



MyDoom and You

I grew up in a community whose other members committed crimes as serious as murder. The city of New York, with its 8 million inhabitants, had hundreds of murders each year, mostly committed by people who lived in the city. Violent assaults and robberies were even more common.

Other evils involving information rather than physical violence were common also. For instance, some New York police regularly lied on the witness stand, and even made up a word for it: instead of "testifying", they described court appearances as "testilying". Some New York programmers fell into the lawful but socially destructive practice of proprietary software: they offered other people attractive software packages without source code, and exacted a promise not to share them with anyone else.

Despite these prevalent evils, never in my life have I seen anyone try to condemn all New Yorkers on the basis of the wrongs that only some have committed. I have not seen anyone assume that all the citizens of New York are guilty of murder, violence, robbery, perjury, or writing proprietary software. People are aware that the mere fact that some New Yorkers were known to have done these things is no justification for treating all of us as guilty. That would be "guilt by association", and people know this is unjust. I now live in the smaller city of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Murder and robbery occur there, too; I do not know if Cambridge police regularly lie in court, but proprietary software is rife. Nonetheless, I have never seen anyone try to condemn the whole city of Cambridge for this. Here, too, people recognize that guilt by association is an injustice.

However, people don't always remember to apply the principle. My virtual community, the free software community which I have helped to build since 20 years ago by developing the GNU operating system, is now the victim of a campaign of guilt by association. A number of articles--I have seen some--have tried to hold our entire community guilty for the development of the MyDoom virus.

We can be pretty sure that some New Yorkers have committed murder, because they have been tried and convicted for it. We do not know whether anyone in the free software community participated in the development of MyDoom. The developers have not been identified; they know who they are, but you and I can only speculate. We could speculate that users of GNU/Linux developed the virus to attack SCO. We could speculate that Microsoft developed the virus so it would be blamed on us. We could speculate that disgruntled former SCO employees developed the virus to get even. But there is no evidence for any of these speculations.

If some day we find out that those who developed the virus were free software users, then my virtual community will be in the same situation as New York City and Cambridge: proved to have had some members who acted destructively.

This should not surprise anyone. The free software community numbers in the tens of millions, larger than New York or even Shanghai. It is hardly to be expected that so many people would all be ethical. Our community is self-selected for at least partial rejection of one unethical practice, proprietary software, but even that doesn't guarantee perfection. The presence of a few wrongdoers among many millions is no surprise--and no excuse for guilt by association. I am confident that nearly all readers of this article have nothing to do with developing the MyDoom virus. So if someone is accusing you, don't act defensive. You have no more to do with the virus than your accuser, so stand tall and say so.

If anyone has knowledge or evidence about who developed the virus, I hope he or she will come forth and make an accusation against specific people based on specific proof. But nobody should make accusations without proof, and there is no excuse for guilt by association. Not in New York, not in Cambridge, and not in the Free World.

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