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E-Mail Monkeys and Snakes

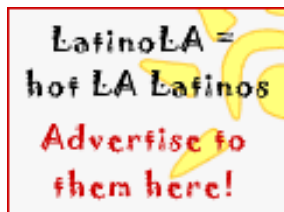
Fighting spam at the mailbox

By Kat Avila | Web Published 9.24.2004

On the average day, I review 1-5 pieces of relevant e-mail, then 50-60 spam messages that have been automatically filtered into a bulk mail folder. I'm tempted to automatically empty the bulk mail folder, except e-mail from friends or acquaintances occasionally slips into it. In a month's time, I receive over 1500 spam messages in my mailbox ("SEXUALLY-EXPLICIT: You Got Lucky This Morning," "INSTANT APPROVAL VISA reserved for Kat," "Free IBM Notebook," etc.), some of which are hoaxes, viruses, worms, Trojan horses, and phishing attacks.



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Definitions:

1. Hoax (no file attachment): Any excuse for the Iraqi intervention. Designed to trick or scare you into believing something that simply ain't true.
2. Virus: A destructive program (that vaporizes all your term papers due next week) that spreads because jerks like to sneeze on other people (to forward everyone in their address book) and make them sick too. Viruses are commonly packed away in infected e-mail file attachments, files, and disks.
3. Worm: A smarter virus that doesn't need an infected host file in order to spread.
4. Trojan horse: The amusing screensaver program you downloaded, for example, that contained a virus.
5. Phishing attack: Spoofed e-mail and spoofed web site. Might look like your mom, older sibling, the kid next door, trusted friend, lover, neighborhood bank. Hand over your account number, PIN number, password, credit card number, Social Security number - and I'll give you love, safety, big money, free stuff - NOT!!!

Got a spam filter and address blocks? Keep your anti-virus software updated, promptly install software bug fixes, and regularly back up important data files.

Friends and relatives know better than to forward hoaxes or chain letters or unconfirmed information to me because I'll make fun of them: "Did you

really believe this? It's old, man. Someone e-mailed me this several years ago!" I've trained everyone to surf over to sites like <http://urbanlegends.about.com/library/bltop25.htm> ("The Urban Legends Top 25") and <http://www.symantec.com/avcenter/hoax.html> (for the latest bogus virus warnings). All it takes is a few minutes of online research to prevent the kind of humiliation a high-level executive felt when a missing girl alert he e-mailed to the entire company (where I worked) turned out to be a hoax. E-mail hoaxes are like monkeys. Knock them out of the sky with the delete key before they cause more mischief!

E-mail snakes are more difficult to detect, especially since they can masquerade in the high grasses as e-mail from friends. EVERYTHING in an e-mail header can be changed and manipulated; it's very disconcerting to receive spam misusing your own name or e-mail address. To shoo off snakes, I pray a lot, block images from incoming e-mail, and do not open any attachments unless I've specifically asked for them or I am expecting them.

I've tried to reduce spam by not posting my e-mail address on every online telephone pole. I've also reconfigured my e-mail address on my web site to thwart any robotic attempts to pick up a useable address, e.g., stopspam2004@yahoo-dot-com where writers change "-dot-" to "." to send mail. Some people insert extra spaces, e.g., stopspam2004 @ yahoo.com, or use a string of characters in place of the "@" sign, e.g., stopspam2004<?!*#5>yahoo.com; humans know or are usually instructed to take out or replace the extra stuff. If my spam increases dramatically, I might turn to disposable addresses to protect my main address.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to check my e-mail and I have some trash to dump.

Kat is currently reading Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez's well-written and spunky "Playing with Boys," (c) 2004, "a look at the fast-paced world of young, smart, and savvy Latina entertainment professionals in L.A...."

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