

“Web War One” ? Really?
Media Coverage of Cyberattacks

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Abstract:

In the days and weeks following the 2007 Estonian cyberattack, many journalists were dispatched to Tallinn to try to make sense of what had just happened. They were tasked with trying to explain what a cyberattack was, and why it happened in Estonia. Most journalists, even those who regularly report on technology, had never covered anything quite like this before. Much of the coverage ended up being sometimes confusing, and occasionally sensationalistic: even *Wired* magazine called it "Web War One."

As such cyberattacks continue to take place, with Georgia in 2008 and Kyrgyzstan in 2009, journalists and members of the cybersecurity community need to work better to help the public understand why this is so important. This is especially difficult when this is an issue that doesn't hit most people – *Postimees*, an Estonian newspaper, reported in May 2007 that half of those surveyed were not affected by the cyberattack at all. Further, as daunting jargon like "botnet" and "zombie attacks" are thrown around, it can easily fly over the heads of the public.

When something like this happens, members of the cybersecurity community are called upon to explain and offer their analysis. But even journalists with the best intentions don't always get all the details right. So, how can cyber researchers and people in the cybersecurity community best explain their work to members of the media, who must explain it to the public?

Journalist Cyrus Farivar will review and critique major worldwide coverage in the English-language media in print and radio of cyberattacks in recent years. He will also provide concrete suggestions to the community as to how to best help the media, and in turn, the public, to understand this important issue.

Farivar is an American freelance technology journalist based in the San Francisco Bay Area. He has covered cyberattacks for various American media, including PRI's *The World*, National Public Radio, and *Slate*. He has traveled to Estonia four times in the last four years. His forthcoming book, "The Internet of Elsewhere," (Rutgers University Press, 2010), focuses on the history and effects of the Internet in four countries around the world, including Estonia.