



By Glenn Fleishman

## Viruses of the mind

**Net myths die hard.** “Hey, I got this great cookie recipe for you, from Neiman Marcus! Not interested? OK, let me tell you about this boy in England who’s dying and is collecting postcards. Wait, wait, don’t open that E-mail—it has the words ‘Good Times’ in the subject!”

All three of these are Net myths, which are analogous to urban myths: made-up stories with enough of a ring of truth that they get spread by the unsuspecting. You’ve probably encountered some or all of these (and more) on the Internet, which is a medium capable of spreading information far and wide with great speed. Peter H. Lewis, the *New York Times’s* Internet correspondent, put it well when he wrote almost a year ago that the Net combines the immediacy of the telephone with the persistence of print.

These myths can be thought of as little viruses; in fact, they already have a name, bestowed by science writer Richard Dawkins: *memetic viruses*. Memes (from which “memetic” is formed) are to human thought what genes are to the human body: discrete quanta of ideas that can be passed on, in the same way that reproduction combines genes and passes them on.

Net myths are a relatively new subclass of memetic viruses, as they can spread more rapidly and to more people than those in any previous medium. Brock Meeks, a correspondent for *Wired* magazine, recently pointed out in a radio interview that people tend to eschew their normal ideas about credibility when reading electronic mail and other online messages.

Meeks mentioned a case in which a university student posted a message about a woman who was allegedly abusing her child; he even supplied a phone number. The woman got a number of phone calls, but the report was false. The student didn’t have firsthand information; he posted the information after receiving it from a third party.

How to fight a memetic virus? With good information (memetic antibodies) and with inoculation. The antibodies and inoculations represent individuals who try to assemble the actual facts and post or E-mail them to the same forums where the viruses originated in the first place.

The “Good Times” virus is the most virulent strain extant. It’s appeared and disappeared in at least three major outbreaks in the last year, despite definitive and prima facie proof of its falsity. The form of the virus is an E-mail message that tells you not to read any E-mail (on a Mac or PC) with the words “Good Times” in the subject line.

The virus originated from a single mischievous individual on America Online, and spread far and wide. It vectored rapidly to the Internet, where an unsuspecting staff member at the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) passed it on. The next mutation of the virus carried the message that the FCC was officially warning people not to download “Good Times” E-mail.

Since the first outbreak, which has cost hundreds of thousands of people many minutes each of wasted time (but has had no other effect), the virus has been effec-

tively controlled through massive information campaigns (memetic shots in the arm). It has surged up again twice, but has been stamped out quickly each time. The advantage of an online service in this case is profound; Steve Case, AOL’s president, can post a message that all five million subscribers will see on their next log-in.

My advice: Before passing on information from E-mails you haven’t been properly introduced to, check the source and check again. There are real computer viruses, none of which can be passed via E-mail at present—but there’s a high risk of ending up with egg on your face.

The inside scoop on several of these viruses can be found at:

“Good Times”: <http://www.tec.open.ac.uk/casg/cert.html>

“Santa Spam”: <http://www.luth.se/misc/Santa.html.en>

My favorite, the “Don’t Send that Spam” page: <http://www.crew.umich.edu/~chymes/newusers/Think.html>. ▀

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**Newest star in firmament.** Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) launched a powerful search engine in late December that almost immediately became everyone’s favorite. Called Alta Vista, and located at <http://www.altavista.digital.com>, it’s incredibly fast and thorough, and shows you two useful items other search engines don’t: a modification datestamp for the document linked to, and the document’s size. Alta Vista indexes Usenet newsgroups as well as Web pages. The folks that run it claim to have indexed 21 million Web pages so far; if so, this gives us the most accurate number of unique Web pages to date, though inevitably it’s incomplete.

**Intrepid explorers.** This reporter and his esteemed colleague Olav Martin Kvern have pitched themselves headfirst into the gaping chasm of writing for the Internet, at *Adobe Magazine’s* sister publication on the Web, *adobe.mag*, scheduled to debut at the beginning of April at <http://www.adobemag.com>. This should make us a little more interactive: if you have questions, elaborations, or heated remarks for me, you’ll soon have a place to send them (I won’t be able to respond to all of them, but I promise to read them all and take account of them as best I can). My column for *adobe.mag*, “WebSpy”—spying’s a little more active than just watching, no?—will be devoted to the dual tasks of explaining how particular Web sites have achieved certain effects, and explaining general concepts about the Web on a somewhat more technical level than I do in this column.



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