RANDOM THOUGHTS

Communications With A Purpose

2004:06

Is this be the end of spam as we know it?

If you've been reading what I write here and elsewhere, you know I don't think much of the Can-Spam Act, but the combined effects of the act, at least one clever provision of the act, some long overdue efforts by Internet administrators, and some legal pressure from big companies with deep pockets might begin to reduce the crush of spam.

Just for the record, I receive about 385 e-mail messages per day. Of those, about 57% are spam and about 35% are from various discussion lists I'm associated with. That leaves a little less than 10% as personal and business messages. It takes me about 5 minutes per day to go through the 200+ spams I receive because I've set enough traps around the perimeter of my e-mail program to pitch all but about 3 per day into the trash.

Fortunately, there are some applications that are increasingly accurate when it comes to separating the chaff from the wheat.

In the past 8 days, I've had 16 spams slip through marked as "good". In that same period, I have had exactly zero good messages classified as spam. Not so bad, except for the annoyance factor – knowing that I'm paying my Internet service provider and website host a total of about $1300 per year so that spammers can send me their sludge.

The guy who runs OptInRealBig.com likes to protest that he's being singled out as a bad guy. He likes to claim that he follows the rules, but the "OptIn" part of his company name is a lie from the start. The messages I receive from this guy's hundreds of domains almost always come to addresses that I use only for domain registration. In other words, I never signed up with this guy or any of his "associate sites" for anything.

A new kid on the blockhead "SCB Express" apparently has registered hundreds of domains – many of them containing "scb" but some of the more recent ones are just nonsense strings of characters.

One of these guys is in Colorado, the other in California. That's good because they might be in the cross-hairs of some big guns on the anti-spam side.

Is all commercial e-mail bad?

Unfortunately, the spammers have pretty much poisoned the well for everyone. When somebody feels that it is his constitutional right to send out 20,000,000 messages a day to promote fraudulent drugs, porn sites, and mortgage companies with questionable ethics, it hurts everyone who wants to use e-mail for marketing.

An acquaintance who is an editor crafted a message to 100 companies that she carefully targeted. Her message enquired about the companies' need for editorial services. That's exactly the kind of commercial message that should be 100% legal. The mailing was small and targeted to people who could actually use the service. Compare that to spammers to indiscriminately vomit up offers to enhance the penis of 12-year-old girls, to provide "generic" Viagra (which doesn't exist) to 8-year-old boys, and on and on.

Yet if someone complains, the editor could lose her Internet account. If her ISP has a zero-tolerance policy, she could find herself disconnected. The big-time spammers don't get disconnected because they use applications that take over the computers of unsuspecting users (this is legal? moral? ethical?) or they pay a pittance to have a service in China, Russia, or other developing country send their vile messages.

Hoping for the best

But I implied that optimism is in the air, and it is.

The FBI says that it has identified some of the big spammers and will begin filing charges under the Can-Spam Act. We'll see if the act has any teeth.

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.

One thing Congress got right, though, was to add a small provision near the end of the bill. The Can-Spam Act specifically does not supersede any state laws concerning spam. This means that a spammer who is charged under the federal act may also be charged under a state statute. I'm no lawyer, so I'm not sure how or whether "double jeopardy" comes into play here, but some of the lawyers for larger ISPs seem to be quite happy about this provision.

Civil action, too

Then we have Microsoft and others joining ranks to file their own civil suits against spammers. Even if the spammer uses an off-shore service, it seems to be possible for aggrieved parties to go after the people who cause performance problems by dumping millions of messages per hour onto their servers.

Spammers aren't necessarily the brightest bulbs in the pack, but they are smart enough to know that if they can get 50 suckers to send them $50 per day by sending out 20 million spams and the cost of sending those 20 million spams is zero, they're making $2500 per day. With any amount of luck, they'll be smart enough to realize that if they suddenly find themselves facing huge fines and even larger legal fees, their profit margins will decline drastically.

If they're not that smart (and some of them probably aren't) then sender validation could nail them. Currently message senders are not validated. Give me an hour or two to find an unprotected mail server and I'll send you a message that looks like it came from Bill Gates. Or George Bush. If you know enough about how routing headers work, you'll figure out that the message didn't come from Gates or Bush, but you won't know who it did come from because there's no validation.

Some of the Internet's movers and shakers are (at long last) talking about authenticating the senders of messages. It will still be possible for people to send unauthenticated messages because there will always be some unprotected servers, but we need not care about those. Any message that arrives at my Internet service provider without authentication can be disposed of with extreme prejudice – unrouted, undelivered, and unopened.

The world will always have bank robbers, spammers, and embezzlers, but bank robbery is a fool's game these days and embezzlers are usually caught. With luck, spammers' days are numbered, too. ß

The Big Yellow Taxi

I found myself thinking about Joni Mitchell on the second Saturday in May. In 1970, she wrote and then sang "Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you got till it's gone." The "Big Yellow Taxi" tune began reverberating through my head about 9 that morning when my connection to the Internet vanished as I was uploading several hundred modified files to the Technology Corner website.

Then I noticed that the TV cable wasn't working either. Cable TV is accused of providing 500 channels of nothing worth watching, but even a curmudgeon like me can usually find one or two programs a day that are worthy of not being totally ignored. For me, losing high-speed access to the Internet was the more serious of the problems. Using a dial-up connection is like strapping on diver's fins and then trying to run a foot race.

I could still download my e-mail without too much trouble, but uploading those hundreds of modified files to the Technology Corner website had to wait.

Mutter, mutter, mutter

As much as we grumble about the technology that surrounds us, it's difficult to imagine going back to what we sometimes refer to as the "good old days."

I couldn't remember the exact lyrics to Joni Mitchell's song and I wasn't even entirely certain that she sang the song. I wasn't sure when the "Big Yellow Taxi" was written or who wrote it. Ten years ago, I might have guessed. Or I might have referred to "that song about the taxi". Today, even on a slow connection, a quick Google search gave me everything I needed to know to accurately identify the writer and singer, the date, and the exact lyrics.

Remember "bankers' hours" that gave banks 3 hours to balance their books before people went home at 5? Now many of us conduct most of our banking transactions at ATMs, on-line, or by phone – and at all hours of the day and night. I don't remember being thrilled by the need to visit my bank (between 9 in the morning at 2 in the afternoon, weekdays only) and stand in line every time I wanted to move money from a savings account to a checking account.

And as much as we like to think automakers "built 'em better in the good old days," that's not true. Today's cars, designed and built with the assistance of computer technology, can easily run for 100,000 miles even if the motorist neglects routine maintenance.

Some things really are better

Most things, probably. Think back to the 1960s. Would you want to go back to washed-out fuzzy TV pictures? Would you be willing to give up access to the Internet? Would you miss your MP3 player that lets you carry around your favorite 10,000 tunes? Would you mind having to get a lube job for your car after every big rainstorm?

The next time some minor technological kerfuffle leaves you a bit distraught, give a thought to the "good old days" and remember that they weren't really all that good. ß

CORNER on the market by A.J. Stinnett

I keep my thoughts positive
because my thoughts become my words.
(Adapted from Mohandas K. Gandhi)