Australia crime official warns of iPhone security risk

October 21 2010, by Amy Coopes

Police stand outside an Apple shop as the iPhone 4 is launched in Sydney in July 2010. A senior Australian crime official has raised serious security concerns over popular smartphones such as Apple's iPhone, which he warned was particularly vulnerable to hacking and information theft.

A senior Australian crime official has raised serious security concerns over popular smartphones such as Apple's iPhone, which he warned was particularly vulnerable to hacking and information theft.

John Lawler, head of the Australian Crime Commission, said the virtual world had brought "boundless opportunities" for crime gangs and mobile technologies were giving criminals "previously unimaginable" reach.

He singled out the iPhone as especially at-risk, explaining that it was the "third most used system in the world" for businesses and "deployed or piloted by more than 70 percent of Fortune 100 companies".

"Yet IT managers are swimming against the phone's tide of popularity because they can't centralise installation and security updates as with other software," Lawler told a criminology conference on Tuesday.

"This overwhelming desire for instant services (comes) at the expense of security safeguards."

Lawler said criminals could breach unprotected devices or fool users into giving access to malicious programs which planted viruses or could harvest lucrative information for fraud.

The "explosive" advent of mobile technology had also triggered a shift in information storage from hard-drives to online "cloud" sites like Hotmail and Gmail, posing complex problems for crime-fighting agencies, he added.

"People are embracing this because they can access applications or data from anywhere in the world via any number of devices other than a computer," said Lawler.

"With cloud computing, where is the computer system? Where is the data? How do we gain access? How do we deal with cross-jurisdictional issues? Where is the victim and where were they when the crime occurred?"

An entire criminal enterprise had sprung up around Apple's smartphone, he said, with an imitation iPhone racket in Italy and sophisticated siphoning scam worth 4.5 million pounds (7.1 million US dollars) linked to devices in London.

The comments come after the German government banned ministers and senior civil servants from using iPhones and BlackBerrys to guard against cyber-attacks.

In Australia, a student breached iPhone security last November with a worm which spread from phone to phone along wireless networks, and could have been used to read text messages, emails and other information stored on the device.

Lawler said fraudsters were increasingly targeting social networking sites for identity theft, seeing the Internet as "technological pipelines flooding with rich data that can be turned to profit".

Cyber security was an issue likely only to intensify as technology advanced, he said, which would "undoubtedly bring even more opportunities" for criminals.

"Strategists predict that so much of our information, entertainment and even our body data, our emotions and senses could be streamed through one, individual and embedded device," said Lawler.

"What will organised crime make of that?"

Apple's spokeswoman in Australia was not immediately available for comment.

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