

RANDOM

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I may be crazy, but I'm not stupid.

THOUGHTS

2004:01

Which applications should you be using?

Some people are Microsoft haters. I am not one of those. Most of the people who listen to Technology Corner probably think I'm more a Microsoft apologist, but that isn't quite right either. My goal is to be a realist.

Being a realist means I understand that Microsoft "owns" the desktop. Maybe not forever, but for now Microsoft has an 80% or more share of operating systems on the desktop. Apple's sales are lousy despite the advent of OS X. Unix or Linux for the desktop? Laughable currently, but not out of the question.



Technology Corner website on Internet Explorer.

Being a realist means I understand that Microsoft's market position places it exactly in the middle of the target for every miscreant on the planet. If somebody wants to write malicious code that affects a lot of people, that somebody will write code to exploit a problem with Microsoft Outlook or with Microsoft Internet Explorer.

Being a realist means I know that Microsoft is doing everything humanly possible to safeguard its operating systems and its applications, but being a realist also means I understand that the advantage will always be with the creeps who can strike without notice.

And being a realist means that I'm beginning to re-think the applications I use most often.



Technology Corner website on Mozilla.

Outlook is out, at least as an e-mail client

For me, Outlook was never in. I prefer The Bat to any other e-mail application I've seen. What the application lacks in HTML "beauty" it more than makes up for with its industrial strength security, customization opportunities, and speed.

Because I don't have an Outlook-based e-mail account, I won't send you a virus-infected e-mail even if I do the unthinkable and open an infected message. I did that once with the "I Love You" virus and I didn't care for the results. I have an antivirus program and The Bat warns me about unsafe files, but the crucial part of my defense system resides between my ears. I'm careful about the messages I open.

Internet Explorer is benched

I still say that Internet Explorer is the best browser when it comes to accurately displaying a website, but it's the browser

Random Thoughts or Dead Trees?

Dead Trees seemed to be a somewhat negative name for this publication. Starting with this issue, the new name is *Random Thoughts*, suggesting – if not deep analytical articles – that at least minimal thought during development of the articles. Please note that I still bear no particular animosity toward trees.

ISSN 1543-1525 (print) – ISSN 1543-1533 (electronic)



Carnegie Mellon's Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) has been an Internet staple for nearly as long as the Internet has been in existence. If you're seeking security information, this is a good place to look.

that 70% or more of all Internet users have chosen and that makes it the browser with the target on its back.

In December, the Carnegie Mellon Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) announced an exploit that involved IE's improper validation of HTML application (HTA) files. Outlook uses IE to display HTML content, so a hostile e-mail message could use an HTA attachment to install the Qhost-1 Trojan horse. For those (like me) who don't use Outlook, the attacker would only have to lure the victim to a hostile website.

Qhost-1 isn't a serious threat at the time I'm writing this. It makes some changes to your computer's DNS (domain name service) entry and stops. It could be nothing more than a test, or it could be one piece of a multi-part attack. Whatever the intent, you don't want to have it on your computer and I don't want to have it on mine.

Microsoft will issue a patch for this "issue" and probably before you read this. But the majority of computer users don't bother to download and install the patches or don't even know about them. I have enabled the Windows Update service and my computers will be patched as soon as the patch files are available. Because I yammer to you about this, yours will probably be updated, too. But what about computers that belong to your friends? Your family? Your employees?

If history is any indication, most computers will not be patched to protect against this exploit, just as they have not been patched to protect against earlier exploits.

Alarmist or realist?

There's a saying about scientists: *The scientist who says something is impossible is almost always wrong.* That may be a bad paraphrase, but the point is that things we think may not be possible today often become possible tomorrow. Before 9/11, most of us thought of airplane hijackers as not dangerous. In less than an hour, we all changed our minds.

Given Outlook's ability to be compromised is it reasonable to use the application? I've already made my decision there. What

about Internet Explorer? Maybe it's time to step away from the browser that is the target of every exploit.

Until recently, the options have not been good. Opera is a "standards based" browser, but sometimes fails to display a site properly. Until version 7, Netscape was hopeless. So there were two choices – neither very good. And even with version 7, Netscape continues to do the kinds of things that would get Microsoft dragged into court. Netscape will install applications you may not want installed. I keep the latest version of Netscape on my computer so that I can check to be sure that websites display properly, but I will not use Netscape as my default browser.

The best browser may be Mozilla

Mozilla is the open-source version of Netscape – Netscape without all the junk that Netscape insists of cramming down your computer's throat. Mozilla's display is accurate. It abides by W3C standards. It's not vulnerable to the attacks aimed at IE.


Now would be a good time to stop by www.mozilla.org and pick up a (free) copy of the current browser.

At the office, I use Opera as my primary browser because I can have a dozen or more sites active with just a single token in the task list. I've set Mozilla to be the default browser. IE is available from the Quick Start panel. It's a safe configuration and it works. The browser you set as "default" is the one that opens when you double-click an HTML file (html, htm, shtml, and others). Setting any particular browser as your default browser doesn't preclude using other browsers on your computer.

Easier than setting the time on your VCR

I occasionally make fun of the people who can't set the time on their VCR, but I must confess that the Technology Corner is the home to two VCRs that flash "12-12-12" continuously. I have at least a dozen ways to tell time in the corner and I don't need the clocks on the VCRs. Someday I may solve the problem with a strip of black electrical tape over the time display.

The fact that I don't set the time on my VCRs doesn't mean that I can't. And I won't judge you to be a "techno-turnip" if I see that your VCR can't tell time, either. **But I will wonder about you if you continue to use MSIE as your default browser in the face of serious security problems.**

If you feel that you must continue to use IE as your default browser, you should at least follow CERT's suggestion (see <http://www.kb.cert.org/vuls/id/865940>) and modify your Registry entry for HTA files. This involves deleting or renaming the key that controls the default application for HTA files. And you should visit windowsupdate.microsoft.com at least once a week (preferably once a day) to make sure that all of your Microsoft applications have the latest patches installed. There is no substitute for preparation, no excuse for being unprepared. 

CORNER *on the market* by A.J. Stinnett.

The chain of command has been replaced by ...
... the chain of concern.