Rush to put death records online lets anyone be 'killed'

August 8 2015, by Glenn Chapman

Australian hacker Chris Rock poses on stage at Def Con on August 7, 2015, in Las Vegas where he gave a crash course in how to kill people online by having them declared officially dead

Hackers at an infamous annual Def Con gathering in Las Vegas got schooled in how to be online killers.

A rush to go digital with the process of registering deaths has made it simple for maliciously minded folks to have someone who is alive declared dead by the authorities.

"This is a global problem," Australian computer security specialist Chris Rock said as he launched a presentation titled "I Will Kill You."

The process of having someone officially stamped dead by getting a death certificate issued typically involves a doctor filling out one form and a funeral home filling out another, according to Rock's research.

Once forms are submitted online, certificates declaring the listed person legally dead are generated.

A fatal flaw in the system is that people can easily pose as real doctors and funeral directors, Rock demonstrated to a rapt audience.

Doctors practising general medicine often don't bother setting up accounts at online portals for filling out information for death certificates.

An aspiring online assassin can step into that void, and borrow the identity of a doctor.

Setting up accounts requires a doctor's name, address, and medical license number. A basic Internet search will turn up that information, which is publicly available for the well-intended purpose of letting people check that physicians are legitimate before seeking care.

Drop down boxes containing illness categories and online guides are available for filling in "doctor speak" on forms and avoiding medical causes or circumstances that might trigger needs for autopsies or investigations, Rock's demonstration showed.

No one off limits

Borrowing a funeral director's identity to establish an online account for death certificate purposes was shown to be simple as well. Required information about legitimate funeral directors is posted on the Internet, and one could even claim to work at a funeral home.

In Rock's case, he made a website for a bogus funeral home and used that to back his application for an account as director. He got an automated call days later saying he was approved.

With both online accounts in place, deaths can be registered in the real world.

"You could kill anyone you want," Rock told AFP after the presentation. "No one is off limits."

A humor-infused list of scenarios included killing oneself off to get life insurance cash or going after others for vengeance.

Someone targeted might not even know they were declared dead until doing something official like trying to renew a passport or driving license.

Rock began digging into the death industry a year ago after an Australian hospital accidentally declared 200 patients dead.

Virtual babies

Getting birth certificates for virtual babies was demonstrated to be even easier than killing off people in the digital world, because registering births online only involves doctors and parents.

"Once you log on as a doctor, not only can you kill someone, you can actually birth someone," Rock said.

Given the time it takes for even a make-believe baby to grow into adulthood, he saw that as more tempting to crime gangs who could invest in the future by creating legions of virtual people for shady doings involving loans, stock trading, imports or other activities.

"You could even make fake identities for your children, so when they grow up they have burner identities," Rock said.

He dove into virtual birth and death in his book titled "The Baby Harvest: How virtual babies become the future of terrorist financing and money laundering."

© 2015 AFP

Citation: Rush to put death records online lets anyone be 'killed' (2015, August 8) retrieved 8 May 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2015-08-death-online.html