

Russian is the mastermind of global spam empire

INSIGHT

A FUGITIVE Russian programmer has been identified as the mastermind behind a new surge of unwanted spam e-mails that have bombarded Britain's computer screens.

Leo Kuvayev, 34, is believed to head an international gang responsible for sending out billions of messages hyping company shares and offering drugs such as Viagra.

The gang, which spreads its e-mails by hijacking home computers without their owners realising, is said to produce a significant proportion of the world's total e-mail traffic.

Over the past year computer users across the world, including Britain, have complained of sharp increases in the number of messages that have evaded

spam filters to reach their inbox. The Information Commissioner's Office, which is supposed to police unwanted messages, has never prosecuted any spammers.

Kuvayev is wanted by the FBI in America, his former home, where a court has ruled that he is the ringleader of a global spamming empire.

Computer experts say he is an accomplished programmer who has pioneered a number of techniques such as hiding messages in picture files to sneak spam past filters that are programmed to detect particular words carried in the text of e-mails.

Spamhaus, a British company that tracks spammers, says Kuvayev has joined forces with a number of east European underworld figures to control millions of computers.

The company believes he has been able to remain at large because of the Russian authorities' reluctance to co-operate in finding him.

"Kuvayev himself is very difficult to locate," a spokesman said. "We know what he looks like... But finding him seems to be something the American law enforcement are just struggling with."

Postini, an American e-mail security company, estimates that 94% of all e-mails are now spam. It detected more than 25 billion unwelcome e-mails in December, an increase of 15 billion on the same month of the previous year.

Kuvayev's e-mails are likely to be familiar to most computer users. He is thought to be behind the recent rash of "hot stock" messages that aim to hike the share prices of little-known companies in which the spammers have bought large stakes.

Born in Moscow, Kuvayev travelled to America with his father after dropping out of college. He went on to study at the University of Massachusetts, where he specialised in computer artificial intelligence.



Kuvayev: underworld links

His first venture into the world of spamming came when he set up two companies that had offices in Montreal, Canada, and postal addresses in Boston, Massachusetts. The companies sent out millions of e-mails offering online gambling, "designer watches", pornography and generic prescription drugs.

One programmer who worked at the Montreal office in 2002 said Kuvayev would do "anything for money" and appeared to have "no ethics".

On a personal web page Kuvayev listed his interests as "anything that is fun and entertaining" and posted pictures of himself travelling to London and other tourist destinations. On one page he boasted: "See if you are smarter or more 'devilish' than me. I don't think so."

In 2005 Tom Reilly, Boston's then attorney-general, brought a legal action against Kuvayev in a civil court accusing him of masterminding a global network of spammers.

"This type of spam is more than just an annoyance to consumers," Reilly said. "It poses a real danger to people who may be fooled into buying counterfeit versions of prescription drugs or unwittingly open e-mail links to sexually explicit websites."

Part of the evidence against Kuvayev was provided by Microsoft, the computer company, which had collected 45,000 of his spam messages in less than a month.

Microsoft officials said his gang had unleashed the largest volume of spam e-mails they had ever seen from one group.

Kuvayev did not attend the court case and had probably already fled the country. He and six associates were convicted and fined £19m, which has not been paid.

Since returning to Moscow, Kuvayev has twice been detained by Russian police on suspicion of supplying fake or unlicensed drugs but he has not been prosecuted.

Computer experts believe Kuvayev is highly professional. Guillaume Lovet, of the computer security company Fortinet, said: "He is the main figure in spamming in general, and probably lots of other activities as well."

"He is very organised: his spam

teams have a structure, with salaries, secretaries and software developers."

Kuvayev is also thought to be one of the authors of a new generation of computer virus that allows gangs to hijack home computers and make them send out spam.

This creates networks of machines — known as botnets — that churn out millions of e-mails to a constantly expanding network.

Lovet believes Kuvayev used his botnets to attack and bring down an anti-spam website last year. The site was unable to operate because it was hit by so many e-mails.

In Britain the Information Commissioner's Office says it received more than 200 complaints about spam last year. Yet it has never prosecuted anyone for sending spam.

A spokeswoman said she had not heard of Kuvayev until he was brought to her attention by The Sunday Times last week.