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## Surprise! We Won the War on Spam.

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Despite continued hysteria, unwanted e-mail is largely a thing of the past.

 [091110\\_TBM\\_spam.jpg](#) [1]

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Remember when we all were going to drown in a sea of offers for male enhancement pills and messages from mysterious bureaucrats with tales of millions hidden in Swiss bank accounts? “Holy mackerel, the Internet is falling!” the cry went out, and the annoyance of junk e-mail messages was built up into an international scourge, costing untold billions in lost time spent hitting the delete key.

In the grip of spam hysteria, Virginia passed a law under which one mass mailer, Jeremy Jaynes, was sentenced in 2007 to nine years in prison. That sentence, and the entire underlying statute, was [eventually overturned](#) [3], but several people have been sentenced to prison under a similar federal anti-spam law, including one, Edward Davidson, who escaped after two months and [killed himself](#) [4] and his family. In addition, courts have meted out civil penalties, including one last year for \$837 million.

These kinds of punishments have failed to diminish the volume of spam in any meaningful way, in part probably because most spam is sent from servers [outside the United States](#) [5]. (The biggest source these days may be Brazil.) The overall volume of spam fell about a year ago when one of the world's biggest gateways was shut down, but it has since recovered nicely. It's now as high as ever, though the number of spam messages with images—which clog up bandwidth and can be used to imitate messages from sources like banks—has dropped. Computer security companies such as [McAfee](#) [6] (MFE) continue to [bang the drum on spam](#) [7], regularly marking new records for the total spam sent.

So the amount of junk e-mail out there hasn't fallen, but since the peak of the furor two years ago, there's been one huge change when it comes to spam: For many ordinary e-mail users, it has ceased to matter. For this conclusion I rely mainly on a focus group of one, myself—but I'm a pretty good test case. I use a number of e-mail addresses so I can easily sort different kinds of communications. Several of them are easily available to anyone who bothers to look at my Web site or blogs, or to robots that search the Web for addresses. (I don't bother with extra spaces or the other tricks that folks use to fake out web crawlers.) My e-mail is also available in the contact information for several domains I've registered, a common source of addresses for spammers.

E-mails sent to any of my addresses all get forwarded to a Gmail account. In addition, I still occasionally check a [Yahoo](#) [8] (YHOO) e-mail account that I've had for eight years, which I stopped using as my primary address

several years ago in part because of the incessant flow of spam. These days that account still gets a fair amount of spam, but virtually all of it gets routed directly to the junk-mail folder. My Gmail account, too, gets an average of half a dozen spam messages a day, but again, hardly any of them ever get past Google's junk filters. I do get plenty of legitimate but semi-irritating messages from various services that I signed up for at one time or another that leave me wondering, “Why the heck did I sign up for *that*?” But almost always they include an “unsubscribe” link of some sort, and 95 percent of the time those links work.

[Google](#) [9] (GOOG) and Yahoo have gotten very, very good at filtering out spam, but just as important, they've also gotten really good at delivering legitimate e-mail. Simply blocking all spam is easy enough—one way of eliminating junk mail, for instance, is just not to deliver any mail at all. The consulting company M86 Security, for example, says that its spam-fighting rules block [99.5 percent of the spam](#) [5] on its test servers. What's bothered me a lot more than spam over the last year, though, are overaggressive filters that send legitimate messages to junk folders to be read a week later or never.

What's noticeably great about Gmail now is its low rate of false positives. Hardly ever does an e-mail I actually want to get—and that includes newsletters and the like, which go out to thousands of people and so can look like spam—go into the spam trash can. Yahoo is just about as good; I assume, or hope, that Microsoft's Windows Live Mail, which used to be dismal and always left me wondering whether my e-mail reached its destination, has gotten better as well.

The methods that the biggest e-mail providers use to identify spam have clearly improved. Articles about spam fighting often talk about techniques for recognizing messages that look like spam, but there's now a lot more to it than that. Yahoo, for instance, now works with a company called Abaca that develops models for monitoring not just the content of e-mail but who is receiving it. Spammers by definition need to send out messages to a lot of folks in a short period of time, and algorithms such as Abaca's—which are [a lot more sophisticated](#) [10] than just counting messages—can't be faked out with e-mails that on the surface look like legitimate mail.

The sheer number of users that Gmail and Yahoo have now gives them a lot of ability to track spammers. Many corporate e-mail systems are not nearly as good, particularly at the letting-legitimate-mail-through part of the equation. I suspect that some tech folks have persuaded their bosses that spam is just a problem with no solution; in fact, the free e-mail services prove that this is not the case.

Bill Gates once proposed a system in which spam senders would be [charged for returned mail](#) [11]. Earthlink introduced a [much hated](#) [12] white-list system that effectively meant that only preapproved e-mails got through. In 2007, *New Yorker* writer Michael Specter [wrote that](#) [13] efforts to filter out junk led mainly to spammers developing more elusive ways of sending mail to elude the algorithms and likened anti-spam efforts to pesticides that did “nothing other than create a more resistant strain of bugs.”

It's turned out that, actually, with the right tools, the bugs can be pretty thoroughly zapped, and there was no need to start charging for e-mail or do a gut rehab of the Internet after all. Stopping spam does take effort—without a doubt Yahoo and Google devote resources to it. But that's just part of their business, no different from all the other things they need to do to keep their e-mail systems running. What matters is that from the point of view of users like me, what's going on under the hood to keep junk out and legitimate messages in needn't concern us.

If the problem of spam is dying out, it's not clear that spam phobia is disappearing as quickly. One point to take away from the history of spam is that problems created by technology can also be solved by technology. The

answer to spam turns out not be jail sentences but better filtering techniques.

But another lesson here is that even after yesterday's problems disappear, old perceptions remain. It's obvious to anyone with a Yahoo or Gmail account—including the majority of journalists—that spam is not anywhere near the problem it once was. But hardly anyone has pointed this out. The slow fade of an overhyped crisis into insignificance just doesn't sound like that exciting a story. On this issue, as on so many others, no one really wants to stand up and say, “Never mind, it's not a big deal anymore.”

So let me come out and say that. E-mail spam was an annoyance, it got hyped as a plague, and it's now turning into a nonissue. The next stage is that in two or three years it will be nothing more than a nostalgia trip. A while ago I started peeking into my spam folders and saving the [more interesting and baroque scams](#) [14], the kind that started with “Dear Most Honorable Mr. Gimein” and involved a dying government minister with an allotment of smuggled Mercedes sedans. I'm not exactly ready to jump on these business opportunities, but I figured it couldn't hurt to keep them around, because the day is around the corner—or maybe already here—when I'll never see another one of those offers in my inbox.

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