BlackHat Abu Dhabi 2011: Fun with Google Custom Searches

Intelligence, Secrets & Leaks

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http://infosecmindstorm.blogspot.com/

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Google Custom Searches- Background

Google offers a program that allows developers/ users to create their own custom search engines. The Custom search option allows interested parties to be up and running in minutes using a wizard interface along with more advanced options to further customize or fine tune their searches as per their needs (Google Custom Search Developers Guide, Introduction). In this case Google does the heavy lifting and allows the custom search owner to focus on developing/ creating their content/ search list. When using Custom Searches the user/ search creator can choose to either host the code themselves, or allow Google to do it for them. Advanced options of note include the ability to fine tune search results by removing items from the search (while leaving the site in question on the list), promoting search results and on-demand indexing. These enable the user to retrieve search results from newly added sources in a shorter time frame (Improved On Demand Indexing, Google Custom Search Blog).

When a user carries out a traditional Google search, he/she can sometimes end up with very large numbers of hits, most of which are not relevant to what they are looking for and when they try to use advanced operators the user is restricted to going through one source at a time. My custom searches allow an analyst/ researcher to peruse multiple relevant sources at the same time. I have put together three different custom searches/ engines; each of these searches goes through different types of online sources/ content and consequently provides different types of information/ intelligence. This paper will examine the type of information each of these searches goes through, how they can be used, and the types of information one can get from them.

The Open Source Intelligence Deep Web Search

(http://www.google.com/cse/home?cx=013791148858571516042:eygbr9xc-ys)

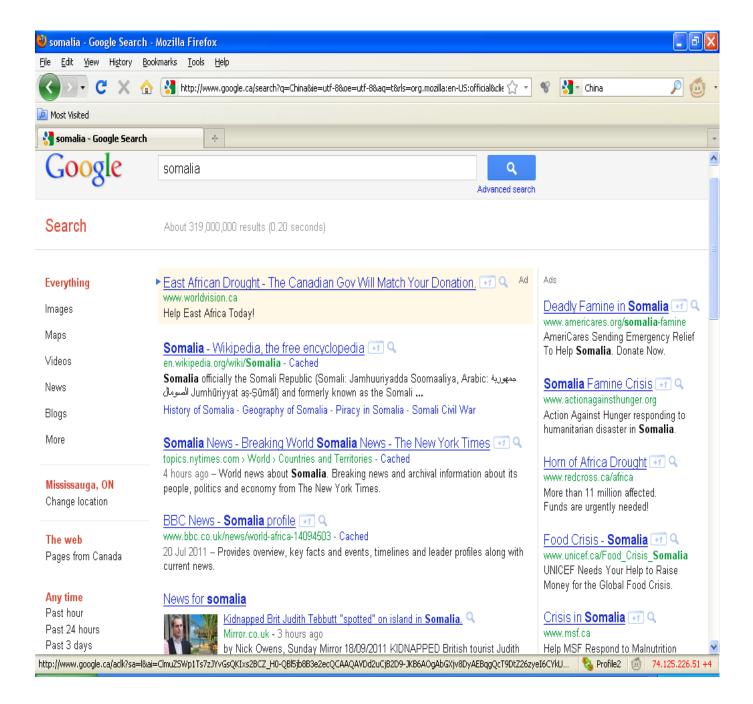
Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) is a form of intelligence gathering from open sources. Open sources refers to publically available information as opposed to covert information. This includes everything from media like newspapers, TV, web content (blogs, wikis, among others), satellite images, public databases, academic journals/ conference info and any other publically available information. In 2006 the Washington Times had an article discussing how OSINT was becoming increasingly important. I find that the following lines were really significant:

"A Defense Department official said Chinese military bloggers have become a valuable source of intelligence on Beijing's secret military buildup. For example, China built its first Yuan-class attack submarine at an underground factory that was unknown to U.S. intelligence until a photo of the submarine appeared on the Internet in 2004." (Washington Times)

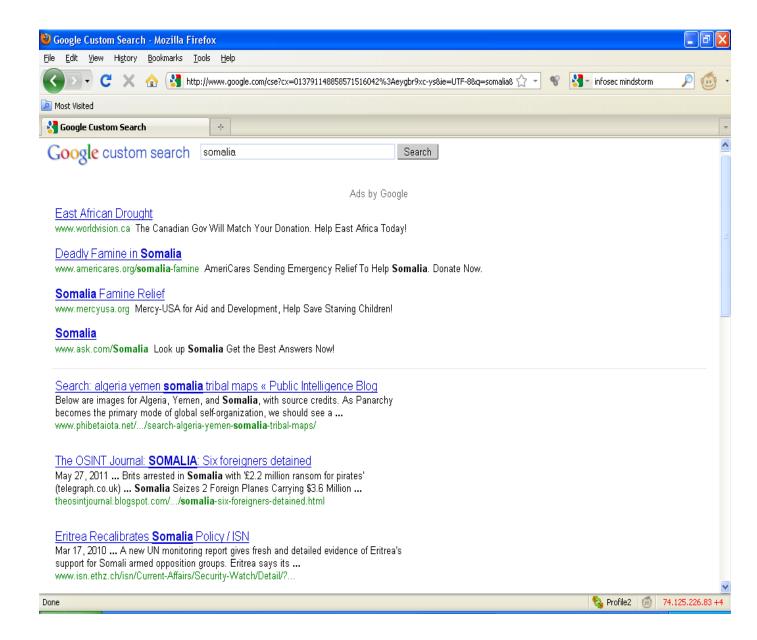
In this case, I have put together a customized Google search that runs against a large list of Open source intelligence sources (which I have compiled and actively maintain); examples of the sites in this search include http://www.deepwebtech.com and http://www.turbo10.com/ (Open Source Intelligence Deep Web Search, Infosec Mindstom).

As we are using Google to run against a specified list of sites that includes a variety of intelligence sources ranging from Chinese military bloggers to specialized sites that query various open databases this provides very different results from a regular Google search. A good example of this is if an analyst is looking for information on Somalia and types this term into a regular Google search they get over 319 million results (Screenshot A) most of which are not relevant to them. The same term run through the OSINT Deep Web Search generates very different results as can be seen in Screenshot B. In another attempt, I typed in "RBC Capital Markets" and came across a listing of individuals who were potentially employed, or were affiliated in some way with RBC Capital Markets, the search and listing can be seen in Screenshots C and D. This sort of information could be very useful for a penetration tester, or for someone who wanted to launch a spear phishing attack targeting specific individuals at an organization. As one can see the OSINT search makes it easier for analysts/ researchers to locate relevant information and reduces some of the false positives that come with traditional searches; this particular custom search is especially useful for acquiring political, economic and related intelligence.

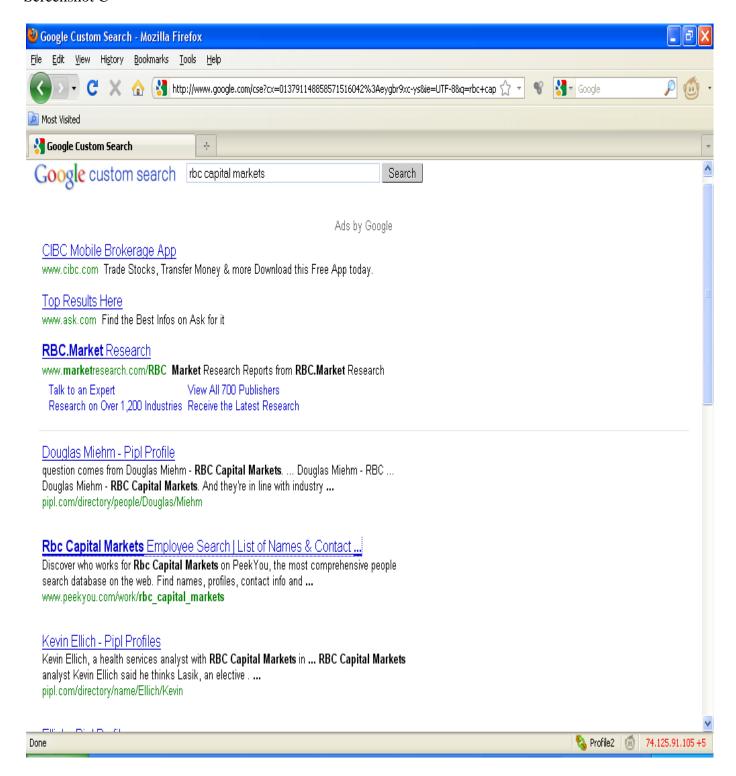
Screenshot A



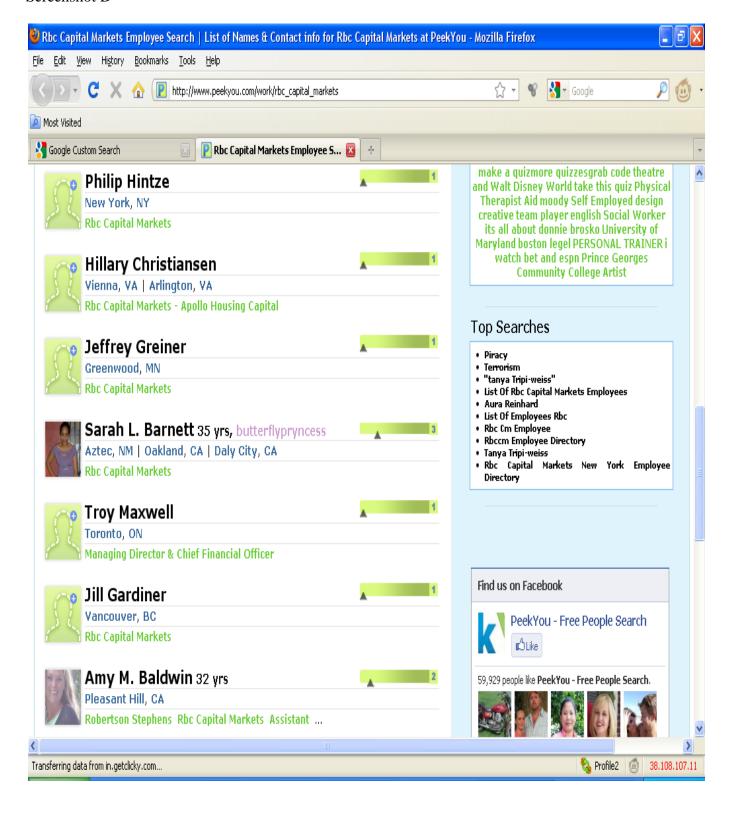
Screenshot B



Screenshot C



Screenshot D



Pastebin and collaborative tools intelligence web search

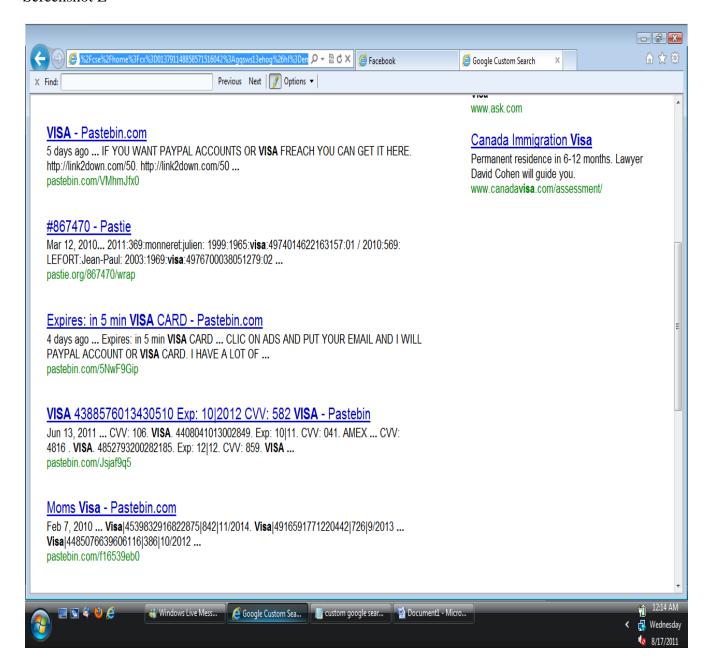
(http://www.google.com/cse/home?cx=013791148858571516042:ggsws13ehog&hl=en)

What is a pastebin? A pastebin is a site that allows users to post snippets of text for others to view; different pastebin sites can be targeted towards different audiences (Wikipedia, Pastebin). This is different from twitter, as twitter has a fixed limit of characters per communication while pastebin sites do not. While pastebin sites do have legitimate uses, a number of pastebin sites are also used to post spam and also by various parties (including Anonymous and Lulzsec) to leak/ post information (Zeltser, The Use of Pastebin for Sharing Stolen Data).

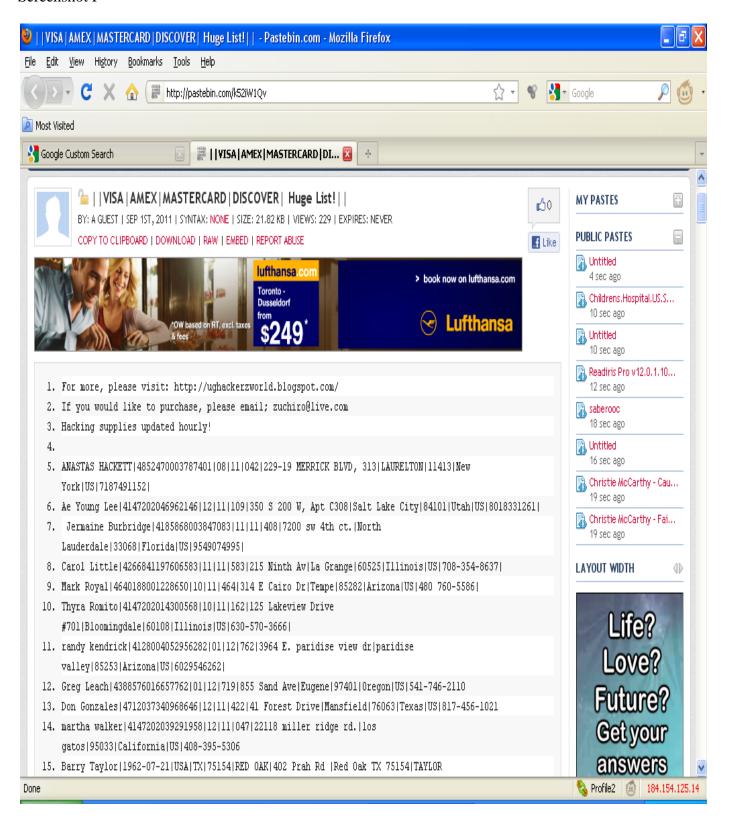
The pastebin intelligence search goes through more than twenty different pastebin sites, ranging from popular sites like pastebin.com to some more obscure sites like http://piratepad.net. The list of sites is regularly updated, but is not available to the public as it is confidential; more examples of the sites being searched can be found on my blog (Pastebin and Collaborative Tools Web Search, Infosec Mindstorm). I tried a number of searches with this custom search engine and got back some rather surprising results. The searches resulted in everything from credit card numbers, leaked databases, compromised sites and even travel itineraries and passport information.

As an example I typed in "VISA" in the pastebin custom search and came across various Visa numbers posted online and various individuals offering to sell credit card related information as can be seen in both Screenshot E and Screenshot F.

Screenshot E

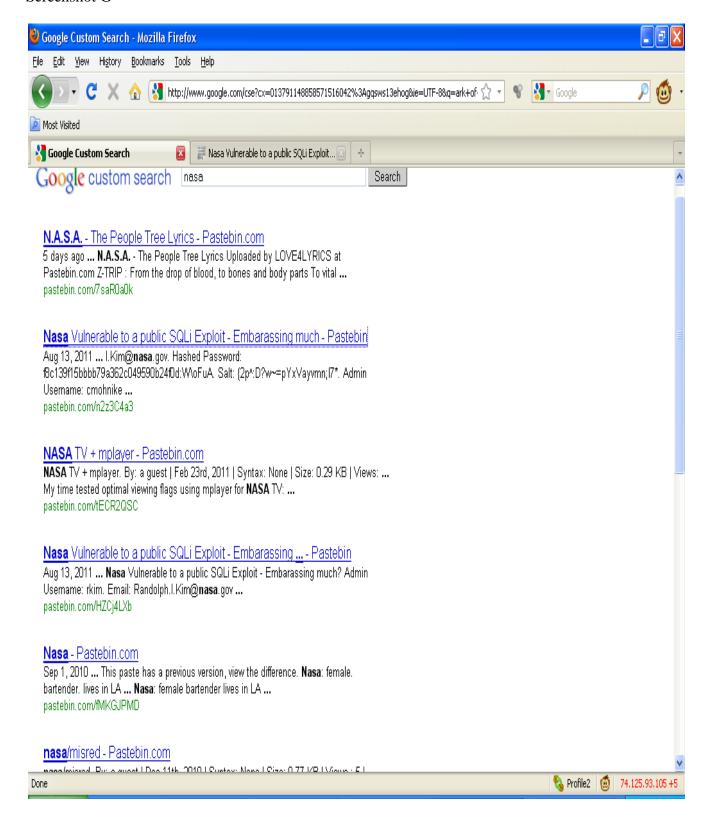


Screenshot F

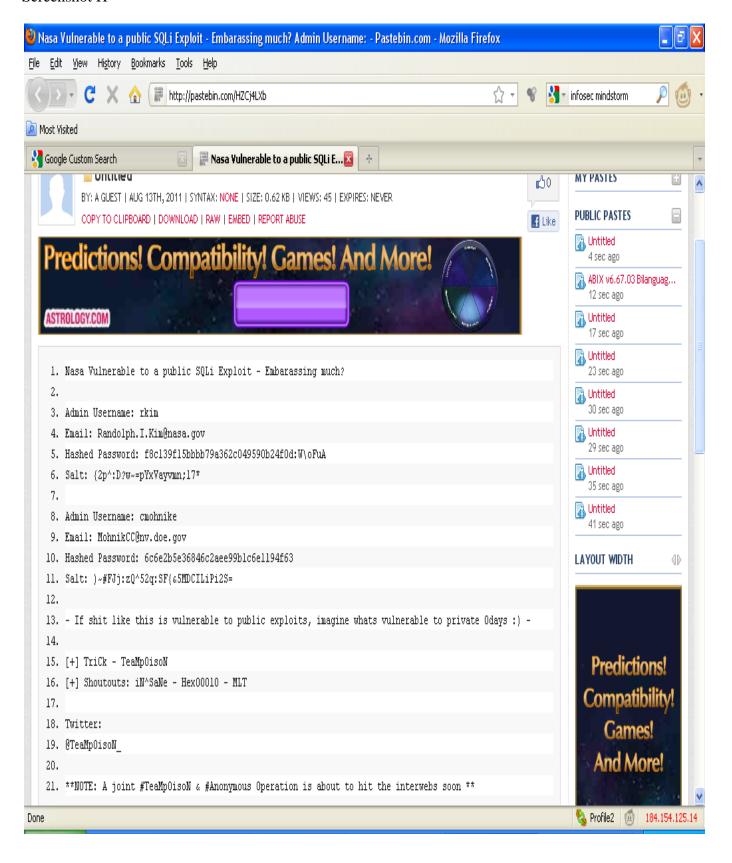


I then tried searching for NASA and came across posts claiming that some NASA sites were vulnerable to a public SQLi exploit and had potentially been compromised, the search and results can be seen in both Screenshot G and Screenshot H. I was really surprised when I got similar results when I searched for Police and Air Force as well (different states/ countries police and air force sites). This is significant because I simply typed in these terms and came across these postings; I was not actively seeking compromised sites.

Screenshot G

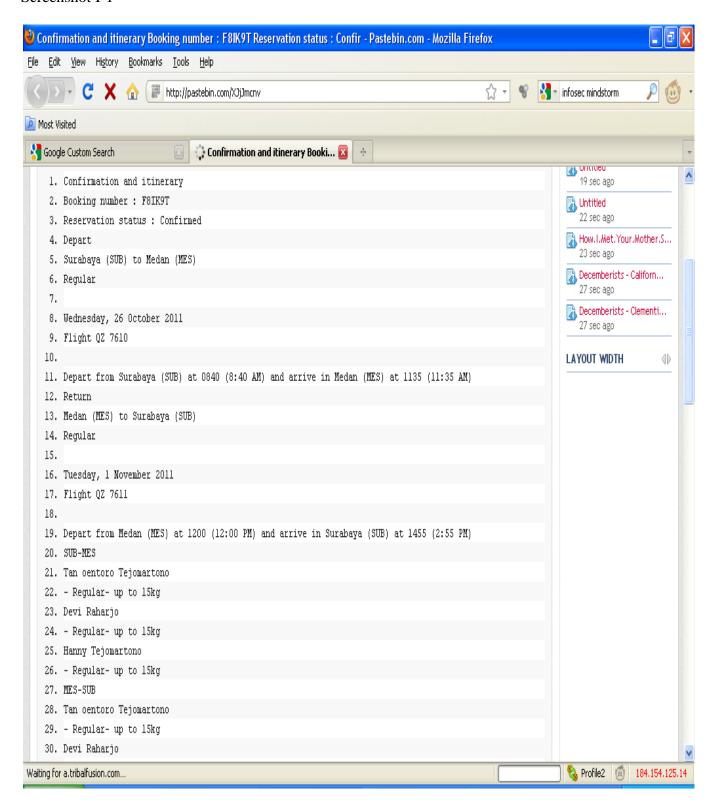


Screenshot H

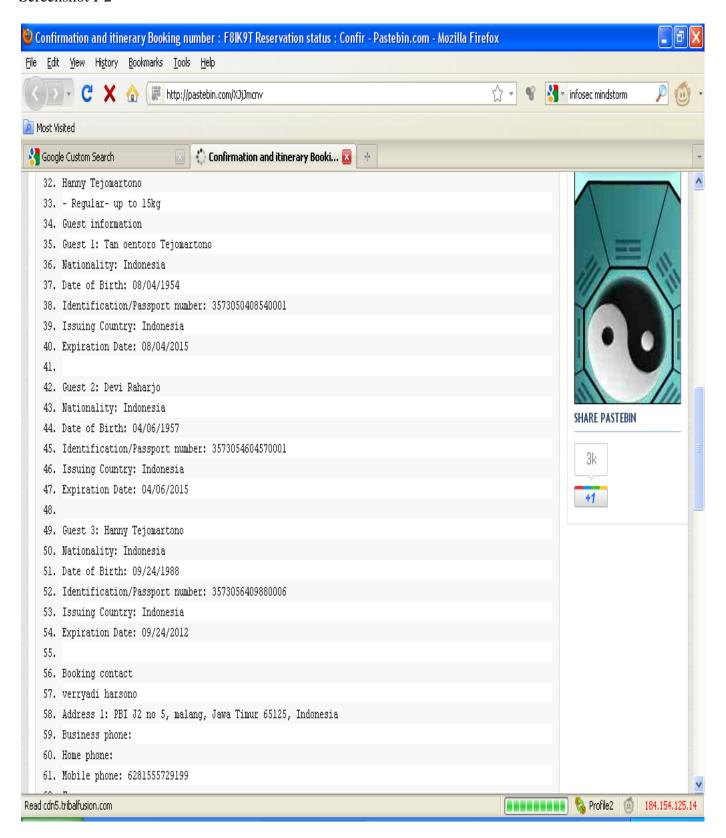


As a final example I typed in passport number and came across several trip bookings that included everything from travel itineraries, flight booking numbers, airline ticket numbers and passport information. In some cases the information was for upcoming travel dates and a malicious party would have been able to interrupt a person's travel plans, by attempting to cancel or reschedule flights, hotel bookings and other plans. In other cases the itineraries and information were for trips that had already taken place, a malicious party could still have attempted to use this information to take over an identity, you can see examples of this in Screenshot I and Screenshot J. The reader can see that the pastebin search generates a lot of results relating to exposed and leaked information; this same tool can also be used to get a better understanding of some of the risks an organization faces and take the necessary actions to counter these. As an example if an organization suspects that one of their members is leaking or stealing information, they can setup a honeytrap and monitor the pastebin engine for specific keywords or terms.

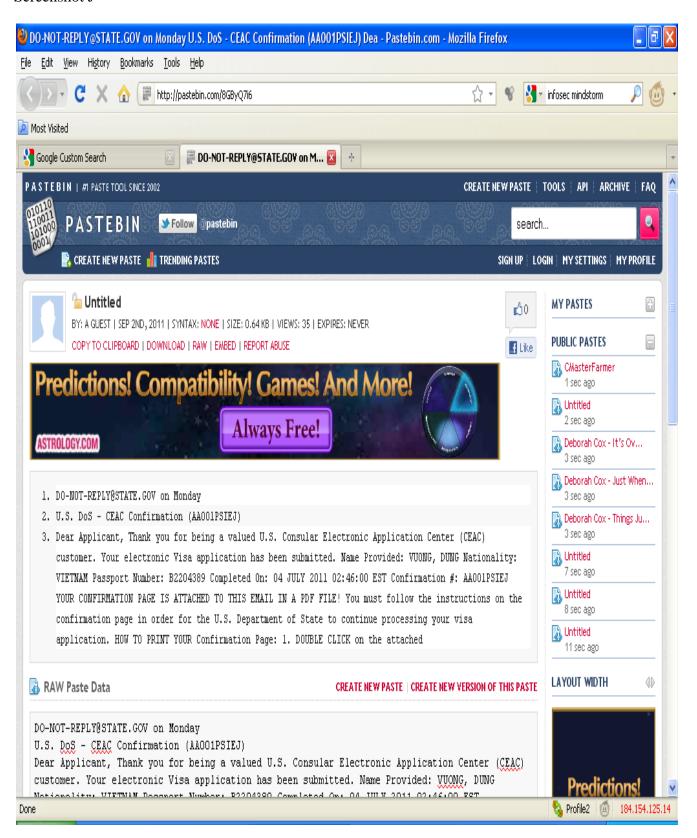
Screenshot I-1



Screenshot I-2



Screenshot J



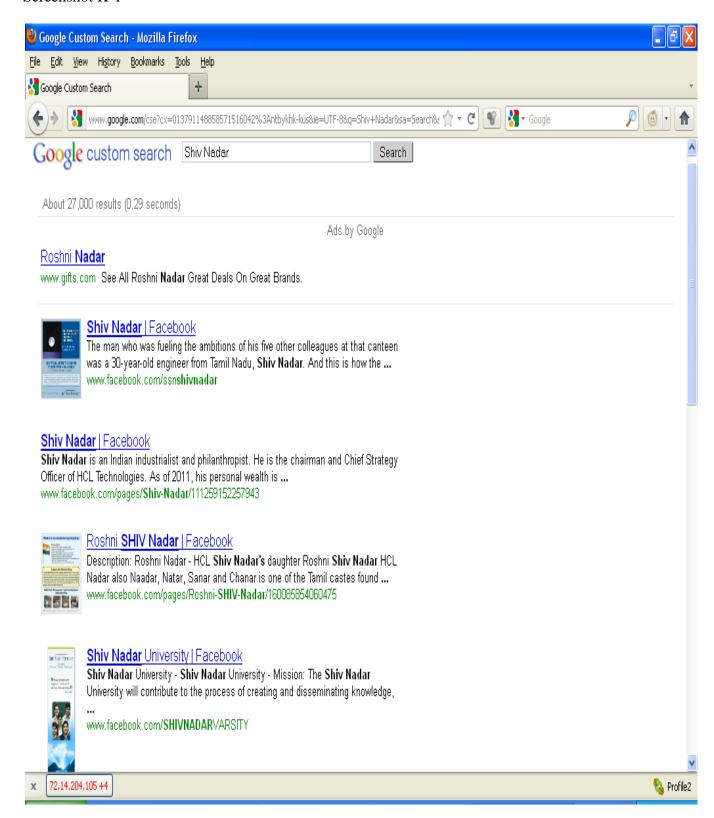
Social Networking Search

(http://www.google.com/cse/home?cx=013791148858571516042:ntbykhk-kus)

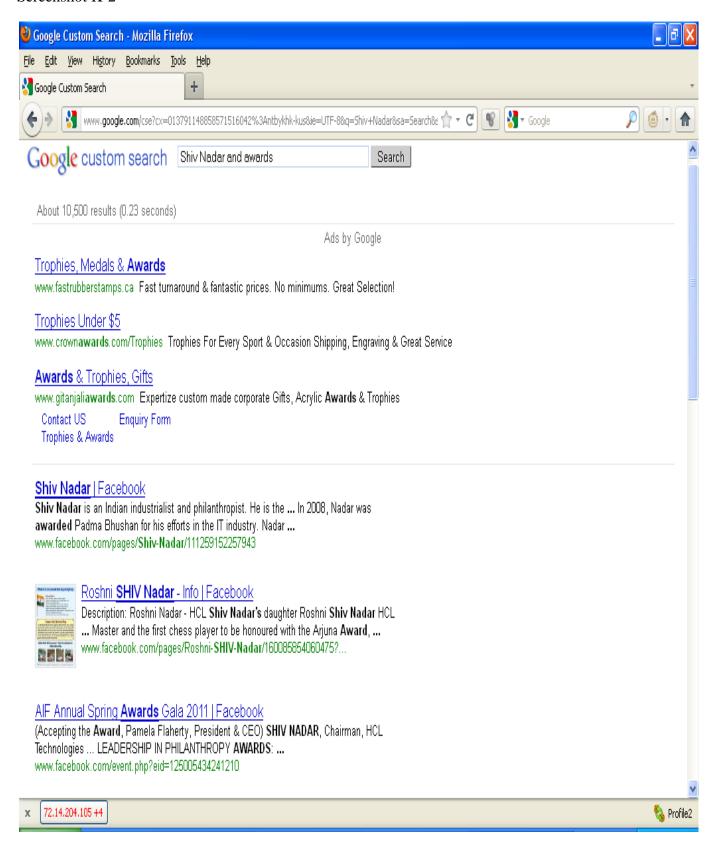
There are currently more than sixty social networking sites that are run through this custom search, examples include flickr, linkedin, facebook and Hi5. The list of sites is regularly updated but is not available to the public as it is confidential; further examples of the sites being searched can be found on my blog (Social Networking Intel/ Footprint Web Search, Infosec Mindstorm). My search attempts generated everything from an individual's personal social media page, to events where they were attending or volunteered at. I also came across individuals who worked at their organizations or people who knew them personally/ friends.

This search is very useful for reconnaissance related activities, intelligence gathering and finding social engineering targets and opportunities. One thing that really surprised me was the amount of information I was able to obtain on certain individuals even if they did not have a social media presence themselves. In some cases there was enough information for me to potentially engineer a meeting with the individual or get an introduction to the person in question. A good example of this is a search I ran on Shiv Nadar a well known multi-billionaire Indian industrialist and philanthropist (Wikipedia, Shiv Nadar). While I was unable to locate a social media page for Mr. Nadar, I was able to get information on events he volunteered at or was involved with as seen in Screenshots K and L.

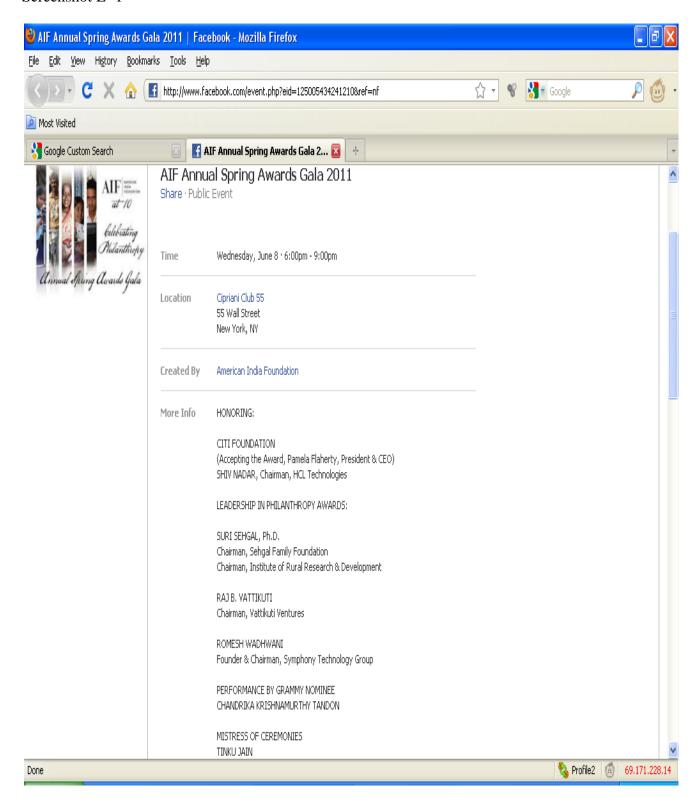
Screenshot K-1



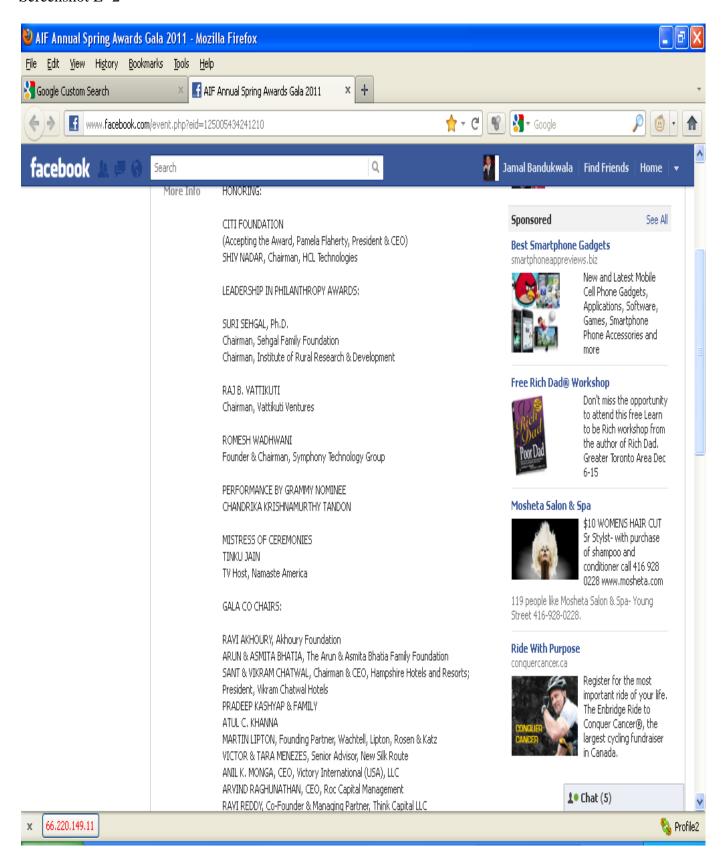
Screenshot K-2



Screenshot L-1



Screenshot L -2



The screenshots posted above (K and L) are very significant because they tell us that Mr. Nadar is involved with America India foundation. The screenshots also indicate that this organization held its annual Springs Awards Gala on June 08 2011 at the Cipriani Club 55 in New York City and that Mr. Nadar was one of the key people being honoured. In addition to this, one also learns that Mr. Nadar is the Chairman of HCL Technologies and the researcher/ analyst also gets the names of numerous other prominent individuals who are also heavily involved in this event and as a consequence likely know Mr. Nadar. This sort of information is very useful for a malicious actor who wants to send out a highly customized spear phishing attack targeting Mr. Nadar or any of the other individuals on that page. In addition to this the information available also allows individuals to create/ engineer opportunities to meet Mr. Shiv Nadar or any of the other individuals listed on this event. An individual could potentially do this by choosing to get involved with the organization or by using a social engineering attack, for instance claiming to have been at the Awards event and having been introduced to these individuals attempting to follow up and meet with them.

Invisible Attacks

While Google Custom Searches can be an excellent reconnaissance tool and are very useful in gathering potential targets for penetration tests, they can be used for other purposes as well. A custom search (with a user's own hit list) can also be used to quickly scan whether any external facing web based applications have been infected/compromised. Hypothetically Google custom searches could also be used to launch 'invisible' attacks, the scenario listed below is a good illustration of this.

A malicious party could potentially hijack an existing researcher's identity and offer a custom search targeted at a very specific audience, for instance providing computer fraud statistics to a select group of senior executives or personnel. If a malicious party attempts to provide a service to a very small group of select individuals, there is a smaller chance of them being detected prior to launching an attack. The attacker could use the search to provide legitimate results most of the time and by doing so build a level of trust into the search engine; once they have sufficient trust built in, they could enter a temporary site into the engine using a service like tiny-url and then with the custom searches in built capabilities promote the results from the newly entered malicious site to the top of the list. The idea here is that the malicious actor would select a piece of malware suited to their requirements that can be stealthily installed and that does not generate a lot of noise. The actor would promote the malicious url for a short period of time, possibly as little as a few hours and then remove the url from the custom search altogether. This is extremely significant because using a temporary link makes it challenging for individuals/ teams to identify the source of the infection and depending on the behavior of the malware to determine whether the malicious code is in their environment at all. In addition to this by targeting a very select group of personnel (small scale) and using what appears to a trusted/legitimate source of information this can also complicate matters in trying to obtain samples and identify the malware in question.

Final Thoughts/ Conclusion

As one can see Google offers a great deal of flexibility with their custom searches and opens a whole new realm of possibilities for the security and intelligence communities. One can clearly find a lot of information (with the right searches) including things like credit card numbers, and passport information. It is significant to note that even if you do not have your own social media/ web 2.0 presence, others in your network can release information about you or your activities on the web. Individual pieces of information by themselves may not mean much or even appear relevant but gathering all these pieces of information together can release a much bigger picture and allow an analyst/ user to get a better understanding of an individual or a situation. The information available in various locations on the internet may make it possible to engineer/ create opportunities for meetings with various individuals including political and business power brokers.

Running the appropriate searches generates useful political, social, economic and related intelligence and can be used to possibly obtain information on upcoming threats (both internet based and others) and take the appropriate actions to combat these. Organizations or other entities can even use these customized searches with a honeytrap if they suspect that an individual is leaking/stealing their information. They can do this by leaking fake information in their organizations and watching to see if they become available via the Pastebin Custom search (or others). To conclude a lot of information is available to an analyst/ user with the right searches and the right content; while some of the information found can be disheartening these same searches can also be used to gather intelligence, anticipate and counter possible threats to an organization. It would appear that the custom search engine owner/ creator and the individual using the searches are both only limited by the content in the search engine and their imagination.

About the Author

Jamal Bandukwala is a security professional at a major financial institution. He is also a blogger and independent security researcher with a variety of infosec interests including Google hacking, Open Source Intelligence & pen testing among others. His personal research and musings can be found at http://infosecmindstorm.blogspot.com/

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