

# Fear hackers? Sochi is little worse than elsewhere

February 7 2014, by Raphael Satter

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How safe is Sochi for your electronics and personal data? The games, like nearly all international events, have sparked a series of online calls to arms, with various branches of the nebulous Anonymous movement pledging action over issues as diverse as gay rights, Chechnya, and the destruction of stray dogs. More recently, a sensational network news report about how spectators' and athletes' devices could be compromised within minutes of arrival of Russia.

But experts say there's one thing that might make the 2014 Winter Olympics riskier: the sheer number of people involved.

"It's just critical mass," Jason Hart, the vice president of Maryland-based data protection company SafeNet, said Thursday. "From a potential attacker's point of view it's a gold mine."

The issue of cybersecurity at the games received a sudden burst of coverage earlier this week when NBC correspondent Richard Engel reported that his phone and two brand new computers were hacked within hours of having been set up in Moscow. Attackers began probing one of his computers within minutes of connecting to his hotel's network, he said. At the local cafe, his phone was hacked before he even got his coffee.

"American athletes and fans now coming to Russia by the thousands are entering a mine field the instant they log on to the Internet," Engel warned.

But researcher Kyle Wilhoit, who collaborated with Engel on the broadcast, later said on Twitter that the phone was hacked only after navigating to a shady website and downloading a malicious file—a basic security blunder that could have happened in Manhattan just as easily as in Moscow.

Outside experts were unimpressed. "Most everything they describe in the story is as equally true at your local Starbucks as it is in Sochi," said Paul Proctor, an analyst at Gartner, a tech research company.

Challenged on that point on Twitter, Wilhoit agreed. "Keep in mind the target audience of the piece wasn't technical," he wrote. "TV's goal is to make it interesting."

But even if using your device in Sochi is as safe as firing it on in a public place, experts say your local coffee shop (or really any other public place) is never a sure thing.

"What they did on the news clip is very possible," said Hart of SafeNet. "Irrespective of the games or not, anyone using a device or a laptop or a tablet in a public space is going to be a public target, or they're going to be at risk."

As far as Anonymous was concerned, Sergey Lozhkin, whose Moscow-based Kaspersky Lab is one of several companies helping to secure the game from online threats, said such groups were probably nothing to worry about.

"Most of those guys are not organized properly," he said. "Security guys are absolutely aware of this stuff and they know how to protect from such unsophisticated threats."

But Lozhkin did worry that more skilled hackers might be tempted to hit

an Olympics-related site, seeing the event in much the same way corporate sponsors do.

"It's a great opportunity for them to create a world-wide known name," he said.

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