

Spam, Spam, Spam

by

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I received something that changed my thinking a couple months ago. It was spam. No, not the lunchmeat spam. I mean spam as in the common term used for unsolicited Internet e-mail.

I first learned of spam when I worked for a business in a small town several years ago. A director of the firm came rushing into my office while I was talking to a computer savvy 21 year old fresh out of college. The Director had just gotten on the Internet several days earlier and his wife had gotten a pornographic e-mail solicitation. "Guys, you have to help me," he blurted. "Someone is out on the Internet sending us filthy messages from an X-rated site," he continued. The college kid looked at him seriously and exclaimed, "you only get those if someone in your household went to a porno site." The Director blushed and ran out of the office. "Wow, is that true?" I asked the college student after the Director left. "Sometimes," he shrugged. "I just never liked that guy and I wanted to make his day," he laughed.

The prevailing theory is that the Internet e-mail term "spam" originated from a song in a Monty Python skit. Vikings, who were sitting in a restaurant whose menu only included dishes made with spam, would sing the word "spam" over and over, raising their voices until it was impossible for the other characters in the sketch to converse. I guess you had to be there. Thus the name spam was born for those who would use their unsolicited e-mail to drown out legitimate mail.

If you are on the Internet, you've likely been spammed. Most are feeble advertisements of get-rich schemes. Many are depraved, inviting you to visit their raunchy websites. But there are now other that threaten the private lives of ordinary citizens.

Consider the following unsolicited e-mail which I received from someplace called netspy a couple months ago:

LICENSE PLATE NUMBER - Get anyone's name and address with just a license plate number! (Find that girl you met in traffic!)

UNLISTED PHONE NUMBERS - Get anyone's phone number with just a name- even unlisted numbers!

LOCATE - Long lost friends, relatives, a past lover who broke your heart!

E-MAIL - Send anyone anonymous e-mail that's completely untraceable!

NEIGHBORS - Learn all about your mysterious neighbors! Find out what they have to

hide!

PEOPLE YOU WORK WITH - Be astonished by what you'll learn about the people you work with!

The e-mail ended with a US snail mail address with directions on how to obtain this software. The software then supposedly goes out onto the Internet and grabs this information.

As something of an Internet aficionado, I was sick to my stomach. In the past, spams were usually just annoyances that you automatically deleted without reading. This time something caused me to pause and consider how dangerous and diabolical this kind of e-mail truly was.

As a free speech zealot, I had always considered the Internet an ideal place to freely exchange ideas and gain knowledge. There was something American about it. I considered the Internet to be the ultimate of that free speech right we cherish. "If one found something offensive on the Internet, don't read it or go to another site," I professed.

But in one swift unforgettable moment as I read this demented e-mail, I changed my thinking. Something unfortunately had to be done to preserve the very freedom I loved so much. Those who seek to do harm by exploiting the privacy of individuals through the Internet are terrorists and enemies of freedom. People and their privacy needed to be protected.

On October 20, 1999, H.R. 3113 was introduced by Rep. Heather Wilson, a Republican from New Mexico and Rep. Gene Green, a Democrat from Texas. It's a bill to protect individuals, families, and Internet service providers from unsolicited and unwanted electronic mail. It may not be the perfect bill but the fact that Congress is grappling with this important issue on a bipartisan basis is encouraging. If the Internet cannot police itself, we need to be vigilant and safeguard our precious liberty.



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