The Web: Death, taxes and Internet spam

March 8 2006

Receiving a lot of e-mail spam lately? If you're like most Americans, the answer is probably a categorical "yes." Blame it on the Internal Revenue Service. Income tax return filing time is approaching for most individuals, and the spammers are inundating the Internet with fake offers of "instant refunds" for taxpayers. Now, not only death and taxes are assured for all. Death, taxes, and Internet tax spam are all now metaphysical realities, experts are telling United Press International's The Web.

"The increase in spam was due to an increase in tax preparation offers other financial service offerings that are more prevalent as we approach April 15," said Andrew Lochart, senior director of marketing at Postini, the San Carlos, Calif.-based electronic message management firm.

Last month just 15.5 percent of all e-mail messages sent over the Internet were legitimate communications, said Postini.

Internet-security experts have been predicting, since as far back as 2002, that spam would one day overtake real e-mail messages. "By all accounts, in 2006, this trend has gotten worse," said Kenneth Shaw Jr., chief executive officer of SOS Onlinebackup.com, a global data storage firm.

The heaviest day for spamming last month -- a month that saw an overall rise in spam, thanks to the fake tax refund offers -- was Feb. 18. On that day, companies quarantined more than 150 million spam messages in the United States, stopping them from reaching their intended, unsuspecting

recipients, Postini's research demonstrates.

Spam overall last month increased by 2 percent on the Internet from January, continuing its relentless growth.

According to research by Postini, much of the spam today is not just junk e-mail, but is routinely a vehicle for carrying viruses and other malware. The major viruses circulating last month included MyTob, bagle, netsky and Swen, Postini said.

"Spammers are always going to use techniques that deliver the best return on investment," Rami Habal, director of product management for messaging security at Proofpoint, told The Web.

According to John Thielens, chief technology officer of Tumbleweed Communications, an anti-spam firm, enterprises are spending far too much money on e-mail infrastructure to handle the 80-plus percent of "useless" e-mail traffic that could be stopped at the network's perimeter.

Recently, the company released its "Dark Traffic Report," which includes data on the prevalence of network-level threats to e-mail infrastructures and the impact to organizations.

Differing only slightly with the Postini report, Tumbleweed said that valid messages account for 17 percent of inbound enterprise traffic. What is more, it is important to note that, of these valid messages, a significant quantity is later determined by content filters to be unwanted spam.

Other findings available in this report include:

-- Growth in denial of service attacks of 300 percent during the third quarter of last year;

-- Growth in directory harvest attacks of 170 percent during the same period;

-- Percentage of inbound traffic that is addressed to invalid recipients was 43 percent.

Most e-mail administrators lack visibility into the composition of inbound "port 25 traffic" and therefore have no ability to shape it, the report said. As a result of the huge volumes of dark traffic e-mail that organizations receive, they continue to add additional e-mail servers and e-mail security appliances to process the invalid e-mail traffic they receive.

Internet service providers are trying additional tactics. "New ventures, and trial balloons, like AOL's e-mail 'postage' are meant to cope with these problems," Clyde Wayne Crews Jr., vice president for policy and director of technology studies at the Competitive Enterprise Institute in Washington, told The Web.

Crews said such "tiered pricing" online might eliminate much spam in the future.

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