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Researchers: 637 million browser users at risk

Posted by Robert Vamosi   4 comments

A group of researches on Tuesday said 637 million Web users are surfing with outdated Internet browsers and therefore at greater risk of Web-based attacks.

Using data collected from Google Web searches and security firm Secunia, the researchers, Stefan Frei (of ETH, Zurich), Thomas Dübendorfer (Google), Gunter Ollmann (IBM ISS), and Martin May (ETH, Zurich), analyzed the browsers used in a new report (PDF). They did so in an effort to understand why so many recent attacks by criminal hackers have been aimed at the browser, and why those attacks have been so successful.

Overall the authors found that roughly 40 percent of users were using insecure versions of Web browsers. Among the least compliant were users of Internet Explorer, which currently dominates the Internet browser market.

The data was collected in mid-June 2008. The users were scattered among 78 percent Internet Explorer users, 16 percent Firefox, 3 percent Safari, and 0.8 percent for Opera. Of these, 52 percent were running the latest version of Internet Explorer, 92 percent for Firefox, 70 percent for Apple, and 90 percent for Opera.

The authors note that it has taken IE 7, the current Internet Explorer release, 19 months to gain only 52 percent of the entire Internet Explorer audience. Forty-eight percent of the users in the study were either using an old version of IE 7 or still had IE 6 installed.

Some of this has to do with how the respective vendors provide updates. IE 7 is currently offered as an auto-update with each monthly set of Microsoft security patches, yet a number of people are opting out of the upgrade and still running IE 6.

The study did not include use of insecure browser add-ons, such as older versions of Adobe Reader, because the data from Google contained only the browser info.

For mitigation, the study used comparisons to the food industry, arguing that people understand the need to buy the safest foods, why not browsers? People understand that food is perishable, so why not make Internet browsers display expiration dates? The authors provided an example of a browser that displayed in red in the upper right hand corner "145 days expired, 3 updates missed."

But unlike the food industry there is no liability for software vendors. And, the authors note, software vendors are not legally obligated to provide software updates.

Imagine if the food industry was not accountable for selling spoiled milk.

TOPICS: Browsers and extensions, Security
TAGS: security, browsers, Internet Explorer, Firefox, Opera, Safari, Stefan Frei, Thomas Dübendorfer, Gunter Ollmann, and Martin May
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by The_Decider July 1, 2008 1:30 PM PDT

How is this news? Windows users are technically not savvy. Windows is insecure by default, it takes a little knowledge and a lot of time to make it somewhat secure. Microsloth's idea of security is to annoy the users to the point that they ignore the security messages. It is a recipe for disaster that get realized time and time again.

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by The_Decider July 1, 2008 1:32 PM PDT

IE is the browser of choice of hackers because it is the lowest hanging fruit(i.e. the easiest). Maybe if IE usage slipped under 1% it might not be the leader in successful exploits.

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