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Malware infection figures are going up by Sean Burke

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If thereâ€™s one word that sends computer users running in fright, itâ€™s malware. Malware, an abbreviation of the term â€œmalicious softwareâ€•, encompasses a range of programmes that can infect a PC, mac or mobile computing device. These include computer viruses, worms, Trojan horses, spyware and adware. Malware, in particular, is designed to interrupt a computerâ€™s normal operations and to get unauthorised access to sensitive or private information on the machine. It can be extremely damaging.

However, while awareness of malware is spreading among computer users, there are some myths that prevail: for instance, that malware infection rates are decreasing. In fact, malware infections have been steadily increasing since the early 1990s. Official studies show that in 1990, there were 357 unique malware pieces on the average PC. But by 1995, there were 8069 unique malware pieces on every computer. In the late 1990s, people had popularly begun to refer to malware by certain names. For instance, the Melissa virus â€“ first detected in 1999 â€“ targeted Microsoft Word and Microsoft Outlook programmes, while the Pikachu virus, started in 2000, is believed to be the first computer virus to target children.

By 2005, statistics show that there were 164,000 unique malware pieces on the average PC, mac or mobile phone. Indeed, the late 2000s were a pioneering time in malware detection, with the first ever Mac OS X virus being detected in 2006 and 83 mobile phone viruses being detected around this time. The first mobile phone virus was Caribe, spotted in 2004, which was designed to infect phones that ran with the Symbian operating system and spread itself through Bluetooth.

In the same period, experts detected a monthly tally of 17,877 unique phishing sites, estimating that 57 million US adults were phished at this time. IM malware attacks tripled, with 21 new attacks being recorded in a month. Major malware detected during the late 2000s included the Conficker worm, which infected up to 15 million computers and cost up to $9bn in damage, and the Zeus Trojan, which was created to steal online banking information.

Over this time, significant developments were made in antivirus software, which aims to combat and eliminate such malware from computers. However, there are many hurdles yet to be jumped in the world of malware protection, especially as new ways of accessing the internet continue to arise. In 2010, an estimated 54 million unique malware programmes were believed to be on PCs, macs, smartphones and tablet computers. The monthly tally of unique phishing sites went up to 34,995 and 90% of all emails were believed to be spam â€“ compared to one in every 20 emails in 1990.

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