

“HackinItaly”: Cnaipic and Fbi stop internet scam

“Pay-per-click” is a model of Internet marketing to “earn” from digital advertising: you put a banner ad on your website and get paid each time the ad is clicked.

A group of hackers found a way to inflate the number of clicks through a network of coopted computers (over 120,000), technically referred to as botnet, based in Europe and the United States, which automatically generate bogus clicks on banners.

As a result of Operation “HackinItaly”, jointly conducted by the Italian Center for IT crime and protection of critical infrastructure (Cnaipic) of the Postal and Telecommunications Police and FBI experts, the main suspect was arrested and five more reported to the judicial authority on suspicion of illegal access to a computer system, botnet creation, and fraud against digital advertising agencies.

The group of hackers made over 300,000 euros from this illegal activity in the last five years.

Police launched the investigation after the US Internet Storm Center (ISC), which is in charge of monitoring “malicious” activities on the Internet, identified a botnet consisting of a series of compromised servers breached by hackers.

The fraud was orchestrated by two Italian brothers from Rome, both engineers of an online betting site. Some accomplices had the task of monetizing clicks using their own tax codes, falsely stating that professional services had been rendered at various prices, though never exceeding 5,000 euros, as beyond that sum a VAT identification number is required by law.

By cooperating closely, Italian and US investigators could trace the server controlling the botnet and detect the email address provided by one of the offenders to the computer services companies, also used to contact the websites of the ad banners’ suppliers. The man is now under arrest.

Those emails contained also messages, payments, and tax documents such as fake billing invoices by the defrauded ad companies.

One of the two brothers, who was the mastermind behind the fraud, was arrested by the FBI in cooperation with the Dutch police in Amsterdam. Police seized a lot of evidence disclosing the suspects’ criminal conduct during house searches conducted in Rome, Reggio Calabria, and Venice.

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Italian version

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