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# When E-Mail Points the Way Down the Rabbit Hole

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Bob Scott

I've been getting more and more spam lately that promises to get rid of other spam.

It's spam, but it's also anti-spam, and in many ways that seems like a new thing in the world: spam so filled with self-loathing that it promises to save me from ever having to deal with any future examples of itself, almost as though - and here's where the creepy organ music should start - it were self-aware.

Certainly, I'm not suggesting that a brainless piece of electronic trash has attained consciousness and is actually thinking about anything, including me. (Besides, as a practical matter, if anti-spam spam really did achieve awareness through self-hatred - or as Ralph C. Merkle, an Internet security expert, puts it, "Loatho, ergo sum" - it would probably self-delete and save me the trouble.)

But researchers like Professor Merkle, who directs the Information Security Center at the Georgia Institute of Technology, say it's also not really safe to predict where the vast forces of the Spy vs. Spy spam world will lead, in either society or technology. Yes, they say, spam is a humble, junk-ridden wasteland, but it is also a hugely powerful machine of innovation, with an open-ended destiny that might ultimately raise some pretty profound philosophical questions, perhaps even to the point of touching the boundaries of what we think of as identity.

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Already my in-box feels like a lab project run amok: I have spam. I have a filter that purports to block spam. And now I have the double agent of anti-spam spam from filter providers that must run the gantlet of my existing filter to try to sell me more filters - and here's the key - by proving that it can get through the filter I already have.

These skirmishes are not driven by traditional economic competition. What's happening here is not competition in which the winner gets a bigger market share. It's more like a race in which each side motivates the other to achieve faster innovation and smarter strategy. The closest analogy is probably not from the business world at all, but in military stealth technology, where systems designed to detect submarines or airplanes battle other systems designed to evade detection.

And what they're racing for is us. The very basis of the spam wars is a search for better analysis of the way human beings think. Those on the defensive side seek to understand what we want to block by analyzing our choices, while the offense tries to find the ever more perfect mirror of what we will actually pause to look at. Each in its own way is trying find a model of human perception: spammers countered by filters countered by spammers, with no goal or destination in sight, only the ever-accelerating process itself.

"It brings home the idea of technology living an independent existence - a parallel universe of computer programs living in a world of their own, having their own quarrels," said Sherry Turkle, the director of the Center on Technology and Self at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "Spam is a great example of autonomous technology raising philosophical questions, and it's playing out in everybody's in-box day after day."

Science fiction writers have theorized for years, of course, about the moment when the gloriously ambivalent machines of human creation develop consciousness. Usually, as in movies like "The Terminator" or "2001: A Space Odyssey," it comes to no good.

But in science fiction, the engines of artificial intelligence are almost invariably the products of Big Science, developed in fancy labs by idealistic dreamers with good intentions. There's usually a moral about best-laid plans.

A machine consciousness that evolved from spam would be quite different, because the spam wars - and here's where it starts to get scary again - are shaped, to a great extent, by the tiny number of people who actually reply to spam solicitations.

What that means is that if a deep-think computer consciousness like Hal from "2001" somehow evolved from the ashes of the spam wars, it might very well be obsessed by the coarse and grubby issues from which it arose: penis size, cheap pharmaceuticals, debt consolidation and online gambling.

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