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SPOTLIGHT ON SOCHI: Social Media Analysis Series

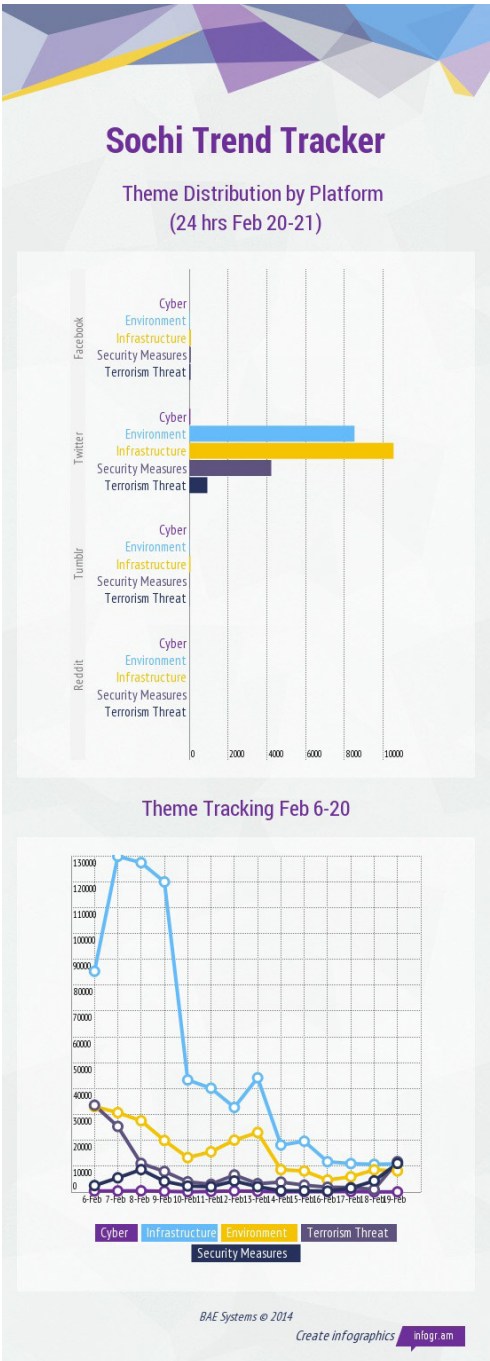
STORM RECAP

BAE Systems is partnering with Homeland Security Today magazine to produce a daily report that provides a unique perspective on the 2014 winter games in Sochi, Russia.

In our February 19 post, “Calm Before the Twitter Storm”, we discussed a Twitter storm slated to take place 4 pm EST February 20 by several hacker collectives. The goal of a Twitter storm is produce high numbers of tweets using the same hashtag as a means to draw attention to an issue. This particular storm was focused on raising awareness of perceived animal cruelty issues relating to the winter games. We’ve included a word cloud that demonstrates the prominence of these issues in the dialogue.

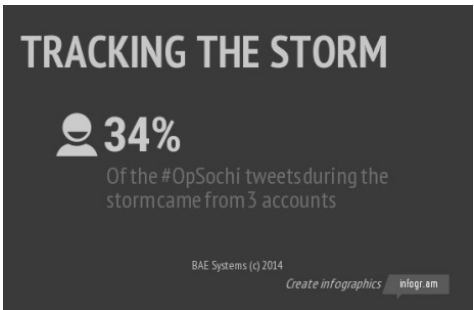
The storm was spearheaded by a couple of accounts using the hashtag #OpSochi. Shortly before the storm was scheduled to begin, the accounts linked to a pastebin.com message. It contained a list of pre-written tweets (known as a tweetpack) that participants were to use, all of which contained the hashtag #OpSochi. Many of the tweets were directed at specific media outlets, official games accounts and the English account of the Kremlin. The storm also attempted to hijack several animal-rights related hashtags, an idea we discussed in our previous post on Feb 14th post, “Hashtag Hijacking”. Additionally, the group crafted tweets for the storm that highlighted their previous successes in attacking Russian websites.





Popularity for the #OpSochi hashtag began to grow February 4 as the DDOS attacks against Russian websites we launched. Following the attacks, the hashtag declined in popularity. The announcement of the Twitter storm on February 12 produced an increase in activity, which continued until just before the storm was scheduled to begin. While the volume of tweets spiked to more than double the daily peak during the DDOS attacks, its momentum did not last long. After several hours, the #OpSochi hash tag fell back to similar levels observed in the buildup to the storm. Throughout the operation there reminders were sent to participants to tweet either using their own messages using the common hashtag or the pre-written tweets provided, but stressed not to re-tweet others. Users were also providing statistics during the storm such as the volume of hashtags the operation produced.

The groups involved in this week's Twitter storm gained publicity following their attacks on Russian and game related websites, which were covered in our February 7 report "Distributed Denial of Sochi". The attacks were able to take down several thousand Russian websites and the groups leaked several databases on their pastebin.com account. The Feb. 12 announcement provided the date and time of the operation as well as further information as to why they were selecting Russian targets. In the days following the announcement, the hacktivists leaked more information taken from several Russian websites. During this period, several unaffiliated groups re-tweeted the @OpSochi plans for the Twitter storm including accounts interested in animal-rights.



Planned Twitter storms such as this one exemplify how quickly an issue can swell in popularity given some level of coordination between parties. With a few more participants, the volume figures could have grown larger than it did. As it turned out, 34% of the #OpSochi activity during the storm was the work of three users. It is also worth noting that even though the storm has subsided, the groups involved continue to attack Russian websites and release the information they have obtained.

Concerns about security issues, and likewise the social media chatter about them, change constantly as the environment around the winter games evolves. Understanding how and why those changes occur will help us better understand both the mood on the ground in Sochi and emerging concerns from the worldwide audience. For the duration of the games, the BAE Systems Advanced Analytics Lab is tracking dynamic social media activity related to common security issues by category and will report daily on how that discussion progresses.

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