The internet's plague: spam

Tony Mobily

When the internet became a "thing" for the masses, it was around 1995. Well, it was a little earlier for some, and later for some others, but I think 1995 is a pretty good point of reference. At the time, we all thought the internet could be a *utopia*, a place where nothing really bad could happen because we were all connected to one another - almost literally.

Anonymity made things even more exciting: there was the freedom to be however we wanted to be (who has never, ever lied on IRC?!?) and to join groups we'd never dreamed of joining before.

I remember being crazy about "Queen", but none of my friends were; well, thanks to the internet I found myself (virtually) surrounded by all of these people who, like me, loved Queen! Yes, I had discovered *alt.music.queen...* I know, it doesn't sound all that ground-breaking now, but at the time doing something like that was really amazing.

But then, something changed. Spam came along and it became part of the equation.

I have always been a good dreamer, but never a good forecaster.

I discovered later (we all did) that spam was to be the internet's worst disease. Let me give a couple of examples.

Newsgroups were fantastic, because they were both centralised (there was only one *alt.music.queen*) and distributed (there were several servers which could feed the same group). A new newsgroup was created if enough people wanted it. Thanks to this fantastic system, online communities were created easily and people could easily find others with the same interests. Unfortunately, because of spam, newsgroups have died (and managed to resurrect) a couple of times over the last two years. Online forums and mailing lists today play what used to be the newsgroups' role, but they struggle to attract people the way newsgroups did because of the lack of "centralisation".

IRC was fantastic too, especially if you didn't have a job. When IRC started having overcrowding problems, more IRC networks were created. It looked like things could actually work out. Overcrowding didn't seem to be too much of an issue anymore. Then, spam came along - yes, IRC spam! For many people (including me), that was the end of it. I haven't spent time on IRC for years, because every time I tried I was put off by spam messages, even in the most "serious" network.

And there is email. I believe the reason that email still exists is because it's become so insanely necessary in today's world. Without email, there would be no Free Software Magazine. Email

is doing everything possible – everything – to survive. It's a hard battle to survive, and I do wonder sometimes if it will manage to avoid being destroyed - by idiotic patent disputes by Microsoft, or by changes in the protocol, which make it harder and more expensive to use.

What about the World Wide Web? Is it really spam free? Well, it is as long as you don't let your users collaborate to your page's contents. If you have a wiki, or a guestbook, or whatever, then you will see: yes, even the www is spammed.

The depressing thing is that nobody seems to be able to come up with a "solution" to the spam problem. I sat down and thought about it for hours and hours. Many people must have done it. None of them have found a way out. (While these people were thinking, Microsoft continued its unbearable behaviour and tried to play the usual "it's my patent" game and fortunately it hasn't managed to win yet).

At this point, it's likely that spam is going to be like the cold virus – something humanity simply has to put up with, without ever "fixing" it. If that's the case, our role (as free software advocates) is to make sure that no single company (especially monopolists) has exclusive rights to use widely adopted technologies to fight spam.

Let the fight continue...

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About the author

Tony Mobily is the coordinator of Free Software Magazine