

Is your e-mail private? No!

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**Is your e-mail private? No!**

**By Tim North**

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Consider the following three claims:

1. Your e-mail is not private.
2. Your e-mail might not be sent to the intended recipient.
3. Your e-mail can continue to exist even after you delete it.

The following article explains the truth of these alarming statements and why you should be concerned if you're sending confidential messages by e-mail.

#### 1. The privacy problem

When you send an e-mail message from computer A to computer B it passes through one or more machines (C, D, E, etc.) on its journey. At each step along the way, an unscrupulous individual with access to the intermediate machine has the opportunity to read — or even alter — your e-mail message.

Within a private intranet (i.e. a company network), such privacy violations could occur if:

- \* IT staff with access to the mail server were unscrupulous;
- \* unauthorised personnel had access to the mail server (e.g. if someone walked away from the server without logging out); or

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\* security measures designed to keep hackers out of the mail server were insufficient or were not enforced rigorously.

When e-mail is sent over the Internet (a public network) the risks become notably higher. If you send an e-mail message from Sydney to New York it may pass through half-a-dozen machines on its journey, \*each\* of which are subject to the risks mentioned above. Thus the hazards accumulate with each extra machine that the message passes through.

### 2. The identity problem

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Another risk with e-mail is that you really don't know who will

receive it. This happens because some people choose to forward (i.e. divert) their e-mail to another person or authorise another person to read it for them. For example, if you send a message to a senior colleague, remember that this person's e-mail might be read by his or her secretary or stand-in. That can be awkward.

I know of a case where a manager sent an e-mail report to his CEO describing a clerical officer's poor performance. The CEO had, unfortunately, forwarded his e-mail to his acting secretary, who that day happened to be (you guessed it) the clerical officer in question. The clerical officer read the critical report, and all manner of morale problems ensued.

### 3. The deletion problem

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A further privacy issue surrounding e-mail involves what happens when you delete an e-mail message. You might expect that deleting an e-mail message removes it irretrievably. This is often not the case. though.

In fact, it's a tough job to delete every copy of a piece of e-mail. There are many ways that a "deleted" e-mail message might still be accessible:

1. Daily or weekly backups of the mail server may still contain messages that were subsequently deleted.

2. When you delete an e-mail message, many e-mail programs simply move it to a trash folder, rather than actually deleting it. It's not until you select their "Empty the Trash" command (or similar) that the message is actually

deleted.

3. Even after you empty your trash folder, many network-based e-mail programs still archive deleted messages for a period of time before deleting them. During this archival period (30-90 days is typical) the message could be available to unscrupulous or unauthorized individuals.

4. Even after a file is deleted from a computer's hard disk, the information is often still available until that portion of the disk's surface is overwritten with new information. During this period the deleted files could be available to unscrupulous individuals with physical access to the computer.

5. Even if you take steps to avoid all the potential problems above, remember that the e-mail message is probably still available on the PC of the person you sent it to (or who

sent it to you).

#### 4. Conclusions

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The moral of this story is clear: e-mail is not a private medium. Don't send messages by e-mail unless you're comfortable assuming that they may be read by people other than the intended recipients.

So next time you go to press that "Send" button, ask yourself "Am I okay with this being seen publicly?" If not, pick up the phone!

Tim North <http://www.betterwritingskills.com> [info@betterwritingskills.com](mailto:info@betterwritingskills.com) You'll find over 200 writing tips in Tim North's new e-book BETTER WRITING SKILLS.

### **There Ought to be a Law**

**By Rosalyn Bronstein**

#### **There Ought to be a Law by Rosalyn Bronstein**

I hadn't fully realized the extent of the computer hacking problem until I began receiving feedback from the article I recently wrote. Apparently, lots of others have had similar -and some much more upsetting experiences. Web sites that legitimate individuals worked hard to create and optimize have been

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"visited and changed", and e-mails have gone out, supposedly from their address, but in actuality from some computer spewing fraudulent messages - and very likely to millions of recipients they don't even know about.

I've had that dreaded experience a number of times. Since I write frequently and send out lots of articles, I decided to use a distribution service to try and eliminate some of these problems. It's helped enormously. Now, the only e-mail account I need worry about is my "throw-away" one, where all the junk mail goes.

Actually, since I've begun using private messaging, I've found that spam and junk mail are a thing of the past. With private messaging, there is no spam - it's a closed environment - and the only people who are sending me messages are my friends and family. These are people I want to hear from, and look forward to hearing from. There's no advertising, and I don't have to be afraid of receiving computer viruses - that doesn't happen. I know that whenever I send or receive using this service, my communication will be private and secure. And I find it easier than e-mail.

So for the most part, my e-mail situation is under control. The major issue now is unscrupulous companies - and they know who they are - who plant their unwanted advertising and spyware on computers. To my mind, this is trespass. They are unwelcome intruders - are they so desperate, and is their product or service so poor, that they must advertise in such questionable ways? Breaking into someone's computer doesn't seem the best way to gain trust.

Anyone who even takes the time to read these offers is only contributing to the problem. Perhaps if they find that no one is paying attention, and that this form of advertising is counter-productive, (which in my case it is), they will find another way to hawk their wares.

Those sending spam have been put on notice that this won't be tolerated. Perhaps we should do the same for those who want to gain control of our computers without our consent.

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