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## What Anti-Malware Scanning Stats Can Tell Us About Our Lifestyles



Don Tennant | FROM UNDER THE RUG  | POSTED 03 FEB, 2016

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One of the **story lines that inevitably emerges in the coverage of major snowstorms** like the one that hit the East Coast late last month has to do with predictions of a baby boom nine months later. But here's an interesting factoid for you: The cities that were most severely affected by that snowstorm experienced enormous spikes in computer malware infections. It seems that in a lot of cases when people are stuck in their homes, they're more likely to gravitate toward their computers than toward each other.

Those malware spikes were noticed by the folks at **Enigma Software**, maker of the SpyHunter anti-malware tool. Each time SpyHunter does a scan for infections, Enigma receives a report with data including the type of infection and the location of the computer. They looked at more than 225,000 infections during January in the states hit hardest by the storm, and found that during the two-day peak of the snowstorm, there was a 69 percent increase in the number of infections in those states. The large cities that were most severely affected told their own stories: Washington saw an 88 percent spike; in New York it was 90 percent; and in Boston it was 155 percent. The Enigma folks aren't blowing the ramifications of those numbers out of proportion, however.

"Is there a giant lesson that anyone can learn? Should someone be more vigilant when it's snowy outside vs. when it's sunny outside? No," said Enigma spokesman Ryan Gerding, in an interview. "So I don't know that there's any broad lesson, other than to show that it's clear that when folks are stuck inside, they go online."

It turns out, there's quite a bit of other information about our lifestyles that Enigma has gleaned by analyzing the data in the reports generated by the scans.

"We've noticed that there is a spike in infections during the holiday shopping season," Gerding said. "In general, over the last couple of years we've found that in the days following **Cyber Monday**, infections across the board jump about 40 percent, and they stay pretty high throughout the holiday shopping season."

During a snowstorm, the spike occurs simply as the result of more people being online. But in the case of the holiday shopping season, one of the factors that causes the spike is increased activity by the malware bad guys.

"At that time of year, I think the bad guys do target people, not in any geographic area, but target them with things like spam emails saying things like there's a problem with their Amazon order, so 'click here to fix it,' when in reality it takes them to someplace that gives them an infection," Gerding said. "So I do think they're smart enough to take advantage of times like that."

Another phenomenon Enigma has looked at, Gerding said, is the question of whether or not people who are older might be more susceptible to clicking on links that would result in infections.

"While it was by no means a scientific study, we did take a look at the infection rates of the cities with the highest average age in the U.S., and with the lowest average age in the U.S., and in fact did find that cities with older residents do have a higher infection rate than cities with younger residents," Gerding said. "It's hard to pinpoint exactly why, but our supposition is that older folks are probably more likely to have a higher percentage of PC ownership vs. Mac ownership, and our software is just on PCs. Our supposition is that older folks may not be as likely to have updated their software and their security settings as often as someone who is younger. And our supposition is that older folks probably use a desktop or a laptop PC more than a younger person who might use a mobile device more. So when we put all those factors together, we think that might be why there is a higher infection rate per capita in older cities vs. younger cities."

Finally, it seems we can expect to see a decrease in the number of malware infections during the upcoming Lenten season, when people give up certain things for Lent.

"You can't say with 100 percent certainty cause and effect, but the number of infections during Lent actually drops. We think that might be because there are people who are giving up social media or online shopping for Lent," Gerding said. "So in those cities with a higher than average Catholic population, we actually see a bit of a decrease in infections, and we



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think that's because they are giving up, at least temporarily, some of the activities that could lead them to getting infections. And then as soon as Easter is over, it goes right back up again."

And it might not just be social media and online shopping that people will be giving up.

"They could very well be giving up porn for Lent," Gerding said. "What we've found is that a large percentage of the malware that ends up on our customers' computers is because they were visiting adult websites."

*A contributing writer on IT management and career topics with IT Business Edge since 2009, Don Tennant began his technology journalism career in 1990 in Hong Kong, where he served as editor of the Hong Kong edition of Computerworld. After returning to the U.S. in 2000, he became Editor in Chief of the U.S. edition of Computerworld, and later assumed the editorial directorship of Computerworld and InfoWorld. Don was presented with the 2007 Timothy White Award for Editorial Integrity by American Business Media, and he is a recipient of the Jesse H. Neal National Business Journalism Award for editorial excellence in news coverage. Follow him on Twitter @dontennant.*

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