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Technology News & Notes

■ IBM Targets Spammers

Despite the continuing backlash against current challenge/response systems used to battle spam, IBM recently unveiled a new technology that incorporates such a system. Called FairUCE (www. alphaworks.ibm.com/tech/fairuce), the technology is intended to fill the antispam gap between now and when more powerful email identity systems are more reliable.

According to Mathew Nelson, IBM engineer and FairUCE creator, new identity systems such as SPF, Sender ID, and DomainKeys require domains to publish new data to help with the identification process. But until all domains do this, we still need something to fight spam.

"The FairUCE best-guess system fills that gap by taking an educated guess," writes Nelson via IBM's developer forums. "Incoming mail is marked as either AUTHORIZED, meaning very likely the address is not spoofed, or NOTAUTHORIZED, meaning the address is probably spoofed."

To mask deceptive emails, spammers use spoofing, a process in which mail headers are forged to make them appear as if someone other than the spammer sent the messages. To fight spoofing, today's challenge/response systems can respond to senders who haven't already been approved by the system and ask them to verify their identity. These systems are unpopular with many users because they force legitimate senders to prove they're not spammers, and the systems tend to interfere with automatic mailing lists and bulk mail users want to receive.

Nelson wrote that the integration of sender identification with a challenge/response system helps to avoid problems such as these because FairUCE only sends challenges to senders of spoofed spam, as well as power users who specify different email addresses for replies to their emails and "the rare exception."

"FairUCE is not perfect," Nelson writes. "It's a first iteration. But it is stopping 99+% of spam from reaching my inbox."

Nelson claims the system's initial testers are satisfied with its performance, but it remains to be seen whether FairUCE differs much in practice from other challenge/response products available today.

■ Under Lock & Key

Sharing a PC with others inevitably leads to privacy issues, even if you configure separate Windows users accounts. After all, if you leave your desk for a moment while your account is open, someone might be able to access your folders and files. Luckily, we're seeing more applications these days that let us easily lock folders and protect them from prying eyes.

Folder Lock, a $35 program from New Softwares (www.new softwares.net/folderlock), makes locking folders particularly easy and secure, thanks to its use of 256-bit Blowfish encryption. Using a small, easy-to-navigate interface, you can choose to lock away files in a folder created by the program, or you can browse for and lock folders you've already created.

This nifty program also includes a stealth mode, plus it monitors cracker attempts, shreds files, erases tracks, and more.

■ PowerPlugs Pushes Spam Away

Although Microsoft Outlook lets you train it for more effective patrolling, it's not perfect. Depending on the amount of spam you receive daily, some junk email is still likely to fall through the cracks and arrive in your inbox. If you're tired of cleaning up after Outlook and want a hands-off spam solution, take a look at CrystalGraphics' PowerPlugs: AntiSpam ($29.99; www.crystalgraphics.com).

This plug-in for Outlook 2000, 2002 (via Office XP), and 2003 installs seamlessly within the email client, adding itself as a new toolbar that lets you easily access the filter's functions. Using the filter is simple: If a spam message arrives in your inbox, simply select it and click the Block This Spam button. Future messages from that sender (and the sender's domain, if you wish) will appear in a spam folder, and you can easily unblock previously blocked email if necessary. When you block spam, PowerPlugs will even display the countries that the email passed through, and you can specify which countries you want to block in the future.

PowerPlugs uses over 300,000 algorithms and rules to identify spam, and CrystalGraphics claims it has a near-zero false positive rate. In addition, the software automatically updates its spam filter rules online.

REVIEW

■ So Long, Spam

If your primary email account is continually clogged with spam, you might need some third-party help. We gave ChoiceMail, a challenge/response utility, a test run to see whether it can hold back a typical week's worth of spam onslaught.

ChoiceMail gives you the option of adding your existing address book to the program's whitelist so that all of your existing contacts won't need verification. The program also adds entries to the list each time you send a message to someone new. Whenever you receive an email from a verified sender, ChoiceMail automatically sends that message to your email client's inbox.

From there, ChoiceMail flags all unrecognized senders and emails them a registration request using a default message or one that you can create. To complete the verification process, senders must visit a Web page and enter their name, email address, and reason for contacting you, as well as perform a task that's easy for a human sender to complete but impossible for a computer to do. After the registration, ChoiceMail alerts you with a pop-up message containing the registration details, at which point you can decide whether to allow the sender's email.

In practice, this process works well to thwart spam, with ChoiceMail stopping all of the spam we received across all accounts. However, some of our legitimate contacts were hesitant to complete the registration process, claiming they didn't trust the system or were annoyed about having to complete it. Although we liked ChoiceMail's flexible options, such as its keyword rules that allow any email containing those keywords, it's possible that spammers will find ways to exploit such rules (though we didn't experience that during the test).

If you think future contacts won't mind the small hassle of registration, ChoiceMail is worth a try. After all, its challenge/response system is particularly effective at stopping unauthorized senders.

ChoiceMail
Free one-account version;
$39.95, multiple-account version
DigiPortal Software
www.digiportal.com

■ **WebWatch Watches The Wicked**

For all of the positive wonders of the Web, there remains a massive undercurrent of online scams, lies, and other dangers, causing many surfers to feel helpless amid the chaos. But believe it or not, efforts are being made to monitor that chaos and provide direction to tame it.

Consumer Reports WebWatch (www.consumerwebwatch.com), a not-for-profit effort from Consumers Union and ConsumerReports.org, aims to "investigate, inform, and improve the quality of information published on the World Wide Web." Launched in 2002, WebWatch keeps a close eye on practices found across the Web, exposing those that could endanger consumers and recognizing those worthy of praise.

WebWatch releases regular reports and in-depth investigations that look at issues facing online consumers today, helping to gauge the general perception of online practices and whether these practices are safe or dangerous. The site also provides a one-stop source for recent news about online scams and threats.

Recently, WebWatch published an investigation about money-laundering schemes that appear on career Web sites. The article included information on a scheme that had employees skimming money from cash donations to a Chernobyl fund before sending the rest of the money to someone in another country. Also included were tips for safe job hunting via the Web, including the recommendation to never pay up front for any job opportunity.

Other investigations cover such online areas as travel sites, search engines, advertising sources, health sites, financial information, nonprofit sites, and others. But WebWatch isn't all about the negative side of the Web; it also gives Web sites the opportunity to follow guidelines

that will "promote Web credibility." These guidelines recommend that sites adopting this credibility pledge clearly identify themselves, distinguish advertising from news and information, clearly disclose financial relationships with other sites, correct false or misleading information, and provide clear, simply stated privacy policies.

Sites currently following this pledge include Travelocity, Shopping.com, CNN.com, About.com, and others.

REVIEW

■ Mobile Fortress

Small, portable hard drives are convenient and easy to use for mobile storage. Unfortunately, that same convenience makes them a prime target for theft, and if you store sensitive data on your portable drive, you're asking for trouble. Of course, you can avoid trouble by securing the heck out of the drive, which is precisely what the Outbacker lets you do.

Available in both 20GB and 40GB versions (we tested the 20GB unit), this rugged, pocket-sized drive features an attractive blue and silver shell and uses a USB (Universal Serial Bus) connection. The Outbacker includes an external power supply, but it isn't required for operation, and MXI (Memory Experts International) says it includes the supply only to comply with the specifications for USB 2.0. However, you can use the Outbacker without the power supply and still reap all the usual speed benefits of USB 2.0.

You can secure the drive using a password with 128-bit AES (Advanced Encryption Standard) encryption, but even better, you can secure it using fingerprint biometrics. Once configured, the drive will flash a green LED (light-emitting diode) to indicate it's waiting for a finger to touch the little scanner on the top of the drive, and when it verifies your print, it'll give you access to the drive.

Configuring the biometrics is a breeze. In the administration console, you can add as many users as you like for the drive. The software confirms the user's fingerprint and stores the information on the unit's silicon—not the hard drive media—to ensure further security. All registered users of the drive can have their own secure virtual folders to hold their data. We love the concept of secure mobile devices, and the Outbacker covers its security bases thoroughly.

Outbacker
$499 (20GB); $659 (40GB)
MXI (Memory Experts International)
(949) 567-1800
www.memoryexpertsinc.com

Compiled by Christian Perry

View the charts that accompany this article.
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