



virus

BULLETIN

Covering the global threat landscape

VBSPAM EMAIL SECURITY COMPARATIVE REVIEW SEPTEMBER 2019

Martijn Grooten & Ionuț Răileanu

In this test – which forms part of *Virus Bulletin's* continuously running security product test suite – 11 full email security solutions and five blacklists of various kinds were assembled on the test bench to measure their performance against various streams of wanted, unwanted and malicious emails.

The news in these test reports tends to be good: email security products are an important first line of defence against the many email-borne threats and, especially against the bulk of opportunistic threats, they perform really well. The news in this report is no exception, with all 11 full solutions obtaining a VBSpam award and six of them performing well enough to earn a VBSpam+ award.

However, it is important to look beyond the spam catch rates: block rates of malware and phishing emails, though still high, were significantly lower than the block rates of ordinary spam emails.

MALWARE AND PHISHING

As in the previous report, we include details of the products' performance against 'malware' and 'phishing' emails, defined as emails with a malicious attachment and emails with a malicious link, respectively. It should be noted that the distinction between these categories isn't always clear – for example when an email has a PDF attachment that includes a link to a phishing website (we classify this as 'phishing', arguing that the attachment itself isn't malicious).

One thing we continue to note in these tests, and in our lab throughout the year, is that block rates for malware and phishing emails are significantly lower than those for spam in general. This isn't so much because malicious spam is significantly harder to block, but because these campaigns tend to be sent in a more professional manner, which helps them stay under the radar.

We always emphasise the point that the numbers in this test are to be taken within the context of the test. It is especially important to understand that the 'spam catch rates' as seen in this test reflect ordinary spam only, and readers should pay extra attention to the malware and phishing catch rates.

RESULTS

Spam catch rates continued to be high, with many products blocking 99.9% or more of the spam, but block rates of malware and phishing were significantly lower. All participating full solutions achieved a VBSpam award, with six vendors – *Axway*, *Bitdefender*, *ESET*, *Fortinet*, *IBM* and *Safemail* – performing well enough to achieve a VBSpam+ award.

Bitdefender, *FortiMail* and *IBM* were the only products that didn't miss a single email with a malicious attachment. No product attained a perfect score in the phishing category, with *ESET* and *Libra Esva* performing best, each missing only two emails.

Janusmail is new to the VBSpam test lab. The hosted solution is run from Italy, a country that has delivered several well-performing products in these tests. *Janusmail* proved to be no exception, and with a spam catch rate of more than 99.9% and a final score of 99.60 the product easily achieves a VBSpam award on its debut.

Also new is *Kasperksy's* DNS-based blocklist that checks the IP address of every incoming email.

Axway MailGate 5.6

SC rate: 99.72%
 FP rate: 0.00%
 Final score: 99.71
 Malware catch rate: 93.33%
 Phishing catch rate: 97.84%
 Project Honey Pot SC rate: 99.69%
 Abusix SC rate: 99.73%
 Newsletters FP rate: 0.5%
 Speed: 10%: ●; 50%: ●; 95%: ●; 98%: ●



IBM Lotus Protector for Mail Security

SC rate: 99.89%
 FP rate: 0.00%
 Final score: 99.89
 Malware catch rate: 100.00%
 Phishing catch rate: 97.60%
 Project Honey Pot SC rate: 99.97%
 Abusix SC rate: 99.88%
 Newsletters FP rate: 0.0%
 Speed: 10%: ●; 50%: ●; 95%: ●; 98%: ●



Bitdefender Security for Mail Servers 3.1.7

SC rate: 99.96%
 FP rate: 0.00%
 Final score: 99.96
 Malware catch rate: 100.00%
 Phishing catch rate: 98.80%
 Project Honey Pot SC rate: 99.997%
 Abusix SC rate: 99.95%
 Newsletters FP rate: 0.0%
 Speed: 10%: ●; 50%: ●; 95%: ●; 98%: ●



Janusmail

SC rate: 99.91%
 FP rate: 0.05%
 Final score: 99.60
 Malware catch rate: 99.26%
 Phishing catch rate: 98.56%
 Project Honey Pot SC rate: 99.70%
 Abusix SC rate: 99.95%
 Newsletters FP rate: 1.6%
 Speed: 10%: ●; 50%: ●; 95%: ●; 98%: ●



ESET Mail Security for Microsoft Exchange Server

SC rate: 99.99%
 FP rate: 0.00%
 Final score: 99.99
 Malware catch rate: 99.26%
 Phishing catch rate: 99.52%
 Project Honey Pot SC rate: 100.00%
 Abusix SC rate: 99.99%
 Newsletters FP rate: 0.0%
 Speed: 10%: ●; 50%: ●; 95%: ●; 98%: ●



Libra Esva 4.4.0.0

SC rate: 99.97%
 FP rate: 0.02%
 Final score: 99.86
 Malware catch rate: 99.26%
 Phishing catch rate: 99.52%
 Project Honey Pot SC rate: 99.997%
 Abusix SC rate: 99.96%
 Newsletters FP rate: 0.5%
 Speed: 10%: ●; 50%: ●; 95%: ●; 98%: ●



Fortinet FortiMail

SC rate: 99.97%
 FP rate: 0.00%
 Final score: 99.94
 Malware catch rate: 100.00%
 Phishing catch rate: 97.84%
 Project Honey Pot SC rate: 99.99%
 Abusix SC rate: 99.97%
 Newsletters FP rate: 1.1%
 Speed: 10%: ●; 50%: ●; 95%: ●; 98%: ●



Safemail

SC rate: 99.95%
 FP rate: 0.00%
 Final score: 99.95
 Malware catch rate: 99.26%
 Phishing catch rate: 99.28%
 Project Honey Pot SC rate: 99.96%
 Abusix SC rate: 99.94%
 Newsletters FP rate: 0.0%
 Speed: 10%: ●; 50%: ●; 95%: ●; 98%: ●



Spamhaus Data Query Service

SC rate: 99.54%
FP rate: 0.05%
Final score: 99.27
Malware catch rate: 88.15%
Phishing catch rate: 77.46%
Project Honey Pot SC rate: 99.71%
Abusix SC rate: 99.50%
Newsletters FP rate: 0.0%
Speed: 10%: ●; 50%: ●; 95%: ●; 98%: ●



IBM X-Force Combined

SC rate: 98.28%
FP rate: 0.00%
Final score: 98.28
Malware catch rate: 88.15%
Phishing catch rate: 83.45%
Project Honey Pot SC rate: 98.93%
Abusix SC rate: 98.17%
Newsletters FP rate: 0.0%

Spamhaus rsync

SC rate: 99.23%
FP rate: 0.00%
Final score: 99.23
Malware catch rate: 87.41%
Phishing catch rate: 70.50%
Project Honey Pot SC rate: 99.24%
Abusix SC rate: 99.23%
Newsletters FP rate: 0.0%
Speed: 10%: ●; 50%: ●; 95%: ●; 98%: ●



IBM X-Force IP

SC rate: 97.76%
FP rate: 0.00%
Final score: 97.76
Malware catch rate: 88.15%
Phishing catch rate: 80.82%
Project Honey Pot SC rate: 97.45%
Abusix SC rate: 97.81%
Newsletters FP rate: 0.0%

ZEROSPAM

SC rate: 99.93%
FP rate: 0.12%
Final score: 99.27
Malware catch rate: 99.26%
Phishing catch rate: 98.56%
Project Honey Pot SC rate: 99.96%
Abusix SC rate: 99.93%
Newsletters FP rate: 1.6%
Speed: 10%: ●; 50%: ●; 95%: ●; 98%: ●



IBM X-Force URL

SC rate: 65.62%
FP rate: 0.00%
Final score: 65.62
Malware catch rate: 2.96%
Phishing catch rate: 47.96%
Project Honey Pot SC rate: 92.75%
Abusix SC rate: 61.01%
Newsletters FP rate: 0.0%

Abusix Mail Intelligence

SC rate: 99.52%
FP rate: 0.09%
Final score: 99.08
Malware catch rate: 84.44%
Phishing catch rate: 86.09%
Project Honey Pot SC rate: 98.31%
Abusix SC rate: 99.72%
Newsletters FP rate: 0.0%

Kaspersky DNSBL

SC rate: 88.18%
FP rate: 0.00%
Final score: 88.18
Malware catch rate: 56.30%
Phishing catch rate: 53.96%
Project Honey Pot SC rate: 95.24%
Abusix SC rate: 86.98%
Newsletters FP rate: 0.0%

APPENDIX: SET-UP, METHODOLOGY AND EMAIL CORPORA

The full VBSpam test methodology can be found at <https://www.virusbulletin.com/testing/vbspam/vbspam-methodology/>.

The test ran for 18 days, from 12am on 17 August to 12am on 4 September 2019.¹

The test corpus consisted of 273,992 emails. 268,126 of these were spam, 38,928 of which were provided by *Project Honey Pot*, with the remaining 229,198 spam emails provided by *Abusix*. There were 5,681 legitimate emails ('ham') and 185 newsletters, a category that includes various kinds of commercial and non-commercial opt-in mailings.

219 emails in the spam corpus were considered 'unwanted' (see the June 2018 report²) and were included with a weight of 0.2; this explains the non-integer numbers in some of the tables.

Moreover, 135 emails from the spam corpus were found to contain a malicious attachment while 417 contained a link to a phishing or malware site; though we report separate performance metrics on these corpora, it should be noted that these emails were also counted as part of the spam corpus.

Emails were sent to the products in real time and in parallel. Though products received the email from a fixed IP address, all products had been set up to read the original sender's IP address as well as the EHLO/HELO domain sent during the SMTP transaction, either from the email headers or through an optional XCLIENT SMTP command³.

For those products running in our lab, we all ran them as virtual machines on a *VMware ESXi* cluster. As different products have different hardware requirements – not to mention those running on their own hardware, or those running in the cloud – there is little point comparing the memory, processing power or hardware the products were provided with; we followed the developers' requirements and note that the amount of email we receive is representative of that received by a small organization.

Although we stress that different customers have different needs and priorities, and thus different preferences when it comes to the ideal ratio of false positive to false negatives, we created a one-dimensional 'final score' to compare products. This is defined as the spam catch (SC) rate minus

five times the weighted false positive (WFP) rate. The WFP rate is defined as the false positive rate of the ham and newsletter corpora taken together, with emails from the latter corpus having a weight of 0.2:

$$\text{WFP rate} = (\# \text{false positives} + 0.2 * \min(\# \text{newsletter false positives}, 0.2 * \# \text{newsletters})) / (\# \text{ham} + 0.2 * \# \text{newsletters})$$

while in the spam catch rate (SC), emails considered 'unwanted' (see above) are included with a weight of 0.2. The final score is then defined as:

$$\text{Final score} = \text{SC} - (5 \times \text{WFP})$$

In addition, for each product, we measure how long it takes to deliver emails from the ham corpus (excluding false positives) and, after ordering these emails by this time, we colour-code the emails at the 10th, 50th, 95th and 98th percentiles:

- (green) = up to 30 seconds
- (yellow) = 30 seconds to two minutes
- (orange) = two to ten minutes
- (red) = more than ten minutes

Products earn VBSpam certification if the value of the final score is at least 98 and the 'delivery speed colours' at 10 and 50 per cent are green or yellow and that at 95 per cent is green, yellow or orange.

Meanwhile, products that combine a spam catch rate of 99.5% or higher with a lack of false positives, no more than 2.5% false positives among the newsletters and 'delivery speed colours' of green at 10 and 50 per cent and green or yellow at 95 and 98 per cent earn a VBSpam+ award.

Editor: Martijn Grooten

Head of Testing: Peter Karsai

Security Test Engineers: Gyula Hachbold, Adrian Luca, Csaba Mészáros, Tony Oliveira, Ionuț Răileanu

Sales Executive: Allison Sketchley

Editorial Assistant: Helen Martin

© 2019 Virus Bulletin Ltd, The Pentagon, Abingdon Science Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 3YP, England












Tel: +44 (0)1235 555139 Email: editor@virusbulletin.com

Web: <https://www.virusbulletin.com/>

¹ Due to a hardware issue, we decided to run the test for two days longer than usual.

² <https://www.virusbulletin.com/virusbulletin/2018/06/vbspam-comparative-review>

³ http://www.postfix.org/XCLIENT_README.html

	True negatives	False positives	FP rate	False negatives	True positives	SC rate	Final score	VBSpam
Axway	5681	0	0.00%	737	267213.8	99.72%	99.71	
Bitdefender	5681	0	0.00%	108.6	267842.2	99.96%	99.96	
ESET	5681	0	0.00%	13.4	267937.4	99.99%	99.99	
FortiMail	5681	0	0.00%	78.4	267872.4	99.97%	99.94	
IBM	5681	0	0.00%	287.6	267663.2	99.89%	99.89	
Janusmail	5678	3	0.05%	231.8	267719	99.91%	99.60	
Libra Esva	5680	1	0.02%	82	267868.8	99.97%	99.86	
Safemail	5681	0	0.00%	143.6	267807.2	99.95%	99.95	
Spamhaus DQS	5678	3	0.05%	1245.6	266705.2	99.54%	99.27	
Spamhaus rsync	5681	0	0.00%	2061.4	265889.4	99.23%	99.23	
ZEROSPAM	5674	7	0.12%	174.4	267776.4	99.93%	99.27	
Abusix Mail Intelligence*	5676	5	0.09%	1295.8	266655	99.52%	99.08	N/A
IBM X-Force Combined*	5681	0	0.00%	4596.8	263354	98.28%	98.28	N/A
IBM X-Force IP*	5681	0	0.00%	5996.8	261954	97.76%	97.76	N/A
IBM X-Force URL*	5681	0	0.00%	92134.6	175816.2	65.62%	65.62	N/A
Kaspersky DNSBL*	5681	0	0.00%	31670.4	236280.4	88.18%	88.18	N/A

*These products are partial solutions and their performance should not be compared with that of other products.
(Please refer to the text for full product names and details.)

	Newsletters		Malware		Phishing		Project Honey Pot		Abusix		STDev [†]
	False positives	FP rate	False negatives	SC rate	False negatives	SC rate	False negatives	SC rate	False negatives	SC rate	
Axway	1	0.5%	9	93.33%	9	97.84%	120.2	99.69%	619.2	99.73%	0.51
Bitdefender	0	0.0%	0	100.00%	5	98.80%	1	99.997%	110	99.95%	0.17
ESET	0	0.0%	1	99.26%	2	99.52%	0	100.00%	13.4	99.99%	0.05
FortiMail	2	1.1%	0	100.00%	9	97.84%	2	99.99%	76.4	99.97%	0.08
IBM	0	0.0%	0	100.00%	10	97.60%	10.2	99.97%	279.8	99.88%	0.37
Janusmail	3	1.6%	1	99.26%	6	98.56%	117.8	99.70%	114	99.95%	0.21
Libra Esva	1	0.5%	1	99.26%	2	99.52%	1.2	99.997%	80.8	99.96%	0.12
Safemail	0	0.0%	1	99.26%	3	99.28%	14.2	99.96%	131.8	99.94%	0.2
Spamhaus DQS	0	0.0%	16	88.15%	94	77.46%	111.6	99.71%	1134	99.50%	0.61
Spamhaus rsync	0	0.0%	17	87.41%	123	70.50%	294	99.24%	1767.4	99.23%	0.74
ZEROSPAM	3	1.6%	1	99.26%	6	98.56%	15.2	99.96%	159.2	99.93%	0.22
Abusix Mail Intelligence*	0	0.0%	21	84.44%	58	86.09%	658	98.31%	637.8	99.72%	1.7
IBM X-Force Combined*	0	0.0%	16	88.15%	69	83.45%	416.6	98.93%	4182.6	98.17%	1.42
IBM X-Force IP*	0	0.0%	16	88.15%	80	80.82%	991.8	97.45%	5007.4	97.81%	1.64
IBM X-Force URL*	0	0.0%	131	2.96%	217	47.96%	2821.6	92.75%	89315.4	61.01%	15.59
Kaspersky DNSBL*	0	0.0%	59	56.30%	192	53.96%	1852.6	95.24%	29820.2	86.98%	5.94

*These products are partial solutions and their performance should not be compared with that of other products. None of the queries to the IP blacklists included any information on the attachments; hence their performance on the malware corpus is added purely for information.

† The standard deviation of a product is calculated using the set of its hourly spam catch rates.
(Please refer to the text for full product names and details.)

	Speed			
	10%	50%	95%	98%
Axway	●	●	●	●
Bitdefender	●	●	●	●
ESET	●	●	●	●
FortiMail	●	●	●	●
IBM	●	●	●	●
Janusmail	●	●	●	●
Libra Esva	●	●	●	●
Safemail	●	●	●	●
Spamhaus DQS	●	●	●	●
Spamhaus rsync	●	●	●	●
ZEROSPAM	●	●	●	●

● 0–30 seconds; ● 30 seconds to two minutes; ● two minutes to 10 minutes; ● more than 10 minutes.
 (Please refer to the text for full product names and details.)

Products ranked by final score	
ESET	99.99
Bitdefender	99.96
Safemail	99.95
FortiMail	99.94
IBM	99.89
Libra Esva	99.86
Axway	99.71
Janusmail	99.60
Spamhaus DQS	99.27
ZEROSPAM	99.27
Spamhaus rsync	99.23

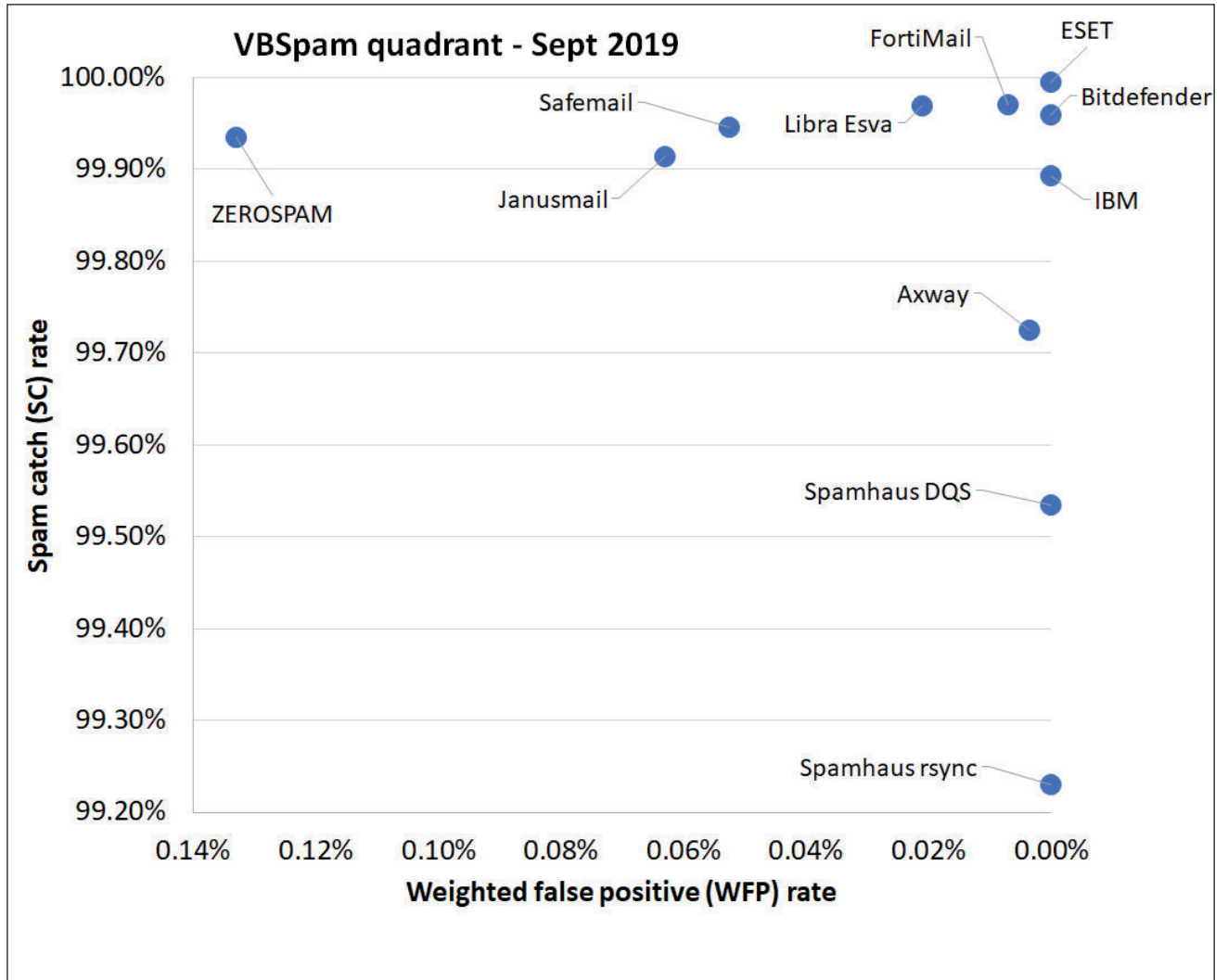
(Please refer to the text for full product names and details.)

Hosted solutions	Anti-malware	IPv6	DKIM	SPF	DMARC	Multiple MX-records	Multiple locations
Janusmail	ClamAV; others optional	√	√	√	√	√	√
Safemail	ClamAV; proprietary	√	√	√	√	√	√
ZEROSPAM	ClamAV			√		√	√

(Please refer to the text for full product names.)

Local solutions	Anti-malware	IPv6	DKIM	SPF	DMARC	Interface			
						CLI	GUI	Web GUI	API
Axway	Kaspersky, McAfee	√	√	√				√	
Bitdefender	Bitdefender	√				√		√	√
ESET	ESET Threatsense	√	√	√	√	√	√		
FortiMail	Fortinet	√	√	√	√	√		√	√
IBM	Sophos; IBM Remote Malware Detection			√		√		√	
Libra Esva	ClamAV; others optional		√	√		√		√	
Spamhaus DQS	Optional	√	√	√					√
Spamhaus rsyc	Optional	√	√	√					√

(Please refer to the text for full product names and details.)



(Please refer to the text for full product names and details.)