Are your online accounts really safe?

The websites generally lull users into a sense of security that their confidentiality can be maintained by a string of letters and numbers. Some of well known people that are experienced in this field are now skeptical about the security of users of many websites.

There have been cases of the online transfer of money by hacking into the bank accounts and by getting credit card details of people. Wired’s Matt Honan had his Apple, Gmail and Twitter accounts in a span of an hour a few months ago. After investigations he had found that hackers generally use reset password functionality to get access to accounts. Most email accounts provide a straight forward way of authentication that can be circumvented by a determined hacker. Even a two method authentication that involves sending code to account owner’s mobile can be bypassed. Let’s take an example of Mathew Prince, CEO of US security company Cloud Flare. His Google Apps account was hacked by one of the group led by a 15-year old. They first hacked into his phone account and then set up a forwarding account. When they requested for the reset password option in his Google account, the authentication code was forwarded to them. Also, New York Times columnist Pogue had his iMac broken as hackers were able to answer his security questions that were supposed to be only known to him. There are many similar cases other than listed above where security is compromised but the need of hour is to learn from them and avoid them wherever they can.

The biggest weakness in any security system is the human mind. There are researches that have shown any authentication method that is acceptable to 65 year old will fall in seconds to 14 year old hacker. When asked to US department of homeland security’s Janet Napolitano about how she kept her email account secure, she answered by saying that she kept it safe by not having one. However, on a serious note, it is time now that involved companies and security agencies sit together and find better methods for authentication that will prevent further damages.