

Email security threats from viruses and spyware, 10 Dec 1991

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Contact details: info@futurizon.com or idpearson@gmail.com

It's hard in 2009 when this stuff is so ubiquitous to believe that it was still a new idea in 1991. Back then, viruses were around but could only be carried between computers on infected floppy disks. The email networks then were typically limited to two or three computers in the same office, connected directly by Apple-talk networks, so it really wasn't that obvious. Anyway, this is how I saw the concept then:

Use of electronic mail for espionage

I D Pearson, Cybernetics, 10/12/91

Problems

Increasing networking of computers with inadequate security
Lack of safeguards

BT Opportunities

Recognition of potential threat to BT & potential danger to some services

Summary

Computer viruses are commonplace and are well understood. Although new forms are being developed continuously, there are reasonable procedures to deal with them. However, recognition of them often depends on their activity, particularly their reproduction.

Another threat exists which takes a different form and may not be as easy to detect. Many viruses have been planted on computers by hackers, and this continues. It is possible for hackers to place programs on a machine which can be used to gather information and send it to a chosen destination by Email. The processes would not need to reproduce and would superficially have no malicious effect on the computers themselves so could go undetected for some time. Meanwhile, they could search all files or messages for keywords, intercept relevant information and package this into messages which could be sent out at intervals. Since this would all blend in well with normal use of a machine, its disguise could be quite effective. These may even already exist without us being aware of them. The espionage threat from these will increase as computers become increasingly networked and as Email becomes more common.