



## COMPUTER WORMS: HOW SCHOOLS ARE FIGHTING A NEW KIND OF VIRUS

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*While federal authorities are cracking down on hackers who create computer viruses, schools across the country are fighting back with tech savvy staff and updated software.*

They may bear seductive names, like Shakira, Britney Spears or Jennifer Lopez, but with the capacity to spread to thousands of computers within minutes and cause billions of dollars in damage to North American businesses, viruses are being recognized as acts of criminals and not just pet projects of lonely computer geeks.

Fred Cohen spread the first computer virus 20 years ago. As a Ph.D. student at the University of Southern California, Cohen designed a program that could "infect other programs by modifying them to include a ... version of itself."

Today, viruses spread through shared documents and e-mails, and exploit flaws in software. Writers of a recent virus, Mimail, targeted Web sites that filter for viruses and unsolicited e-mails, or "spam," while gathering e-mail addresses.

In an attempt to find and punish virus authors, Microsoft has created a \$5 million antivirus reward program. The bounty includes \$250,000 for evidence leading to the capture and conviction of the original author of the MSBlast.A worm or SoBig virus.

In August, Jeffrey Parson, known online as "teekid," was charged in federal court in Seattle for spreading a variant of the Blaster worm. The 18-year-old senior from Hopkins High School could get up to 10 years in prison and \$250,000 in fines for infecting 7,000 computers and causing millions of dollars in damage to Microsoft alone.

### **What schools are doing to beat viruses**

Technically, Blaster is a worm, a program that begins with a single machine and infects other machines, leaving a copy of the worm behind, so the infected machine hunts for others to attack.

At Parson's Hopkins High School in Minnetonka, Minn., the Blaster worm was more of an annoyance than a major threat to the school's network, according to Peter Markham, head of the technology department. Hopkins' two-man information technology staff watched Blaster in real time using Symantec, the school's antivirus software, and was immediately able to locate and work on the 12 computers it infected.

Hopkins has avoided serious virus problems because many of their computers are Macintoshes. Most viruses, Markham said, don't cause damage to Macs.

"Ninety-nine percent (of viruses) were written against Windows operating systems, because they're the most popular. Not many write (viruses) for Macs, which works for me."

Most of the viruses come into Hopkins as e-mail attachments. Their antivirus software now blocks any attachment that ends in ".exe," ".vbs" or ".ser.," common extensions for infected files.

Karen House, webmaster for Regina Dominican High School, a small private all-girls school outside Chicago, said most of their viruses are transferred from disks.

House worries most about students receiving e-mails from hackers that direct them to delete antivirus software. One particular message cons the recipient into believing they are deleting a corrupted file, when they are really destroying their virus protection. Regina relies on antivirus software and has suffered some problems, but nothing major, said House.

Cesar Valle, the lone technology coordinator at Eastern High School in Washington, D.C., downloads updates from the Norton antivirus system all D.C. public schools use every night around 11 p.m. and midnight. Valle said that is the prime time for teenagers hacking away at home to send out viruses.

"We were not touched by the Blaster worm," said Valle. "But every other school in D.C. was affected."

### **Cracking down**

Though virus author Parson may not receive the maximum sentence if he is found guilty, authorities are trying to set an example that hackers will be sought out and prosecuted.

"With this arrest we want to deliver a message to cyberhackers here and around the world," U.S. attorney John McKay said at a press conference in Seattle. "We will devote all available resources to tracking down those who attack our technological infrastructure. Let there be no mistake about it. Cyberhacking is a crime."

*By Michael Melia, Online NewsHour*

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