

## Is the Facebook Hack Part of a Bigger Spy Threat?



Reuters

Rebecca Greenfield Feb 15, 2013

In the latest admission from a major company that it had been hacked, Facebook announced in a blog post on Friday afternoon that its "systems had been targeted in a sophisticated attack" and that "Facebook was not alone," which immediately raised the cyber-espionage question of the moment: Was China behind this one, too? High-profile disclosures of months-long Chinese malware attacks from *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* raised the public stakes late last month, but the FBI, the Obama administration, and private security experts are monitoring what is a much wider espionage campaign against major American organizations — and Facebook, which appears to have been hacked late last month or in early February, could very well be its latest victim.

Facebook does not detail where the malware compromise was initiated in its blog post, and company spokespeople are telling journalists it "won't comment on hack origins." But there is an important admission in the official post: "Facebook was not alone in this attack. It is clear that others were attacked and infiltrated recently as well." That sounds awfully familiar to Twitter's hacking announcement from another Friday evening this month,

which some speculated had to do with China because of Twitter's nod to the *Times* and the *Journal*. In its own blog post, Twitter said, "We do not believe it was an isolated incident. The attackers were extremely sophisticated, and we believe other companies and organizations have also been recently similarly attacked." Facebook said it shared details with other possibly compromised companies—maybe Twitter was one of them? On the technical side, both Facebook and Twitter also mentioned a Java browser plug-in exploit, which may point to a connection between the hacks, even though 250,000 of Twitter's accounts were affected and none of Facebook's were.

It remains unclear if the Facebook attack has anything to do with the Chinese cyber-espionage campaign against high-profile U.S. companies, publications, websites, and more. There is another key word in Facebook's admission — "sophisticated" — that makes the hack seem high-level enough. And per Facebook's spokesperson, the attack "didn't reach the legal threshold for user notification," so they did *have* to even say anything. Neither did the *Times* or the *Journal*, both of which mentioned an ensuing FBI investigation in their admissions. Facebook also says it has handed over the case to law enforcement officials, Facebook Chief Security Officer Joe Sullivan told Ars Technica's Sean Gallagher. This week, after President Obama issued an executive order and talked about cyber-security threats in his State of the Union address, major companies started sharing hack-attack information with more federal investigators.

Sullivan, the Facebook security boss, goes on to say that the Facebook hack "looked like a new campaign that wasn't linked to previous Advanced Persistent Threat activities," referring to the cyber-security term for espionage that targets governments and big companies. So maybe this is isolated and not part of the wave of Chinese cyber threats. Or maybe the "sophisticated" Chinese spying operation just has a fancy new hacking technique to add to its trail of malware malfeasance. But if Facebook's new trouble is related to the Twitter hack, one would think the pattern would "appear to be related" to something, right? Guess we'll have to see which big company comes clean next.

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