

Diseas'd Ventures: A Critique of Media Reportage of Viruses

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by George Smith

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"[These are] diseas'd ventures that play with all infirmities for gold" - William Shakespeare

When it comes to the subject of computer viruses, few people have any sense of history. It is as if public consciousness of the topic is afflicted by a neurological disorder that destroys long-term memory. How narrow the world becomes when all one can recall is the events of five minutes ago (Internet time) or a couple of virus hypes so massive they couldn't be avoided even if one shunned the Internet altogether.

Virus = Crisis

I give the media, a favorite but deserving whipping boy, a good share of the blame for this short-term collective memory. This is because of the way in which crises of all kinds - real or, frequently imagined - are covered by the media. Crisis reporting as a whole is almost always a simplistic portrayal of reality. It is distorting in that it tends to take over a substantial part of the news, becoming an invariant backdrop to everyday life.

As a broad-based example, let's consider the current case of a well-publicized virus of the biological type - England's hoof-and-mouth epidemic. Because of the crisis model of reporting, the only recent news-based perception of England that most Americans have is of a place where diseased cattle and hogs are killed and incinerated. If not for agricultural crises like this, or the less-recent "mad cow" disease, *Dear Old Blighty* would appear infrequently in the US news media, and rarely on the front page. That is, of course, unless it would be to announce even more news of disease.

The generation of news about techno-crises on the Internet, of which computer viruses are probably the most prominent example, adheres to the same pattern of crisis reporting.

Every few months, the media descends in force to cover an explosively emerging virus, "Anna Kournikova" and the "Naked Wife" booby trap being two of the more recent spectacles. The impending virus is often described in dramatic, purple prose - it is said to be 'rampaging',

'storming', 'raging', or 'burning its way through computers'. The language used to describe a virus sounds like a war correspondent describing the Blitzkrieg.

Although most viruses are said to be unique or a technological breakthrough, closer examination reveals that they are neither new nor unique and that similar examples exist and have been described in academic discussions on the subject for years. As in standard crisis news reporting, the much-ballyhooed consequences of a virus threat, which are usually predicted to be biblical in proportion and tragic in nature, are rarely, if ever, covered. Were the apocalyptic forecasts realized? Did the Internet collapse upon itself, as was predicted? Were computers around the world, like hoof and mouth-infected livestock, thrown into a trench and burned, rendered useless by operating system mutilation? Or was it, by some slim chance of fortune, business as usual the next business day? It is often difficult to say, because the media follow-up to the pre-virus hype is minimal by comparison to the build-up. Such questions remain open, never examined in detail, even when the next major virus, accompanied by similar hand-wringing hype, arrives two months later.

The current method of reportage fails to discuss virus threats in a historical context, predominantly because such analyses cannot be easily shoehorned into the immediacy of crisis news. As a result, new threats are rarely, if ever, discussed in a rational, well-informed (i.e., non-hysterical) manner that compares and contrasts the expectations and realities of previous threats, and treats the current threat accordingly.

To sustain the public's interest between peaks in concentrated crisis coverage, there is the columnist or reporter assigned to what I call "the cyber-trouble beat." The "cyber-trouble" beat-reporter needs competitive news every day in order to maintain the audience numbers required to keep sponsors happy. Since crisis coverage is the modus to which everyone faithfully subscribes, the "cyber-trouble" reporter is often compelled to depend upon press releases from anti-virus companies, comsec firms, government agencies and hackers and virus-writers. The less sceptical may call these "tips". However, they can also be seen as a method of special interest groups attempting to capture some measure of attention by crowing about and/or predicting of techno-problems, thereby capitalizing on those problems.

With the ubiquity of networked computers in contemporary society's economic and social life, and with the general public's lack of understanding of network technology - and the attendant mistrust and uncertainty of computers that arises as a result - it is almost always possible to get techno-crisis stories published in a 'news' venue somewhere. The majority of stories

produced in this manner help to create a twisted image in which networked computing is always balanced at the edge of disaster. Without the technical knowledge to assess these reports critically, the public seems to face waves of computer viruses coming at them like plagues of locusts borne upon the back of the e-mail that their daily lives now depend upon. In its insatiable and indiscriminating appetite for news, it is a system that is easily gamed.

With this in background in mind, let's take a stroll through a selected history of recent and not-so-recent computer viruses and their portrayal in the media. It will be so enlightening you'll be moved to bang your head on the keyboard at the joy of it.

Virus-Powered Propaganda

VBS_Injustice.A

Do you recall the [Injustice virus](#), which appeared in the media around March 20 this year? It's only a few weeks old! It was considered by one news source "to be the . . . first politically-motivated" virus because it displayed a plea to "HELP US TO STOP THE BLOOD SHED!! [sic]" in the Middle East, along with text that went on to detail the shooting of a Palestinian child by Israeli soldiers while being shielded by his father. One anti-virus minister of information described the threat as "virus-powered propaganda of the first order" ("Firms Warn Over Political Worm", by Steve Gold. Newsbytes. March 20, 2001.)

But not so fast there, lil' partner, this is not an isolated incident by any stretch. There have been other notable instances of viruses that were disseminated in order to spread propaganda.

MacMag's Message of Peace

In 1988, the publisher and editor of a computer magazine went about the commissioning of a Mac-infecting virus that activated on March 2 and displayed the message: "RICHARD BRANDOW, publisher of MacMag, and its entire staff would like to take this opportunity to convey their UNIVERSAL MESSAGE OF PEACE to all Macintosh users around the world." This might have been the first case of virus as 'branding exercise'. If the virus was the vehicle, publicity for MacMag was undoubtedly the payload.

Unfortunately for Mr. Brandow, the payload never hit paydirt. Writing engagingly on the affair in his *Guide to Computer Viruses*, Robert Slade noted that the allegedly politically motivated

MacMag virus "backfired almost immediately," generating an ill-will and notoriety that overwhelmed its ostensible message of peace. It was Slade's opinion that the MacMag virus was "written mostly with advertising in mind," an assertion that was bolstered by Brandow's efforts to "[milk] it [in the media] for all it was worth." The aforementioned Injustice virus, which attempted to log the target to Palestinian websites, was similar: the political message can be dismissed as an excuse to write an annoying malicious program that gets the author, a sponsoring group or a Web site some much-coveted news coverage.

Over the years, 'message' viruses of this nature have been produced in significant quantity. Quality is an entirely different matter. The majority are deadeningly inane and barely functional. One obscure example from about a decade ago was the 'Sadam' virus, which featured a screed proclaiming: "HEY SADAM LEAVE QUEIT [sic] BEFORE I COME." As sophisticated message-bearers, viruses have never worked for the simple reason that media commentary surrounding them almost always exceeds the impact of the virus. This is due, at least in part, to the technical inability of a virus to broadcast a compelling idea efficiently.

(Note: there is an - ahem - subtle distinction between the appeal of a political message as a 'compelling idea' and the promise of free porn. While not necessarily smart, most virus-writers implicitly grasp the concept that that the standard office ninny will probably react more enthusiastically to a subject header screaming "Hey, check these pictures of naked, nubile tennis girl" than they would to one pleading to "STOP THE BLOOD SHED." Of course, there is always the option of combining the two . . .)

In any case, the anticipated results of the Injustice virus 'threat' never materialized because it was predicated mostly on press releases, as opposed to the proliferation of the virus itself. In fact, any effect it did have was due more to media attention than to dissemination, which was described as mediocre at best. It probably did not warrant media coverage in the first place. Generated only as part of the "cyber-trouble" beat, the Injustice virus was dropped as soon as the "Vierika" virus arrived, which was history as soon as the "Adore" virus appeared, which lasted only until . . . well, you get the picture.

If the absurd logic of the current reporting system is pursued to the end, it becomes easy to imagine a few virus stories, all saying generally the same thing, all about 250 - 500 words long, every single day (or more often.) The question must be asked: Does this greatly contribute to a better understanding of computer viruses? Does a computer virus story every day or every week accurately reflect the level of risk posed by the phenomenon of computer viruses, or does

it result in a dangerous skewing of perception?

Virus Writing Competitions

Moving right along, let us now mull over the spell-binding history of the virus-writing contest, the most recent of which is the "GateKeeper Challenge."

As far as virus-writing contests go, the money offered in the current challenge is more interesting than past come-ons: 100 dollars for the computer virus that successfully executes on their e-mail handling system and \$9,900 in "consulting" payment for an analysis and written instructions that result in reproducing the virus and exploit.

Reaction in the media to this contest was nothing if not predictable. One anti-virus minister of information offered what has become the standard knee-jerk response to such things, saying: "this type of behavior is incredibly unethical." Another decried it as "irresponsible". However, these contests are not new. Nor are their motives.

In 1993, Mark Ludwig announced his "First International Virus-Writing Contest." Running from February to April Fool's Day, it offered a paltry hundred dollars for the smallest petty .COM file-infecting virus that would preserve the complete functionality of the infected program. As it was, it held no lessons for, or applications in, computer security. The security community as a whole gained nothing from the venture, either in the way of new knowledge or increased user awareness.

The eventual winner was Stormbringer, a hacker in the virus-writing group, phalcon/SKISM. The code of the winning virus, called Companion-101, as well as a number of other insubstantial infectors submitted during the contest, were published in Ludwig's *Computer Viruses, Artificial Life and Evolution* later that year.

The reaction to this virus-writing contest was remarkably similar to that which greeted the recent one. Anti-virus industry comment, republished from *Computer Underground Digest*, was unsurprising: "...yet another attempt to incite the creation of computer viruses that hides behind seemingly legitimate reasons" and, further, "...much better to ponder a bit how unethical the whole thing is..." [Computer underground Digest 5.21, April 1993.]

Of more interest was the comment of a computer security administrator, a woman also familiar

with the workings of computer viruses, for the government. Summed up, it boiled down to "I don't care." Intriguing, too, was her observation that virus-writing contests didn't attract many takers even when the cash prizes extended to \$1000.

Ludwig was no fool when it came to marketing his books. The \$100 he devoted to contest for virus-writing served as a well spent investment in targeted advertisement for his books which were far too opaque for general interest readers, anyway. Any and all controversy and comment - pro or con - surrounding the contest served to put his name into the community. According to one old saw, "there is no such thing as bad publicity". Indeed, Ludwig, who was also the publisher of my book, mentioned it once rather wryly in conversation.

Similarly, virus-writing contests still have their greatest value as advertising. Everyone realizes that they guarantee attention, if only because some industry hacks can't resist condemning them as irresponsible and dangerous, thereby guaranteeing them and, more importantly, their sponsors free publicity in the media. An inflammatory contest becomes a low-risk way of capturing the media spotlight for very little investment of time and money.

Even if no virus-writer is crowned, no one cares, anyway, and the p.r. stunt is allowed to fade gracefully into the sunset, having performed its intended function magnificently. A month or two down the road, an eon in terms of the current attention span, it disappears completely from the collective consciousness of the herd. Until someone else thinks it's a neat idea again.

The Moral of the Story

The moral of the story, as these examples have shown, is that media reports of virus scares have the journalistic value of a whoopee cushion. Virus-writers are reasonably canny marketers. They don't really need to develop and distribute viruses that actually live up to frightening claims. They merely have to get the media to buy the story of ominous viral consequences unleashed upon the world, a much simpler task. The media will then willingly take the hysteria ball and run with it.

No, chicken-little, the sky isn't falling, the media just hopes it will, so they'll have something to fill their 'threat of the week' column. Indeed, as the Bard might say, when it comes to media portrayal of virus threats and virus writing contests, theirs "is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

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