Operation Ghost Click - International Cyber Ring That Infected Millions of Computers Dismantled

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New York, NY (RPRN) 11/10/11 — Six Estonian nationals have been arrested and charged with running a sophisticated Internet fraud ring that infected millions of computers worldwide with a virus and enabled the thieves to manipulate the multi-billion-dollar Internet advertising industry. Users of infected machines were unaware that their computers had been compromised —or that the malicious software rendered their machines vulnerable to a host of other viruses.

Details of the two-year FBI investigation called Operation Ghost Click were announced today in New York when a federal indictment was unsealed.

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Officials also described their efforts to make sure infected users' Internet access would not be disrupted as a result of the operation.The indictment, said Janice Fedarcyk, assistant director in charge of our New York office, "describes an intricate international conspiracy conceived and carried out by sophisticated criminals." She added, "The harm inflicted by the defendants was not merely a matter of reaping illegitimate income."

Beginning in 2007, the cyber ring used a class of malware called DNSChanger to infect approximately 4 million computers in more than 100 countries. There were about 500,000 infections in the U.S., including computers belonging to individuals, businesses, and government agencies such as NASA. The thieves were able to manipulate Internet advertising to generate at least $14 million in illicit fees. In some cases, the malware had the additional effect of preventing users' anti-virus software and operating systems from updating, thereby exposing infected machines to even more malicious software.

"They were organized and operating as a traditional business but profiting illegally as the result of the malware," said one of our cyber agents who worked the case. "There was a level of complexity here that we haven't seen before."

DNS—Domain Name System—is a critical Internet service that converts user-friendly domain names, such as www.fbi.gov, into numerical addresses that allow computers to talk to each other. Without DNS and the DNS servers operated by Internet service providers, computer users would not be able to browse websites or send e-mail.

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