

News monitored for: Jupiter Capital

Trai outs personal email addresses of lakhs, gets hacked

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NEW DELHI: India's telecom regulator on Monday made public around a million e-mail personal addresses, making them plum targets for e-marketers and spammers and prompting a group of alleged hackers to take the website down after widespread social media outrage over the privacy breach.

The addresses belonged to everyone who wrote to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) to uphold non-discriminatory web access as part of a viral campaign after the body floated a consultation paper that sparked fears that telecom companies would throt-

CRUCIAL DATA

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tle the internet for monetary benefits.

In a series of tweets, Anonymous India, a little-known group that calls itself the Indian arm of the global computer hackers collective Anonymous, claimed responsibility for the hacking.

» CONTINUED ON P6

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TRAI outs...

"We are just bunch of kids trolling "brilliant" minds at #TRAI who have no clue how to handle such situation. Sorry India, you deserve better," @opindia_revenge tweeted shortly after the Trai website became inaccessible. The website was made functional nearly six hours after the hacking.

Trai secretary Sudhir Gupta, however, blamed a network issue from the National Informatics Centre for the website glitches. "Whatever we have received, we have uploaded on the website," he said, when asked about the privacy breach. A list of e-mail addresses such as the one the regulator released is usually worth top dollars to spammers since they are a confirmed repository of active, legitimate e-mail addresses.

A huge chunk of the respondents were also middle-class young professionals and students - attractive demographics for e-marketers - making them sitting ducks for all sorts of spam, ranging from Viagra ads and credit cards to bank loans and insurance. All a spammer has to do is download the document on Trai's website and skim email addresses from it. "I understand it is the duty of the Trai to make everything they have received public since it is a public consultation after all," says Rajya Sabha MP Rajeev Chandrashekhar, who says he is taking up the broader issue of citizens' privacy up in Parliament. "Still, there is an obligation on them to not reveal personal details like my email address or my phone number."

Activists also said the body's action could lead to harassment because India didn't have well-defined privacy laws. "Even if these details were to be provided publicly, they shouldn't have been published in a manner where they could be scraped easily by any email marketer," said Apar Gupta, a lawyer and an active participant in the SaveTheInternet campaign.

The campaign has galvanised people against proposals by telecom service providers to charge extra for certain services such as WhatsApp that activists allege violates net neutrality, a concept that stipulates companies make all data accessible to everyone at the same possible speed and cost.

Mounting public anger has also forced a clutch of Indian companies, including Flipkart, NDTV, Cleartrip among others, to withdraw from controversial web initiatives that were inimical to equal treatment of all online traffic, crucial to keeping the internet a level-playing field.

(with inputs from agencies)