ITU WSIS Thematic Meeting on Countering Spam
Geneva, 7–9 July 2004

Briefing Note

Spam: a threat to the information society

Unsolicited commercial communications or spam, as it is more usually known, has grown into one of the major plagues affecting today’s digital world. In a short period, spam has become more prevalent than legitimate e-mail correspondence, with spammers sending hundreds of millions of messages per day. This is now causing significant financial costs and losses in productivity for service providers, businesses and end-users. With the growing dependence of users on the Internet and e-mail for their personal and professional communications, the phenomenon of spam can seriously hamper the development of the digital economy and society by undermining user confidence in online activities.

What is spam?

Although there is no universally agreed definition of spam, the term is commonly used to describe unsolicited electronic communications over e-mail, mobile (SMS, MMS) and instant messaging services, usually with the objective of marketing commercial products or services. The content of these messages can range from advertisement for low-cost plane tickets to offensive pornographic material. While this description covers most kinds of spam, a rising phenomenon is the use of spam to support fraudulent and criminal activities—including attempts to capture financial information (e.g. account numbers and passwords) by masquerading messages as originating from trusted companies (“brand-spoofing” or “phishing”).

Spammers have proven highly creative in avoiding detection, including falsification of origin of e-mail and randomization of content to bypass spam filters. The scale of the problem has grown to such an extent that anti-spam laws are being rapidly enacted in a number of countries—although different national approaches and remedies are used. At the same time, there is increasing recognition that countering spam is an issue requiring international coordination and cooperation.

During the Geneva phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), spam was identified as a potential threat to the full utilization of the Internet and e-mail. Accordingly, WSIS participants recognized that spam is a “significant and growing problem for users, networks and the Internet as a whole” (WSIS Declaration, paragraph 37) and, that in order to build confidence and security in the use of ICTs, there is a need to “take appropriate action at national and international levels” (WSIS Plan of Action, paragraph C5, d).

About the event

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU), is organizing an ITU WSIS Thematic Meeting on Countering Spam which will take place from 7 to 9 July 2004, at the International Conference Center of Geneva (CICG), next to ITU headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. Regularly updated information about the event can be found at http://www.itu.int/spam/. For any additional information, please contact the ITU Strategy and Policy Unit (SPU) at counteringspam@itu.int. The proceedings of the meeting and associated documentation will be in English only.

* Organized as a candidate WSIS thematic meeting for the Tunis phase of WSIS in 2005. Designation of the thematic event will be made by the WSIS process.
WSIS thematic meetings are intended to contribute to the preparatory process of the Summit by dealing with key issues that were raised during the first phase of WSIS and will likely require further discussion, analysis and negotiation before the second phase in Tunis in 2005. Thematic meetings will therefore aim to increase the awareness of the problem as well as identifying possible approaches through an international forum involving a wide range of stakeholders.

Meeting objectives

The ITU WSIS Thematic Meeting on Countering Spam will serve as a forum for stakeholders, including government policy-makers and regulators, consumer groups, Internet service providers, software companies, academics and civil society organizations, to exchange experiences and share their views on technical, legal and other solutions to countering spam, and to discuss possible initiatives to be undertaken at the national and international level.

At the conclusion of the meeting, participants will seek to identify a number of policy priorities and possible solutions to addressing the problem of spam in a comprehensive and coordinated manner, focusing in particular on the role of international and multi-stakeholder cooperation.

Agenda and registration

The discussion during the ITU WSIS Thematic Meeting on Countering Spam will be structured around five main themes:

- **Scope of the problem**
- **Technical solutions**
- **Consumer and small business education and awareness**
- **Legislation and enforcement**
- **International cooperation**

A series of discussion papers are under preparation and will be made available ahead of the event, to provide speakers and participants with background materials and to emphasize some of the most important issues. The meeting is open to all UN Member States, International Organizations, ITU Sector members, WSIS accredited NGOs, civil society entities and accredited business entities. Further details about the agenda and registration are available at [http://www.itu.int/spam/](http://www.itu.int/spam/) or by writing to counteringspam@itu.int.

Contribution to other ITU initiatives in countering spam

The meeting will also provide input into other initiatives ITU is taking vis-à-vis spam. At the last ITU Global Symposium for Regulators (GSR) meeting, held in December 2003, a follow-up action is the exploration of further multilateral cooperation initiatives among governments to fight spam, particularly with a view to improving the exchange of information and collaboration between national authorities.