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Spam Blockers Pass It On

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A controversial list that helps e-mail administrators block traffic from spam-friendly servers has now passed to a third generation of volunteer activists after a second-generation operator was sidelined.

Earlier this month, New Zealander Alan Brown closed down his [Open Relay Behavior-Modification System](#) (ORBS) after two local companies won legal injunctions against him for listing them. Now, at least three volunteer foot soldiers elsewhere have picked up where Brown left off.

The three are Phoenix, Arizona's [Open Relay Black List](#); Basingstoke, England's [Open Relay Block Zone](#) (ORBZ); and Aarhus, Denmark's [Open Relay Database](#) (ORDB). Each has built its own services upon the list of roughly 94,000 open mail relay servers Brown had compiled.

Open mail relays are Internet e-mail servers that forward -- without restriction -- e-mail aimed at third parties. Spammers exploit these open relays as intermediate hops to mask their spam's origin. Thus, the activists' strategy for plugging this spam hole in the Internet is simple: Test the relays. If they're open, publicize them so server administrators elsewhere can refuse e-mail from them.

"A spammer using a third-party relay is a thief," says Paul Cummins, who runs ORBZ on a voluntary basis. "When spammers send out thousands of pieces of advertising this way, the people paying are the ones running the open relay, and end users who have to put up with spam."

For Cummins and others, open mail relays have no place on today's Internet. They remain a legacy of earlier days, when spam wasn't such a problem and many e-mail servers happily passed along mail. Now, with spam clogging the Internet's arteries, most e-mail administrators are cautious about servers which they'll accept mail from.

"There's no excuse these days apart from technical incompetence for allowing an open mail relay," says Alan Hodgson, a Vancouver software programmer widely credited with starting the ORBS movement.

In 1997, Hodgson got fed up with spam. He began testing e-mail servers worldwide and estimated that as many as 400,000 servers worldwide appeared to have open mail relays.

Hodgson then built a largely automated listing service of such relays, keeping a publicly accessible log which he dubbed ORBS. But after a dispute with BC Telecom over how he should manage ORBS, Hodgson passed control of ORBS to New Zealander Alan Brown. Brown ran it from 1998 until early June of this year, when Brown raised the white flag after two local companies won an injunction against him for listing them.

Now, Brown's and Hodgson's fans are pledging to continue the fight. Cummins is just one. Soren Boll and a group of Aarhus Danes are another.

"We were greatly disappointed when orbs.org was shut down, since we'd been using their service for quite a while to limit the amount of spam received by our mail servers," said Boll, one of seven volunteers who now operate ORDB. "We thought we would make a contribution to the Internet community and provide orbs.org-like services ourselves."

Activists like Boll and Cummins believe up to 90 percent of e-mail spam could be choked off by closing open mail relays. Spammers would then be forced to use more costly and traceable subterfuges to deliver their unsolicited mail, with a few being pushed out of business along the way.

But the various ORBS blacklists are raising the vocal ire of opponents such as Electronic Frontiers Foundation co-founder John Gilmore. Gilmore believes ORBS and its derivatives take a heavy-handed, meat cleaver approach to a problem that should be handled with a scalpel. He believes legitimate e-mail eventually gets caught in the net.

"I think this is wrong, and that the antispam pressure tactics behind it are wrong," Gilmore says. "Any measure for stopping spam should have as its first goal: Allow and assist every non-spam message to reach its recipients."

At present, Gilmore's attorneys are negotiating with his own Web-hosting company Verio, which has threatened to terminate Gilmore's [website](#) for refusing to close his [open mail relay](#).

For his part, Gilmore believes spammers have a right to peddle their messages, and mail server operators have a right to forward mail if they want to. For Gilmore, spam blocking should occur at the recipient level, not at the level of self-appointed upstream censors.

"I noticed years ago that the community tends to go 'mob' and lose its morals and principles when it comes to spam," Gilmore says. "Free speech, interoperability, inclusiveness, tolerance, privacy, anonymity -- all go out the window when they get in the way of killing off those damn spammers."

"I don't feel that way. I believe that our foundational principles should govern," Gilmore says. "We have the right of free expression. You may not like the message of the guy on the street corner, or the ad on the store on the street corner, but you can't legally shut them up."

Operators of databases like ORDB beg to differ. They believe server operators have the right to determine who uses their resources. Forwarding unsolicited spam devours a server's resources, degrading service to the server's own users.

"Using the services of ORDB is entirely voluntary. No one is forcing anyone to block anyone else's e-mail," Boll said. "We're not breaking Danish laws and we're not exercising any power over anyone. We simply provide a free service for anyone to use."