

May 10th 2005**NZ Herald
Owen Hembry**

NZ software could have plugged leak on shooting

A New Zealand company says its software could have spared the American military major embarrassment when censored information about the death of an Italian secret agent was leaked last week.

The military report was easily cracked by a hacker with just two mouse clicks and subsequently posted in full on Italian newspaper websites.

The report was the result of an investigation into the shooting of intelligence agent Nicola Calipari by soldiers at a US checkpoint in Iraq on March 4. He was taking released Italian hostage Giuliana Sgrena to Baghdad airport. Both Sgrena and the driver of the car were wounded but survived.

The Herald obtained a copy of the report - an Adobe PDF file - and found that selecting, copying and pasting the censored text into another document revealed the hidden information.

The previously censored text included the names of soldiers and units involved, details of attacks in the area by insurgents and procedures for blocking traffic.

Onstream Systems of Wellington has developed software called RapidRedact designed for secure electronic censorship, which it says could have saved the Americans a good deal of embarrassment.

"The cost of this to the Americans must be absolutely enormous," said chief executive David Kelly.

But so far, he says, the software hasn't been easy to sell.

"I've been trying to catch the eye of the military attache at the US Embassy in Wellington, but he won't ring back. It would certainly have solved their problem." Kelly said electronic files often store more data and information than was visually displayed. "Documents that are stored and passed on electronically can carry with them every text change and annotation from the time of first creation."

Large sections of the 45-page report were blacked out when released - but in the electronic world, things are not always black and white.

Judith Salonga, Adobe Systems marketing manager for Australia and New Zealand, said the US military had used a formatting function for a purpose it was not designed for. "It appears that to remove the information they used a black highlighter on black text in the document to conceal the sensitive text." Simply deleting data could also be inappropriate, even if you could guarantee previous versions could not be accessed, she said.

Kelly said freedom-of-information laws in many countries required reports to display sections where information had been censored.

Onstream launched RapidRedact in New Zealand, Australia, Britain and the US in November. Updated versions have been released since then. The software can handle data from multiple formats including written documents, spreadsheets, emails and web pages, the company says.

Users can search for specific words and phrases, blank them out, cite the relevant legislative clause and clean out background data to prevent retrieval.

The resulting output is a censored document that can be posted safely, and an audit copy for storage, Onstream says. Kelly said 15 US law firms had joined his customer list in the past two weeks.

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