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Unsolicited E-Mail Hits Targets In America in First Cyberwar

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Think of it as the first cyberwar. While missiles explode over Belgrade, refugees from Kosovo pour into Albania and politics play themselves out on a global scale, some Serbs are fighting for American support, using laptops as their weapon.

[Crisis in Kosovo]



In recent days, electronic mail attacking the NATO bombing campaign has been lobbed by at least 25 computers in Yugoslavia, clogging the in-boxes of well more than 10,000 Internet users, mostly in the U.S. Many people on the receiving end are annoyed by this unwanted Serbian "spam," which at the very least is a pain to delete.

Boomerang Effect

For many recipients, there's an added, irksome twist. Hundreds have sent reply e-mail messages demanding to be taken off the Yugoslav mailing lists. In many cases, copies of the requests are then circulated to everyone who received the message in the first place and that engenders new messages from new sources. That's a lot of e-mail. There are, for instance, 6,500 names on the mailing list of the Belgrade Academic Association for Equal Rights in the World, an organization whose mail is boomeranging all over the world.

Many people are reaching for the delete button. "I came in Saturday morning just to do some things, and there were 80 messages in there," complains Jeff Anderson, general manager of KBCI TV, the CBS affiliate in Boise, Idaho. So far, Mr. Anderson says, he has received between 200 and 300 e-mail messages, from Yugoslavia and from recipients of the original mailings begging to be released from cybertyranny. "I don't like it.

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It's very annoying," says Mr. Anderson. "They're not helping their situation at all."

One irritated recipient, a TV-news producer from Regina, Saskatchewan, replied to a Yugoslav aggressor: "OK. You win. I've called off the bombing."

This is premeditated cyberassault, says Matthew P. Bender, the systems administrator for the Appalachian Regional Commission in Washington, which fell under a heavy barrage of e-mail from a sender signing itself "students of Serbia." Says Mr. Bender: "This had to be from a programmer or a hacker. I would highly doubt that this was a mistake." Donald Matthews, network manager at the Toronto Globe and Mail, disagrees. He says the Belgrade Academic Association, which sent e-mail messages to both the commission and the newspaper, didn't make proper use of the standard mailing-list software program it used.

Decrying the Bombing

In two separate e-mail messages, the Belgrade Academic Association declined to answer most questions and referred a reporter to a Web site. "We are trying to inform world's public about situation in our country," the group said in one of the messages.

The tenor of much of the Yugospam is polemical: "In the last nine days, NATO barbarians have bombed our schools, hospitals, bridges, killed our people but that was not enough for them now they have started to destroy our culture monuments which represents the core of existence of our nation."

One of the reverberating e-mail messages came from the office of Czech Republic President Vaclav Havel, an unhappy recipient, the Czech Embassy in Washington confirms. "Remove from your list immediately," was the curt request.

"I'm in distinguished company with this headache," says Joe Harrison, a San Antonio lawyer. He says that on Monday, he was receiving e-mail messages at the rate of 15 to 20 every half hour. He has no idea why the four partners in his eight-lawyer real-estate-tax firm ended up on Yugoslav mailing lists.

A member of a foreign-policy think tank, who didn't want to be named for fear of a renewed attack, says: "This is the first war of the information age, so I don't know if any other cyberwar victims can sit around and tell stories about life in the cyber trenches."

For Yugoslavs hunched over their keyboards, it's more serious, of course.

"I really despise spam messages that are sent everywhere to a zillion addresses, but now we really don't have a choice," says Dragomir D. Dimitrijevic, a software-development consultant who lives near NATO bombing targets in Belgrade. He has sent e-mail to 880 addresses. "There is nowhere we can run. The last place I can run now is my basement, and I'm not going there. I'm staying here with my computer," he says. "I send e-mails to friends as missiles fall."

Getting the Word Out

Armed with a dictionary and "spell checker," Marko Manojlovic, of Novi Sad, 50 miles north of Belgrade, has sent e-mail messages to about 150 people, including journalists. "That is my only weapon for resisting NATO's killers," says an e-mailed answer from Mr. Manojlovic, who owns a small computer business. He says he has received few responses. "They do not know what happens here, and I think that they do not want to know."

It makes sense for journalists to be on the mailing list for such pleas, but foreign policy isn't exactly the Appalachian Regional Commission's thing. The small agency, which finds funding for communities in Appalachia, has been dragged electronically into the Kosovo conflict. Since Friday it has received about 250 e-mail messages. Messages from "students of Serbia" sent to 15 staff members rambled on about "NATO fascists" and how "it is unthinkable that on the beginning of new millennium, destiny of world civilization lies in the hands of an American sex maniac."

That was just the beginning. That assault was followed by a wave of reverberating e-mail messages from fellow targets of the students. An outraged employee shot off her own e-mail asking to be removed from the students' mailing list. And as her e-mails were forwarded to someone else on the students' list, she would receive yet more e-mail, this time notifying her that her e-mail had been delivered.

Mr. Bender is now screening out all e-mail received from addresses ending in "yu," a telltale sign it is from Yugoslavia. Mr. Matthews, of the Toronto Globe and Mail, began investigating after about two dozen of the newspaper's e-mail addresses were inundated with Yugospam. "Our editor in chief is where this first came up," says Mr. Matthews. "He was getting a lot of these messages into his mailbox and he was wondering what to do about it." Mr. Matthews also was able to block some of the new e-mails that came his way.

Blocked for Now

[MindSpring Enterprises](#) Inc., an Internet service provider in Atlanta, is now blocking mail sent into its system from some Yugospam artists. The company shut down about five e-mail addresses associated with the

Belgrade Academic Association. "We might unblock them when the hostilities end," says Ed Hansen, a MindSpring spokesman.

Meanwhile, the boomerangs keep coming back. Dr. Dimitrijevic, who says that he removes names from his mailing list on request, thinks some people may be hitting "reply to all" when they respond. And Jason Catlett, of the anti-spam group Junkbusters Corp., says e-mail recipients who "talk back" to a spammer can end up escalating an e-mail arms race. "Spammers often retaliate against people who try to stop them," he explains.

Mr. Matthews has taken it upon himself to soothe the frayed nerves of other targets. In an e-mail, he counseled them to "stay calm" and not to send angry e-mails to the source because they would be forwarded to people "just as fed up as you."

And on Tuesday, he finally made contact with one of the e-mail culprits, who apologized by e-mail: "Sorry for the inconvenience. You are now unsubscribed."

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