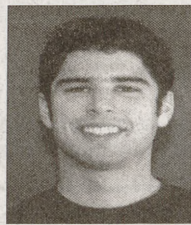


Grass-roots trespassing

Low-tech hackers bypass security, get to the source

Texas A&M is doing everything it can to protect its computer network from hackers sneaking in the back door. Sophisticated firewalls protect the network from outside attacks, and virtual private networks allow students secure access to their information off campus and from wireless locations on campus.



CHRIS JACKSON

The front door to the system at A&M and other systems, however, is being left wide open.

On Jan. 9, 2003, malicious Saudi Arabian hackers exploited five poor passwords on the University phone system and then made international collect calls at the University's expense.

The default passwords for at least five voice mail accounts had not been changed. Those default passwords were made up of the same numbers included in the telephone number. Low-tech trespassers sometimes exploit a few weak passwords such as these among many strong ones to gain access to vital information or simply for the fun of it.

Business Week reported that an associate dean at Princeton University was fired for accessing a Yale admissions site using student passwords that he guessed. Darielle Insler admitted to guessing one of her teacher's passwords when gaining access to her grades at the University of Delaware. The New York Times reported. The Saudi Arabians who hacked A&M's phone system correctly assumed that default passwords that included parts of the accounts' phone numbers had not been changed.

Yet weak passwords are not always the cause of low-tech security breaches. Sometimes, a trespasser can gain access to a restricted system by simply asking a user for a password.

The industry phrase is "social engineering," and it is the technique of acquiring a critical password or other information by merely asking for it.

The New York Times reported that Darielle Insler called the personnel department at the University of Delaware posing as one of her teachers and was given the password needed to change her grades.

She was failing math, science and English until she asked for — and received — the access to restricted information.

Hacker-turned-consultant Kevin Mitnick discussed social engineering with the San Francisco Chronicle in late October 2002. He described how these low-tech hackers might pose as a technician trying to fix a problem.

"(Potential hackers) will call or e-mail an unsuspecting person and tell them that there is a problem with their network and then try to troubleshoot that nonexistent problem," Mitnick said. "When the problem is solved, the attacker asks, 'While I have you on the phone, can I ask a favor?'"

Social engineers make it seem all right to give out restricted information because the engineer poses as someone who could get that sort of information through legitimate channels if he wished. At first, this approach seems simple enough to protect against; employees and other users should keep their information private. The skilled social engineer, however, is able to break through the common sense barrier to get what he wants — whatever it may be.

Mitnick said he called a Motorola 800 number as he walked home from work one day, and by the end of the 20-minute walk, he had the source code for his Motorola cellular phone. With that code, he could have dismantled his phone's software and found vulnerabilities to exploit in other Motorola phones. Mitnick did not comment on what he did with the knowledge, but said, "You have to think about how much money and high-tech security Motorola had used to protect that code," highlighting the fact that he had in 20 minutes what Motorola had probably spent millions of dollars to protect.

The most expensive and powerful security available would not have been able to protect

Motorola's source code in Mitnick's case, because the security was not broken — it was bypassed altogether.

The good news is that social engineering does not need to be a problem in businesses and organizations. The solution lies simply in the education of users on the importance of password security. Users should know and understand that network administrators and other people who actually need computer access codes will be able to get them through means other than average end-users.

Large-scale computer networks have working security measures to detect and correct intrusions after the fact, but the burden of preventing these breaches falls into the hands of the users themselves.

Yale's associate dean was discovered in his trespassing. Insler's grade-changing scheme was found out at the University of Delaware and the Saudis' free phone service was promptly cut off by A&M. These universities experienced problems which can be caused by weak passwords, unwitting divulgence of passwords, and poorly maintained systems that employ basic or default passwords. Without user education and cooperation, organizations will continue to spend money barricading the back door while intruders walk right in the front.



- Never give out your password
- Report suspicious requests for your passwords
- Don't use names, places or dictionary words as a password
- Always change default passwords
- Use numbers, uppercase and lowercase letters

TRAVIS SWENSON • THE BATTALION

Debate over Hawaiian volcanoes continues

By B.J. Reyes
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Geologists say an outpouring of lava from the Kilauea volcano that began last May may have stemmed from activity beneath neighboring Mauna Loa, reviving a decades-old debate about whether the two volcanic systems are connected.

"We have detected a correlation between these events at a very short time scale," scientists reported in the current issue of the journal Nature.

The scientists have long believed that Mauna Loa, the world's largest volcano, and Kilauea are connected deep beneath the Earth's surface.

But the new study suggests there is a shallow interaction between the magma systems of Mauna Loa and Kilauea, reported Peter Cervelli and Asta Miklius of the U.S. Geological Survey's Hawaiian Volcanoes Observatory at Kilauea.

"I think it's real," said Paul Segall, a geophysicist at Stanford University. "We know there's ultimately a single source. This indicates that they're probably a little more complicated than that and there are interactions between their two systems."

Mauna Loa has erupted 33 times in the past 150 years, most recently in Spring 1984, when a three-week eruption sent a 16-mile lava flow toward Hilo. The current Pu'u 'O'o-Kupaianaha eruption at Kilauea began 20 years ago and ranks as the most voluminous outpouring of lava on the volcano's east rift zone in the past six centuries.

Last Mother's Day, lava

began flowing from a new vent on the west side of Kilauea.

At about the same time Mauna Loa began inflating with the summit area rising slightly and the caldera widening to suggest swelling of the magma reservoir within the volcano, researchers said.

"The Mother's Day flow was nothing spectacular or unusual on Kilauea, except that it had been preceded by several months of inflation," Cervelli said. "If it's not coincidence, this is kind of the first line of geophysical evidence that shows the two volcanoes are communicating."

Tests, simulations and other monitoring determined that the possibility of a coincidence was less than one in 10, Cervelli said.

Researchers said there are two possible explanations for the apparent connection between the volcanoes.

"One way of thinking about it is ... Mauna Loa began to inflate and on May 12 squeezed its neighbor Kilauea, which pushed it over the edge and that caused the Mother's Day event," he said.

"My favorite hypothesis is that a slug of magma entered into Mauna Loa and actually as it was passing by Kilauea squeezed Kilauea and triggered this failure — it sprung a leak, in effect, and the Mother's Day event ensued."

It's hard to tell whether similar events have occurred before because equipment being used today — including continuous monitoring using global positioning devices — is far better than anything used in the past, Cervelli said.

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