

Spam... spam...spam



Spam in a sandwich may taste good but the sort you get on the Internet is regarded as a curse. We explain what this Net spam is and some steps you can take to reduce your intake of it

If you've had any experience of either e-mail or newsgroups, you've probably already suffered from that hotly debated modern phenomenon, one of the scourges of the Internet era, 'spam'. The technology that makes e-mail and newsgroup communication such a boon when used properly can unfortunately also be turned against us only too easily.

Technically, it's not difficult for an individual or a company to copy a single message to every Usenet newsgroup in the world. Most IP news servers carry some 20,000 or more groups, so that's how many messages can be sent with one malicious click of a spammer's Send button. If you're curious, the word 'spam' is based loosely on the Monty Python sketch 'I don't like spam', although of course that referred to the canned variety more commonly associated with chips or sandwiches, itself a derivation of spiced ham.

A working definition of spam is 'The act of excessively copying a message, especially a commercial one, to many different Internet addresses.'

Don't be misled by that emphasis though, because many seem to get upset by private spam too. I think it depends on the circumstances. If someone with a technical problem requests help and copies ('cross-posts') it to four newsgroups, that's fine. It increases the chances of getting what might be an urgently needed answer, with minimum effect on others or on hard-stretched Net capacity (bandwidth). Strictly, however, it's still spam, and sometimes attracts anything from snide remarks to downright rudeness.

Commercial spam is another kettle of fish entirely, and can take virtually any form, from gently promoting a potentially useful product to aggressively marketing a pornographic girlie video. At the most extreme end of the spectrum you get blatantly misleading or fraudulent proposals of one sort or another, often involving chain letters. Collectively these have a rather similar label, 'scam'.

— by Terry Pinnell —

But the most common spams are simply advertisements. Your reaction to them will depend on your temperament, because most are harmless and even occasionally interesting. An example from my e-mail is typical: 'Introducing the EARTHS-MART LAUNDRY CD. Replaces Laundry Detergent Forever! 6 REASONS WHY EVERYONE WANTS THE EARTHSMART LAUNDRY...' and so on, shrieking with capitals and exclamation marks by the dozen. Like many of its kind, the bottom line is a clear statement of what they're pushing (local distributorships for selling detergent) plus an invitation to visit the appropriate Web site for more details.

Another spam I received recently was amusingly ironic, although probably not by intention: 'Hi, to get info on how to stop receiving unwanted spam e-mail in 30 min. E-mail jdab@worldnet.att.net.'

So, apart from being unsolicited and often having a high wince factor due to spelling and grammatical errors, this sort of spam is no real problem. On the other hand, unlike junk mail that drops through your letter box, spam costs phone charges to download; by contrast, the only one who suffers as a result of conventional junk mail is probably your hapless postman. Even innocuous spams can become tiresome and expensive when their volume grows.

What can you do about them? Well, one obvious way to escape the spam curse is to refrain from subscribing to mailing lists and

to confine newsgroup activity to 'lurking' - reading messages but not replying to any of them, and not posting any messages yourself. By the way, despite its rather insalubrious name, lurking is perfectly respectable - in fact it's highly recommended to do a fair amount of it before you dive into contributing to a newsgroup. But sustaining such abstinence is a pretty steep price to pay. And, unlike the contraceptive equivalent, it appears that even this is not completely safe; somehow users who have never publicly revealed their e-mail address still receive spam. Spooky!

By the way, despite its insalubrious name, lurking is perfectly respectable