China Spies on Airline Passengers with IMSI-Catchers

September 23, 2015 by Pierluigi Paganini

The popular expert John McAfee claims passengers with four Chinese airlines are spied with the IMSI-catchers technology by the Government of Beijing.

The former owner of McAfee security firm, John McAfee was always known to have made some controversial comments in the IT industry, but also to have good sources that let him get precious information at first hand. This time in his most recent article, he talks about the ability of the Chinese government to spy on four highly renowned airlines costumers.

John McAfee has never revealed the names of the airlines and never explained how he got this information, but he provided details on the tactic behind the cyber espionage campaign.

First, he got an Android software that had the capability to detect "man in the middle attacks by devices that emulate legitimate cell phone towers, to hundreds of international travelers flying with four highly renowned airlines".

The software tries to detect anomalies in the IMSI-catchers (International Mobile Subscriber Identity), something that manufacturers can't hide.

The next question is, but what is an IMSI-catcher?

"IMSI-catchers are devices that emulate cell phone towers. They trick our smartphones into believing a cell tower suddenly appeared in close range and entices our phones to connect through it."

If your mobile is caught by any IMSI-catchers, you are in trouble. Once you are connected to the fake cell tower a man-in-the-middle attack is performed, "the IMSI-catcher analyses our configuration and "pushes" the necessary software into our smartphones in order for some third party related to the IMSI catcher to take control."

If you are interested in more details on this technology give a look to the post "StingRay Technology: How Government Tracks Cellular Devices" where I provided detailed information on IMSI-catchers and similar devices.

The use of IMSI-catchers is well-known and documented, but it's alarming that is being used by airlines controlled by the Chinese government.

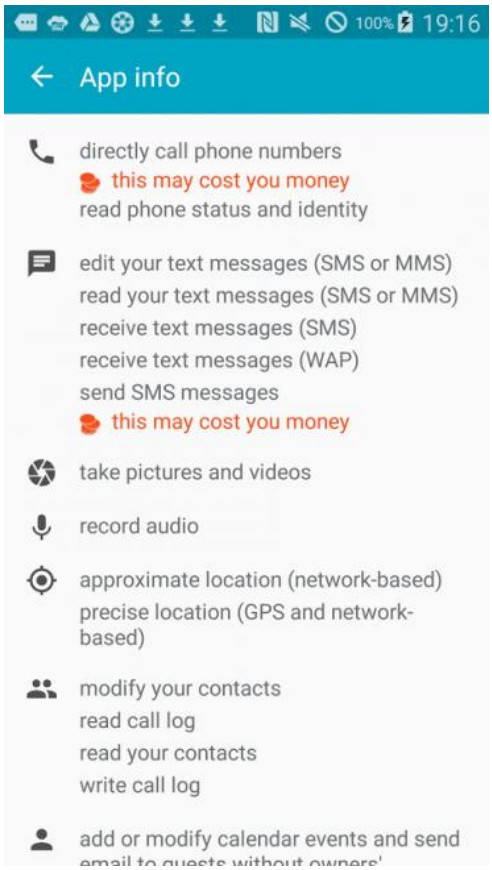
The method used by the airlines to control the passengers is simple as effective as reported by the Internationa Business Times, the airlines use the IMSI-catcher to compromise traveler's devices when it is attempting to connect to the onboard Internet.

"In every case where an international traveler with these four airlines attempted to connect to the onboard internet, a module was pushed to the connecting smartphone that surreptitiously turned on the 3G or 4G communications (without displaying the corresponding icon). From

that point, an onboard IMSI-catcher attempted to connect to the phone. There was a 100% success rate."

After this step, it will be determined if your mobile have already installed an Android APP called " *Silent Logging*", if not the application will be pushed to your device.

"Silent Logging" has the purpose of spying on you and uses the following permissions:



"After Silent Logging is activated, a spyware app is downloaded to the users' smartphone that utilises the Silent Logging app, unless the phone is "physically wiped" by the manufacturer, this software remains forever."

If you try to do a factory reset by your own be aware that the spyware will detect it and emulate that you are doing a factory reset.

Once you have this spyware installed your device will available for the government to check on you, reading emails, SMS, recording videos, voice,etc etc, and all is sent to China.

The alleged espionage activity operated by the Chinese Government through the IMSI-catcher technology is alarming, and should be taken seriously.

About the Author Elsio Pinto

Elsio Pinto (@high54security) is at the moment the Lead McAfee Security Engineer at Swiss Re, but he also as knowledge in the areas of malware research, forensics, ethical

hacking. He had previous experiences in major institutions being the European Parliament one of them. He is a security enthusiast and tries his best to pass his knowledge. He also owns his own blog McAfee Security Engineer at Swiss Re, but he also as knowledge in the areas of malware research, forensics, ethical hacking. He had previous experiences in major institutions being the European Parliament one of them. He is a security enthusiast and tries his best to pass his knowledge. He also owns his own blog McAfee Security Engineer at Swiss Re, but he also as knowledge in the areas of malware research, forensics, ethical hacking. He had previous experiences in major institutions being the European Parliament one of them. He is a security enthusiast and tries his best to pass his knowledge. He also owns his own blog http://high54security.blogspot.com/

Edited by Pierluigi Paganini