

Not Guilty

By Bob Osgoodby

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We receive such a tremendous amount of unsolicited commercial email (spam) in our In-Box every day, we can certainly understand why some people become "Anti-Spam" crusaders. Since the majority is sent with phony return addresses, it is virtually impossible to track them down. While there are ways to find out where it originated, it is usually an exercise in futility, as most come from professional spam houses who own their own servers, and aren't about to shut themselves down.

Most people simply delete the clutter, or create filters with their email package to automatically get rid of a lot of it. There are some however, whose primary mission in life is to get rid of all the spam on the Internet.

Frustrated by their inability to get rid of most of it, they might find a valid email address, and like a hawk seeking its prey, they pounce upon the offender. They relentlessly pursue their intended victim, and file a complaint with every email address provider they can identify.

Some fanatics seem to take great pleasure in getting someone's domain blocked, or being shutdown by their ISP or email provider. But wait - what if the complaint is not valid. We all know how easy it is to forge someone's valid email address, and many spammers do just this. If a complaint is filed against that stolen address, the true owner is being unjustly accused. At the very least they will have to defend themselves, and worse case they are shut down. This is wrong.

Others obtain software that parses their email, and automatically sends a complaint to every provider found. Now, having a spastic moment, they might do this with a newsletter they subscribe to, and asked to receive. That means that the provider of every email address found in the newsletter will receive a complaint. This includes the authors of articles in the newsletter, all advertisers who list an email address, as well as the publisher. This action will cause people who are not guilty of spamming significant problems. This is unconscionable.

The typical scenario is that someone subscribes to a newsletter with a free email address and forwards their email to their real email address. When they receive the publication, decide they don't want it, and try to be removed from the distribution list, they are told that they are not subscribed under that address, which is true. Forgetting about the fact that it is actually being sent to their free account and being forwarded, their level of frustration increases with every copy received, and they fire off their complaints.

People who make unfounded complaints, like terrorists, are guilty of a crime. No, they don't kill anyone, but they could put legitimate people, who are not spamming, out of business due to their

complaints. They are, in point of fact, depriving someone of the right to earn a living, and should be legally liable for any damage they cause.

Don't get me wrong - I am as sick of receiving this garbage in my mailbox every day as everyone else. I don't like to receive unsolicited commercial email. I can't stop it however, and I don't think anyone can. I don't like receiving ads for porn sites, for legal representation, viagra, cellular phones, printer cartridges or anything else that winds up uninvited in my email.

I don't have a surefire solution to this problem, but I do know that it is wrong to persecute the innocent on the outside chance of getting a spammer, who will simply spring up someplace else.

The anti-spam fanatics who pursue tactics like this are more of a problem than the spammers they are trying to get rid of. While I can take steps to eliminate the spam I receive, I can't prevent the fanatics from making false accusations, which could be detrimental to my reputation and business.

Face it - the number of spams received from misdirected individuals is miniscule in comparison with those received from the untraceable pros. Rather than persecuting legitimate people who are not guilty, why not take some steps to provide a workable solution.

Spam is theft, Spammers are thieves, and should be treated as such. They are stealing your available resources, not to mention your time to sort through it. Legislative solutions have become mired, and remove lists don't work. Filtering email is only a partial solution as much spam is an HTML document that you can't eliminate on a keyword in the body of the note, and since they use a different address every time it is sent, it is virtually impossible to block.

In my judgement, the most effective way to keep unsolicited mail from getting in your email box, is to enact legislation that requires the letters "ADV" to precede the subject of the unsolicited email. That would identify it as an ad, and allow you the option to easily filter the email to where you wish. Something must be done, and a reasonable first step would be to send a copy of this article to your elected representatives, and demand action on their part.

The least effective way is to make complaints to ISP's found in an email, as the majority of the time, you won't be getting the real offenders. You could however, wind up hurting someone who is not guilty.

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