

JULIA SCHEERES BUSINESS FEB 6, 2001 12:00 PM

Friends Don't E-Mail Friends HTML

Carl Voth describes himself as a regular guy — a 37-year-old family man who lives in scenic British Columbia with his wife and three young daughters. But he's also the dude who discovered a fatal flaw in Microsoft and Netscape programs that allows forwarded e-mails to be traced and read. Voth, who works as a [...]

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But he's also the dude who discovered a fatal flaw in Microsoft and Netscape programs that allows forwarded e-mails to be traced and read.

Voth, who works as a systems design engineer, says he's always been a security buff. He subscribes to e-mail discussion lists, browses websites and thinks about the issue constantly.

"One day back in 1998 I was driving home in my car and I got to thinking about what could be done with the new technologies," Voth said. "I was wondering if the contents of an e-mail could be pushed out without the user knowing."

So he spent a few hours learning JavaScript and found that if he embedded "document.body.innerText" into an e-mail, he could access the message once it was

forwarded to other people if they were using HTML/Java-enabled readers.

He sent his bugged e-mail to a couple buddies who agreed to be guinea pigs. Each friend added a message to the original e-mail before forwarding it to somebody else. Each time, Voth got a copy of the entire forwarded mail, including their comments.

"To my horror I found that this wasn't just a theory," Voth said. "It worked. Each time the message was forwarded, the information was sent back to me."

Then he contacted Russ Cooper, administrator of NTBugTraq, a bug-reporting e-mail list for Windows NT users. But Cooper suggested it was a privacy issue, not an NT problem. So Voth contacted Richard Smith, a privacy whiz who was then the president of Phar Lap, a company that produces embedded development tools. Smith told Voth to contact Microsoft directly. So he did.

"I e-mailed them all the details and a copy of the script," Voth said. "They got back to me in a couple days, acknowledged the problem was there, but said they weren't going to do anything about it. They said it was a matter of customer convenience."

Voth got steamed and then published the entire JavaScript on the Internet. Although it was written in 1998, a little tweaking would quickly update it, he added.

"It's better to let the world know that this is out there so that people can protect themselves from it," Voth said. "Some evil twerp could have used it for some nefarious purpose."

He hoped that posting the code would force Microsoft to change their policy and forgot about it. Then a few weeks ago, he stumbled across an Internet discussion about different types of Web bugs that allow cookies to be installed on computers or alert e-mailers when a message is read.

"So I fired an e-mail off, basically saying 'you missed one,'" Voth said. Richard Smith, who was now the chief technology officer of the Privacy Foundation, answered, and the rest is history.

The Privacy Foundation experimented with Voth's JavaScript for two weeks, and found that Outlook Express and Netscape 6 e-mail readers were vulnerable to attack because both companies had default preferences that enabled JavaScript and HTML formats. The foundation reported its findings Monday morning, and the feeding frenzy began.

"I'm not exactly relishing my 15 minutes of fame or whatever the hell this is," said Voth, who sounded weary from dumbing down his story for the benefit of ignorant reporters.

"My dream solution is very simple: I want the vendors to do two things. First, don't run JavaScript in e-mail messages. Second, if someone forwards an e-mail, make sure the JavaScript is stripped out before sending the e-mail."

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