

Meta shuts down “surveillance for hire” groups that targeted 50,000 users in 100 countries

Article

The news: Meta, Facebook and Instagram’s parent company, banned seven “surveillance-for-hire” groups found targeting 50,000 people including political activists, celebrities, journalists, and dissidents from over 100 countries.

How we got here: Seven known surveillance-for-hire companies set up **1,500 fake accounts** on Facebook and Instagram to trick users into handing over vital information so the firms could install spyware on their devices per the MIT Technology Review.

- “While these ‘cyber mercenaries’ often claim that their services only target criminals and terrorists, our months-long investigation concluded that targeting is in fact indiscriminate and includes journalists, dissidents, critics of authoritarian regimes, families of opposition and human rights activists,” said Meta’s director of threat disruption, **David Agranovic**.
- Acting as real people, cyber mercenaries contact their targets and use social engineering tactics through fake accounts to gain access to victims’ devices.
- Spyware is a growing concern for Big Tech companies, which have responded decisively to companies targeting their users. In context, **Apple** and Meta both sued beleaguered Israel-based **NSO Group** for its **Pegasus** software.
- Meta’s report reveals NSO is one piece of a “global mercenary ecosystem.” Four entities are based in **Israel** and the other three are based in **China, India, and North Macedonia**.

More on this: Meta’s revelations could be the tip of the iceberg and expose how easy it is to manipulate Facebook for nefarious purposes. There could be hundreds other cyber mercenaries operating within Meta properties.

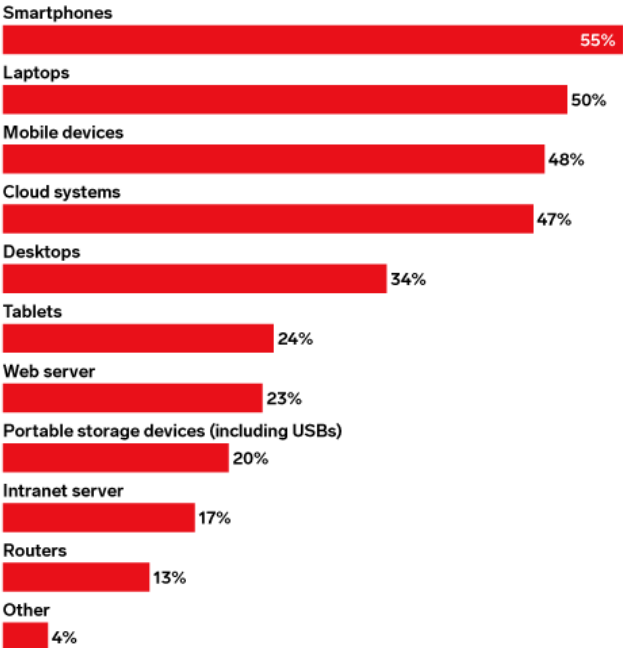
- Facebook troll farms peddling misinformation reached **140 million** Americans monthly ahead of the 2020 US presidential election. Facebook failed to stop misinformation after the 2016 election.
- Facebook removed various fake accounts with links to individuals in China and the Philippines in 2020. Those accounts reached **280,000** with posts about domestic politics, military anti-terrorism activities, and proposed legislation, per The Guardian.

What’s next? Meta is mobilizing to fix various problems with Facebook, including making Facebook’s AI more inclusive, but a major overhaul of Facebook’s signup and user verification methods is needed to weed out fake accounts.

Expect Meta to continue culling bad actors like trolls and cyber mercenaries in properties like Instagram and Facebook.

Most Vulnerable Endpoints/Entry Points to Their Company's Networks and Enterprise Systems According to IT Professionals Worldwide, Aug 2020

% of respondents



Source: Ponemon Institute, "Cybersecurity in the Remote Work Era: A Global Risk Report" sponsored by Keeper Security, Oct 13, 2020

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