Are these Ads Safe: Detecting Hidden Attacks through Mobile App-Web Interfaces

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Consider This...
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The Problem

• Enormous effort toward analyzing malicious applications

• App may itself be benign
  • But may lead to malicious content through links

• **App-web interface**
  • Links inside the app leading to web-content
  • Not well-explored

• Types
  • Advertisements
  • Other links in app
Outline

App-Web Interface Characteristics

Solution

Results

Conclusion
Outline

- App-Web Interface Characteristics
- Solution
- Results
- Conclusion
App-Web Interface Characteristics

• Can be highly dynamic
• A link may recursively redirect to another before leading to a final web page
• Links embedded in apps
  • Can be dynamically generated
  • Can lead to dynamic websites
• Advertisements
  • Ad libraries create links dynamically
  • Ad economics can lead to complex redirection chains
Advertising Overview

Advertisers  Ad networks  Apps / Developers  Users
Ad Networks

• Ad libraries act as the interface between apps and ad network servers

• Ad networks may interface with each other
  • Syndication – One network asks another to fill ad space
  • Ad exchange – Real-time auction of ad space

• App or original ad network may not have control on ads served
Solution Components

- **Triggering**: Interact with app to launch web links

- **Detection**: Process the results to identify malicious content

- **Provenance**: Identify the origin of a detected malicious activity
  - Attribute malicious content to domains and ad networks
Solution Architecture
Triggering

• Use AppsPlayground\(^1\)
  • A gray box tool for app UI exploration
  • Extracts features from displayed UI and iteratively generates a UI model

• A novel computer graphics-based algorithm for identifying buttons
  • See widgets and buttons as a human would

Detection

• Automatically download content from landing pages

• Use VirusTotal for detecting malicious files and URLs
Provenance

- How did the user come across an attack?
- Code-level attribution
  - App code
  - Ad libraries
    - Identified 201 ad libraries
- Redirection chain-level attribution
  - Which URLs led to attack page or content
Results

• Deployments in US and China

• 600 K apps from Google Play and Chinese stores

• 1.4 M app-web links triggered

• 2,423 malicious URLs

• 706 malicious files
Case Study: Fake AV Scam

- Multiple apps, one ad network: Tapcontext
- Ad network solely serving this scam campaign
- Phishing webpages detected by Google and other URL blacklists about 20 days after we detected first instance
Case Study: Free iPad Scam

- Asked to give personal information without any return
- New email address receiving spam ever since
- Origins at Mobclix and Tapfortap
  - Ad exchanges
  - Neither developers nor the primary ad networks likely aware of this
Case Study: iPad Scam from static link

• Another Scam, this time through a static link embedded in app
• Link target opens in browser and redirects to scam
• Not affiliated with Facebook
Case Study: SMS Trojan Video Player

- Ad from nobot.co.jp leads to download a movie player
- Player sends SMS messages to a premium number without user consent

Click on ad
Limitations

• Incomplete detection
  • Antiviruses and URL blacklists are not perfect
  • Our work DroidChameleon\textsuperscript{2} shows this

• Incomplete triggering
  • App UI can be very complex
  • May still be sufficient to capture advertisements

Conclusion

• Benign apps can lead to malicious content

• Provenance makes it possible to identify responsible parties

• Can provide a safer landscape for users
  • Screening offending applications
  • Holding ad networks accountable for content

• Working with CNCERT to improve the situation
Future Work

• Speeding up collection of ads

• Goals of analyzing an order of magnitude more ads in shorter time
Software and Dataset

• Dataset of 201 ad libraries:  

• New release of AppsPlayground:  
Thank you!