

Private investigator abuses T-Mobile Austria's network data

The Austrian Supreme Court recently stopped the operation of a private investigator who was using T-Mobile Austria's internal network data (September 15). In every mobile phone network, transmitting stations are identified by a unique code, called "Cell-ID". Every mobile phone in range receives and internally processes the Cell-ID. The Cell-ID is generally invisible for users of phones, but can be revealed by using a secret code or special software on the phone.

A private investigator modified his mobile phone to display the Cell-ID and hooked it up with a laptop computer and a GPS-navigation system. Driving around Austria he logged most Cell-IDs in T-Mobile's network and linked them with the geographic coordinates received through the GPS-system, finally collecting this information in a database. His intention was to offer all kinds of "Location Based Services", ranging from surveillance of persons and vehicles to logistic applications. Buying or renting his system enabled his customers

to track the position of a mobile phone, using a convenient web-interface.

T-Mobile Austria sued the private investigator. The Austrian Supreme Court stated that that the private investigator's system violates the Austrian Statute on Unfair Competition and prohibited the further operation and marketing of the system. According to the Supreme Court, the system abuses the internal data (Cell-IDs) from T-Mobile Austria's phone network. The private investigator did not pay for the use of this data but copied the information - especially the link between the Cell-ID and the location of the transmitting station - into his own database. The relevance of this decision for similar computer-systems and their internal data is obvious.

By Dr Rainer Knyrim and Christian Podoschek

This story will be covered in more detail in February's edition of the International newsletter.
