

Service Providers Team to Fight Spam

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Messaging Anti-Abuse Working Group to collaborate against spam, botnets, and zombies

JANUARY 25, 2007 | A who's who of major service providers and technology vendors -- think AOL, BellSouth, Cloudmark, Comcast, Cox Communications, Earthlink, France Telecom, Microsoft, Sprint, Symantec, Verizon, Yahoo, and most recently, AT&T, eBay/PayPal, and Time Warner Cable, among others -- is preparing to tighten the noose on Internet abusers.

Those efforts will be spearheaded by the Messaging Anti-Abuse Working Group (MAAWG), whose projects planned for this year reflect key shifts in service providers' role in combating spam and botnet and zombie activity.

Botnet and zombie program has exploded, with estimates of up to one fourth of computers on the Internet now zombies according to some accounts (with 80 percent of spam is carried by zombies). As a result, the pressure is on network service providers to dig into the trenches in the botnet battle. Today, many mostly look for traffic anomalies, and throttle back offenders, but experts say ISPs need to do more. (See [Five Unsolved Mysteries of Security](#).)

MAAWG's new projects offer a peek at what some of the major ISPs are up to in this space. While its anti-spam mandate now extends beyond email to instant messaging, VOIP, and wireless phones, MAAWG is also forging closer collaboration among its members to stem botnet and zombie infection, according to Charles Stiles, co-vice chair of MAAWG.

"We started at the end of last year holding what we call an ISP 'closed colloquium,' a roundtable of ISPs openly sharing ideas and thoughts and how they address problems," he says. The idea is to provide ISPs a safe and private forum for helping one another in the spam and botnet battle.

"Everyone is starting to be much more proactive," Stiles says. "We combat spammers and phishers by setting up rules for ourselves."

Although many ISPs and MAAWG members already block the infamous Port 25 (SMTP relays) that was once a popular pipeline for spammers, botnets use zombified client machines to spew their payload instead, which has shifted the battle to a different front. (See [Spam Service Shuttered](#).)

Stiles says the solutions MAAWG members are kicking around include DomainKeys Identified Mail (DKIM) and SenderID, email authentication schemes that would designate the reputation of the sender. "This is not intended to stop spam, but lays the groundwork for building reputation services," Stiles says, so that service providers would have a means of classifying heavy mailers -- as spammers or legitimate newsletter providers, for example.

Email providers could then "intercept, or push, the mail before it gets to users," he says. "Those systems and processes are still being developed... You will see a lot more development in that area in 2007."

Mary Youngblood, senior product manager for anti-spam at Earthlink, is a member of the new MAAWG technical subcommittee on bot and zombie issues. "Lots of network providers are sharing information on their fight against spam, which is very helpful," Youngblood says. "Together as an industry we can put up a good fight."

— Kelly Jackson Higgins, Senior Editor, *Dark Reading*

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