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Finance

Fri, Jul 13, 01

New net software can beat the censor

A program that enables people in countries with tough web censorship to access banned material has just been unveiled

By NIALL MCKAY

This weekend, in what is perhaps the most unusual gathering in the computer security field - the DefCon Hacker Trade Show in Las Vegas - more than 4,000 hackers, crackers and cyber-terrorists will mingle with spooks (FBI, CIA and NSA agents), security consultants and self-proclaimed security experts.

There they will exchange tips, tricks and strategies for breaking into and securing computers. The show features speeches given by the glitterati of the hacker scene on issues ranging from securing Windows NT computer systems to "social engineering", a term applied to gaining information such as computer passwords by tricking somebody into giving it to you. Security groups of all stripes use the occasion to release software and show off gadgets. And one of the favoured pastimes is the "Spot the Fed" (short for Federal Law Enforcement Official) competition, where a delegate will point to somebody and shout "Fed", and that person must stand up and admit or deny the charge.

The stars of the show will, no doubt, be a group called the Cult of the Dead Cow, or cDc, who describe themselves as "ethical hackers". Several years ago they achieved international attention for releasing Back Orifice 2000, a piece of software designed to give unauthorised access to computer programs.

At that time the program won them such fame that they

got to lord it over the hacker community like rock stars. This year, however, the group is turning its considerable computer programming talents to attacking internet censorship with a new software called Peekabooty.

"We believe that Peekabooty will spread throughout the internet faster than herpes during spring break [college vacation]," says Oxblood Ruffin, a former UN consultant who acts as the Cult of the Dead Cow's information officer.

Traditionally, countries (or indeed companies) that want to stop their citizens (or employees) from accessing websites over the internet will set up a domain name system (or service) filtering software. So, for instance, a country that wants to stop its citizens from accessing The Irish Times over the web (God forbid) would type in the web address, in this case www.Ireland.com, and all requests for that site would be redirected to a page saying that this site was illegal.

Similarly, companies can stop their employees using the internet to access undesirable websites. However, the Cult of the Dead Cow has managed to come up with a software that circumvents such censorship. Using software similar to, but not the same as, peer-to-peer networking programs such as Napster or FreeNet, the user behind a domain name filtering software can make requests to internet users outside the censored area and their computer retrieves the web page and sends it back to the web-surfer.

As usual with software from the Cult of the Dead Cow, much controversy surrounds such a release. Few can deny that countries like China restrict their citizens from accessing perfectly reasonable websites such as the New York Times, and such censorship is becoming more prevalent. What's worse is that the information accessed is no longer anonymous. It is now quite easy to see what a particular person is accessing, when and for how long.

So software that circumvents such practices will prove very useful to people living in areas where information is censored.

On the other hand, it will also make it easier for people to access undesirable information - pornography, for example - from a company computer system.

"Frankly, we're not interested in porn," says Oxblood. "We are trying to give people in countries where there is excessive censorship access to material that is lawfully published in the rest of the world."

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