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Are you using the latest web browser?

Wednesday, July 16, 2008 1:24 PM
Written by Thomas Duebendorfer

In view of mass defacements of hundreds of thousand of web pages - with the intent to misuse them to launch drive-by download attacks - security researchers from ETH Zurich, Google, and IBM Internet Security Systems were interested in looking at the other side of the attack: the web browser. By analyzing the web browser versions seen in visits to Google websites, they have shown that more than 600 million Internet users don't use the latest version of their browser.

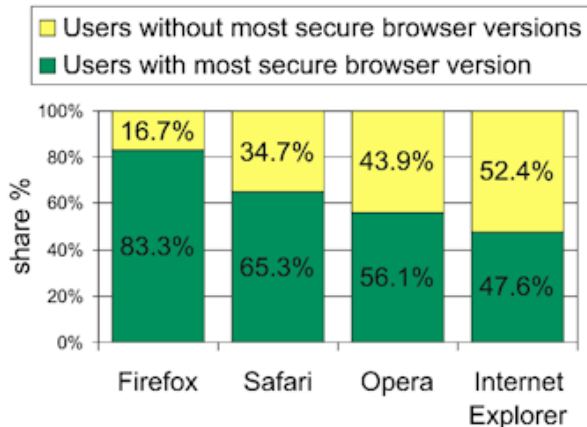
Slow migration to latest browser version

The researchers' paper, entitled "[Understanding the Web Browser Threat](#)", shows that as of June 2008, only 59.1% percent of Internet users worldwide use the latest major version of their preferred web browser. Firefox users are the most attentive: 92.2% of them surfed with Firefox 2, the latest major version before the recently released 3.0. Only 52.5% of Microsoft Internet Explorer users have updated to version 7, which is the most secure according to multiple publicly-cited Microsoft experts (among them Sandi Hardmeier). The study revealed that 637 million Internet users worldwide who use web browsers are either not running the latest version of their preferred browser or have not installed the latest patches. These users are vulnerable to exploitation due to their web browser's "built-in" vulnerabilities and the lack of more recent security mechanisms such as improved phishing protection.

Neglected security patches

Over the past 18 months, the study also shows, a maximum of 83.3% of Firefox users were using the latest major version of the web browser and also had all current patches installed (i.e. latest minor version). Only 56.1% and 47.6% of Opera and Internet Explorer users, respectively, were similarly utilizing fully-patched web browsers. Apple users are no better: since the public release of Safari 3, only 65.3% of users operate the latest Safari version.

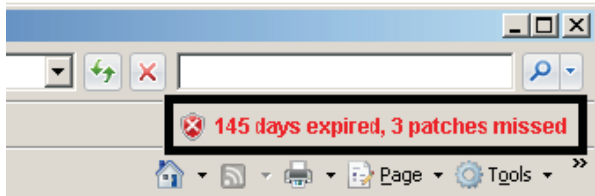
Share of most secure browser versions



Maximum measured share of users surfing the web with the most secure versions of Firefox, Safari, Opera and Internet Explorer in June 2008 as seen on Google websites.

Obsolete browser warning

The study's most important finding is that technical measures now in place do not sufficiently guarantee browser security, and that users' security awareness must be further developed. The problem is that most users are unaware that they are not using their browser's latest version. It must be made clear to web browser users that outdated software is associated with significantly higher risk. The researchers therefore suggest that, as a critical component of web software, a visible warning be instituted that warns the user of missing security patches in a way analogous to the 'best before' date in the perishable food industry. Software updates must also be made easier to find. The resulting transparency would go far in contributing to end user awareness of software weaknesses, and allow users to better evaluate risks.



Example "best before" implementation on a Web browser

As a side effect, having users migrate faster to the latest browser version would not only increase security but also make the lives of webmasters easier, as they would need to test and optimize websites for fewer older versions of web browsers.

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2 comments:

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That's all fine and dandy, but here in the good ol' US of A well more than 50% of the country still has no access to broadband, and the broadband services they CAN use (like [Hughes](#)) actually have policies in place that make patching a machine that's been offline more than a few months (or has never had patches applied) near impossible.

It's simply absolute folly to rely on security on the users' end. As hosts, webmasters and industry professionals, we simply have to prevent them from accessing dangerous content (like through [DNS filters](#)), or by being far more aggressive in filtering user-supplied content to our sites, thus preventing that avenue of attack.

[JULY 16, 2008 3:11 PM](#)

[Shawn K. Hall](#) said...

It's also disingenuous to claim that IE7 or FF3 are the 'most current' versions. Quite a few of my local clients are still using Windows 2000, Windows 98, and OSX 10.2 - which do not support 'current' versions of IE or Firefox.

[JULY 16, 2008 3:22 PM](#)

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