



Digital Media

When Words Come Back From The Dead

David M. Ewalt, 12.13.05, 5:00 PM ET

In the year since pharmaceutical giant **Merck** withdrew its arthritis drug Vioxx from shelves, the company has been hit with 7,000 personal injury lawsuits--one of which already cost the company \$253 million. But it could be a frequently misused feature of **Microsoft** Word that turns out to be the straw that broke Merck's back.

Last week, editors at *The New England Journal of Medicine* said that before Merck (nyse: [MRK - news - people](#)) submitted a major study to the *Journal* for publication in 2000, information linking Vioxx to an increased risk of heart attacks was deleted from the document.

In an statement posted on the NEJM's Web site, the editors said that during a review of the study, they "determined from a computer diskette that [relevant data was] deleted from the VIGOR manuscript two days before it was initially submitted to the *Journal*."

According to Dr. Gregory Curfman, an executive editor at the *Journal*, the NEJM determined data had been deleted by turning on a feature in Microsoft (nasdaq: [MSFT - news - people](#)) Word called "Track Changes," which keeps a record of what's been added and removed to a document, and allows users to add notes to the text. It's commonly used by groups of people who are sharing a document, since it allows them to make changes to each other's work, without permanently deleting or altering the original document.

When a group of users have completed a document and wish to finalize it for printing or distribution, they can click a button that accepts all the changes. That removes all previous versions of the text and notes, leaving them with only the finalized content.

But users often forget that step, and when they distribute the document, anyone who wants to can turn the feature on, gaining access to all the drafts, deletions and notes made to the document by its authors. That appears to be what happened in Merck's case.

"I think it's a freak accident," says Mark Diodati, a security analyst with the Burton Group. "I'm willing to bet because Merck is so immersed in so many corporate regulations, they're aware of this feature, and they probably have a rule about it."

However it happened, the tracked document did slip out, and the mistake highlights a potential security risk for users of the software.

Analysts say Microsoft isn't to blame. "Microsoft Word is so well used, and this track changes feature is well known," says Diodat. "I don't think it's a security issue with Microsoft Word. I think it's the people creating the document."

Nonetheless, mistakes like this do happen with some regularity. "It's a very common mistake," says Rob Enderle, Principal Analyst with the Enderle Group, who says he recently "gave Microsoft a lot of grief" after one of their PR firms sent out a release with all the changes still tracked. "That was just sloppy."

Current versions of Microsoft Word make it easy to turn "Track Changes" off and finalize a document. Microsoft Word 2003 and Word 2002 will even warn users before they print, save or

send a file that contains tracked changes or comments. "When I moved from Office XP to Office 2003, I stopped making that mistake," says Enderle. Older versions of the software--many of which are still in use in offices around the world--require a much more convoluted process to remove all the hidden data.

Representatives for Microsoft declined to comment on the Merck situation but said that the "Track Changes" feature will be revised and further enhanced to reduce these accidents in the next version of the software.

Microsoft Word isn't the only application guilty of including draft information in its documents--and Merck isn't the only victim of inadvertently released data.

Last week *The New York Times* published a story about an Iraq speech given by President [George W. Bush](#) on Nov. 30 at the U.S Naval Academy outlining his strategy in Iraq. The paper asserted the speech strongly reflected the views of Peter D. Feaver, a Duke University political scientist new to the Administration, pointing out that the **Adobe System's** (nasdaq: [ADBE](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) Acrobat software used to prepare the document showed its creator as "feaver-p." Once the document was posted on the White House Web site, anyone who downloaded it could find out its author with only a few keystrokes. The White House did not return calls for comment.

These leaks serve to underline the importance of carefully reviewing documents and making sure understand all the features of a computer program. "It's like any powerful tool," says Enderle. "It's only prudent to understand how to use it."

Want to track news by this author or about this industry? Forbes Attache makes it easy.

http://www.forbes.com/2005/12/13/microsoft-word-merck_cx_de_1214word_print.html