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Facebook Cybercrimes Getting More Sophisticated

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Facebook crimes ranging from scams to online bullying are on the rise, and they are getting more sophisticated, experts warn.

It's no secret that scammers on the social media website rely on carefully crafted baits that often include scandalous and explicit video content or exclusive footage of the latest and hottest events, from celebrity death claims to never-before-seen footage of a natural disaster.

Just last week, a "clickjacking" scam that claimed Lady Gaga was found dead in a hotel room spread like wildfire on Facebook thanks to a link that took users to a fake BBC News website.

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Ploys such as the Lady Gaga scam aim to increase clicks to a page or link because they are paid by advertisers for every click they help generate. Others steal personal information, from names to addresses that are extracted when users fill out a fake survey, and that data is later sold to other cybercriminals.

Meanwhile, rarer cybercrimes on Facebook involve the installation of malicious software, or "malware," on computers so credit card information can be easily stolen.

However, the rise of these Facebook crimes isn't limited to just scams and phishing activities. There's also cyberbullying, sexual predation and even robberies that occur after users post GPS location about their whereabouts to inform others they are out of town.

A Facebook crime wave?

As Facebook becomes riskier to use, experts are weighing in on why these crimes are happening at such a rapid rate.

"These types of crimes are designed to use your own actions or weaknesses against you," said Lynette Owens, director of Internet Safety for Kids & Families, an online resource hosted by Trend Micro, a global digital security firm based in Tokyo.

"As humans, and for good reason, we put trust in others more often than not because most people at most times are worthy of that trust. The online world is no different than the offline world in that sense."

A recent Pew Internet & American Life study found that Facebook users are more trusting than

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people who are not members of the social networking site.

In fact, a Facebook user who uses the site multiple times per day is 43 percent more likely than other Internet users and more than three times as likely as non-Internet users to feel that most people can be trusted.

According to Paul Zak, a professor at Claremont College, scammers prey on Facebook users not only because they are an easy target, but because they also don't know their victims.

"It's easier to hurt someone when you're not seeing them in person," Zak told TechNewsDaily. "Neuroscience research shows that moral violations are less likely when interactions are personal because people empathize with those they meet in person. In the online world, people are just a number."

Many cybercriminals include pictures in scams since the brain is especially sensitive to images, Zak said.

For example, he noted that a reoccurring scam started popping up on Facebook that solicited donations to pay for the funeral of a young child allegedly from a neighboring town.

"However, we started to notice that every weekend there was another child's funeral that needed donations, and that's when suspicions started to rise," Zak said.

The scams

The social scam industry is thriving overall because scam creators are taking legitimate Facebook functionalities and persuading people to click on links, said Ioana Jelea, communication specialist at BitDefender.

"Social engineering has reached unprecedented levels, with scam waves being customized according to the very latest events that make the headlines of tabloids," Jelea said. "With celebrity-themed baits, for example, click counts will spike within hours, and as hot topics become 'old news,' they will be dropped and rapidly replaced with fresh meat."

Cyberbullying, sexual predator behavior and other non-spam related social networking crimes have been in the spotlight over the last year, especially as some events have led to tragic consequences.

In fall 2010, a student from Rutgers committed suicide after his roommate posted a video of him engaging in a sexual act and posted a message about it on Twitter. In addition, news of sexual predators lurking behind Facebook personas and establish relationships with children has also created a media stir.

"Most sex offenders are under some type of electronic surveillance, which prevents them from being in the vicinity of children, but Facebook allows them to create dummy profiles to nurture relationships with minors," said Sedgrid Lewis, founder of Atlanta-based Spy Parent LLC. "After sexual predators gain the trust of the minor, then they invite them to a location to meet."

Lewis also attributes the rise of these types of Facebook crimes to the popularity of mobile phones that allow Facebook users to easily post to the site anytime and from anywhere. He noted that the lack of resources by local law enforcement is also at fault.

"Most crimes committed on Facebook have to be investigated by the federal government, which won't usually become involved unless the crime is serious in nature," Lewis said. "Local law agencies don't have the technology or the resources to go after cybercriminals. Instead, they pass laws to prevent crimes such as cyberbullying through social media, but it's been slow moving."

Trust bust

Jelea of BitDefender argues that it's not just users' trust in the platform that puts them at risk, it's their insufficient familiarity with the Facebook's security and privacy settings, as well as the threats inherent to online info sharing.

"Simple yet often disregarded precaution, such as carefully reading the permissions requested by an app, could spare users the effort of cleaning their accounts of automatic scammy posts," Jelea said.

Owens of Trend Micro agrees that Facebook users aren't taking extra precautions to prevent these crimes.

"You assume that your house won't be robbed each time you leave, but you probably still lock the door," Owens said. "When you are home and someone rings the door bell, you let those you know in and not those you don't know. The same rules apply to social networks."

That said, Owens advises Facebook users to connect only with those they know can be trusted, use the strongest privacy settings possible, share only when necessary and keep up-to-date, reputable

security software on every device used to access the Internet.

"I don't think it's solely the responsibility of social networks to solve these issues," Owens said. "Parents should become savvy users themselves so they can teach their kids early on how to be safe online."

"Schools should also integrate this into education, especially as technology becomes a greater part of the education system overall," he added.

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