The History of Spam

Timeline of events and notable occurrences in the advance of spam

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The growth of unsolicited e-mail imposes increasing costs on networks and causes considerable aggravation on the part of e-mail recipients. The history of spam is one that is closely tied to the history and evolution of the Internet itself.

1971   RFC 733: Mail Specifications

1978   First email spam was sent out to users of ARPANET – it was an ad for a presentation by Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC)

1984   Domain Name System (DNS) introduced

1986   Eric Thomas develops first commercial mailing list program called LISTSERV

1988   First know email Chain letter sent

1988   "Spamming" starts as prank by participants in multi-user dungeon games by MUDers (Multi User Dungeon) to fill rivals accounts with unwanted electronic junk mail.

1990   ARPANET terminates

1993   First use of the term spam was for a post from USENET by Richard Depew to news.admin.policy, which was the result of a bug in a software program that caused 200 messages to go out to the news group.

The term "spam" itself was thought to have come from the spam skit by Monty Python's Flying Circus. In the sketch, a restaurant serves all its food with lots of spam, and the waitress repeats the word several times in describing how much spam is in the items.

When she does this, a group of Vikings in the corner start a song:
"Spam, spam, spam, spam, spam, spam, spam, spam, lovely spam! Wonderful spam!"
Until told to shut up.

Thus the meaning of the term: something that keeps repeating and repeating to great annoyance.

1994   January, first large scale spam distributed across USENET – "Global Alert for All: Jesus is Coming Soon" was cross posted to every newsgroup

1994   April, spamming became business practice, two lawyers Canter and Siegel posted a message "Green Card Lottery – Final One?" to every news group possible

1997   US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) spam hearings

1997   First SMTP hijacking – Simple Mail transfer Protocol (SMTP) is a sender push technology

that delivered all messages without any sender requirement to provide an authentic return address.

1997   First Relay hijacking - allows third-party relay of e-mail messages by processing email that is neither for nor from a local user, an open relay makes it possible for an unscrupulous sender to route large volumes of spam using network resources from unsuspecting providers

1997   Paul Vixie creates Realtime Blackhole List (RBL) of spam sites

1998   DC ISOC Chapter of the Internet Society hosts meeting on spam

2000   Nigerian "419" email spam

2001   Code Red worm and Sircam virus infiltrate thousands of web servers and email accounts causing a spike in Internet bandwidth usage

2003   May 3rd – 25th anniversary of the first "spam" and the first time that the amount of spam email exceeded the amount of legitimate email

2003   First spamming "botnets" appeared

2006   IronPort released a study (June 28, 2006) that found that 80% of spam emails originated from "zombie" computers. It also reported there were 55 billion spam emails sent in June 2006.
Botnets sent from zombie computers are often used to spread e-mail spam. Most owners are unaware that their computer is being used in this way therefore the computers are called zombies.

2009   Majority of spam sent around the world was in English, however spammers started using automatic translations services to send spam in other languages.

2010   An estimated 88% of worldwide email traffic was spam (Symantec)

2011   Largest "botnet" on record (Rustock) that had infected over a million computers and had the capacity to send 30 billion emails a day was taken down in March through cooperation and actions between industry and various governments

2012   The rise of social media spam

type-name-date-language

Internet Society