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NEWS

MELISSA VIRUS EXPOSES HIGH-TECH VULNERABILITY

By James Coates, Tribune Computer Writer. Also contributing to this report were Tribune staff writers Melissa Wahl, Jon Van and John Schmeltzer and Jon Bigness
Chicago Tribune • Mar 30, 1999 at 12:00 am



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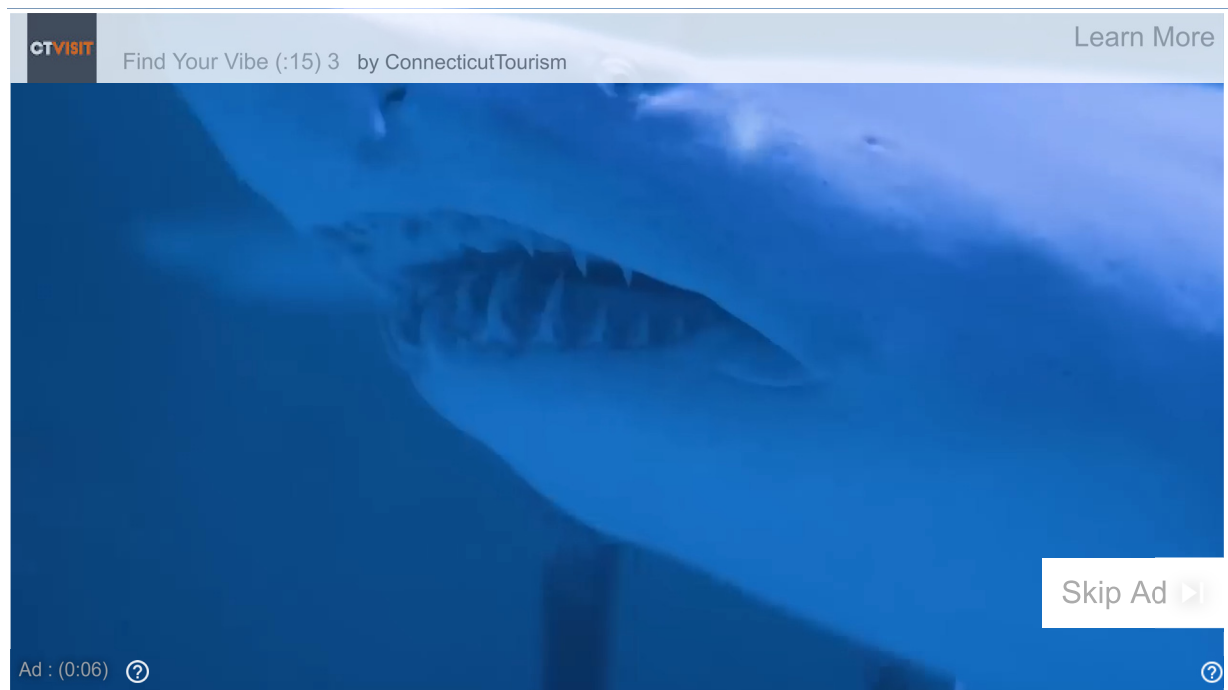
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Her name was on the lips of just about every computer network administrator in America on Monday.

Melissa the Dominatrix, a variety of computer virus known as a macro bug, was designed to make the computers it attacks send massive waves of e-mail messages to addresses it found stored in the machines' mail and word-processing programs.

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Warnings about Melissa mail started circulating Friday. By Monday, it had become the worst virus outbreak of the Information Age to date, with the fastest, newest computers the most vulnerable.

Between Friday afternoon and Monday evening, Melissa struck an estimated 100,000 computers at hundreds of businesses, government agencies and academic institutions, snarling networks with millions of unwanted e-mail and forcing many to briefly shut down the Internet lines that are becoming the lifeblood of commerce.

To be sure, once the warning was issued, information technology experts rushed into action, and by Monday, virtually every virus protection maker in the country had distributed fixes. The FBI announced it was searching for the perpetrator and that the crisis had passed.

But a cloud remains. Melissa's four-day run ushered in a new wave of concerns about our increasingly wired world's exposure to mischief. Even a year ago, noted experts, Melissa would have gone all but unnoticed because the virus needs today's ultra high-speed computers and ultra high-speed Internet connections to do its e-mail bombing.

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- At Ameritech's headquarters, spokeswoman Robin Urbanski said the company decided to shut down its Microsoft Outlook e-mail system from Friday through Monday as technicians installed fixes.

- Banc One Corp. spokesman Richard Johnson said a Melissa outbreak at its Delaware credit card operation forced a brief shutdown.

- At Motorola Inc. headquarters in Schaumburg, employees were greeted with emergency voice mail and fliers pasted on the doors telling them how to escape the virus.

Elsewhere, the companies most afflicted were a roll call of the computer elite: Microsoft Corp., Intel Corp. Lucent Technologies Inc., Dell Computer Inc. and others.

"It was like somebody walked into our building and tossed a big stink bomb," said Michael Dell, chief executive officer of Dell Computer, who said his company was forced to shut down e-mail for about 20 minutes.

D.J. Forman, an engineer at California-based Data Fellows, an encryption and anti-virus software producer, said the Melissa virus not only vexed hundreds of thousands of computer users but also put the world on notice that its latest high-speed equipment brings new vulnerabilities to the scene.

The virus only attacks networks using both the latest Microsoft Word 97 and Word 2000 software and Microsoft Outlook e-mail. It works by sending 50 e-mail files to 50 different addresses at the click of a victim's mouse.

The virus prepares an e-mail with a header reading "Important Message From (less than)name(greater than)" where the name is taken from the Outlook address book. It then attaches a 40-kilobyte file of pornographic Web sites approved by "Melissa the Dominatrix" to the message and sends it 50 times. The attached file is what starts the next wave of Melissa mail.

If each of the 50 people who get these messages open and look at the attachment, they trigger 2,500 messages, which, in theory would trigger 125,000, and so on, thus snarling e-mail traffic generally.

Lisa McComb, a public relations executive at Grant/Jacoby Inc. in Chicago, said "When the

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"My first thought was that these guys who sent me those notes were going to get into some very serious trouble," she said.

Virus expert Forman said that until today's high-speed computers came into play, it would have taken so long to send those lengthy 50 e-mail notes that the user would have noticed what was going on and been able to halt the barrage.

"Today we have 400 megahertz machines on everybody's desk and they are connected to high-speed bandwidth, so it takes just seconds to shotgun-style send these messages, when even a year ago it wouldn't have been so fast," Forman said.

Significantly, the virus was most active at companies like Microsoft and Intel that, by definition, have the fastest Internet links and the most powerful computers around.

As time passes and such computing power reaches deeper into the marketplace, the issue will become even touchier, Forman said.

He noted that the concept behind the Melissa virus of triggering a torrent of e-mail by extracting addresses from a targeted computer's address book has been around for years, but slower machines and sluggish e-mail connections made it impractical.

Times clearly have changed.

Late Monday, for example, computer executives were reporting a copy-cat virus called Papa that uses Excel worksheets instead of Word documents to trigger e-mail attacks. With the Melissa warning very fresh, the Papa virus wasn't considered as serious.

But Papa's appearance on the stage so recently vacated by Melissa is hardly a good omen.

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