After a year of intensely investigating password theft, here's what Google found

IMAGE: NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

BY MARK KAUFMAN

NOV 13, 2017

Hackers are constantly trying to break into Google accounts, so Google researchers spent a year tracing how hackers steal passwords and expose them on the internet's black market.

To gather hard evidence about the tools hackers use to swipe passwords, Google collaborated with University of California Berkeley cybersecurity experts to track activity on some of these markets. On Thursday, they published their results.

"There's a lot of anecdotes about how accounts are being hijacked and we're providing solid evidence about how this is going on in the wild," Google anti-abuse researcher Kurt Thomas told *Mashable*.

SEE ALSO: Google adds stronger security features for hacking targets

Google found that most passwords are obtained in two ways: deceptive e-mail phishing and "third-party breaches," such as hackers scraping passwords from a massive corporation like Equifax. In the year between March 2016 and 2017, Google found 12 million credentials (which are a combination of both usernames and passwords) obtained from phishing and a whopping 3.3 billion credentials swiped during third-party breaches.

The numbers are staggering because passwords are an attractive commodity — especially a Google account password that allows access to one's Gmail, Google Docs, Google Drive, and so on.

"It's the key to the kingdom," said Thomas. "Accounts are incredibly valuable to hijackers. There's an incredible effort they're putting into getting access to your email."

> "Passwords are no longer a paradigm that you can really trust in."

Although the study's stolen password numbers are massive, it's important to note that the research team was limited in scope, so these figures could be significantly higher; the team only collected information that was freely available on the web.

"A hijacker that doesn't hold themselves to that standard can get a lot more," explained Thomas.

It's certainly not rare anymore for people to have their e-mail accounts hijacked by the web's malicious players. Google says that 15 percent of web users report having an account breached by hackers, although that number could certainly be much higher.

If passwords have so many enemies today — either through direct hacking or massive corporate data breaches — how do we battle these constant attempts at password theft?

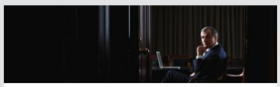
Thomas emphasized using different passwords across sites, which many people know but simply disregard. Juggling passwords used to pretty inconvenient, but today there are reputable password managers. "Use a password manager," said Thomas, while also emphasizing Google's own security measures, such as Google's Security Check-up and having a phone number associated with your account — so Google can alert you of suspicious activity.

In short, meaningful password security — for Google accounts — is a collaborative effort between Google's behind-the-scene efforts to spot strange account activity and your own vigilance.

Take it from a cybersecurity expert: "Passwords are no longer a paradigm that you can really trust in," said Thomas.

WATCH: Puerto Rico is recovering cell service... with balloons

TOPICS: BIG-TECH-COMPANIES, GMAIL, GOOGLE, PASSWORD SECURITY, PHISHING, TECH



CULTURE

I am the CEO of Duolingo and if our passive aggressive push notifications don't make you learn French, I don't know what will

TECH

The Force might not be able to stop your phone from shattering, but these Star Wars Otterbox cases can