

Protect your family from Swine Flu

The bad guys will always take advantage of what is in the headlines, such as the world's concern over swine flu, to snare unsuspecting users. Claims about celebrity deaths are another popular way to get attention. But these days it is even easier for a user to end up clicking on a bad link because of the prevalent use of the shortened URL.

There are many URL-shortening services that allow users to truncate the length of a link in order to save space in a Twitter tweet or a Facebook status update. But it is impossible to see where the link will take you, which is exactly why criminals are increasingly using them to direct folks to bad sites. According to a recent Symantec MessageLabs Intelligence report, shortened-URL spam is also a popular technique for spammers seeking to sell drugs online.

"Spammers are taking advantage of the heightened interest in health-related issues such as swine flu and Obama's healthcare reform, to distribute large shortened-URL spam runs using the powerful Donbot botnet," MessageLabs officials said. In fact, abuse of the shortened URL actually resulted in the closure of several legitimate URL-shortening services, according to the report.

Some of the URL-shortening services have begun to attempt to filter out bad sites by checking URLs against known black lists, but the issue is far from resolved noted Cluley, particularly because despite increased efforts to block malicious links, Twitter and Facebook do not have a filtering mechanism for bad shortened URLs.

"They and the other social networks have a lot of maturing to do," he said. "You cannot rely on them alone. You will need some defense on your computer."