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Should Antivirus Software be Free?



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Should Antivirus Software be Free?

"One reason I think so many PCs are undefended is because antivirus apps keep getting more expensive. That's why I offer a challenge to the major antivirus companies: I'd like to see one of you offer a free version of your best-selling antivirus product for desktop PCs. You'll still make your profits, and your user base will certainly increase. " (Vamosi)

Despite ZD.net being the online portal for a series of reputable digital technology content publications, their article proposing industry wide free antivirus software should be read for its shock, controversy stirring, and reader attracting qualities rather than be considered a serious work of business, financial, or utilitarian analysis. I have reviewed the history of the antivirus software industry from its origin to today. I have concluded that the current state of affairs is optimal and that supporting industry wide free antivirus software is in no way positive for the common good.

INDUSTRY BACKGROUND

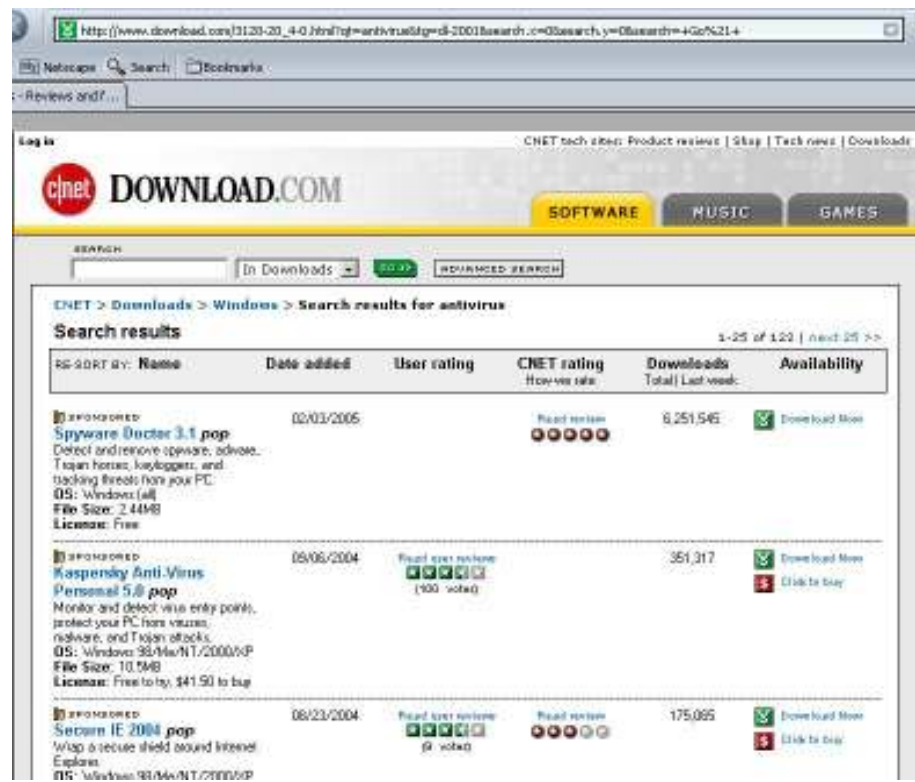
"TROUBLE IS, the big security companies make a lot of money on antivirus software. And they've gotten greedy. While signature file updates for your antivirus programs used to be free, for example, they now cost extra." (Vamosi)

The previous statement does not take into account that there are more than one hundred cheap or free antivirus software applications available for download off of the Internet (Download.com). Although some of these applications have been downloaded by thousands and are readily accessible by anyone with an Internet connection, there is not a large demand for free or cheap antivirus software by the hundreds of millions.

"Symantec goes even further. On top of paying \$20 a year for a signature file subscription, the company requires home users to pay an additional \$30 every two to three years to upgrade to the latest version of its Norton AntiVirus app. Imagine if, every two or three years, Windows stopped working and Microsoft required you to upgrade to the latest version of its operating system. No one would stand for that. I can think of no software sub-industry other than antivirus that forces its users to consistently pay for the continued use of its products. No wonder millions of desktops remain unprotected from viruses and worms." (Vamosi)

The value that differentiates an antivirus software application from most other commercial software is that it must not only have the ability to protect against known viruses but to be able to update itself daily with code that neutralizes the threat of newly created viruses. Symantec and McAfee, the two leading market share antivirus software companies, have teams of employees whose daily job is to spot new viruses and quickly program effective countermeasures that eliminate the threats posed by the latter. It is difficult to ascertain whether the competition that offers its software for free can assure the same quality let alone guarantee that they will be in business in a few years. Clearly, based on the number of downloads of free antivirus software vis-à-vis Symantec and McAfee on Download.com, corporate and home customers do not think so.

It is not true that personal computers remain unprotected from viruses because of the pricing tactics of McAfee and Symantec. Given the availability of free antivirus software the people who refuse to download free antivirus thus keeping their personal computer unprotected are either consciously or unconsciously negligent.



Ex. 2 – Cheap or Free Antivirus (Download.com)

The model for success in the antivirus software development industry has been massive capitalization for extensive product development, free product giveaways coupled with multi-million dollar marketing campaigns, and subsequent purchase and maintenance fee introduction into the vendor/customer relationship. Even so, dozens of companies listed on corporate software web site NETworldwide.com who have spent millions of dollars executing the above strategies while incurring huge losses are not players in the market today.



Ex. 1 – Former Antivirus Software Industry (NETworldwide.com)

"Since antivirus apps are essentially useless without signature updates and unless you're using the latest version, I say: Let the antivirus companies' corporate clients pay for the software and the annual signature-file subscriptions, and let the home users download both for free." (Vamosi)

The above statement is counterproductive to the future availability of better quality antivirus protection at lower prices for all consumers. It is also a morally dishonest argument. The notion of private corporations subsidizing the antivirus protection of private computer users is morally equivalent to having private computer users subsidize the hundreds million dollar losses incurred by the multitude of companies who competed in the antivirus software development market over the past ten years.

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UTILITARIAN CONSIDERATIONS

“But the bottom line is this: Whichever one of you does so can claim you're truly making the Internet safer for everyone--and that's priceless.” (Vamosi)

In order to prove that McAfee and Symantec pricing strategies are morally incorrect we must prove that they bring significant disutility to the groups affected by their actions. I have attempted to determine the short and long-term utilitarian impact on the following groups of people:

- **McAfee/Symantec:** The current pricing policies help them generate profits that they can pay back to their investors, invest in new software, or use to improve their quality of service.
- **Customers:** Customers find value in paying fees to Symantec and McAfee, rather than to a variety of cheaper or free competitors, so that they can use their antivirus software services. They place significant importance on protecting their networks and computer data from viral threats. A cheaper or non-existent pricing scheme would eventually lead to lower quality products, such as many available on the market today, that the vast majority of the public would not be interested in.
- **McAfee/Symantec Investors:** More profits increase the chances that the stock prices of their respective companies will increase.
- **Antivirus Industry:** A severe reduction or a lack of profits would certainly doom the remaining antivirus software competition given that the profit incentives for greater market share acquisition would diminish.
- **Government:** The current pricing policies are designed to protect the financial well-being of the McAfee and Symantec. The financial well-being of

these companies is proportional to the amount of taxes that they pay to the government according to their success in the marketplace.

- **National Economy:** Current pricing policies help McAfee and Symantec generate profits. Greater economic output relies on the number and magnitude of financially successful employers operating in the country.
- **American Public:** Greater economic output relies on the number and magnitude of financially successful employers operating in the country. The success of the economy increases the economic and political capital of the government that can work towards influencing the geopolitical sphere in a way that is more advantageous to American political and economic interests. These successful attainment of these interests increase the level of economic opportunity in the United States.

OPPOSING VIEWS

Some of my colleagues may claim that McAfee and Symantec pricing strategies are immoral. In order to be successful in disproving my stance they will have to prove the following:

1. McAfee and Symantec caused overall more disutility than utility to the groups affected by their actions (See Utilitarian Considerations).

CONCLUSION

Despite ZD.net being the online portal for a series of reputable digital technology content publications, their article proposing industry wide free antivirus software should be read for its shock, controversy stirring, and reader attracting qualities rather than be considered a serious work of business, financial, or utilitarian analysis. I have reviewed the history of the antivirus software industry from its origin to today. I have

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