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Tech sleuth tracked down Net flaw just for the 'thrill'

By Dan Lee
Mercury News

Paul Watson is still digesting his flash of Internet fame this week, when he became the talk of the cybersecurity world.

The independent security researcher from Milwaukee became a tech celebrity of sorts after the British government Tuesday made public his research exposing a flaw in a core Internet technology that could allow hackers to shut down large portions of the global network.

The flurry of security bulletins and media coverage in recent days was the climax in a man's tinkering rippled across the globe, gaining the attention of national government of high-tech companies and Internet service providers.

"I'm really just shocked and amazed at the response," said the 35-year-old Watson, his research Thursday at the CanSecWest computer security conference in Vancouver Columbia.

Watson's brush with tech fame began anonymously in Las Vegas in late July, when he presentation by two Cisco Systems scientists at a computer security conference. Watson's "fine presentation with outstanding research," but he nonetheless had lingering ques

"It just didn't sound right," he said. "What bothered me was no one else in the room thought there was something wrong."

On Aug. 5, Watson wrote on his personal Web site that he planned to compose a de

technical rebuttal."

Watson, who works as a computer security officer for industrial automation company I Automation, began devoting much of his spare time to the issue. He said he spent every week of vacation holed up in his basement.

The resulting paper was ``Slipping in the Window: TCP Reset Attacks.''

Computer experts said Watson's research was a new approach to a long-known vulnerability previously considered too complex and time-consuming for hackers to exploit. The flaw or Transmission Control Protocol -- could allow people to remotely attack computer systems routers, the key devices that ferry traffic around the Internet, by tricking them to shut

Such attacks, security experts said, could temporarily cause broad lapses in Internet service. In the chance of a breach, it was thought, was remote because a hacker would have to guess port numbers within a certain ``window" of time in order to end the TCP connection -- so the shot was considered about a 1-in-4 billion shot.

But Watson concluded that an accepted number actually could be guessed in just seven

Watson sent his findings to Cisco, the world's biggest seller of Internet routers. Early in the year the San Jose company turned it over to the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Computer Emergency Readiness Team (CERT) and then to Britain's National Infrastructure Security Coordination Centre.

From there, computer equipment makers and Internet service providers were warned of the vulnerability.

``The important thing is that a significant number of ISPs were given time to protect their users before the release of the vulnerability," said Jeff Havrilla, an Internet security expert at U.S.-CERT.

Cisco praised Watson for his handling of the matter. ``We appreciate the high ethical standard by contacting our scientists," said Mojgan Khalili, spokeswoman for the San Jose company.

Independent computer researchers such as Watson are driven by some common motivations, including being first with a discovery and spurring tech companies to fix vulnerabilities, said Allan Paller, director of SANS Institute, which provides cybersecurity training.

``There's a dynamic that plays out with all of the researchers," Paller said. ``They work hard for their excellence."

Watson traces his motivations back to, well, being a dedicated geek.

``I go to work eight or 10 hours a day. I come home and spend four to six hours playing with my computer," he said, acknowledging his wife's patience.

One of his personal Web sites reflects his passion for computers, if in an alarming-sounding name ``terrorist.net," he said, has to do with his fixation on computers and nothing else. He said he has owned the domain name for years, and the name became a running joke among his friends that was easy to remember. ``It has no connotation whatsoever to terrorism in my mind," he said.

Watson, who grew up in Indiana, said he is largely self-taught in computer science. He worked at the Air Force, working on computers for NORAD, North American Aerospace Defense Command, in Alaska.

Watson said he loves attending DefCon, the annual hackers convention in Las Vegas, but he has never done anything illegal at the computer keyboard.

“It's the thrill of discovery,” he said.

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