Earlier this month, American cybersecurity firm SentinelOne released a report on discovering a hacker group called ModifiedElephant, which has been operational for over a decade and allegedly planted incriminating evidence on personal devices of Indian journalists, human rights activists, academics and lawyers. But is there an operating system (OS) that can help keep journalists safe when navigating the internet and communicating with sources? Can it help activists, journalists remain anonymous when they go online? What about politicians worried about cyber-espionage from rival interests?

If anyone believes they are threatened by cyberattacks from malicious actors with considerable resources, including state and state-aligned entities, Tails OS could be their first step towards protecting their digital activities. Tails, which stands for The Amnesic Incognito Live System, is an open-source, security and privacy-focused operating system. It is based on Debian-based Linux distribution and was famously used by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden to speak to journalists and documentary filmmakers.

Unlike Windows and Mac OS, Linux is not built by one single organisation. A Linux distribution or distro refers to an operating system made using the Linux kernel (the computer program at the core of the operating system) with other programs and applications, tailored towards a particular use case. The Linux kernel is also used for other popular operating systems including Ubuntu, Manjaro, Linux Mint and Pop!_OS.

Tails works on a simple enough premise: it is designed to be booted off a flash drive every time you use it. Tails can be used to operate a computer and access the internet without compromising user identity and data. Since Tails runs separately from the OS installed on a computer and doesn’t make use of the computer’s hard drive. It also does not store any data, which can make it incredibly complicated and annoying to use for most people. In theory, it can offer protection to users even on a compromised system.

Here’s a closer look at the Tails operating system, and how you can safely install it on any flash drive.

[2] Debian