

Hundreds of SA Facebook profiles cloned

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Hundreds of South African Facebook profiles have been cloned in the past five days and used to solicit money from the victims' contacts.



Computer forensics expert Bennie Labuschagne said scammers used programs designed to "deep mine" online accounts to bypass security features. "Cloning is very common and it is now like the 419 scams, only on social networks," he said.

One of the South African Facebook victims, Dinesh Ramrathan, said on Monday, 27 May 2013: "A Facebook friend called me to find out why I had sent her a message asking for money online? I then discovered that my page had been duplicated. My friends were caught off guard and accepted friend requests from the hacker, who then started sending requests for money," he said.

The impostor claimed that Ramrathan was in trouble and needed money urgently.

"I am lucky because all my Facebook friends know me personally outside of the social network so they knew that I was not in trouble," he said.

Debby Bonnin's husband received a friend request from her even though they were already Facebook friends.

Identity theft

One of six-million local users of Facebook, Bonnin said: "My major concern is identity theft and all the possible ramifications of that. On Facebook the prime issue is reputation. But the person behind the false profile could use your identity to access confidential information from your friends and then there could be security or financial problems that arise," she added.

Another Facebook user, Josh Delport, said his stored scores and tokens on game applications on the site had disappeared.

University of KwaZulu-Natal associate professor of information systems Manoj Maharaj said that, though Facebook could

not be hacked because of its hi-tech security features, the affected users might have put themselves at risk by clicking on links to external games, applications and shopping sites.

"Users are clicking on these links without realising that their information is being passed on. If one of those sites is hacked, their information, such as credit card details, is easily accessible. Facebook users are sharing too much online and this is helping criminals gain access to their personal information," Maharaj said.

He said that identity theft was surpassing the number of drugs-trafficking cases worldwide because stolen identities were "extremely valuable".

Real risks

"The risk depends on the user. If you share minimal information online, the risk will be minimal. But if you are someone who gives a lot of information, when your identity is stolen your information can be used for malicious purposes and to defraud you," he said.

Facebook cloning has been a concern internationally since 2010 when security experts revealed that it was being used to trick Internet users into parting with their money. Scammers sometimes intercept a cloned Facebook profile and make use of the maiden name of a user's mother, their pet's name or even a home address to defraud others.

Labuschagne said law-enforcement agencies would have to work with international crime fighters to combat cloning. A charge of online cloning has not yet been prosecuted in South Africa.

Information technology security specialist Marthinus Engelbrecht said the only recourse available to victims was to report the matter to Facebook. "Police would not take the case," he said. He urged users to educate themselves about online security.

Last week, the personal details of at least 16,000 whistleblowers were published online after a cyber attack on the SA Police Service website. Hundreds of police officers' names, ranks and personal contact details were also uploaded by the hacker.

Source: The Times via I-Net Bridge

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