Dark Caracal: Good News and Bad News

BY GENNIE GEBHART | JANUARY 19, 2018

ENGLISH

Yesterday, EFF and Lookout announced a new report, Dark Caracal, that uncovers a new, global malware espionage campaign. One aspect of that campaign was the use of malicious, fake apps to impersonate legitimate popular apps like Signal and WhatsApp. Some readers had questions about what this means for them. This blog post is here to answer those questions and dive further into the Dark Caracal report.

Read the full Dark Caracal report here

First, the good news: **Dark Caracal does not mean that Signal or WhatsApp themselves are compromised in any way.** It only means that attackers found new, insidious ways to create and distribute fake Android versions of them. (iOS is not affected.) If you downloaded your apps from Google's official app store, Google Play, then you are almost certainly in the clear. The threat uncovered in the Dark Caracal report referred to "trojanized" apps, which are fake apps that pretend to look like real, trusted ones. These malicious spoofs often ask for excessive permissions and carry malware. Such spoofed versions of Signal and WhatsApp were involved in the Dark Caracal campaign.

The malicious actors behind Dark Caracal got these fake, malicious apps onto people's phones by spearphishing. Several types of phishing emails directed people—including military personnel, activists, journalists, and lawyers—to go to a fake app store-like page, where fake Android apps waited. There is even evidence that, in some cases, Dark Caracal used physical access to people's phones to install the fake apps. Again, if you downloaded your apps from the official app store, you can rest easy that this has likely not affected you.

And now the bad news: Dark Caracal has wide-reaching implications for how state-sponsored surveillance and malware works. Most people do not have to worry about this very specific threat. But for the small minority of users who may be directly targeted by nation-states or other skilled, motivated adversaries—and for the malware researchers who try to track those adversaries down—the Dark Caracal report uncovers a new infrastructure that makes it even harder to attribute attacks and malware campaigns to a particular nation or actor. More details are available in the report.

Dark Caracal is also a reminder that most modern hacking requires the unwitting participation of the user. The most dangerous thing in the online environment is not necessarily complex, headline-grabbing vulnerabilities, but well-crafted phishing messages and fake apps that trick users into handing over log-in credentials and granting excessive permissions. Keep an eye out for links, attachments, and apps pretending to be something they're not, and make sure your friends, neighbors, and others in your community are informed too.

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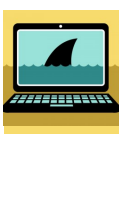

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The Electronic Frontier Foundation, for example, commended the feds for asking a judge to review exactly what data the FBI would and would not touch in victimized devices, which were located across the country. It was a "positive step" toward accountability and transparency in FBI computer break-ins, EFF staff attorney...

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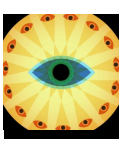

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As with any tool designed for military and civilian uses, there are dangers of these hacking programs falling into the wrong hands. To be sure, the misuse of government-grade exploits unnerves many civil liberties groups. "Governments shouldn't be able to use them to crack down on free speech or dissidents,"...