public sector operates via computer systems, including municipal water systems and electric grids. In addition, virtually all of our critical national security infrastructure, including law enforcement and intelligence capabilities, are now dependent upon computer networks.

These advances, as beneficial as they can be, come with great risks. Users of the information highway share the road with many other drivers, and some have criminal intent. It's important that we recognize our vulnerability, in our homes and outside, and protect ourselves.

October is designated as "Cyber-Security Month," devoted to raising awareness for everyone—from a home computer user to the largest corporate and political organizations—to be vigilant in preventing computer crime.

In this age, we have a special responsibility to protect our children from online pornographers and predators. Blocking software and other protective measures are available, but there is no technological substitute for parental supervision.

I hope parents err on the side of being overly-protective when it comes to monitoring the online activities of their children. There are far too many predators in the world today who view the Internet as a useful avenue to the lives of our children. Congress and the federal government are taking important steps to crack down on these predators, stiffen penalties against them and protect children online through such measures as the Internet SAFETY Act, which I cosponsored. But it's also important for parents to warn their children and be actively involved with their Internet use.

The rules in your home should be familiar. Be extra prudent with the information you share online. Don't give out your computer user identifications, or your passwords—such as those you might use to access your bank or credit card account—to anyone online. Make certain your passwords are complex and unpredictable.

Government and businesses must be equally alert. An organized cyber attack on our public computer systems would disrupt national security, halt production and distribution of needed goods and services, and endanger the health of our entire economy.

As Texas Attorney General, I convened a panel of security experts, business leaders and government officials from throughout the state to explore ways to safeguard key components of our state computer infrastructure. Significant progress has been made since then.

Congress began to address the critical need for security in our federal computer networks by passing the Federal Information Security Management Act in 2002. Unfortunately, federal agencies continue receiving an overall grade of "D" when evaluated for compliance with the guidelines laid out in the 2002 security management legislation.

Two years ago, I helped persuade my Congressional colleagues to require that federal agencies make information security a priority during the earliest possible stages of a new computer system's planning and investment decision-making process.

I'm pleased that the Department of Homeland Security has appointed Gregory Garcia to fill an important new post—Assistant Secretary for Cyber Security and Telecommunications. First responders to a cyber security attack against America have far different needs and functions than traditional first responders. They require clear and visible leadership within DHS to organize and maintain our security, and now they are getting it.

The effort to secure our computers, at home and across the business and government world, will never be complete. As soon as one threat is countered, the human mind will find a way around the countermeasures.

Computers and the Internet are increasingly important parts of our society, and our daily lives. We must remain ever vigilant to minimize the vulnerability that inevitably accompanies our expanding use of these marvelous technological advances.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.

For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/column