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Mobile Phone Virus Found in United States

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By Spencer Swartz
Reuters
Friday, February 18, 2005; 6:36 PM

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SAN FRANCISCO -- The world's first mobile phone virus "in the wild" has spread to the United States from its birthplace in the Philippines eight months ago, a security research firm said on Friday.

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The virus, called Cabir, has spread slowly into 12 countries and marks the beginning of the mobile phone virus era, which could one day disrupt the lives of many of the world's 1.5 billion mobile phone users.

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The biggest impact of the relatively innocuous virus, found in about 15 variations so far, is draining mobile phone batteries, said Mikko Hypponen, director of Finnish anti-virus research company F-Secure .

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Hypponen said Cabir was found on Monday in a technology gadgets store in Santa Monica, California, when a passing techie spotted a telltale sign on the screen of a phone in the store.

"It's interesting (the Cabir variant) has now been found in the United States, but it's not the end of the world," said Hypponen.

The mobile-virus threat will grow in the future as virus-writers become more sophisticated and phones standardize on technologies that make it easier for viruses to spread across not just specific devices but the whole industry.

The danger is small at the moment, in part because of the range of handheld technologies. This is unlike the personal computer world dominated by the Windows operating system made by Microsoft Corp. .

Also, many handheld device makers have recently released new mobile phones equipped with anti-virus software.

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The store owner's phone had also been infected, Hypponen said. Both devices were Nokia

Analysts say the various features in smart phones make them more vulnerable to viruses than voice-only phones.

Hypponen said it was likely other devices in the area were also infected by Cabir, although there was no confirmation of that.

Unlike computer viruses that spread quickly around the world via the Internet, Cabir spreads slowly because it travels only over short distances through a wireless technology known as Bluetooth. It also requires a user to restart the phone after it has been exposed for the virus to take hold.

In cases where Cabir spread to different countries, an infected phone has typically been carried by the user to another country.

Cabir has been found in countries ranging from China to the United Kingdom.

In November, another virus program known as "Skulls" aimed at advanced mobile phones was sent to security firms, not to consumers, as a so-called "proof of concept" to alert them of the virus writer's capability.



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