

HI-TECH CRIME TRENDS 2021/2022



ACCESS BROKERS

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HI-TECH CRIME TRENDS 2021/2022



Uninvited guests: the sale of access to corporate networks

PART 1

Analysis of dark web forums to understand the
sale of access to compromised infrastructure

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GROUP-IB HI-TECH CRIME TRENDS REPORT

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The Hi-Tech Crime Trends report analyzes cyberattacks, examines how the cybercrime industry functions, and forecasts upcoming changes in the threat landscape for various sectors of the global economy. Group-IB has published the report every year since 2012, integrating valuable data and key insights that the team has gained through over 70,000 hours of experience in responding to cybersecurity incidents worldwide.

The information provided in Hi-Tech Crime Trends enables businesses, NGOs, governments, and law enforcement agencies around the world to fight cybercrime and help potential victims. Intended for IT directors, heads of cybersecurity teams, SOC analysts, incident responders, and other security professionals, the Hi-Tech Crime Trends report serves as a practical guide for strategic and tactical planning.

With the use of unique tools for tracking threat-actor infrastructures and the careful analysis of globally-distributed specialists, Group-IB experts identify and confirm patterns of cyber threats each year. This information serves as a basis for forecasts, which have proven accurate every year since the first Hi-Tech Crime Trends report was published. These forecasts help companies around the world build effective cybersecurity strategies with relevant threats in mind.

The forecasts and recommendations contained in Hi-Tech Crime Trends are aimed at reducing financial losses and infrastructure downtime. They are also designed to help organizations take preventive measures to counteract targeted attacks, espionage, and cyber-terrorism operations.

Group-IB strongly believes that the continual exchange of data, combined with lasting partnerships between private companies and international law enforcement agencies, is the most effective way to combat cybercrime. Cybersecurity awareness helps preserve and protect digital spaces and freedom of communication. It is to these ends that the Hi-Tech Crime Trends report is published.

Last year, Group-IB Threat Intelligence analysts provided a comprehensive picture of the shadow industry which sells access to corporate networks on dark-web forums. Such offers have increased in number year after year, but it is challenging to evaluate the overall underground market for selling access because such deals are usually kept secret. However, Group-IB's technology for analyzing underground platforms, which takes into account data that hackers have tried to delete or hide, enables the company's experts to study the market, exchange data with law enforcement officials, and estimate the industry's scale.

Over the past four years, one of the clearest trends on underground forums is the sharp increase in the number of offers to sell access to compromised corporate networks.

Access to a company's corporate network involves Citrix Gateway (later simply referred to as Citrix), VPN and RDP credentials; control panels; web shells; reverse shells; Cobalt Strike sessions; and more. Gaining initial access enables threat actors to penetrate the target company's network and obtain legitimate user or administrator rights.

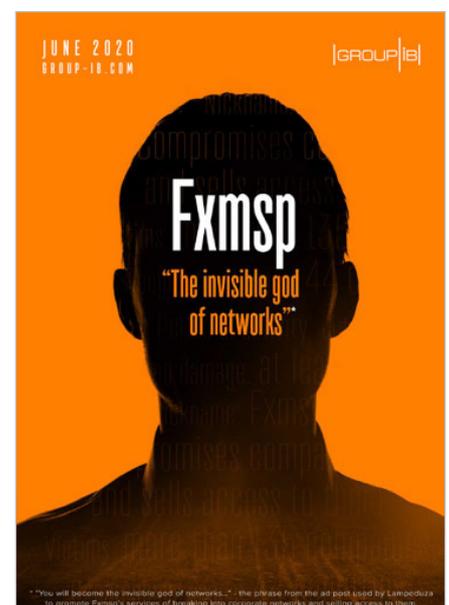
Group-IB experts have identified several factors contributing to the rapid growth of the initial access market.

One such factor is the emergence of Fxmsp, a hacker who first appeared on underground forums in 2017. Posts about selling access to corporate networks had appeared on dark-web resources before, but they had been rare and not streamlined. Fxmsp was the first to focus on gaining initial access for the purpose of selling it.

According to estimates by Group-IB Threat Intelligence specialists, Fxmsp's total revenue likely exceeded \$1.5 million. Fxmsp did not focus on compromising a particular industry. The threat actor targeted major banks and hotel chains, but also websites belonging to schools. The hacker's success inspired other threat actors. The first and so far only analytical report about the hacker's tools and tactics, entitled **Fxmsp: "The invisible god of networks"**, is available on Group-IB's website.

Demand creates supply. The principle also applies to the sale of initial access to compromised networks. Beginning in 2019, there was a sharp increase in the number of ransomware attacks, the first stage of which is gaining access to a company's network. This fuelled demand for initial access and bolstered the rise of initial access markets. Initial access brokers (IABs) remove the need for threat groups carrying out ransomware attacks to put any effort in at this stage.

Fxmsp: "The invisible god of networks"



In the report **Ransomware Uncovered 2020—2021**, Group-IB experts noted that ransomware operators had set a record: between 2019 and 2020, they made at least \$1 billion, making the year the most profitable for ransomware to date and thereby motivating such groups to continue their activities.

The third factor furthering the rise of initial access markets is the low threshold to enter the industry. A threat actor can gain access by using a type of malware called an information stealer, brute force, or by carrying out a targeted attack. The latter requires in-depth knowledge and skills, while the former two are available to low-skilled threat actors who cannot independently develop a profitable attack. In the case of information stealers, threat actors do not even need to think about how to deliver the malware to the target: the “results” of information stealer activity are sold on underground forums as archives containing various compromised credentials, both personal and corporate. Within that data, threat actors only need to find active accounts for corporate resources. The brute-force scenario does not require much knowledge, either: ready-made programs for brute-forcing passwords are publicly available. Attackers merely pick their victim.

The fact that tools for conducting full-fledged attacks against corporate networks are widely available means that underground actors can make money with almost no risk or effort. The market for initial access has been flooded with low-skilled threat actors who, despite their poor knowledge of the technical aspects involved, pose a threat to companies.

Such attackers (let us call them beginners) select their victims based on how simple it is to gain access to their network rather than on how popular they are, how big their business is, or how much money they make. This primitive way of choosing a target means that any company, regardless of its size or other characteristics that are important to highly skilled threat actors, is at risk of being compromised.

This explains why major companies are likely to be compromised even by low-skilled threat actors, which is now even more likely given how common remote work practices have become due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Information that IABs provide about their targets sometimes helps **Group-IB Threat Intelligence** analysts identify victims even before access to their infrastructure is sold. This shortens incident detection time and, in some cases, prevents attacks from being developed further.

This report looks at key aspects of how and why the market for initial access to corporate networks has developed, provides a detailed analysis of the most active sellers’ activity, and presents statistics on the most targeted countries and industries.

Ransomware Uncovered 2020—2021



KEY TRENDS

02

RANSOMWARE HAS GENERATED WORK FOR MANY HACKERS

Conti, LockBit, PYSA and REvil affiliate programs have been the most active.

MORE THAN 200 NEW BROKERS

Entered the market between H2 2020 and H1 2021.

THE LEADING COUNTRIES

With regard to the number of access offers are still the United States (30%), France (5%), and the United Kingdom (4%). Offers to sell access to companies in Australia (4%) and India (3%) have increased significantly.

THE TOP INDUSTRIES

In which initial access was put up for sale in 2020–2021 are manufacturing, education, financial services, healthcare, and trade.

A NEW TREND

Is emerging among IABs: in their posts, they have started including a short description of the victim company specifying its revenue, location, and industry. It is becoming increasingly rare for IABs to focus on technical aspects of vulnerable servers and databases.

1,099 ACCESS OFFERS

In total, were made between H2 2020 and H1 2021.

THE NUMBER OF SELLERS

Between H2 2020 and H1 2021 grew by **205%** compared to H2 2019–H1 2020.

THE NUMBER OF OFFERS

To sell access made between H2 2020 and H1 2021 grew by **204%** compared to the same period the previous year.

THE OVERALL MARKET SIZE

In the current period (H2 2020–H1 2021) is **\$7,165,387**, which is 16% higher than in the previous period (H2 2019–H1 2020), when the market was **\$6,189,388**.

THE PRIMARY METHOD

Of gaining access to corporate networks has remained the same for brokers: exploiting vulnerabilities in published applications and compromising accounts for remote access tools.

THE LEADERS IN ACCESS SALES

Have changed: five brokers make 35% of all the profit from access sale offers.

FORECASTS

03

THE NUMBER OF BROKERS

Will grow, while the average price for access will go down

INITIAL ACCESS BROKERS

May create their own platforms for auctioning off access.

RANSOMWARE

Will remain the main way to monetize access

CLOUD SINGLE SIGN-ON

May become a new entry point to networks, as more and more companies switch to this technology. Threat actors will gain access to applications and services accessible through cloud sign-on.

HOW THE MARKET DEVELOPED

04

HI-TECH CRIME TRENDS 2021/2022

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Authentication data has been sold on underground forums since they came into existence. One noteworthy example is CarderPlanet, which appeared in 2001.

At first, threat actors sold data that was easy to monetize, such as bank accounts, from which threat actors withdrew money to third-party accounts, and bank card data, which was used to make fraudulent transactions.

Over time, the type of information being exchanged on dark web markets changed from stolen financial data to other types of valuable information. This shift was largely the result of new security controls that made it more difficult to monetize the type of financial data previously exchanged on these underground forums.

Access to remote devices emerged on the black market in the early 2000s: threat actors would provide access to individual servers for a relatively small fee. This usually involved web shells on websites or FTP access.

Below, and throughout this report, we use historical data and screenshots stored by our platform, **Group-IB Threat Intelligence & Attribution**.

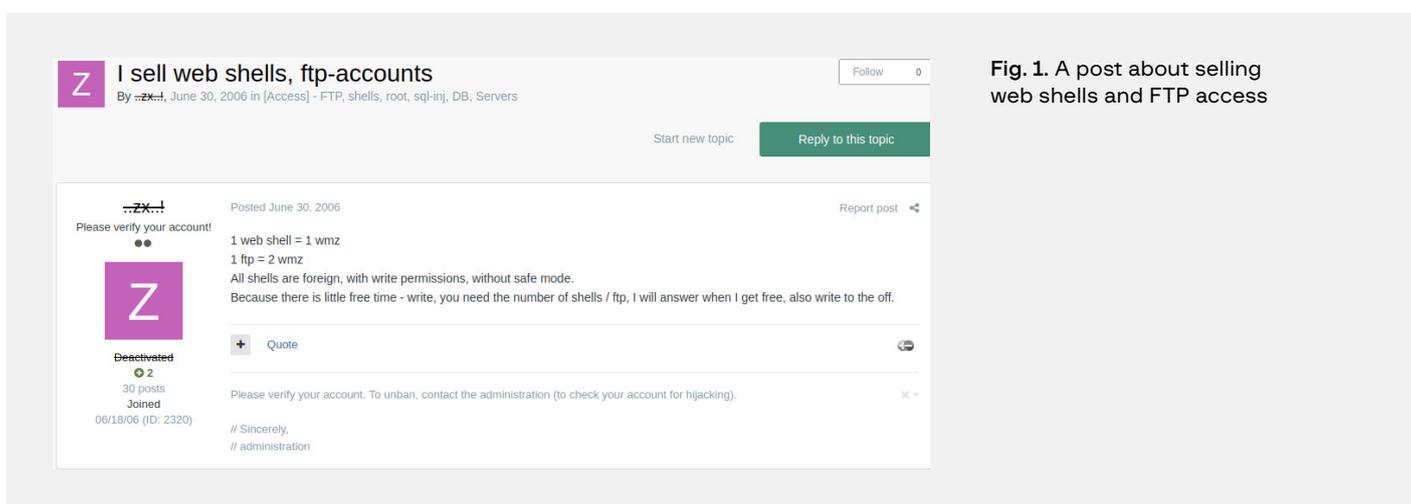


Fig. 1. A post about selling web shells and FTP access

In the second half of the 2000s, offers to sell brute-forced remote access to dedicated servers emerged in various countries, and such access was mostly bought for the purposes of fraud.

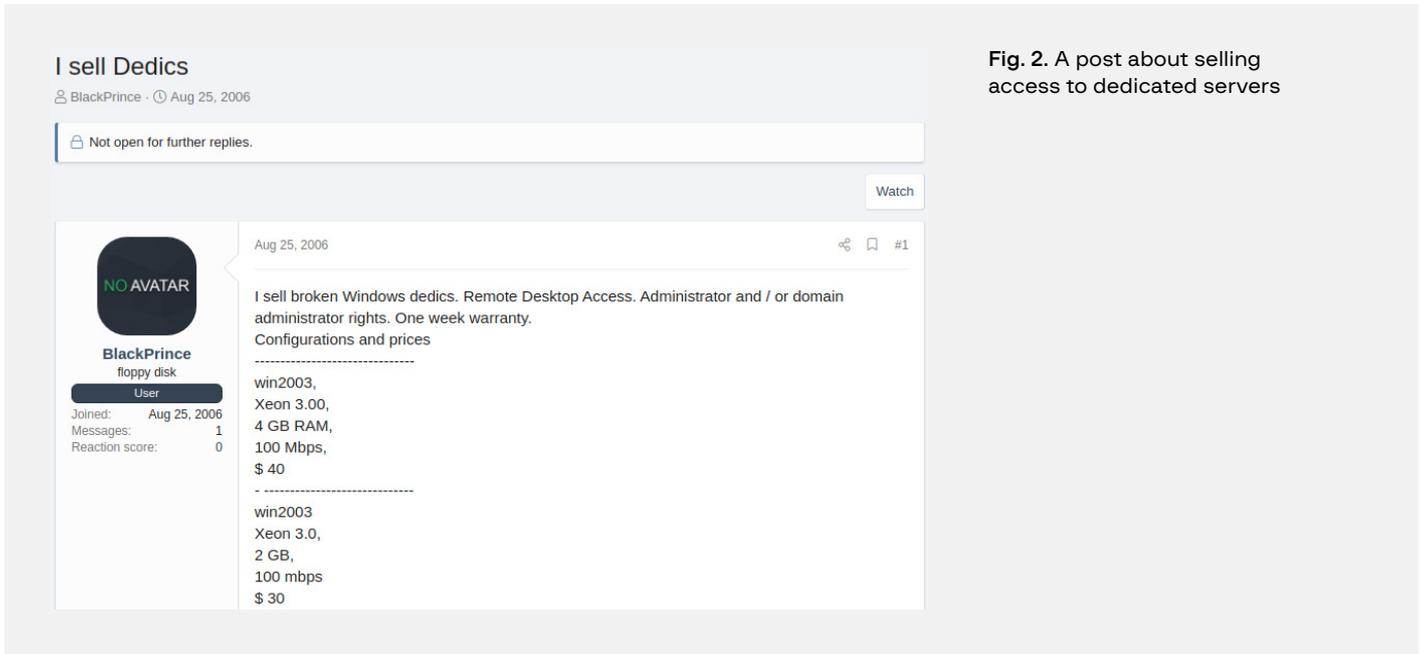


Fig. 2. A post about selling access to dedicated servers

At the time, it was typical for threat actors to not conduct any additional analysis after finding servers and gaining access to them; they did not realize that the compromised servers could belong to major companies and could therefore be monetized easily. At the time, the computing power of compromised servers, the memory available on them, and the bandwidth were the commodities most valuable to threat actors.

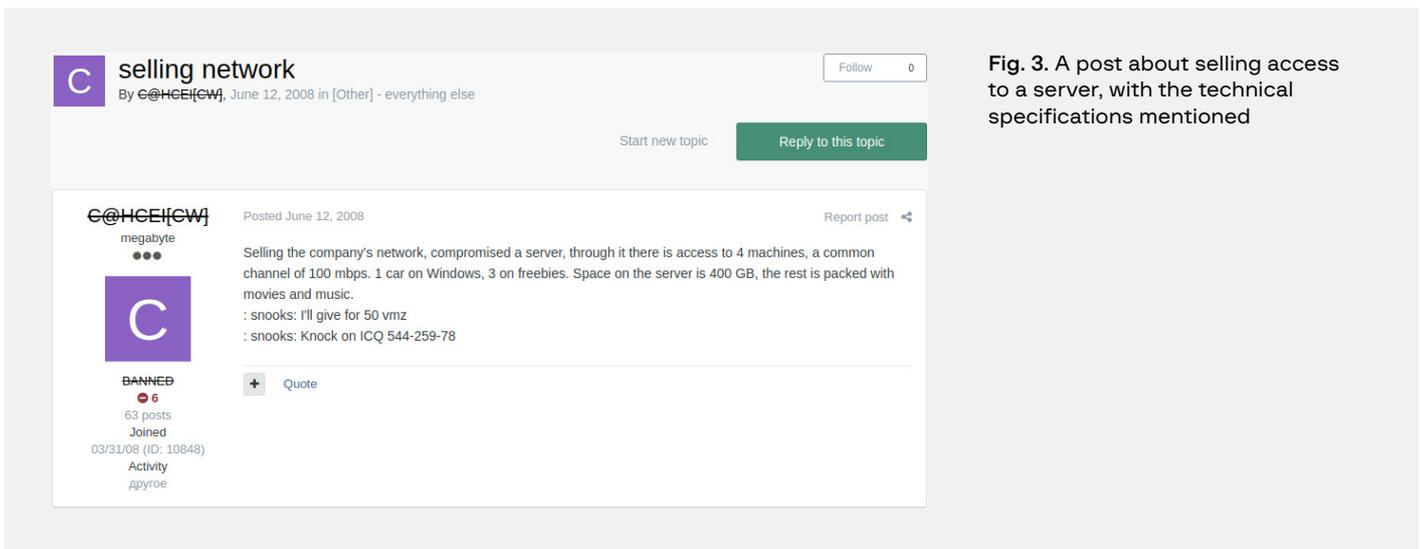


Fig. 3. A post about selling access to a server, with the technical specifications mentioned

Much later, around the second half of the 2010s, threat actors took an interest in information stored on servers.

However, those who obtain such information might not necessarily know how to use it. This is true for situations where, instead of aiming to gain access to a specific object, a threat actor chooses a victim that can be hacked using a small skill set and basic knowledge about potential vulnerabilities.

Nevertheless, it was the shift in focus to information stored on servers that pushed threat actors to learn to whom their compromised devices belonged.

Interestingly, despite the same access mechanisms, descriptions in sales-related forum threads changed together with views on monetization. Between 2005 and 2014, the most common title was “Selling dedicated server.”

Since 2015, such posts are more often titled “Selling network access” or “Selling access to company.” Instead of focusing on the technical capabilities of the servers that they gain access to, threat actors now prioritize what information the servers contain and to whom the servers belong. This marked the emergence of the market for initial access.

However, in the early days of the access market, threat actors often struggled to think of a way to monetize the information they obtained.

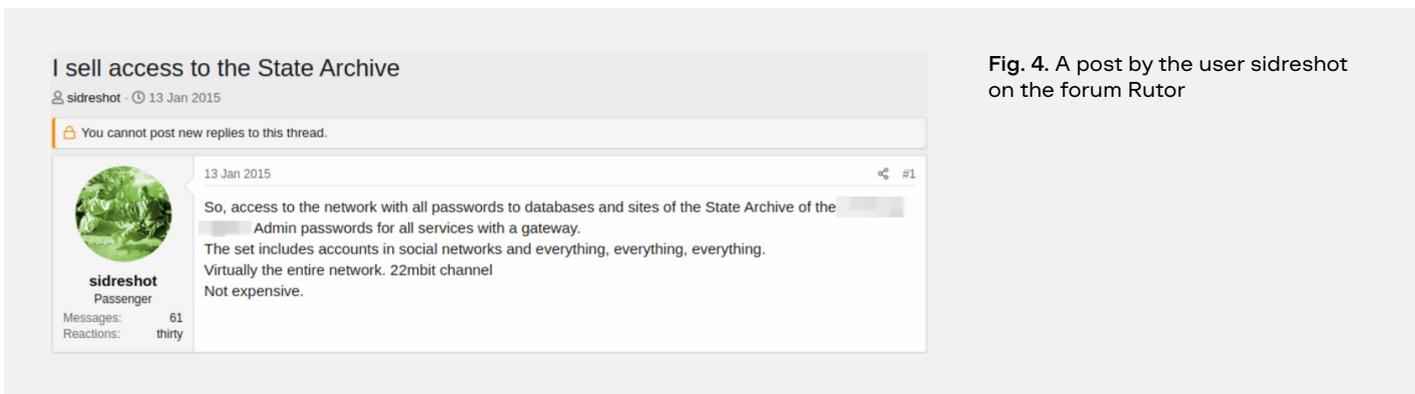


Fig. 4. A post by the user sidreshot on the forum Rutor

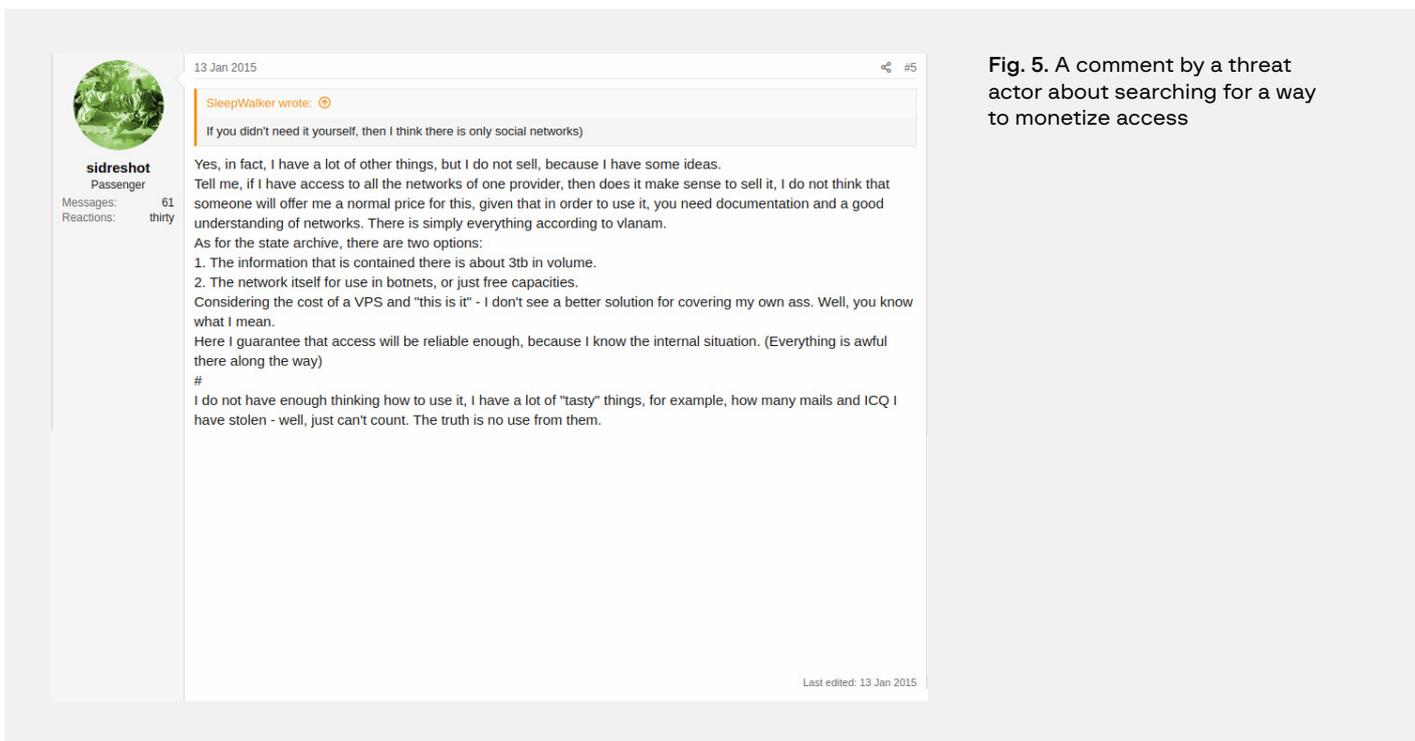


Fig. 5. A comment by a threat actor about searching for a way to monetize access

Unclear ideas about monetization in turn caused difficulties in deciding on the price of initial access. The example in Figure 6 shows, a threat actor is trying to find out an appropriate price from other forum users.

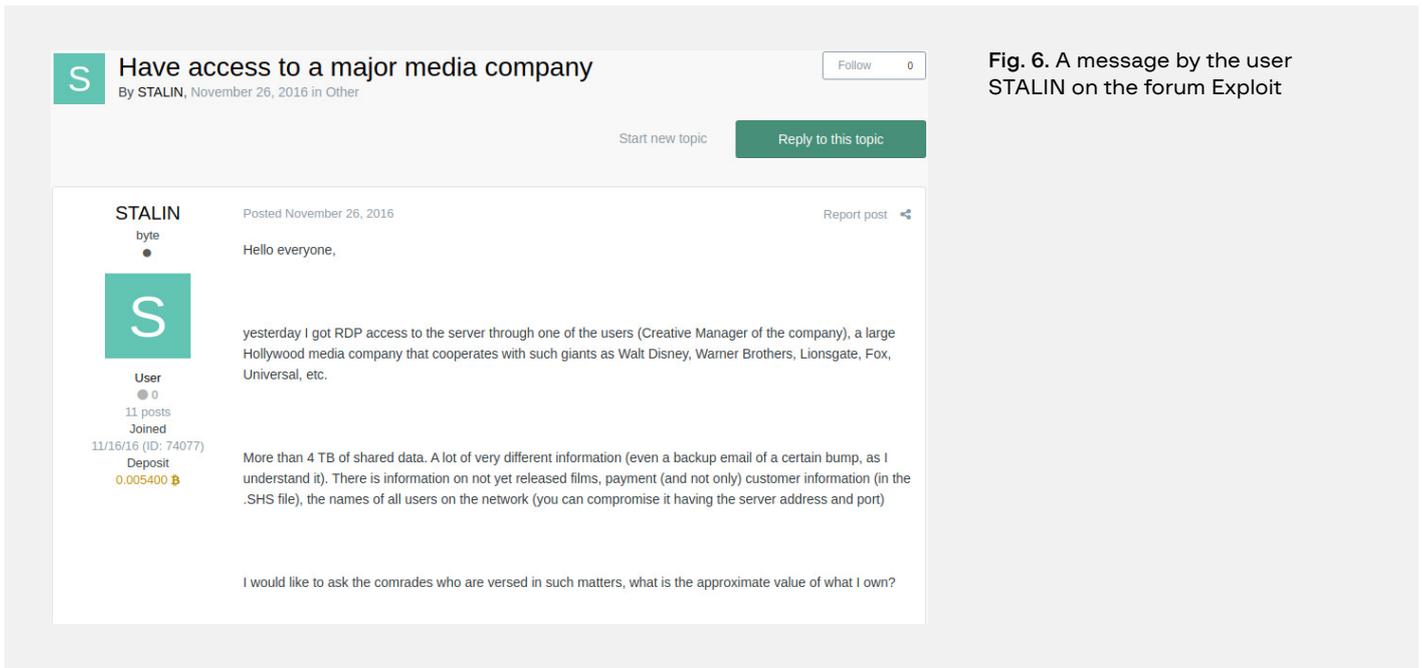


Fig. 6. A message by the user STALIN on the forum Exploit

One option that the threat actor (who had gained RDP access) came up with was an attack involving social engineering. Below is a post from 2016.

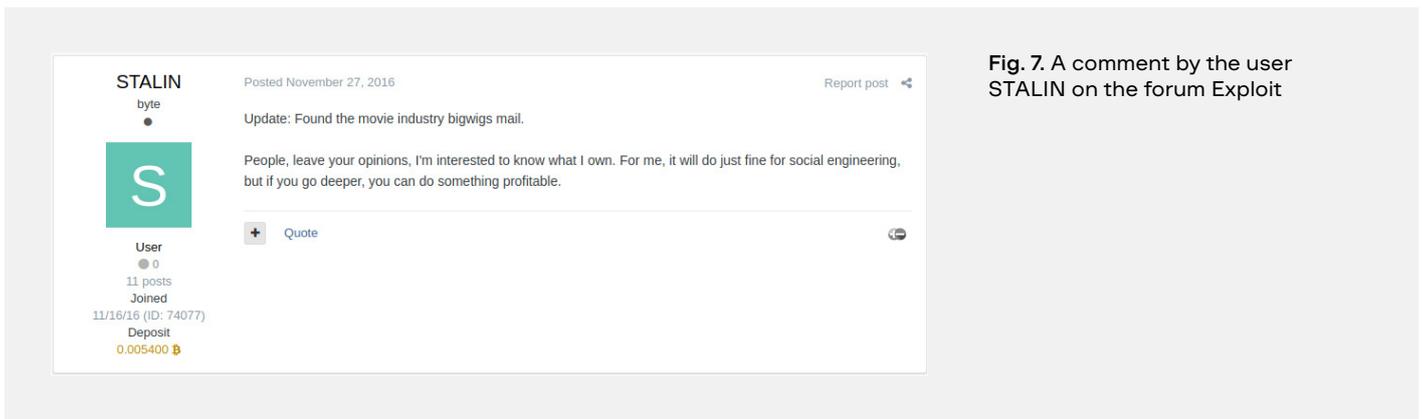


Fig. 7. A comment by the user STALIN on the forum Exploit

The ideas that emerged on underground forums back then have now become a reality. For instance, one forum user jokingly left a comment suggesting to upload ransomware to the target company’s network. Clearly, at the time, no one realized that the alliance between IABs and ransomware operators would become one of the most dangerous and profitable relationships in the history of cybercrime.

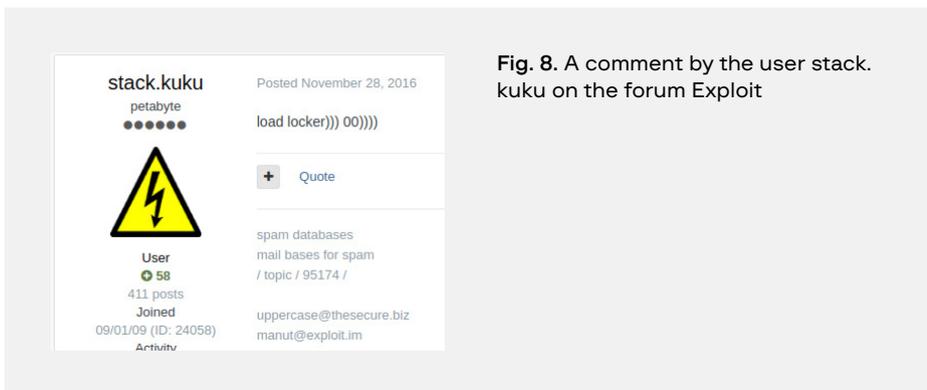


Fig. 8. A comment by the user stack.kuku on the forum Exploit

Although attempts to sell access to corporate networks were made, they were not streamlined. Offers for the sale of initial access were rare. As threads of this kind continued, threat actors came up with more ideas about how to monetize initial access, most of which were applicable to web shells that had been offered on forums from the beginning.

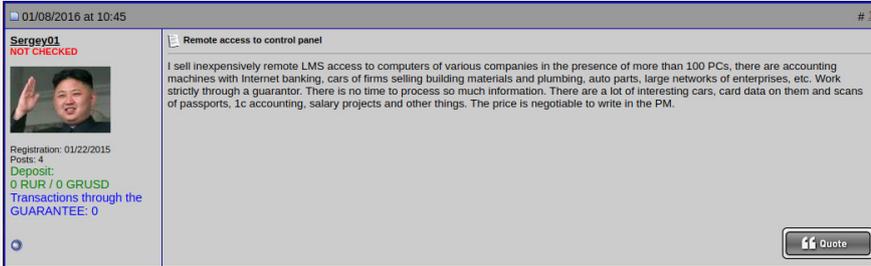


Fig. 9. An offer to sell access in 2016



Fig. 10. Another offer to sell access to a corporate network in 2016

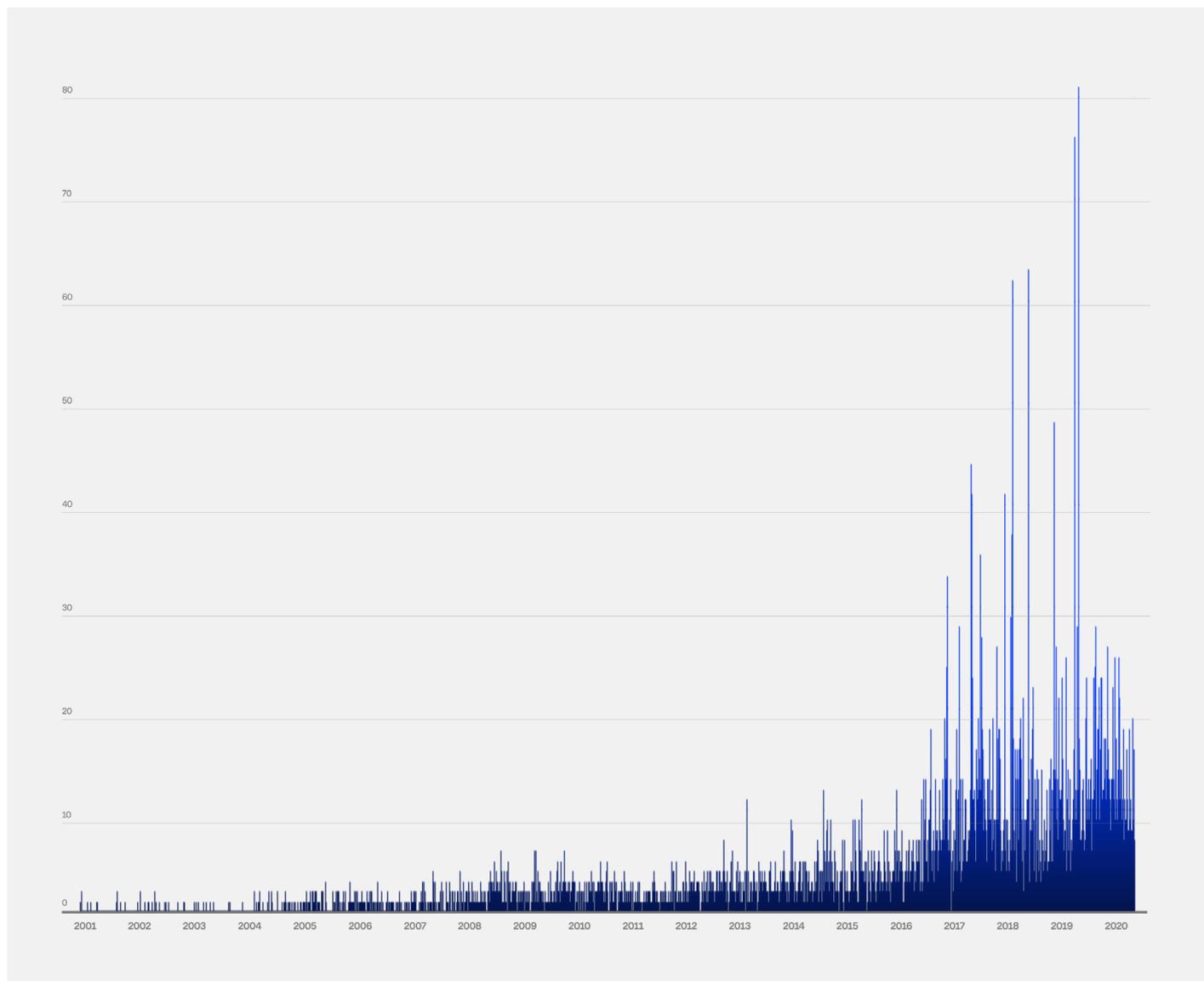
In 2017, the situation changed as some threat actors began to focus exclusively on gaining and selling access to corporate networks. One of the most notorious hackers was **Fxmosp**, who pioneered the sale of initial access.

Fxmosp: "The invisible god of networks"

HOW FXMSP CHANGED THE ACCESS MARKET

Before Fxmsp arrived on the scene, the number of access offers remained stable. Between 2015 and 2016, there were no more than ten ads. The figure stayed the same until October 2017, when the number of offers to sell access to corporate networks on underground forums began growing exponentially.

Fig. 11. Offers to sell access by year



In October 2017 an advert was posted on one of the most popular Russian-speaking underground forums, **Exploit**. The ad was for the sale of access to corporate networks belonging to various companies. For the first time, an individual with an unusual username was offering access to all the critically important network segments of compromised organizations and claimed that a bank was among the victims. Back then, this was entirely unprecedented.

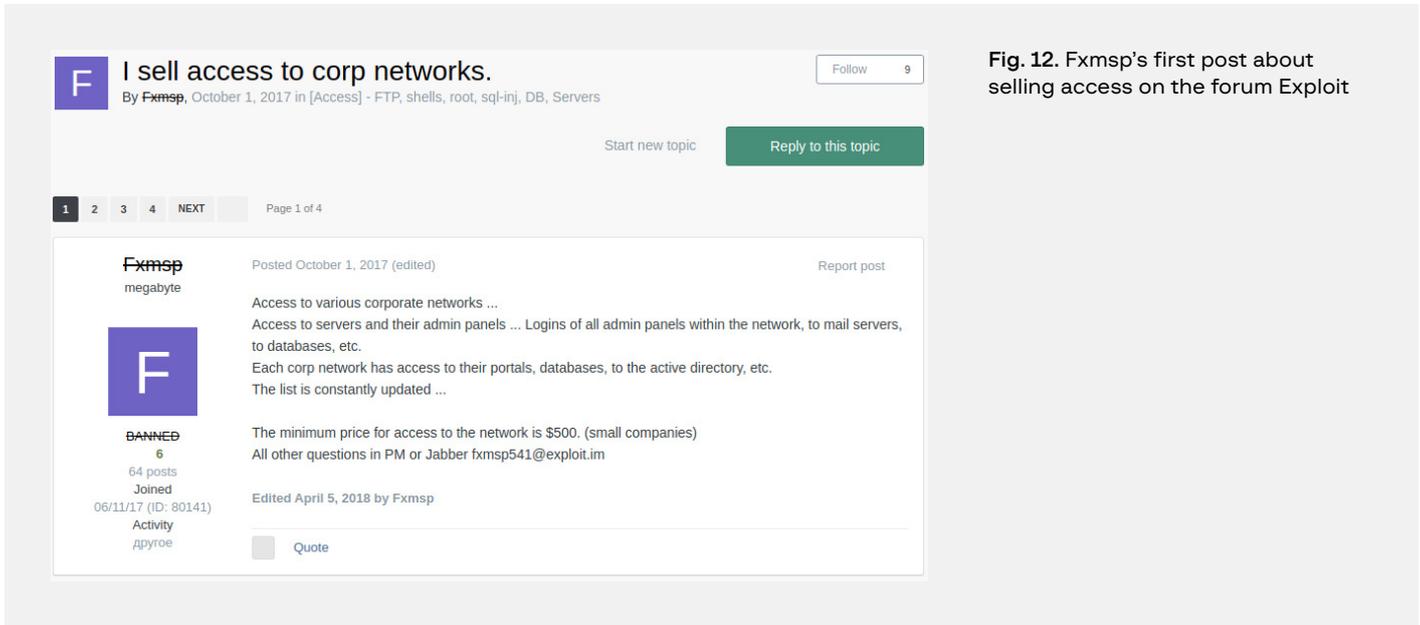


Fig. 12. Fxmsp's first post about selling access on the forum Exploit

From the start, Fxmsp realized that not understanding the victim reduces demand and, as a result, increases the time it takes to sell access.

A week after posting his first ad, which contained no specific details about the victims, Fxmsp left a message in which he named the company to which he was selling access. The year was 2017, and it can be called a watershed moment for the industry of selling unauthorized access to compromised corporate networks.

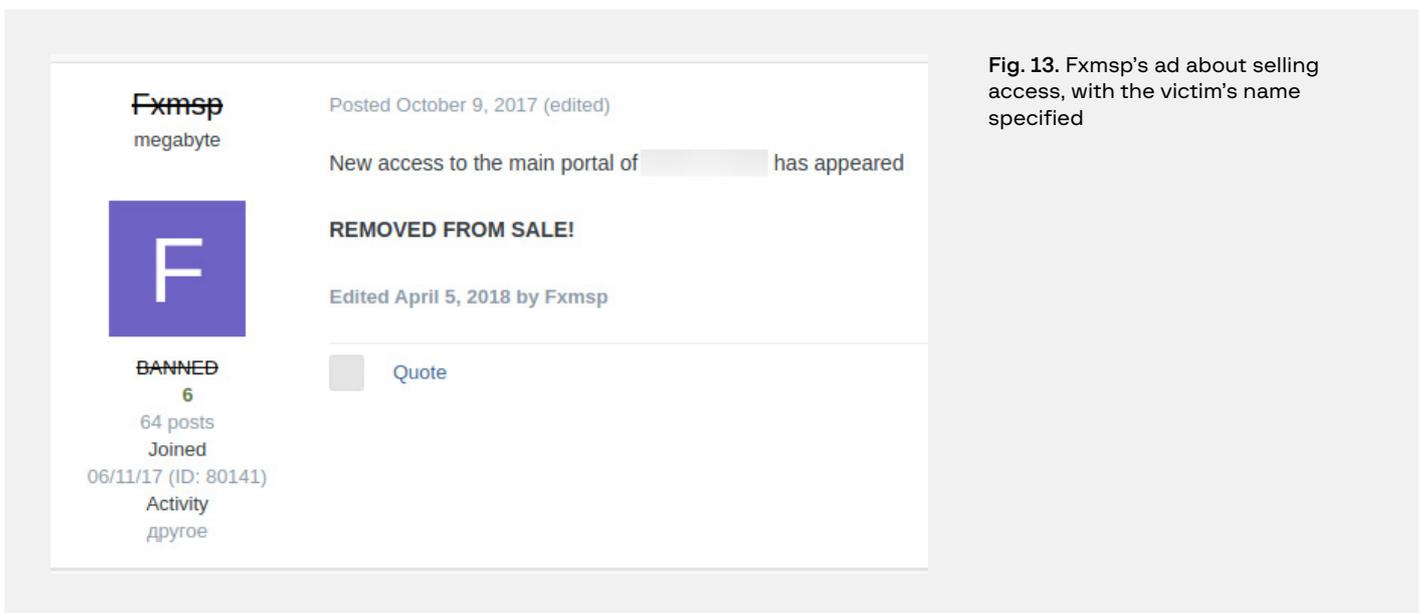


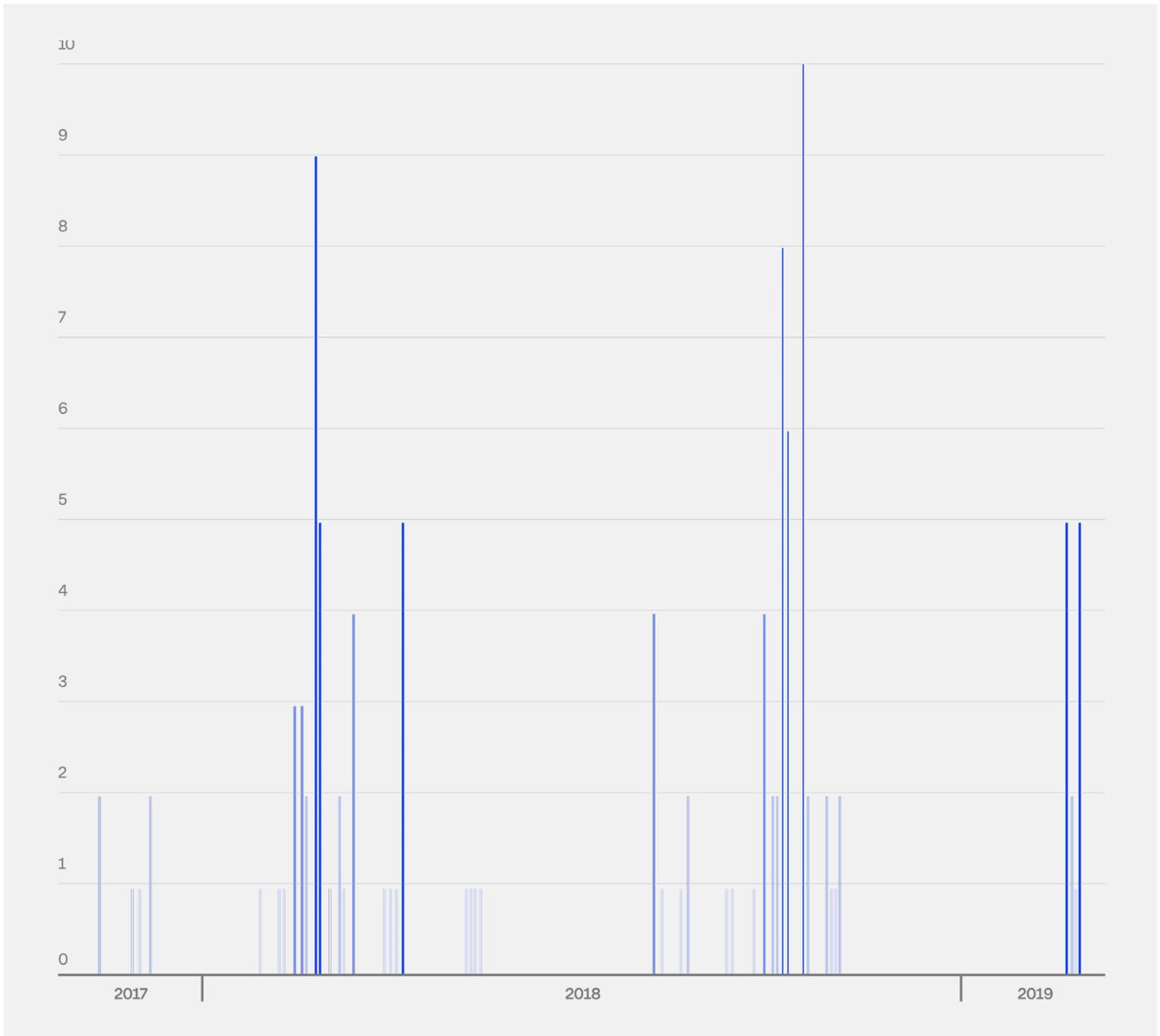
Fig. 13. Fxmsp's ad about selling access, with the victim's name specified

Throughout his activity, Fxmsp specified who his victims were.

Group-IB specialists analyzed Fxmsp’s activity in the Russian-speaking underground from the moment he registered on the first forum in September 2016 until late 2019, when he ceased all public activity. More information is available in the report entitled **Fxmsp: “The invisible god of networks.”**

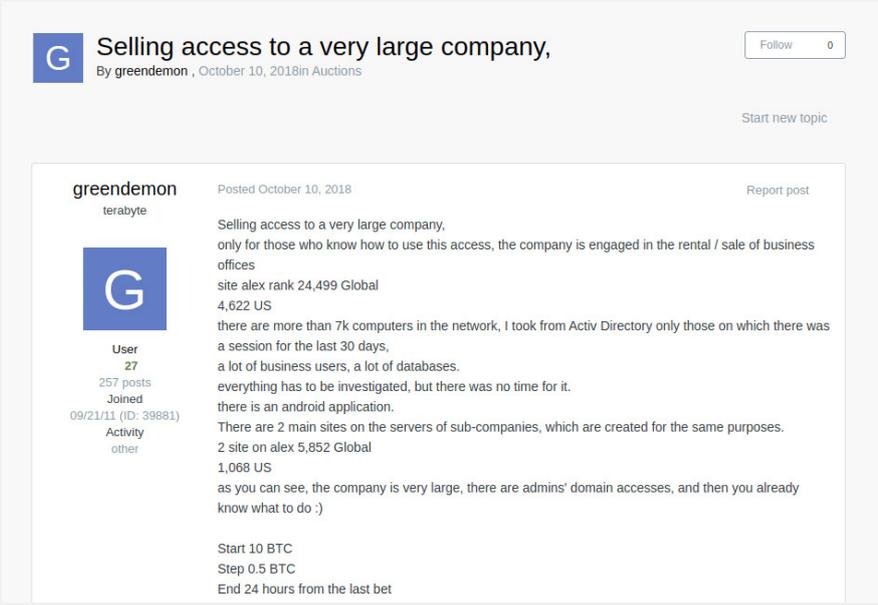
Throughout his activity, Fxmsp posted 135 ads about selling access to corporate networks, which made him at least \$1.5 million. The figure below shows a timeline of Fxmsp’s posts about selling unauthorized access to networks on underground forums.

Fig. 14. A timeline of Fxmsp’s posts on underground forums



In late October 2018, Fxmsp’s activity came under threat. It turned out that both Fxmsp and Lampeduza, the alias of Fxmsp’s sales manager, tried to sell access to the same network to different buyers. On October 24 of that year, both users were banned from the main underground forum. The duo suspended its activity on all other forums and allegedly focused on “private sales,” i.e., they worked only with a limited circle of trusted clients. Nevertheless, the threat actor’s fruitful activity motivated numerous hackers to start a similar “business.”

In 2018, other users started actively posting on Exploit about selling access to corporate networks.



Selling access to a very large company,
By greendemon , October 10, 2018 in Auctions

greendemon
terabyte

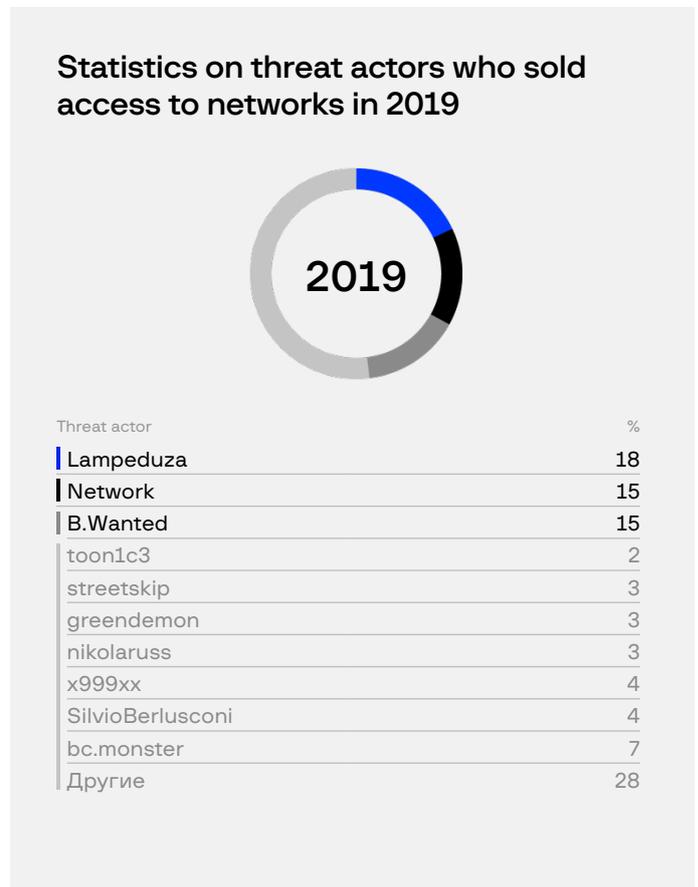
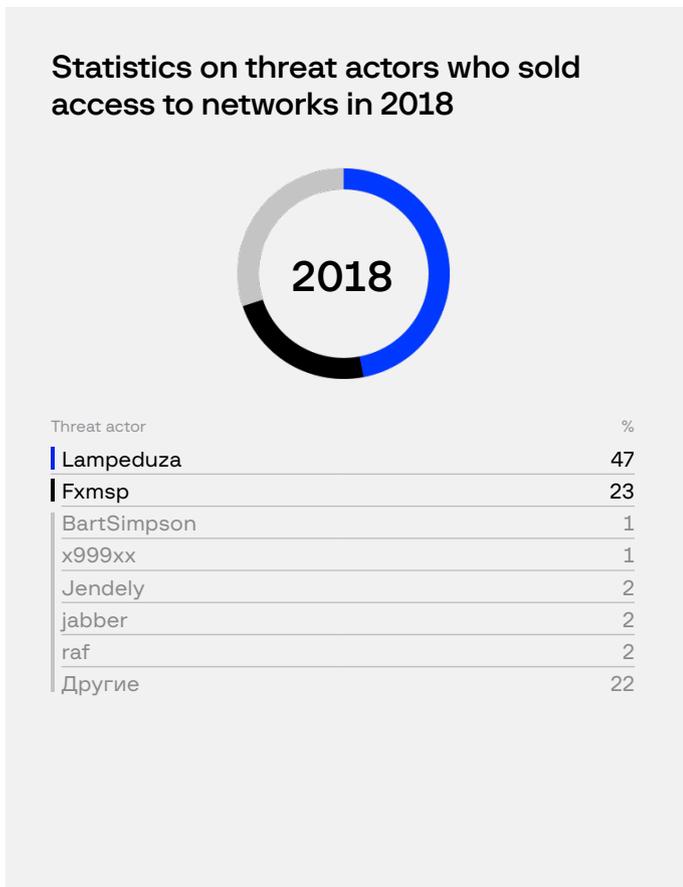
Posted October 10, 2018

Selling access to a very large company, only for those who know how to use this access, the company is engaged in the rental / sale of business offices
site alex rank 24,499 Global
4,622 US
there are more than 7k computers in the network, I took from Activ Directory only those on which there was a session for the last 30 days,
a lot of business users, a lot of databases.
everything has to be investigated, but there was no time for it.
there is an android application.
There are 2 main sites on the servers of sub-companies, which are created for the same purposes.
2 site on alex 5,852 Global
1,068 US
as you can see, the company is very large, there are admins' domain accesses, and then you already know what to do :)

Start 10 BTC
Step 0.5 BTC
End 24 hours from the last bet

Fig. 15. A post on Exploit from 2018 about selling access to a major company

In 2018, Group-IB's Threat Intelligence & Attribution platform detected 141 threads about selling unauthorized access, 98 of which belonged to Fxmosp and his sales manager Lampeduza.



The two diagrams on the previous page show that in 2018 Fxmsp and Lampeduza were the absolute market leaders and left their competitors far behind, while 2019 saw the emergence of new threat actors who gained considerable market share, even surpassing the share of the market controlled by Fxmsp and Lampeduza.

Nevertheless, it was Fxmsp and Lampeduza who created the market for selling unauthorized access to corporate networks as we know it today. Fxmsp formed the concept of a specialized underground threat actor: a broker of initial access to corporate networks. He pioneered this activity and showed other threat actors how initial access could be monetized on the black market.

It is uncertain whether Fxmsp still operates.

Group-IB's analysis of the threat actor's activity helped uncover the tools he used to compromise companies. For the first time, details about the hacker's identity were revealed in our report entitled **Fxmsp: "The invisible god of networks"** in which we also give recommendations on how to protect against such attacks.

[Fxmsp: "The invisible god of networks"](#)

IMPACT OF RANSOMWARE AS A SERVICE ON THE MARKET

06

HI-TECH CRIME TRENDS 2021/2022

GROUP-IB.COM

IABs used to mention the number and characteristics of hosts in compromised networks and highlight the large volume of data available. As ransomware attacks became more popular, however, such details stopped attracting buyers. Below is a post about selling access at a time when the ransomware-as-a-service (RaaS) sales model was not as popular as it is today.

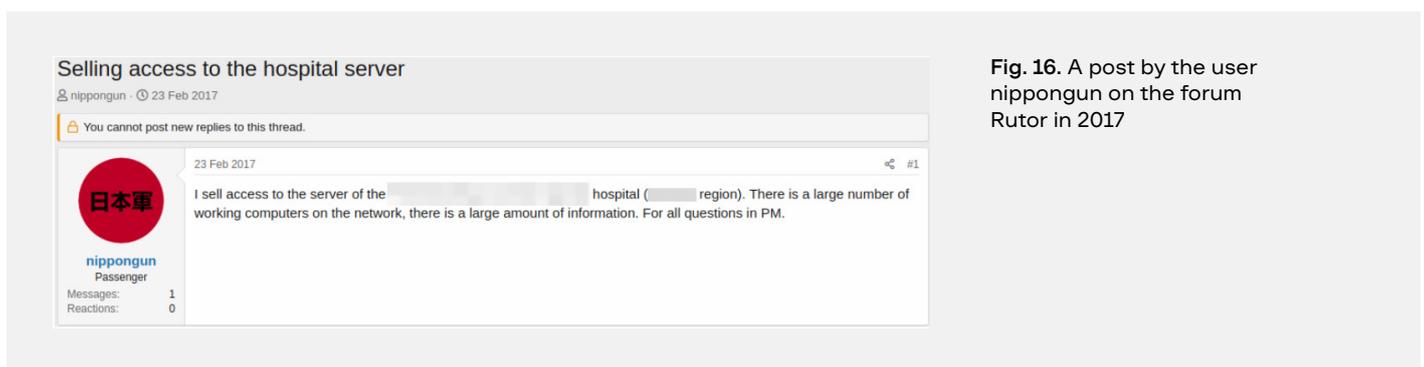


Fig. 16. A post by the user nippongun on the forum Rutor in 2017

After obtaining access, threat actors would look for information about their victim to determine a fair asking price. The price is influenced by the following characteristics of the target company:

- Revenue
- Brand awareness
- Industry
- Scale of business

The above details attract more attention and therefore make it easier to find a buyer and accelerate the sale.

Below is a thread about selling access published around the same time that the RaaS model was beginning to gain popularity.

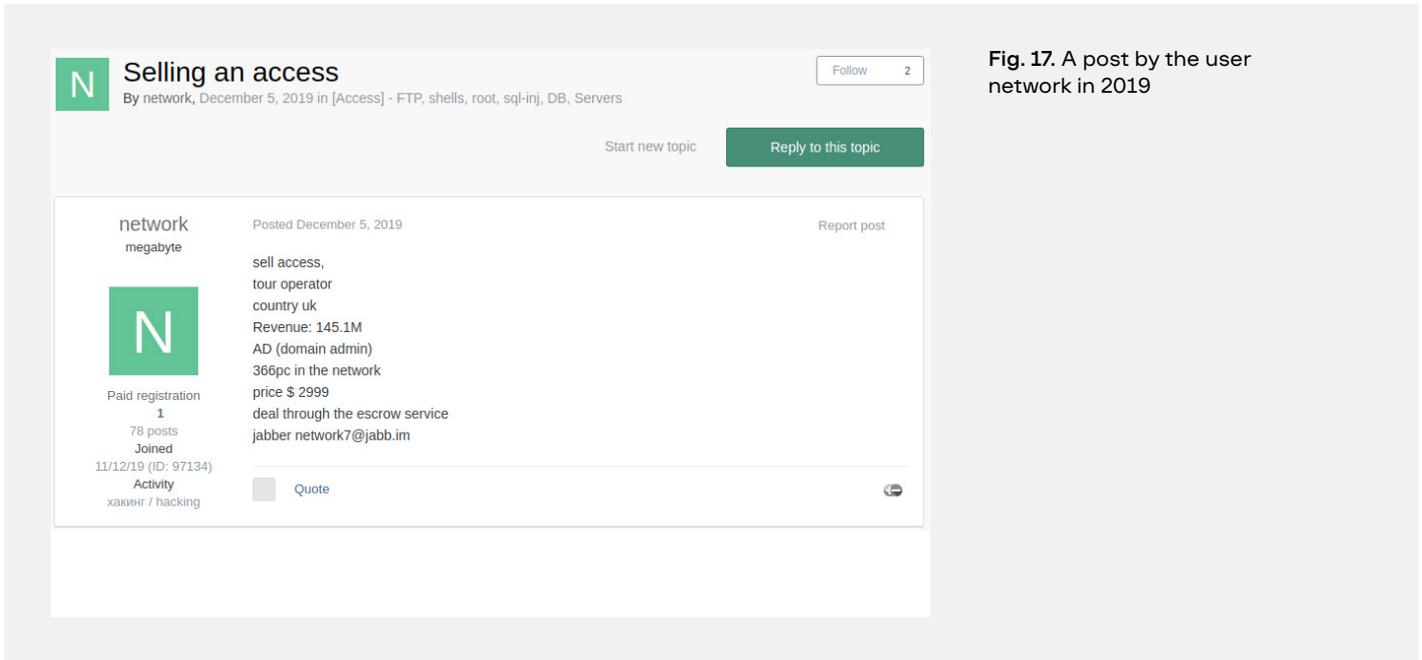


Fig. 17. A post by the user network in 2019

Information about a company’s revenue is the decisive factor for threat groups who conduct ransomware attacks, as it helps them determine the ransom size.

Usually, access to networks belonging to companies with the highest revenues is particularly popular among buyers. In the example below, the user **babam** advertised access to the corporate network of a major bank with a revenue of over \$30 billion.

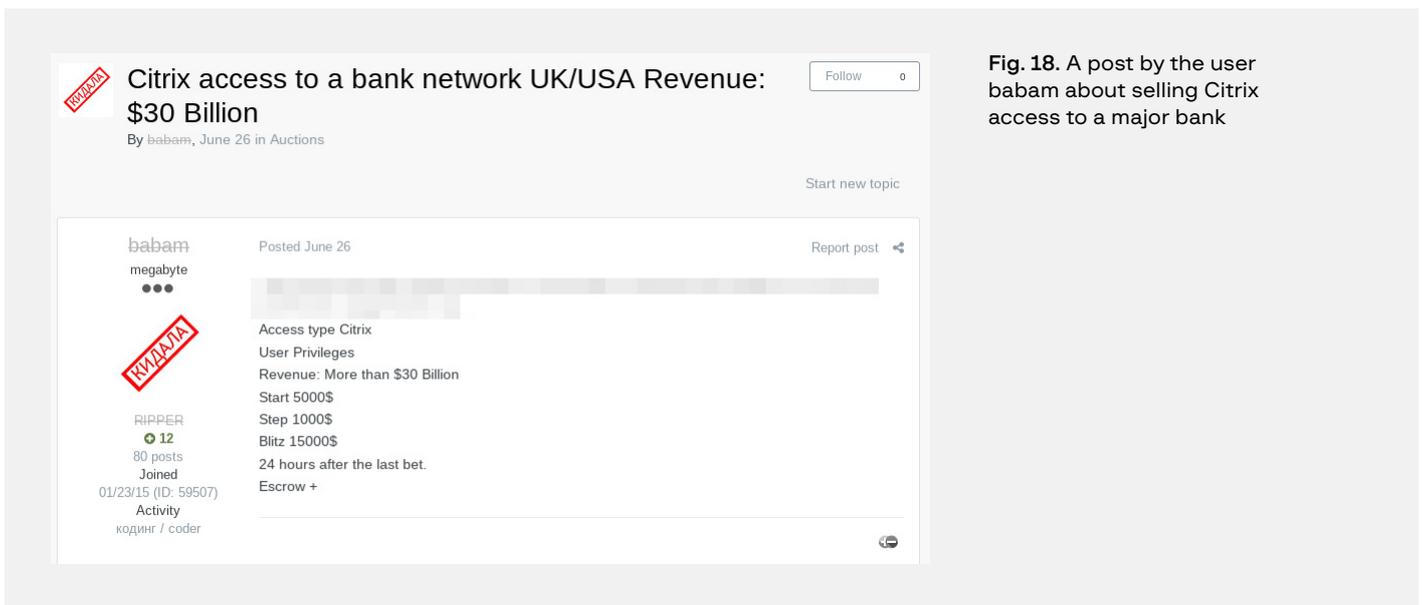


Fig. 18. A post by the user babam about selling Citrix access to a major bank

A few hours after the post was published, an interested user wrote a message, after which the access was purchased.

What types of access do ransomware operators buy?

A key criterion for choosing victims is their brand awareness. After infecting a company with ransomware, threat actors use blackmail them and threaten to disclose all the data in the corporate network if the company refuses to pay a ransom. The outcome jeopardizes the victim’s reputation and, if the company is well known, the attack could completely halt the company’s operations.

Characteristics such as industry and scale of business are also significant for threat actors who use RaaS. Such information helps them assess how well the target company is known and what its revenue is, which is why such details often appear in posts that advertise the sale of access. In addition, knowing the target company’s industry helps attackers determine what type of data they could obtain, if they gain access.

Threat groups take the above factors into account when deciding whether it is worth carrying out an attack and whether it will satisfy their financial ambitions.

A key factor that affects the price and speed of the sale is the level of access: the higher it is, the more expensive the offer. Below is a thread about selling access to an Italian pharmaceutical company with administrator rights.

The screenshot shows a forum post with the following details:

- Title:** Selling access to a pharmaceutical company. Italy.
- Author:** i3g0las · Mar 18, 2021
- Profile:** i3g0las, Premium member, joined Jul 16, 2020, 46 messages, 17 reaction score, 0.0006 deposit.
- Post Date:** Mar 19, 2021
- Post Content:**
 - Selling access to a pharmaceutical company. Italy.
 - Access type: VPN-RDP
 - Access level: Domain Admin
 - Company revenue: 60-220 million \$ (zoom and rocketreach)
 - Machines in the network: 230+
 - Price: 1800 \$
 - First contact in PM.
 - I do not transfer the network for verification until the payment / guarantor.
 - I do not disclose the name until payment / guarantor.
 - Work only with Russian-speaking people.

Fig. 19. A post about selling access to an Italian pharmaceutical company

Access with domain administrator rights provides all existing privileges, so the purchasing threat actor gets access to all information in the network and can manage other accounts. For a threat actor planning to purchase access, the words “Domain Admin” in an ad mean that they will not struggle to steal information from the network in question or to launch malware, and the only thing standing between them and the target is the price of the access, which is likely to pay off.

Threat actors sometimes directly mention the company to which they are selling access. The screenshot below shows a thread about selling access to a healthcare organization in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

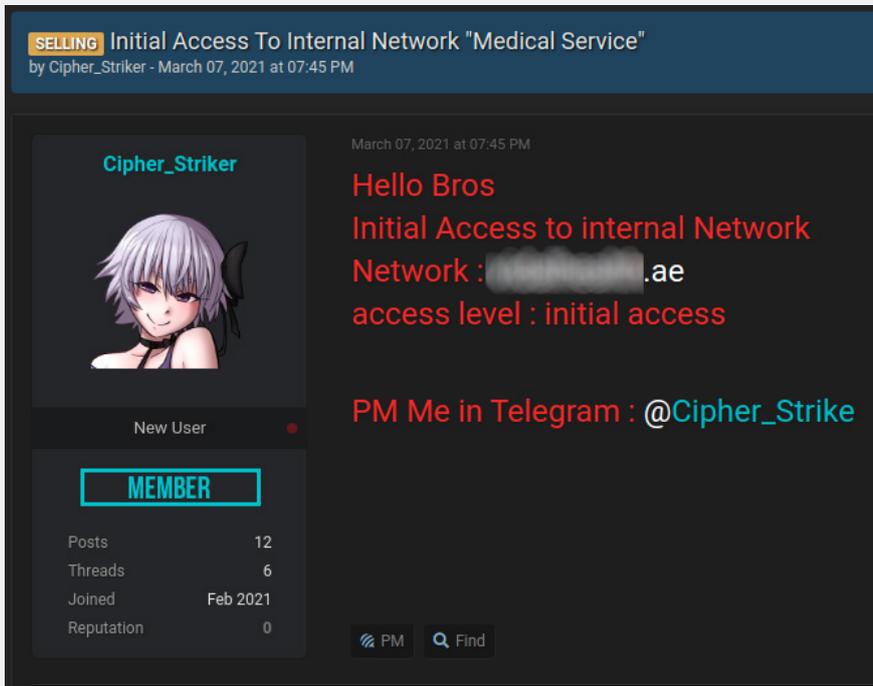


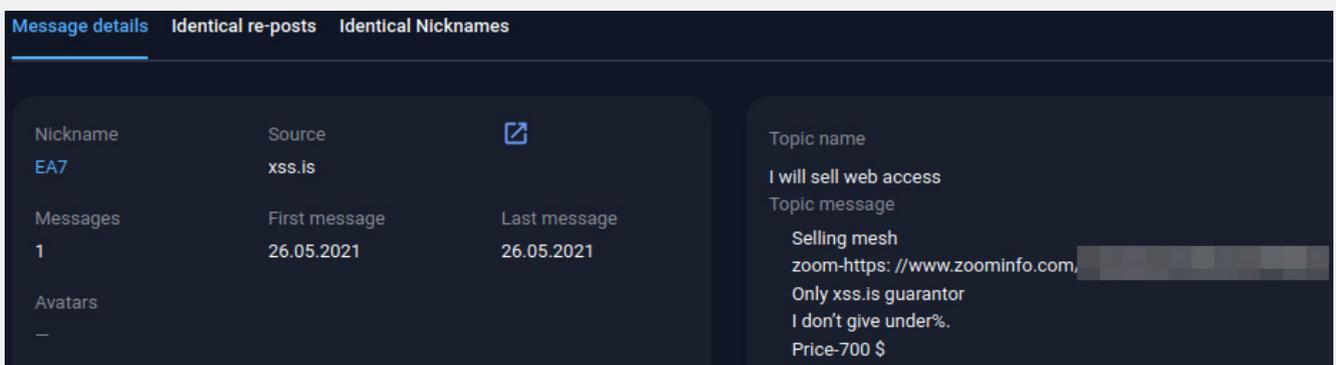
Fig. 20. A post about selling access to a healthcare organization in the UAE

However, this approach to publishing ads is risky for threat actors because security researchers are likely to notify the victim company, which will result in the access being closed. For this reason, most sellers prefer giving key information about the compromised company (annual revenue, type of access, country, and industry) without mentioning its name.

In some cases, IABs take descriptions from official websites or business databases.

In the example below, the seller included a link to the company's page on a website called Zoominfo. The thread is currently unavailable on the forum; the screenshot was saved by Group-IB's Threat Intelligence & Attribution platform.

Fig. 21. A post about selling access to a Belgian healthcare organization



Zoominfo is a website that provides information about companies from its database. As shown in the screenshot below, the website includes characteristics that help decide whether or not to buy access.

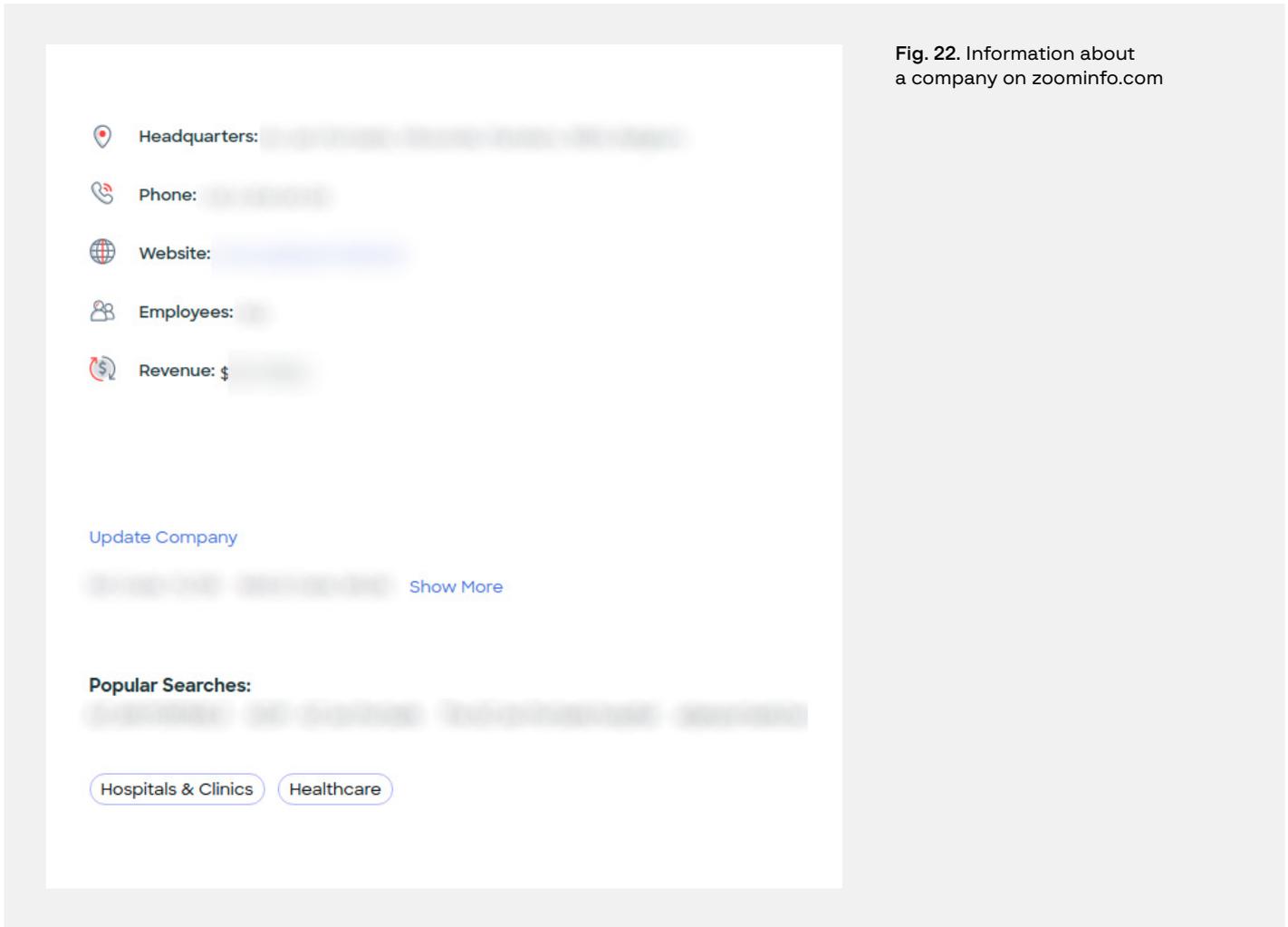


Fig. 22. Information about a company on zoominfo.com

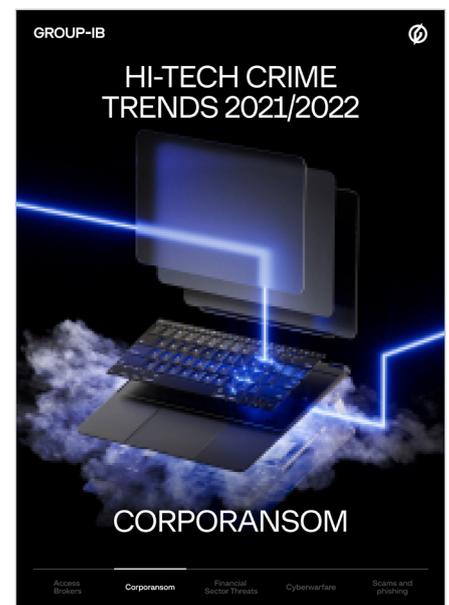
Since early 2020, the number of ransomware affiliate programs has increased significantly due to the pandemic, which has resulted in many companies having to change their infrastructure for employees to work remotely. Detailed information about the current ransomware trends can be found in the upcoming Group-IB report entitled **Corporansom**.

In many cases, deploying ransomware starts with establishing an RDP connection with a compromised server. Next, attackers move across the network to a domain controller. Publicly available RDP servers are the most common target for many ransomware operators, which in turn generates interest in sales of RDP access to corporate networks.

RDP access to servers is not the only entry point where ransomware operators apply brute force attacks. This method is also used against VPN services without multi-factor authentication.

As ransomware became more and more popular, the number of threat actors who sell access to corporate networks grew. This meant that ransomware operators and affiliate program participants no longer needed to search for vulnerabilities in infrastructures because they could simply purchase access to a network from a third party. Ads about buying access to networks became commonplace on underground forums.

Corporansom



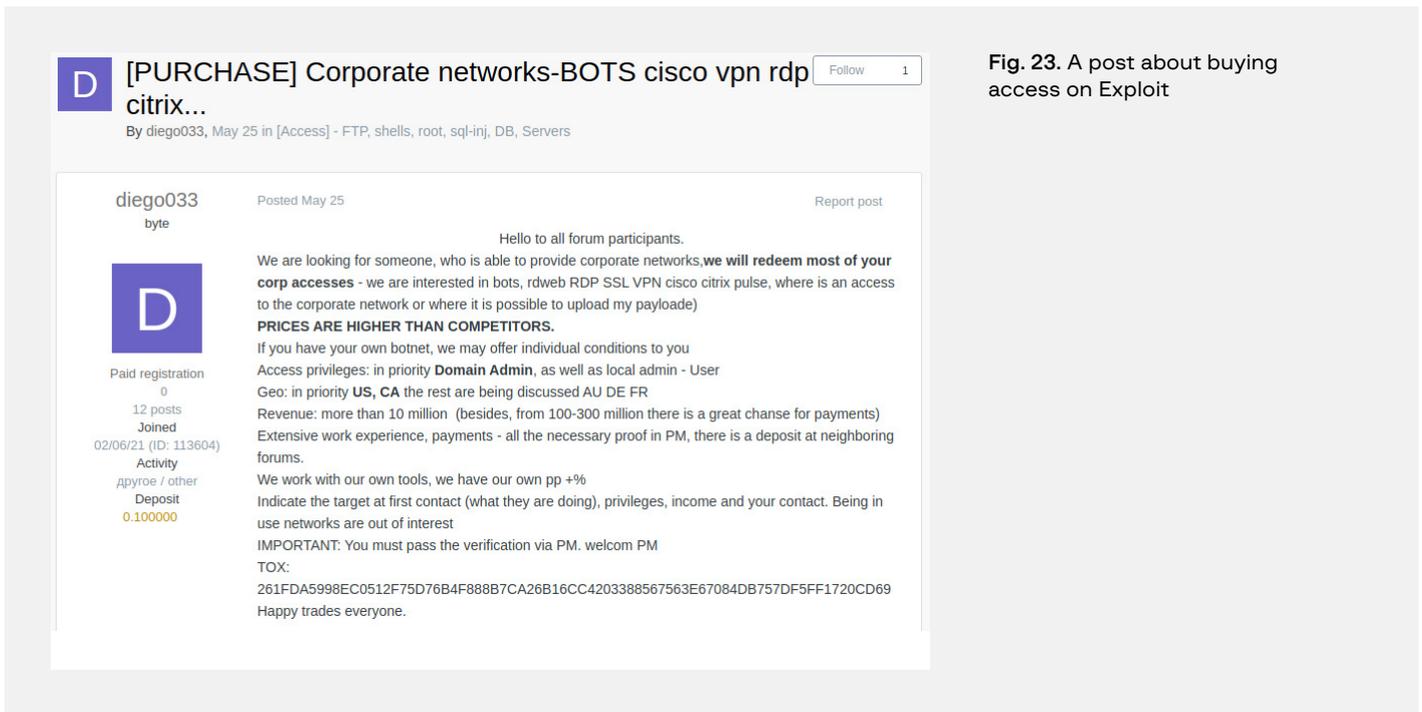
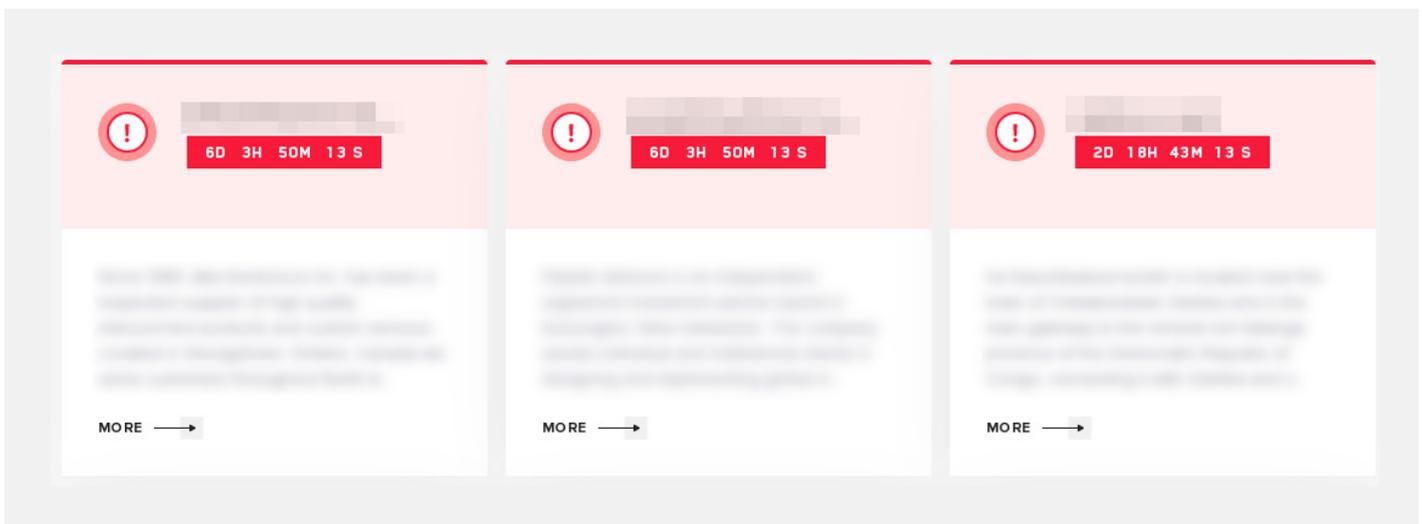


Fig. 23. A post about buying access on Exploit

The goal of ransomware operators is to extort ransoms in exchange for decrypting data. As such, in addition to encrypting data, their main goal is to destroy backup copies of critical information in order to ensure that victims cannot recover the data without paying the ransom. As a result, most ransomware can disable or delete system recovery features.

Many ransomware operators create dedicated leak sites (DLSs) where they periodically post compromised data as a way of intimidating their victims.

Fig. 24. A DLS of Lockbit ransomware operators

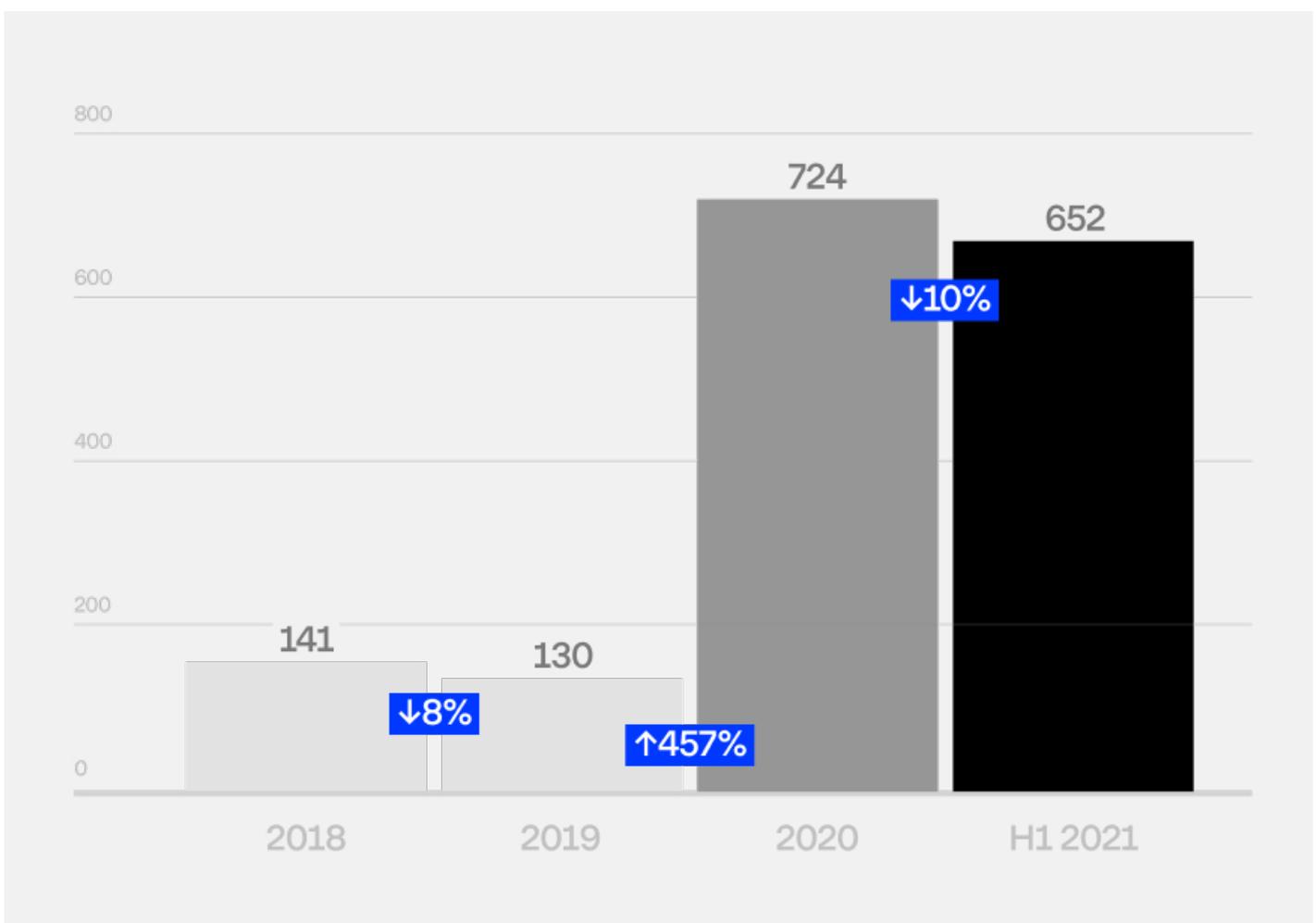


Since every group that operates ransomware can have several affiliates, threat actors who use the same ransomware can have different tactics, techniques and procedures. Group-IB conducted an in-depth analysis of ransomware and published a report called **Ransomware Uncovered 2020—2021** in March 2021. The report analyzes the main ransomware tactics and techniques and provides recommendations on how to prevent ransomware threats.

Affiliate programs have created demand for access to corporate networks, thereby motivating IABs to continue developing their activities.

A total of **1,647** offers to sell access were shared between early 2018 and mid-2021. Most (**1,099**) were made in the past year (H2 2020–H1 2021). Below are statistics for the number of access offers made since 2018.

Fig. 25. Graph of selling access

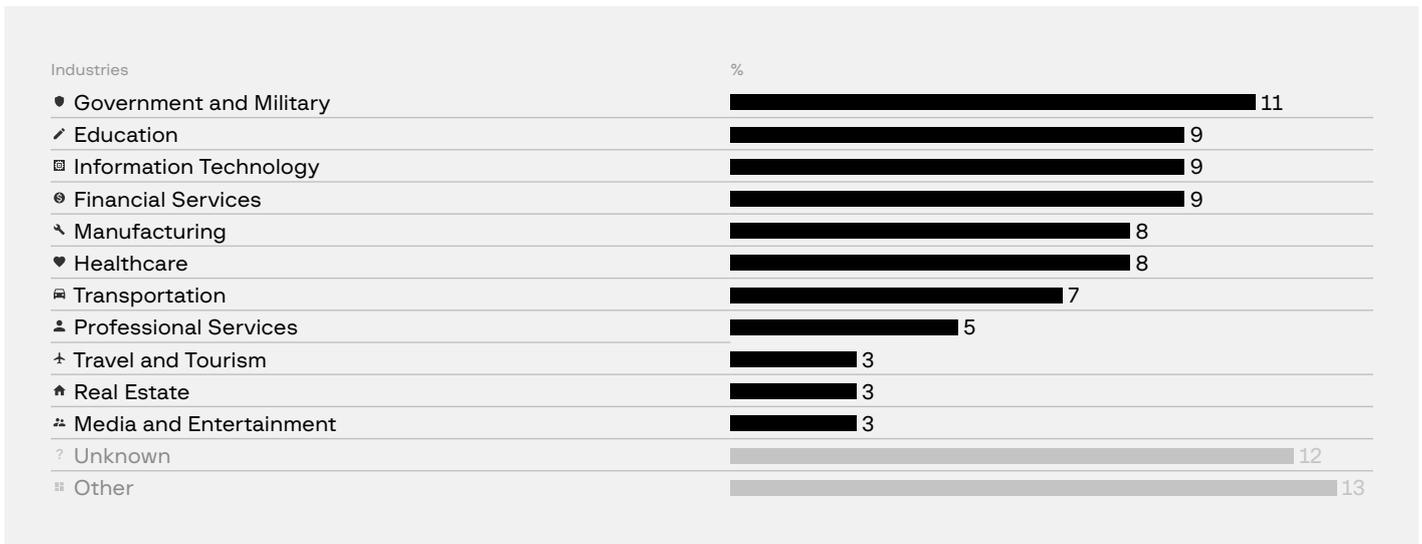


Fewer offers from Fxmsp and limited demand for initial access are two factors that slightly reduced sales in 2019 (**130 access offers**) compared to 2018 (**141 access offers**). A year later, however, the number of access offers soared 5.5-fold (**724 access offers in 2020**). The first half of 2021 saw slightly fewer offers on forums: **652**.

This section analyzes the market for initial access to corporate networks discovered on underground forums in the past two years.

Since the market emerged, virtually no major industry has been spared from having initial access sold on the black market.

The diagram below shows statistics for industries where unauthorized access was sold between the second half of 2019 and the first half of 2020.



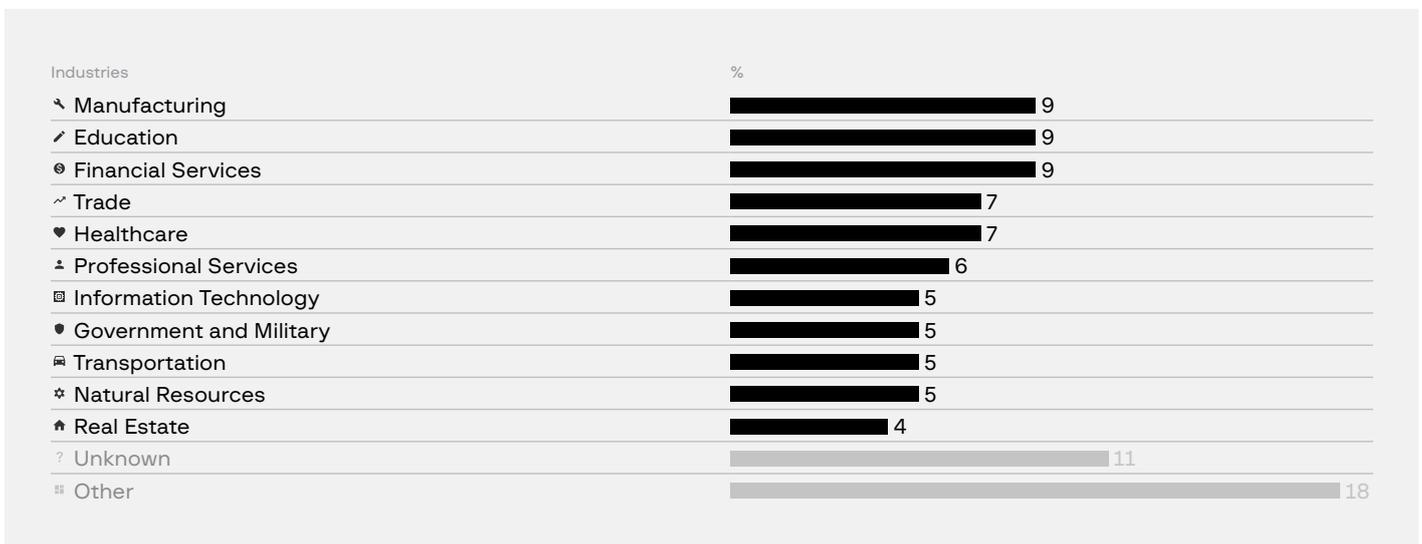
IABs share as little information as possible in their ads in order to generate interest among buyers and to avoid revealing identifying information about their victims. Often, they only publish information about a company’s revenue and location. Industries are usually not specified or they are described in a way that reveals only whether the company is government-related or commercial. For this reason, 12% are in the “Unknown” category.

A similar figure applies to the “Other” category, which represents the total number of offers to sell access to companies from industries not shown in the diagram, with each accounting for no more than 2% of the total number of access offers between H2 2019 and H1 2020. These industries include charities as well as sports and gaming organizations.

Throughout this time, a total of **362 offers to sell access** were made, with government and military services comprising the industries with the most activity.

A year later, the situation changed markedly: the overall number of access offers between the second half of 2020 and the first half of 2021 amounted to **1,099**, which is nearly **three times more than during the previous period**.

Below are statistics for industries for which access offers were made between the second half of 2020 and the first half of 2021.



Manufacturing, education, and financial services are the leaders in the sale of unauthorized access. These three industries pushed the government and military sectors to fourth place. Due to an increase in the overall number of access offers, a decrease in a given industry’s percentage does not mean that the total number of access offers related to it dropped. On the contrary, their number also increased.

The fact that the number of affected industries has expanded significantly shows that threat actors did not initially realize the full spectrum of potential victims. A year ago companies from 20 industries were affected. Now, the number is 35.

The situation also changed for attacked countries. The diagram below shows statistics for countries where the companies to which access was sold between H2 2019 and H1 2020 were registered.



The United States ranked first, with the most companies attacked. However, a considerable percentage of access offers at the time could not be attributed to a specific country. A large percentage of access offers for which the victim’s location is unknown, due to criminals publishing ads containing limited information. Below is an example of such an ad.

Fig. 26. A post about selling access to various organizations

It is difficult to include information from such offers in statistics, but we can assume that the victims in question are small, low-income organizations, considering that initial access to large organizations is usually sold separately and for a higher price.

Below are similar statistics for H2 2020 – H1 2021.



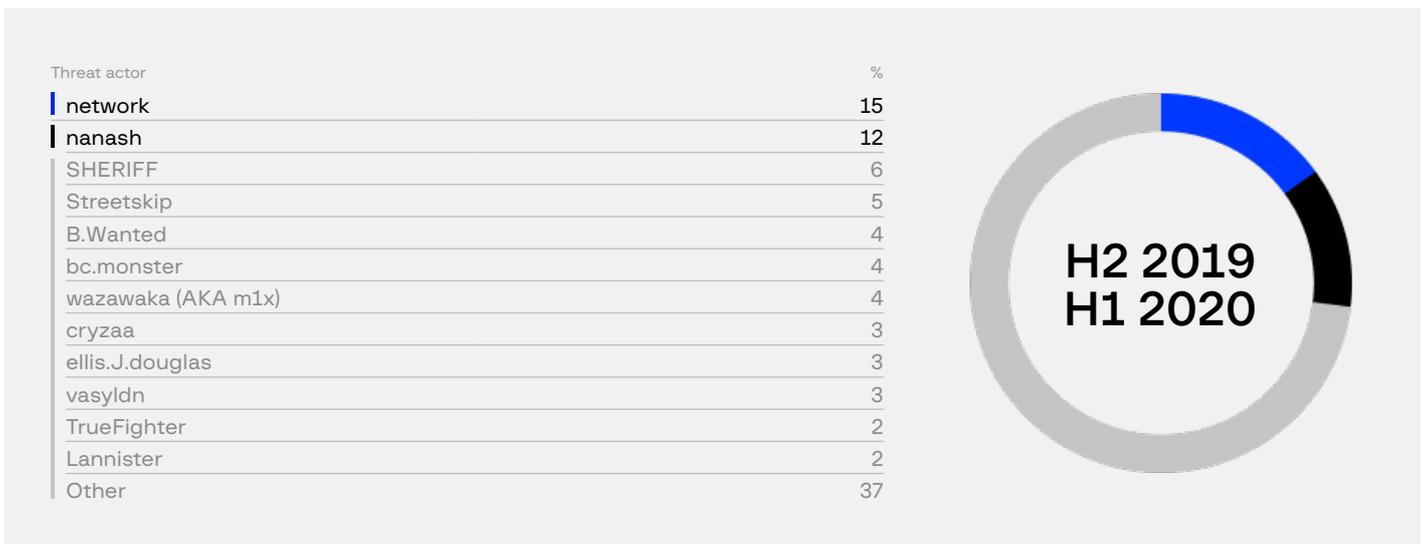
The following year, the United States kept its leading position. Although its share has decreased, the overall increase in the total number of access offers does not point to a positive trend for the United States and other countries.

Notably, offers of access to companies in India have become some of the bestselling lots, surpassing China by several positions.

The number of countries in which unauthorized access can be gained has also increased: **68 countries** were attacked during H2 2020 – H1 2021 compared to just **42 countries** a year earlier.

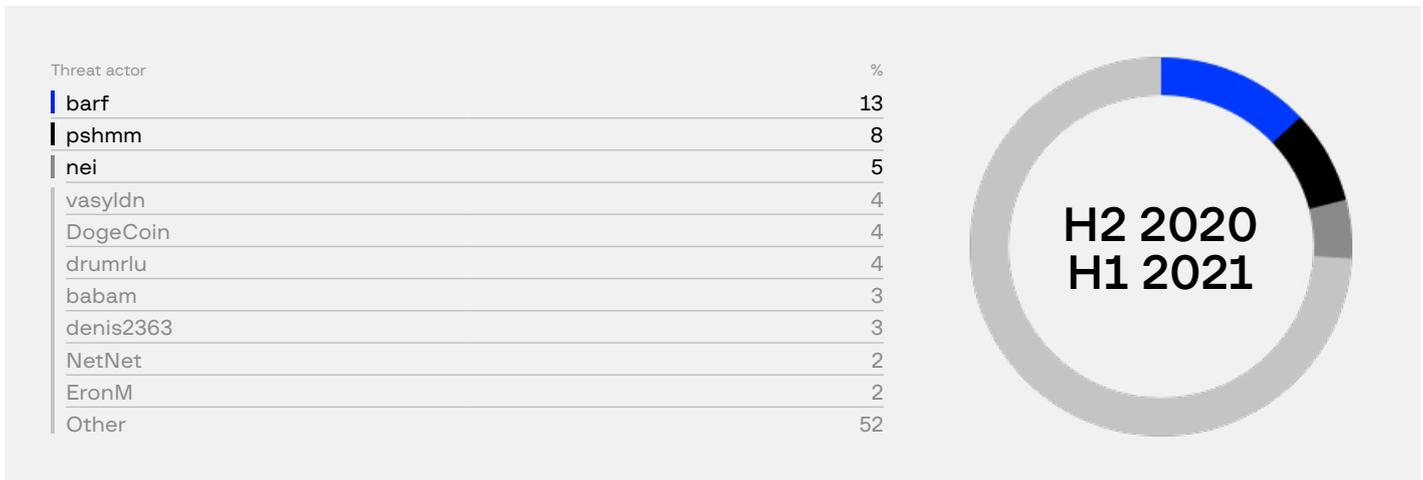
There are also more cybercriminals actively selling access to corporate networks. Between **H2 2019** and **H1 2020**, Group-IB specialists identified **86 sellers**, and over the last year (H2 2020 – H1 2021) the number has grown to **262**, which is 3 times more than in the previous period. Among these, 229 are new brokers.

The diagram below shows statistics on cybercriminals who published ads for the sale of unauthorized access from the second half of 2019 to the first half of 2020.



During this period, the market leaders were sellers with the usernames **network** and **Nanash**, who were responsible for more than a quarter of all access offers.

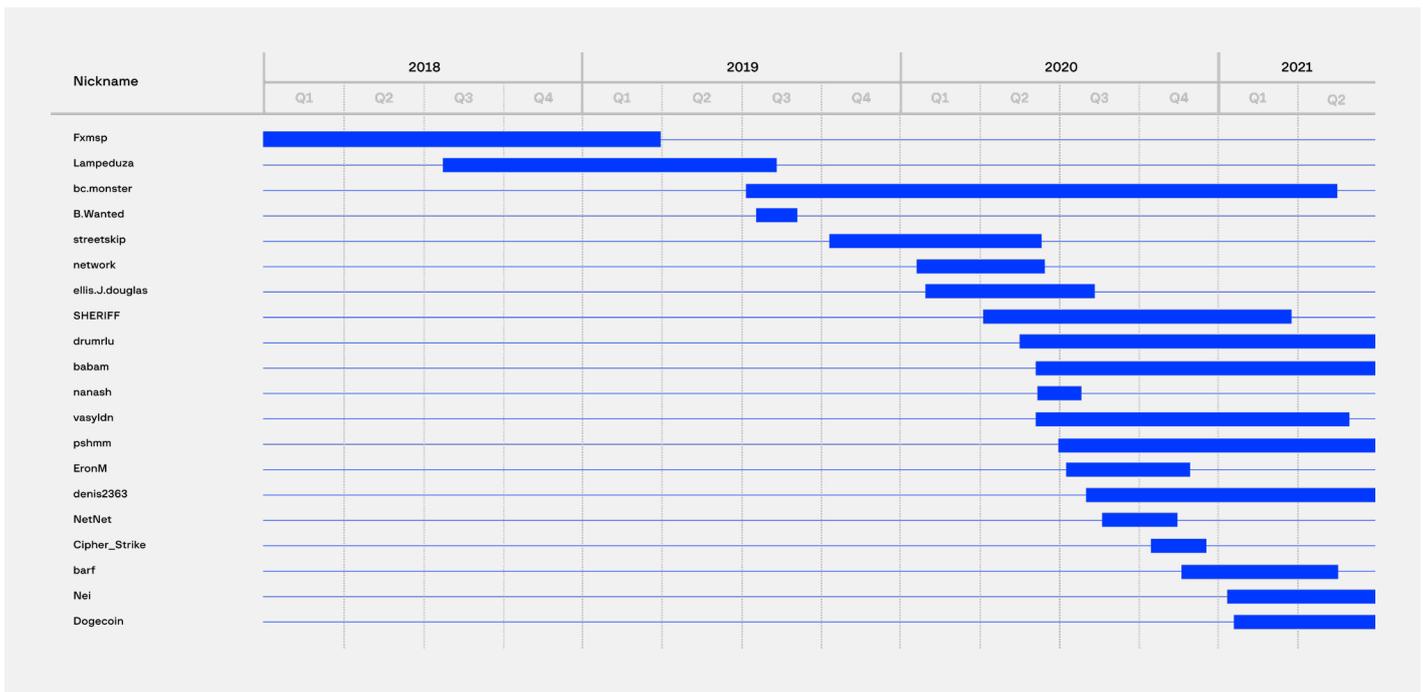
Below are statistics for the current reporting period, between H2 2020 and H1 2021. The number of cybercriminals making single offers on the access market has increased significantly, which means there are more cybercriminals who want to earn extra money from this type of crime.



Only one criminal remained among the leaders in terms of access sales for two years in a row: an individual with the username **vasyldn**.

Between H2 2019 and H1 2020, **network** placed 54 access ads, which made him the leader among sellers. A year later **barf** took their place with 145 offers.

The diagram below shows the activity timeline of the main IABs from 2018 to the first half of 2021.



Size of the market for selling access to compromised networks

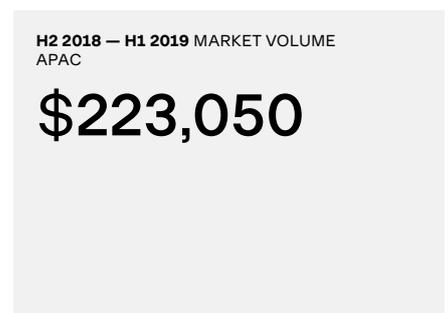
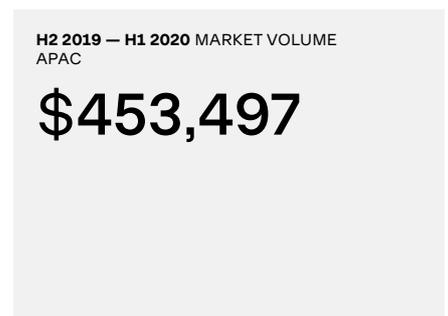
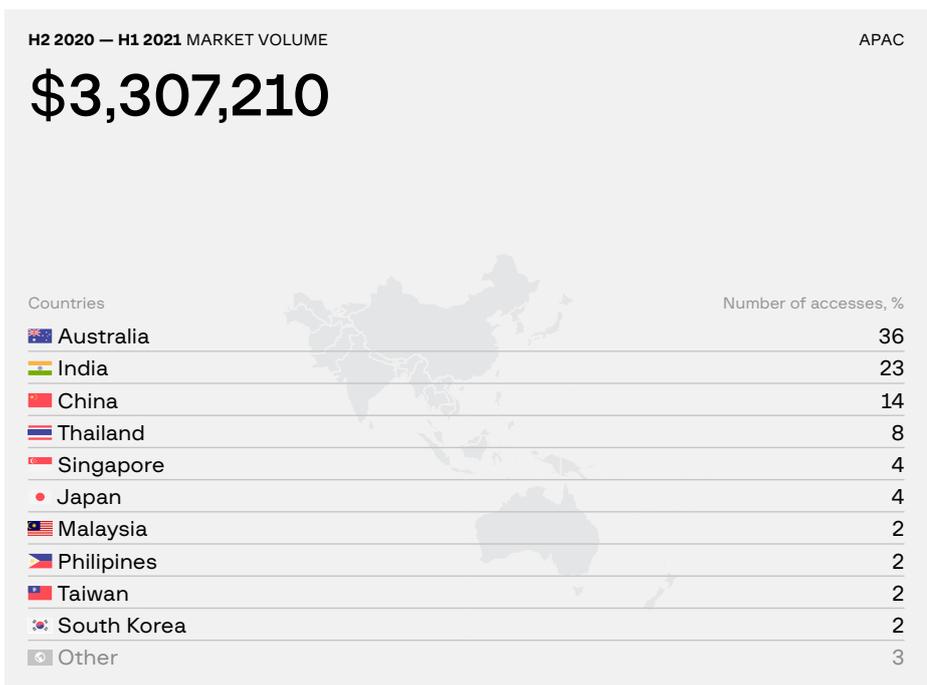
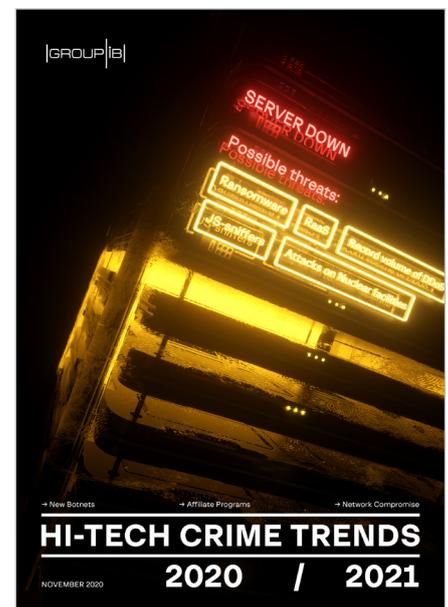


In last year’s **Hi-Tech Crime Trends 2020/2021** report, which is available on Group-IB’s website, Group-IB Threat Intelligence analysts estimated the total size of the market for selling access to corporate networks sold on dark web forums. The specialists concluded that the market size was increasing from year to year, but that “the peak of sales occurred in 2020.” During that reporting period (H2 2020 – H1 2021), the number of offers on the market exceeded the peak of the previous period by almost three-fold. Group-IB specialists estimated the total market size in the current period at **\$7,165,387**, which is 16% more than in the previous period (H2 2019 – H1 2020), when the market size was **\$6,189,388**.

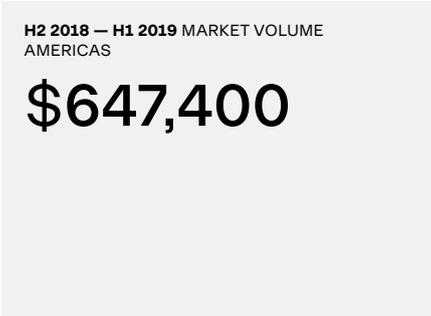
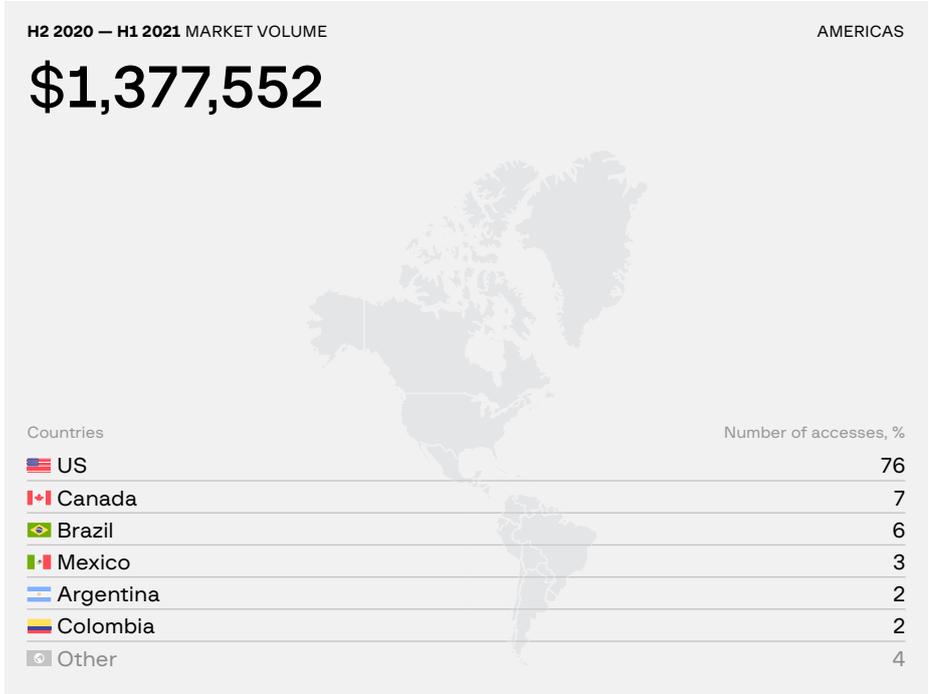
Group-IB experts also analyzed regional statistics. It is important to reiterate that we were unable to attribute some companies to specific countries, which is why the actual number of victims in each region may differ.

As can be seen below, the largest market share was estimated for instances of access to companies based in **APAC** countries. Between H2 2020 and H1 2021, the total cost of access was **\$3,307,210**, which is almost six times more than in the previous year. The largest number of access offers in APAC countries during the above period was in **Australia (36%)**, followed by **India (23%)** and **China (14%)**.

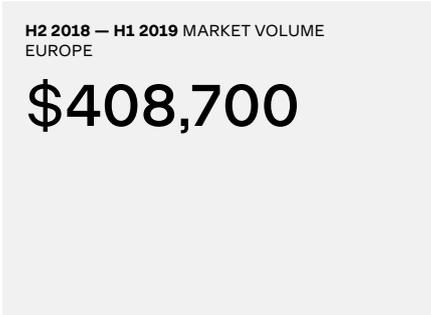
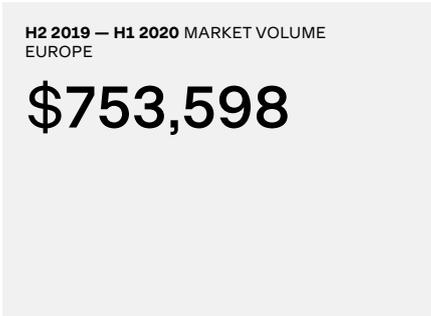
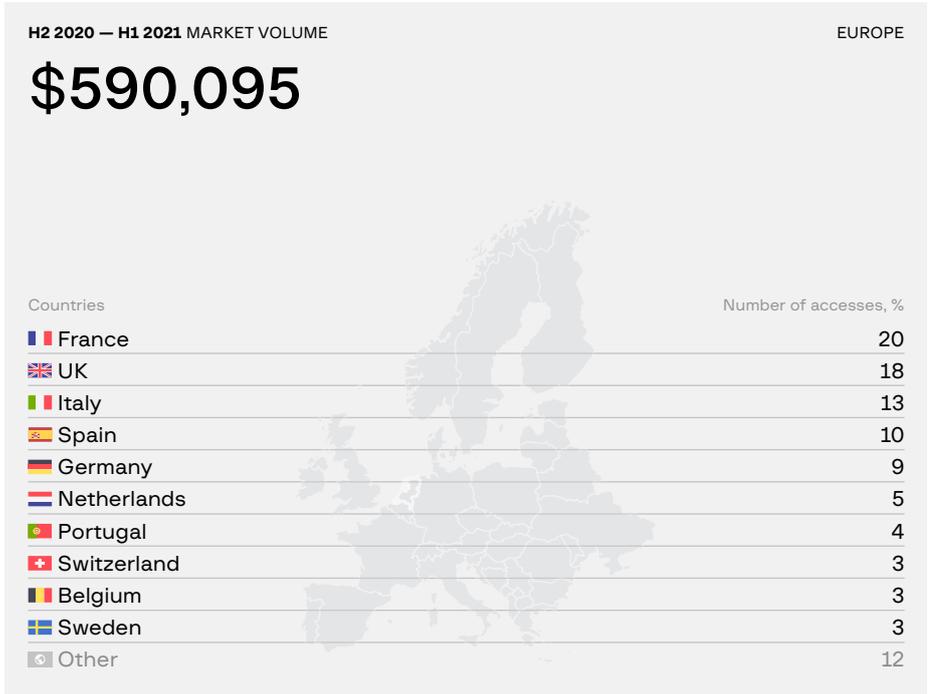
Hi-Tech Crime Trends 2020/2021



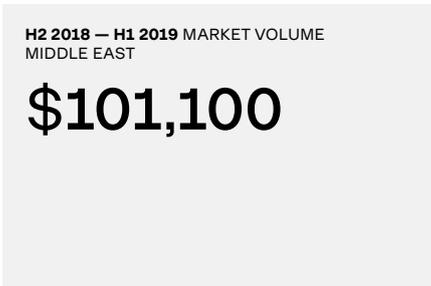
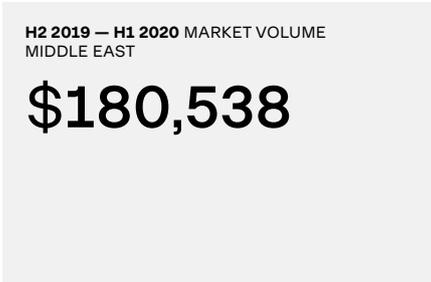
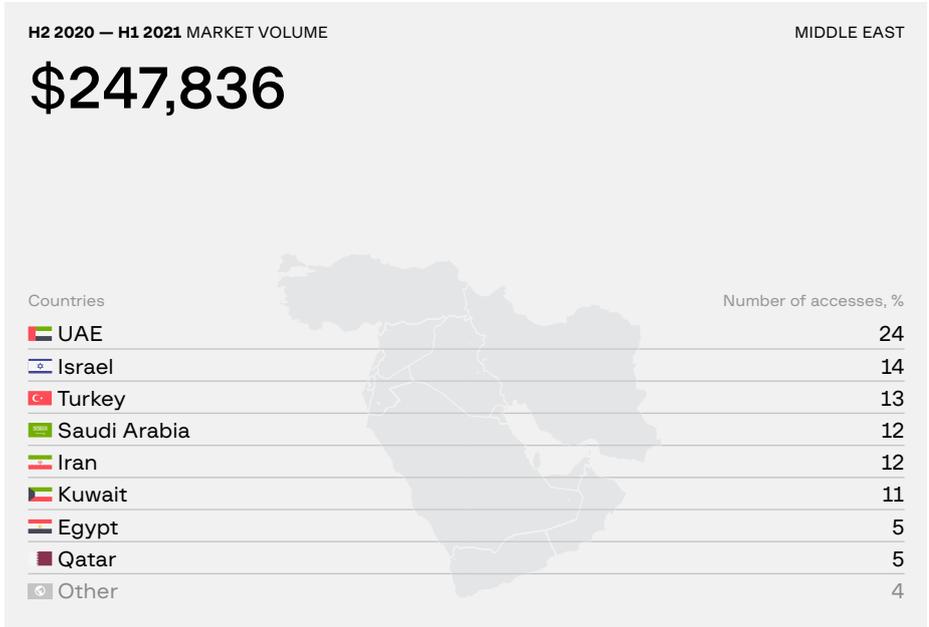
Countries in the Americas ranked second in terms of access market size, which accounted for **\$1,377,552**, just under half as much as in H2 2019 - H1 2020, when the market amounted to more than **\$3 million**. The United States ranked first among American countries, accounting for **76%** of all offers.



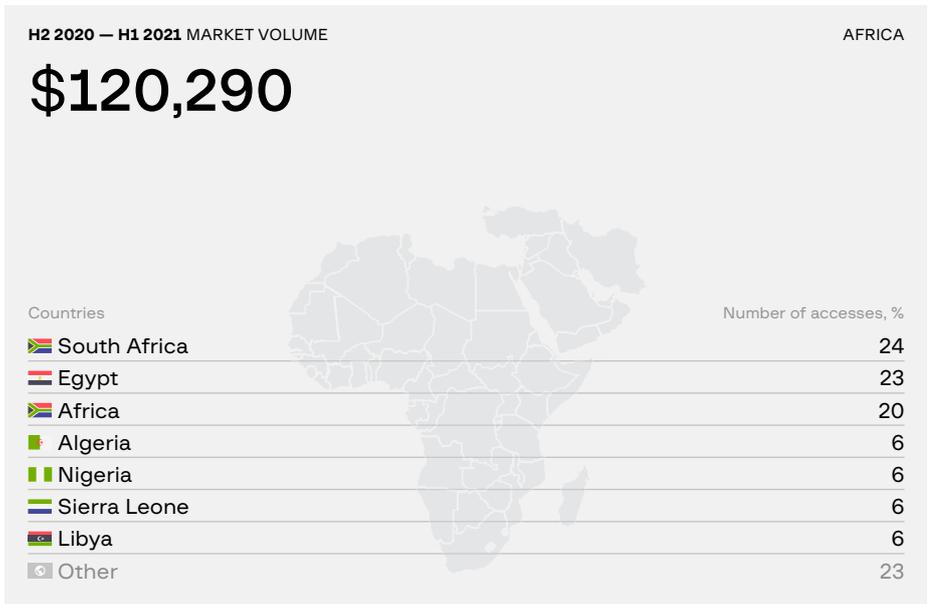
For **European countries**, the peak occurred in the previous period and amounted to **\$753,598**, which is 25% more than between H2 2020 and H1 2021 (**\$590,095**). The leading positions in this region are occupied by **France** and **Great Britain**, which gained **20%** and **18%** of the total, respectively. **Italy** ranked third (**13%**), and each of the remaining countries account for no more than 10% of the total number of access offers.



As for **the Middle East**, in contrast to Europe, the market increased by 1.5 times as compared to the previous reporting period. The undisputed leader in this region is **the UAE**, with **24%** of the total number of access offers. Next are **Turkey** and **Israel**, each with **14%** and **13%** respectively and finally **Saudi Arabia** and **Iran** with **12%** a piece of all access ads in the region.



Among **African** countries, we observed less interest in access offers. Compared to the previous year, the market fell to **\$120,290**. Between H2 2020 and H1 2021, two countries held the leading position in this region: **South Africa** and **Egypt**, whose shares in sum accounted for almost **50%** each of the total number of access sales in Africa. In addition to that, **23%** were ads in which the location was indicated as Africa, but the country was not explicitly stated. The share of each remaining country was no more than **6%**.



In **CIS countries (the Commonwealth of Independent States)**, the market peak occurred in H2 2019 – H1 2020 and amounted to **\$142,058**, while in H2 2020 – H1 2021 the market size was almost three times less (**\$48,239**). In the most recent period, Russia held the main access market share at **76%**. It is noteworthy that almost all of the brokers identified are Russian-speaking and that they tend to refrain from attacking organizations in the CIS region, which makes it the least often attacked of the regions discussed.



Given that offers published on underground forums hide various information (including the cost of access to a particular company) more and more often, it has become difficult to estimate the total market size. In addition, many transactions are carried out privately. However, Group-IB’s technologies for analyzing information on underground forums (including deleted entries and information hidden by cybercriminals) help measure the dynamics and scale of sales of such “goods” on the dark web.

MOST WANTED: THE TEN MOST ACTIVE SELLERS OF ACCESS CREDENTIALS

08

HI-TECH CRIME TRENDS 2021/2022

GROUP-IB.COM

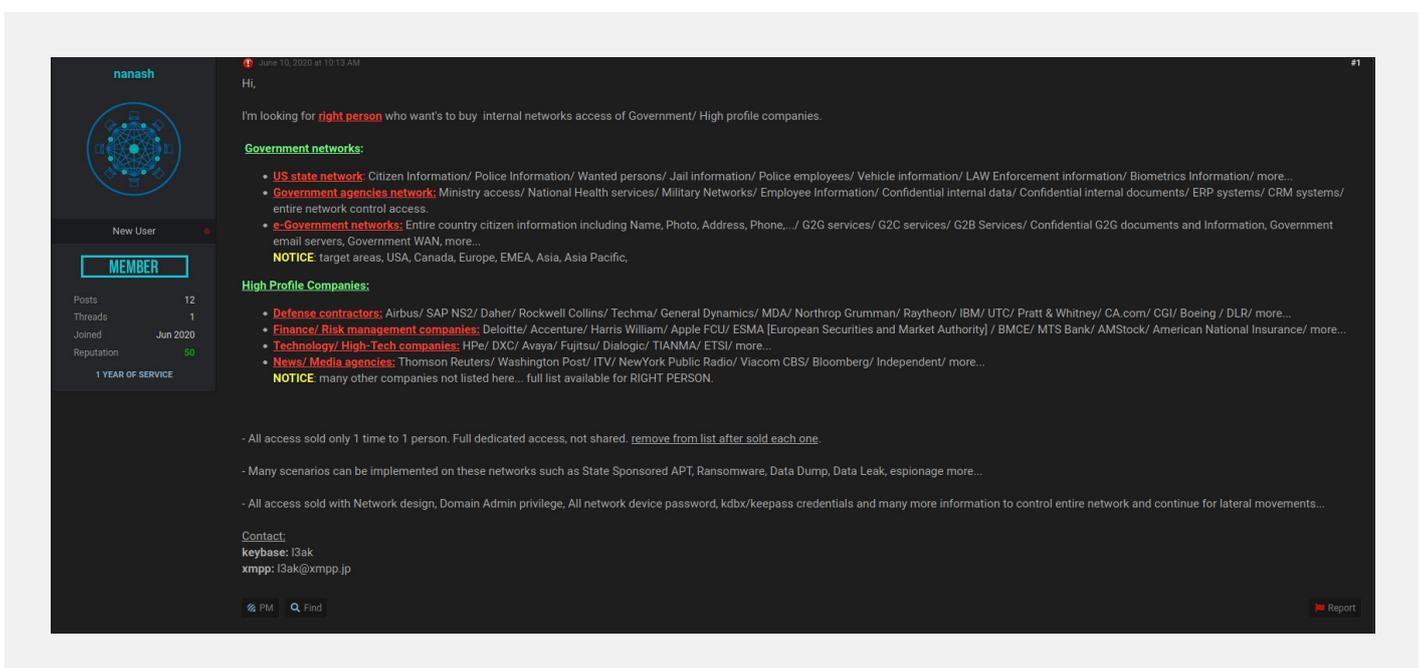
This section takes a close look at the ten sellers who offered the most initial access credentials for sale during the period under review.

Nanash

📅 Active	June 2020 — July 2020
👤 Number of victims	40+ companies
🌐 Attack geography	11 countries
💰 Estimated earnings	\$5,000,000

Nanash created an account on RaidForums, an underground forum, on June 10, 2020. That same day, Nanash started a for-sale thread offering access to corporate networks belonging to more than **40 companies** and government agencies worldwide. The account was last active in July 2020. In the subject line of their original message, Nanash included a short description of the companies and organizations to which they claimed to have access.

Fig. 27. Nanash's original Raidforums post



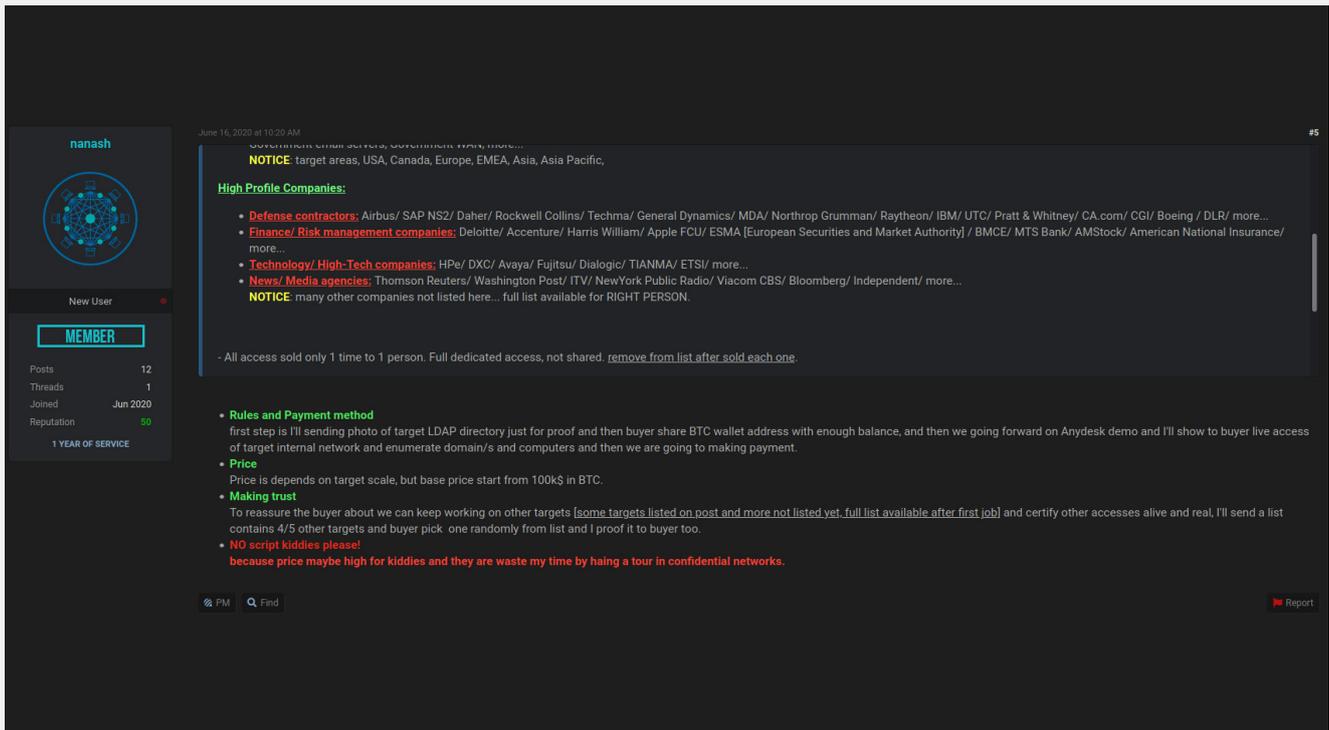
The criminal’s message implied that they had access credentials for government agencies in **North America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia Pacific**, but Nanash did not specify the names of most. In addition to government organizations, among their alleged victims Nanash listed private companies such as **Northrop Grumman, Airbus, Raytheon, Boeing, Deloitte, Accenture, HPE, Thomson Reuters, and The Washington Post**.

Nanash caused a mixed reaction from forum denizens: some expressed interest in the offerings, while others treated the newcomer with suspicion. However, Group-IB researchers discovered that the hacker had gained access to at least two companies, which was corroborated by the screenshots the criminal shared and by real-time LDAP preview logs.

After chatting with several forum members, Nanash quoted **11 BTC (\$100,000)** for each set of access credentials. The criminal also insisted that they would sell access credentials to one buyer only, noting that they would share the full list of victims only with a trusted buyer. The hacker said that they expected the prospective buyer to pay 5 BTC upfront to “reserve the transaction,” then pay the rest to get the full access data.

Based on the full list of access credentials for sale, and given the quoted price per set of access data, we estimate that the criminal could have potentially made at least **\$5 million** from the sale.

Fig. 28. Nanash’s comment about their price for access data



What happened to Nanash after they posted their ad remains a mystery to this day. It is still unclear how many sets of access credentials they managed to sell, assuming that they actually had them in their possession. After this, the criminal disappeared from the forum.

A couple of months after Nanash was last seen on Raidforums, **ClearSkySec** researchers **published** a study on the Pay2Key ransomware campaign operated by the Iranian APT group best known as Fox Kitten. The researchers also connected a user known as **kharpedar** to Fox Kitten based on their

posts on underground forums. ClearSkySec wrote in the report that kharpedar was selling access to many companies whose description seemed to match those that Nanash was offering for sale, expressing interest in Turkish organizations and showing no interest in the Indian government.

The diagram below presents the statistics relating to the home countries and industries of Nanash’s victims.



ATT&CK Matrix for Enterprise (Nanash)

TACTICS	TECHNIQUES	DETAILS
Discovery	Account Discovery: Domain Account (T1087.002)	The criminal provided an LDAP screenshot showing information about users of corporate network domains.
	Permission Groups Discovery: Domain Groups (T1069.002)	The criminal provided an LDAP screenshot showing information about corporate network domains.

Vasyldn

📅 Active	June 2020 — May 2021
👤 Number of victims	50+ companies
🌐 Attack geography	14 countries
💰 Estimated earnings	\$360,000

On June 15, 2020, a user named **vasyldn** created an account on the forum Exploit and immediately started a thread on selling access to Active Directory networks belonging to companies and government organizations, thereby starting their campaign to sell access to more than **50 organizations** across **14 countries**. Vasyldn was last seen posting on the forum in May 2021, and went silent after that.

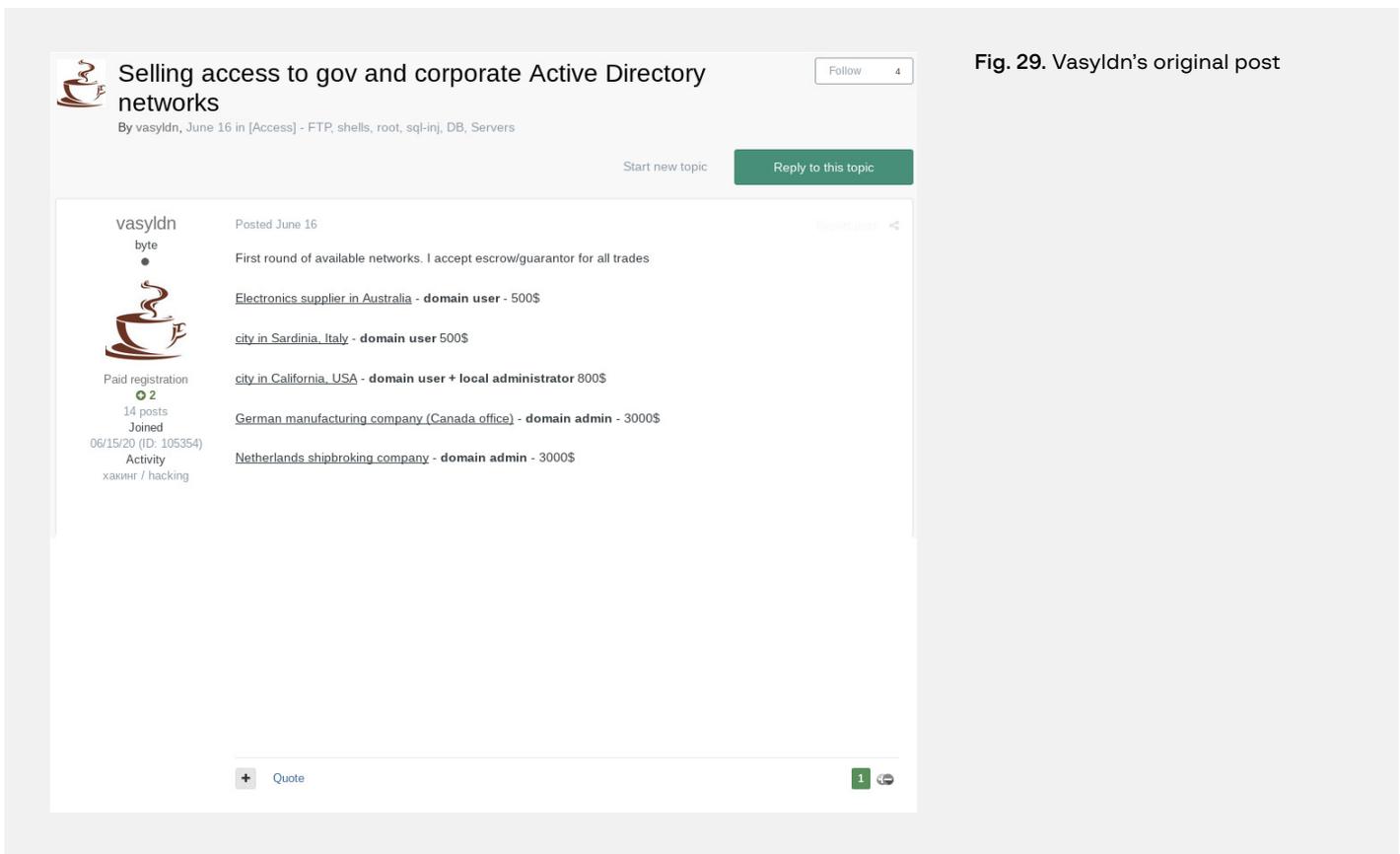


Fig. 29. Vasyldn's original post

In their first post, vasyldn advertised access to Active Directory networks belonging to five entities based in **the US, Italy, Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands**. The victims included an Australian electronics supplier, a Dutch ship broker, and a German manufacturing company, as well as infrastructure elements in unnamed cities in Sardinia and California.

Vasyldn actively promoted access credentials for sale until as late as October 2020. During this time the criminal compromised 23 companies, the access credentials for some of which were sold soon after the hacker posted the ads. After a six-month hiatus, vasyldn returned to selling access data. From March 2021, the criminal posted about 30 more ads.

Among others, the criminal's posts advertised data belonging to six companies based in different US states, including a major US bank with \$1 billion in revenue.

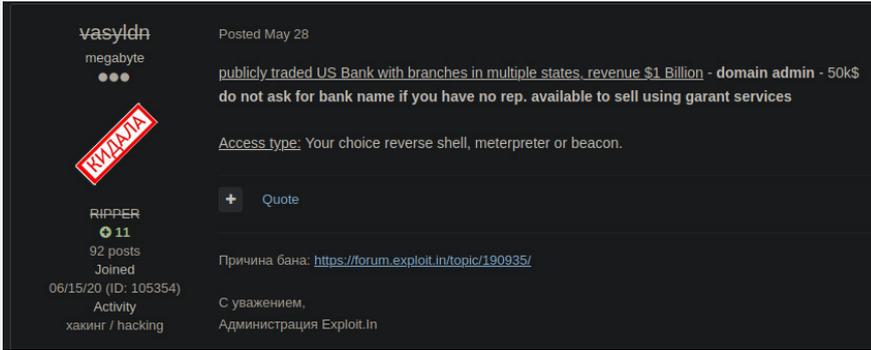
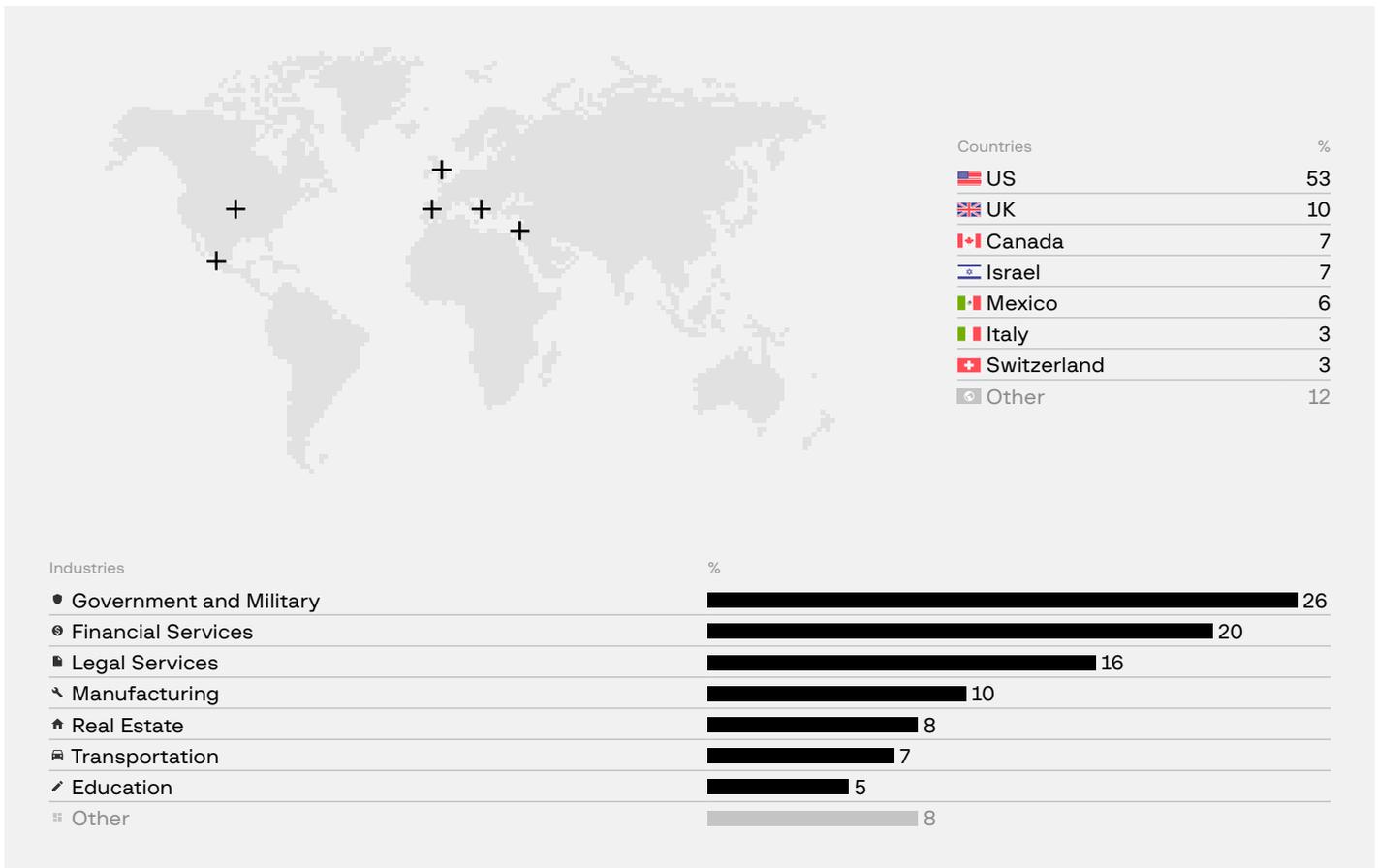


Fig. 30. Vasyldn's post advertising a bank's access data for sale

It is not entirely clear how vasyldn gained access to the corporate networks. What we do know is that the criminal used current domain admin account data to gain initial access.

An analysis of the hacker's activity revealed that vasyldn used Cobalt Strike to achieve persistence in networks, as well as alternative authentication methods (including pass-the-ticket and golden tickets) to move laterally across the network. In one of their posts, the attacker explicitly said that they had used ransomware within an unspecified network.

The chart below shows that vasyldn attacked companies mainly in the US, the UK, and Canada.



ATT&CK Matrix for Enterprise (vasylDn)

TACTICS	TECHNIQUES	DETAILS
Initial access	External Remote Services (T1133)	The threat actor relied on RDP, VPN, and SSH to access corporate networks.
Execution	Command and Scripting Interpreter (T1059)	The threat actor indicated that they could provide access via Meterpreter and a reverse shell.
Credential access	Steal or Forge Kerberos Tickets: Golden Ticket (T1558.001)	The threat actor posted an ad claiming they were selling access with a Kerberos Golden Ticket (krbtgt) hash.
Discovery	Account Discovery (T1087)	The threat actor provided information about the number of hosts on the victim's network.
Command and Control	Ingress Tool Transfer (T1105)	The threat actor could have used Meterpreter or CSB to install a RAT on a victim's PC.
Impact	Data Encrypted for Impact (T1486)	The threat actor used encryption ransomware.

Drumrlu

📁 Active	May 2020 — present
👤 Number of victims	50 companies
🌐 Attack geography	22 countries
💰 Estimated earnings	\$180,000

Drumrlu, also known as **3lv4n**, is a database supplier and broker of initial access who is thought to be based in Turkey. Drumrlu was first seen on dark-web forums in May 2020. The threat actor started out by selling a database of private data relating to 500,000 Saudi nationals.

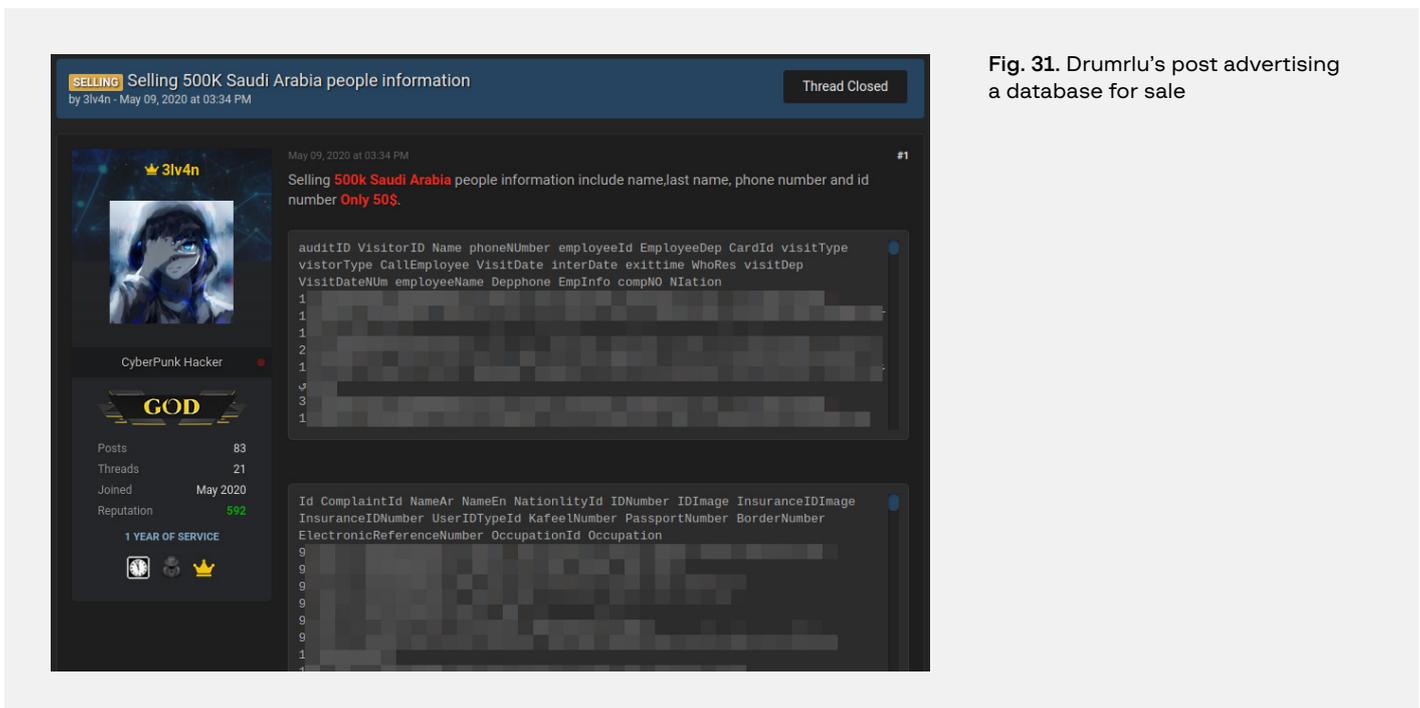


Fig. 31. Drumrlu’s post advertising a database for sale

In addition to selling personal data, Drumrlu was seen on forums discussing vulnerabilities with other users. For example, Drumrlu suggested that someone should look into CVE-2018-14847, a critical WinBox vulnerability giving read and write access to random files due to a directory traversal vulnerability in the WinBox interface, which can be used to compromise an ISP. The threat actor also attempted to sell an exploit for the remote code execution vulnerability CVE-2020-0688 in Microsoft Exchange servers.

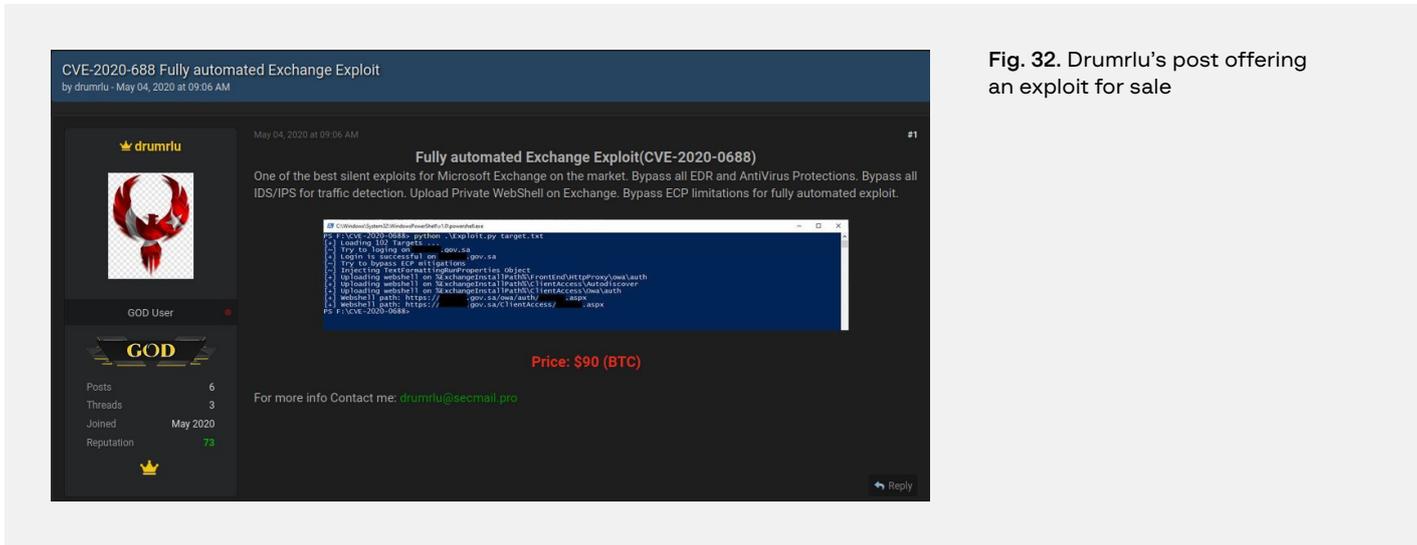


Fig. 32. Drumrlu’s post offering an exploit for sale

Drumrlu has also likely worked with Nosophoros, the developer of Thanos. The two forum users have been seen praising each other’s work on several occasions.

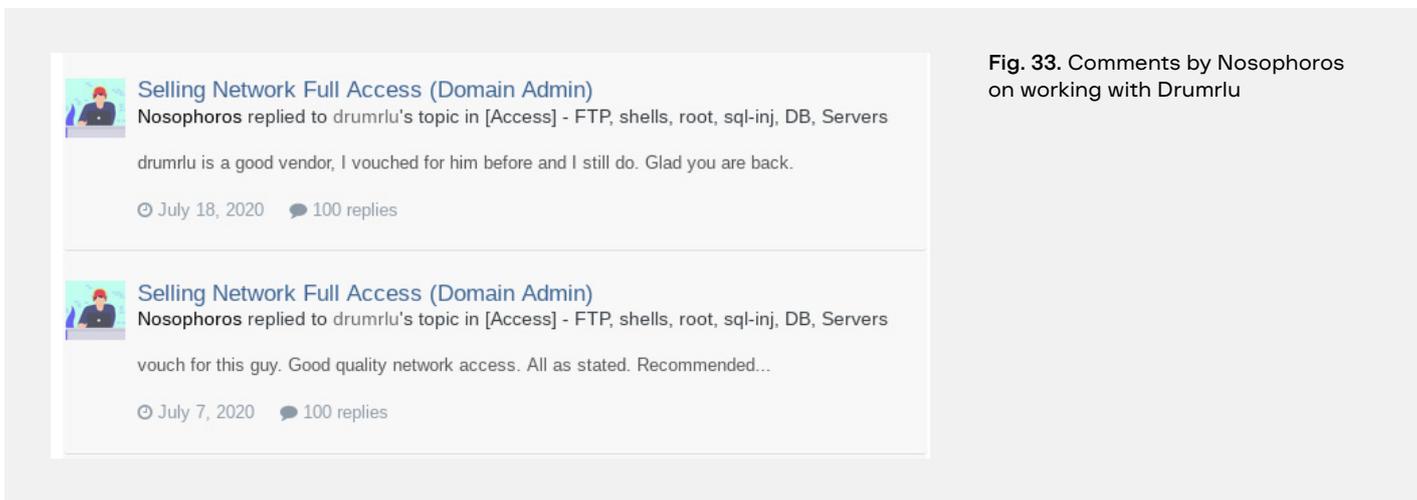


Fig. 33. Comments by Nosophoros on working with Drumrlu

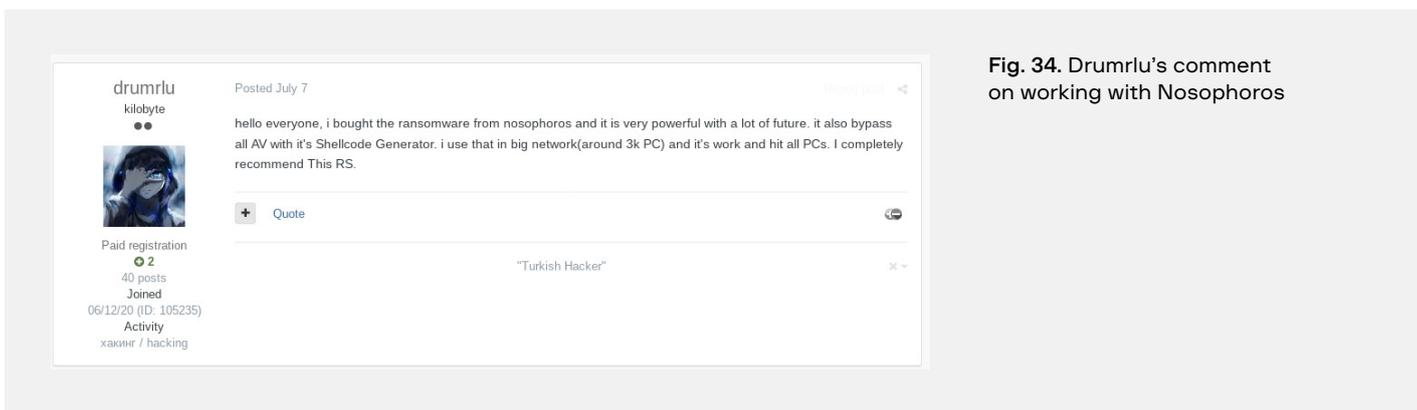
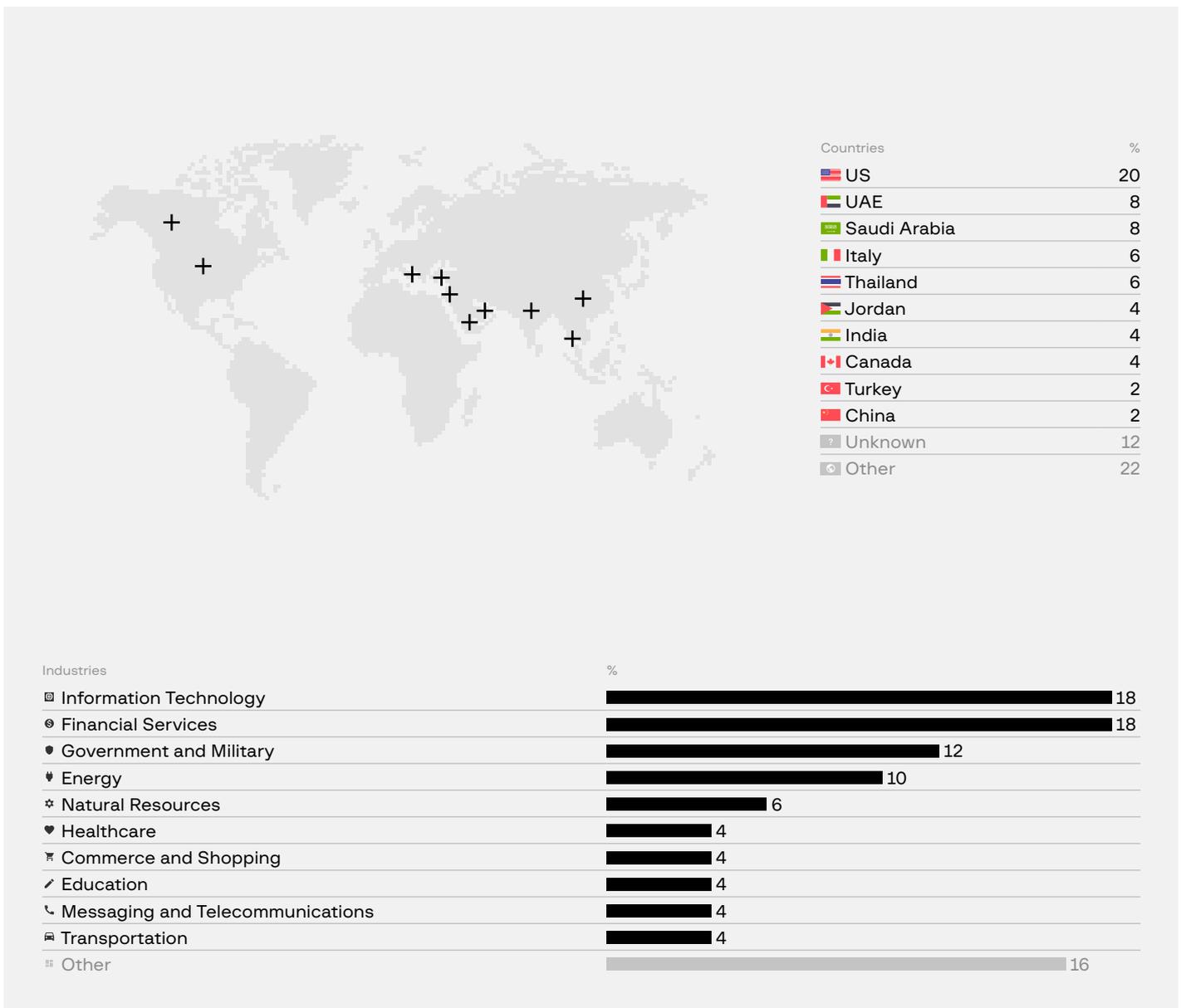


Fig. 34. Drumrlu’s comment on working with Nosophoros

Drumrlu’s use of ransomware is further corroborated by a team of researchers at **Intel 471**, who published a report stating that the hacker was presumably working for the Iranian government. According to the report, ransomware was deployed at several organizations a few months after the comment above was posted. Research findings indicate that the TTPs used by Drumrlu are similar to those used by MuddyWater, an APT group that works for the Iranian government.

Drumrlu obtains data using various methods. Group-IB has identified some of them based on the threat actor’s posts, in which the criminal claims to have obtained data either by using malware or directly from the victim’s network. In their earlier for-sale posts, Drumrlu mainly offered access to ESXi and AD servers. Based on Drumrlu’s price quotes, the threat actor could have made approximately **\$180,000**.

The chart below shows that most of Drumrlu’s victims are based in the US, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia.



ATT&CK Matrix for Enterprise (drumrlu)

TACTICS	TECHNIQUES	DETAILS
Initial access	External Remote Services (T1133)	The threat actor used VPN and Citrix accounts to access networks.
	Exploit Public-Facing Application (T1190)	The threat actor offered an exploit for the Microsoft Exchange vulnerability CVE-2020-0688.
Execution	Command and Scripting Interpreter: Visual Basic (T1059.005)	The threat actor used malicious Office document files with macros.
Persistence	Server Software Component: Web Shell (T1505.003)	The threat actor offered web shells for sale.
Credential Access	OS Credential Dumping: NTDS (T1003.003)	The threat actor advertised NTDS files for sale.
Discovery	Account Discovery: Domain Account (T1087.002)	The threat actor provided an LDAP screenshot showing information about users of corporate network domains.
Impact	Data Encrypted for Impact (T1486)	The threat actor posted a review about Thanos ransomware.

denis2363

📁 Active	August 2020 — present
👤 Number of victims	50+ companies
🌐 Attack geography	4 countries
💰 Estimated earnings	\$160,000

The individual who goes by **denis2363** started out on the forum Exploit on November 3, 2015, and continues to actively sell access data today.

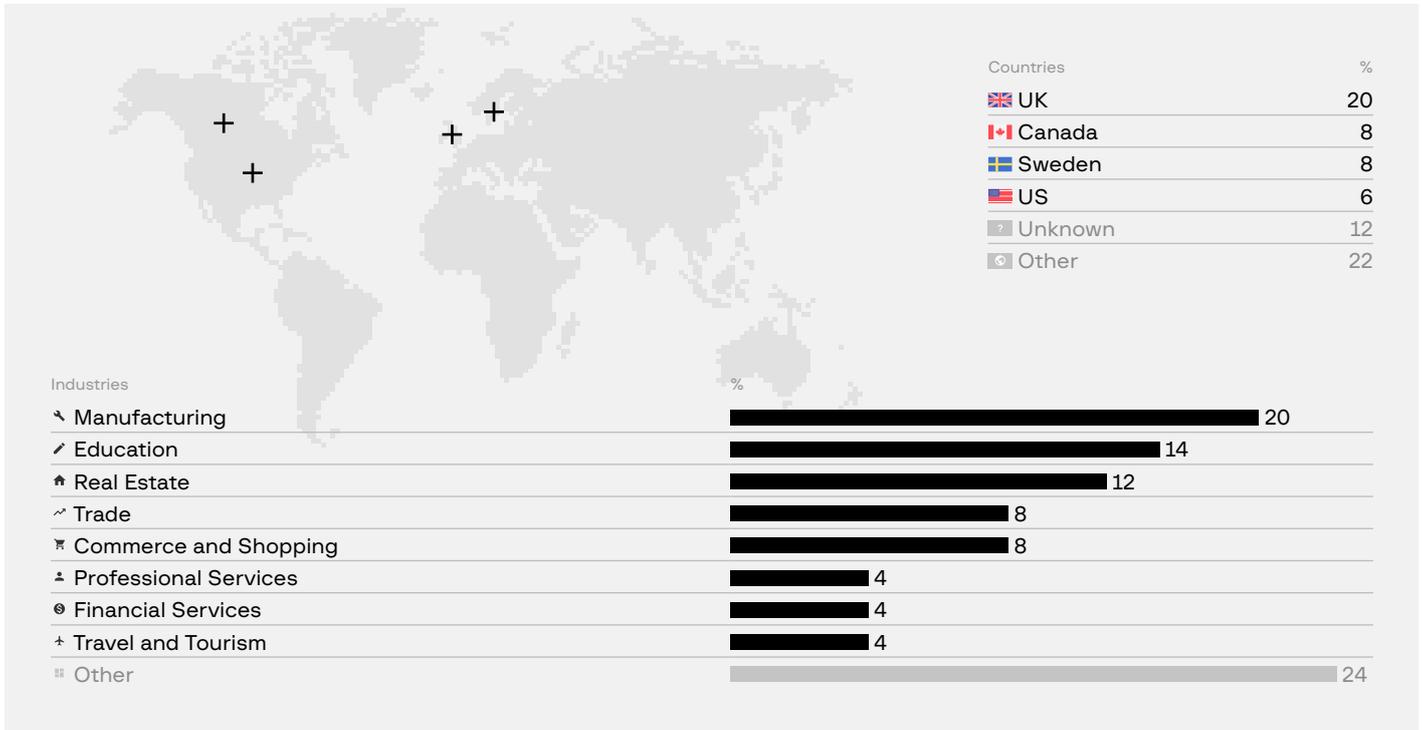
On August 9, 2020, denis2363 posted their first ad offering access data for a game developer, setting the price at \$25,000. Later that day, denis2363 lowered the price to **\$5,000**, and on August 26 the threat actor left a comment in their for-sale thread claiming that the access data had been sold.

The screenshot shows a forum post by user denis2363. The post title is "Access to one of the most renowned game publishers and developers". The post content reads: "There is an access to the account of the one famous cloud service of a very famous gaming company. Once it was one of the largest in the world, now it is also well-known. 29 servers, 28 mysql databases and other data are available. Games on google play, steam, the latest game has 10+ million downloads on google play. Start: \$ 25000 Blitz: \$ 50,000". The post includes a "Quote" button and a "Report post" link. The user profile for denis2363 is visible, showing they have 3 users, 23 posts, and joined on 11/03/15 (ID: 64806).

Fig. 35. A post by denis2363 offering access for sale

After analyzing denis2363’s public activity, we concluded that they had exploited the BlueKeep, EternalBlue, and PrintNightmare vulnerabilities during some attacks. The threat actor identified vulnerable hosts by scanning open IP addresses and used **Shodan** to do so, among several other methods.

The threat actor has victims in many sectors, but most are in manufacturing, education, and real estate.



ATT&CK Matrix for Enterprise (denis2363)

TACTICS	TECHNIQUES	DETAILS
Reconnaissance	Active Scanning: Vulnerability Scanning (T1595.001)	The threat actor scanned IP addresses for signs of vulnerable services.
Initial Access	Exploit Public-Facing Application (T1190)	The threat actor exploited vulnerabilities in Citrix and FortiGate to gain access.
	External Remote Services (T1133)	The threat actor used VPN and Citrix accounts to access networks.
	Valid Accounts: Domain Accounts (T1078.002)	The threat actor used compromised domain accounts to access networks.
	Valid Accounts: Local Accounts (T1078.003)	The threat actor used compromised local accounts to access networks.
Persistence	Create Account: Local Account (T1136.001)	The threat actor mentioned creating a local admin account to achieve persistence in networks.
	Hijack Execution Flow: DLL Side-Loading (T1574.002)	The threat actor took advantage of DLL Side-Loading to exploit a vulnerability called PrintNightmare.

TACTICS	TECHNIQUES	DETAILS
Discovery	Network Share Discovery (T1135)	The threat actor used shared folders to exploit the vulnerability called PrintNightmare.
	Account Discovery (T1087)	The threat actor provided information about the number of hosts on the victim's network.
Lateral Movement	Exploitation of Remote Services (T1210)	The threat actor used the BlueKeep and EternalBlue vulnerabilities to move through networks.

Pshmm

📁 Active	July 2020 — present
👤 Number of victims	85+ companies
🌐 Attack geography	19 countries
💰 Estimated earnings	\$300,000

An English-speaking hacker using the alias **pshmm** was first seen on forums in early 2020 and was still active in October 2021.

Pshmm started their illegal activities by selling access to a US-based healthcare company’s network domain controller.

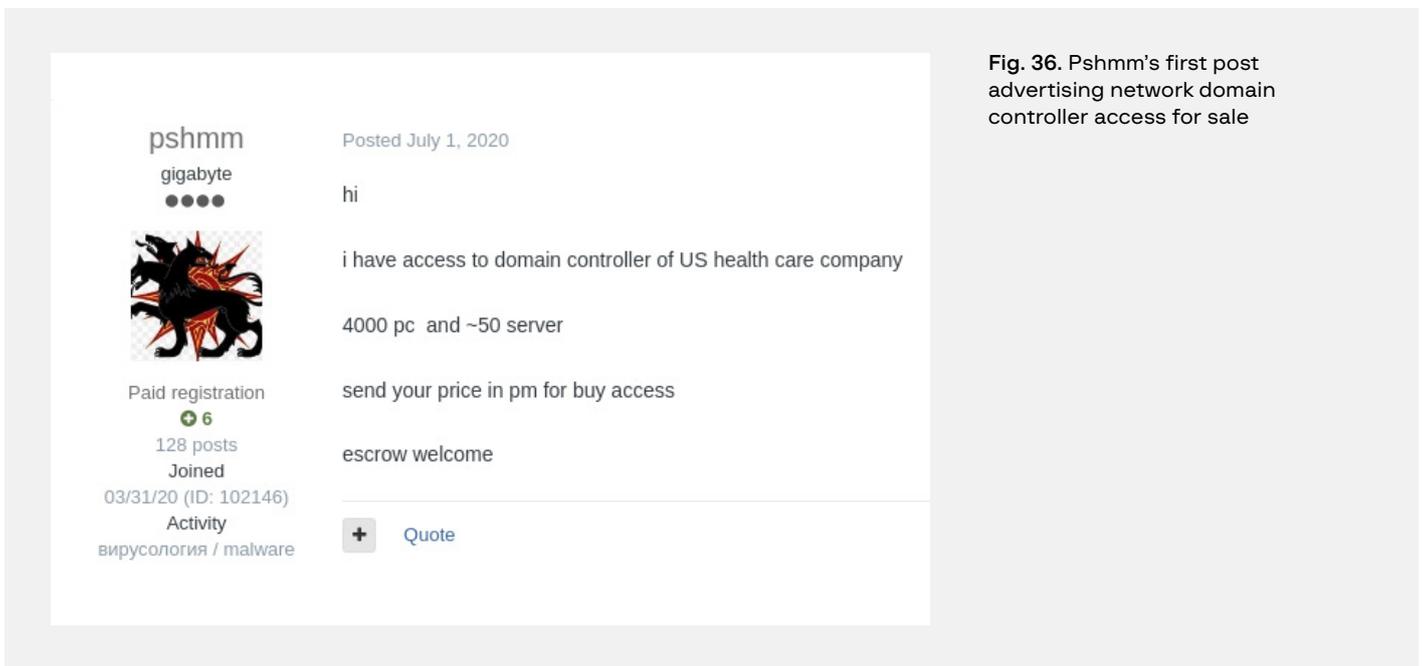


Fig. 36. Pshmm's first post advertising network domain controller access for sale

The day after creating an Exploit forum account, pshmm started a dedicated thread that they later used to post ads about access data for sale. The threat actor sold data belonging to more than 85 companies in 19 different industries across 19 countries.

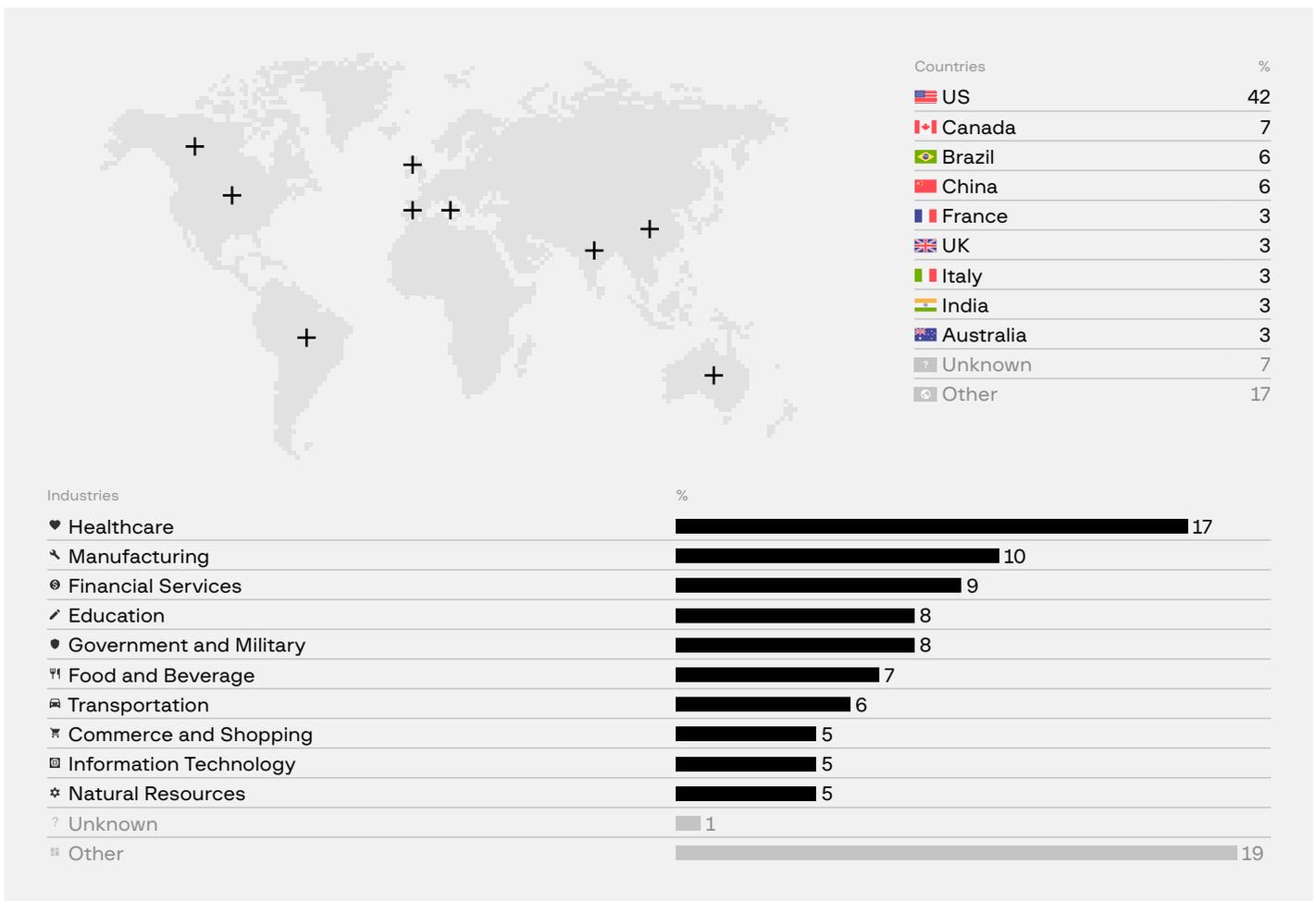
Although pshmm started out by selling access to network domain controllers that they had presumably infiltrated via RDP, the threat actor also claimed to have gained access to compromised networks by using corporate remote monitoring and management (RMM) software.

We know that pshmm used Zoho ManageEngine Desktop Central (software for centralized control over PCs and mobile devices on local networks) as a network access point. The software enables users (usually IT professionals) to perform remote operations such as deploying third-party software, configuring and setting policies, and— most importantly— launching custom scripts.

In January 2020, an RCE vulnerability was identified in Desktop Central but it remained unpatched for two months. The vulnerability enabled attackers to execute a series of commands of their choice with SYSTEM privileges without the need for authentication. Security researchers noted that this vulnerability was actively exploited, even after the official patch was released in March 2020. It is highly likely that pshmm exploited it.

As can be seen from the figure below, pshmm, like many other IABs we have looked at, has focused on the United States, which account for 42% of all of their victims.

Based on how the threat actor’s attacks are distributed by industry, it seems that pshmm was focused on the healthcare sector, including hospitals and healthcare organizations, followed by manufacturers and financial service companies. Pshmm seems not to have a clear sequence of action when attacking an organization. Judging by the threat actor’s activity, they were not focused on a particular country or industry for mass attacks, instead targeting whoever they could to make profit.



As for profits, given the access price quotes in the threat actor’s posts, they could potentially have earned more than \$300,000. Based on updates announcing the sale of access to certain buyers, it is safe to assume that pshmm made around \$65,000 in guaranteed proceeds from selling unauthorized access.

ATT&CK Matrix for Enterprise (pshmm)

TACTICS	TECHNIQUES	DETAILS
Reconnaissance	Active Scanning (T1595)	The threat actor scanned devices running public RDP services.
Initial access	External Remote Services (T1133)	The threat actor used RDP and VPN accounts to access networks.
	Valid Accounts: Domain Accounts (T1078.002)	The threat actor used compromised domain accounts to access networks.
	Valid Accounts: Local Accounts (T1078.003)	The threat actor used compromised local accounts to access networks.
Credential access	Brute Force (T1110)	The threat actor used the brute-force search technique to access RDP accounts.
Discovery	Remote System Discovery (T1018)	The threat actor scanned the target environments for network domain controllers and remote services.
	File and Directory Discovery (T1083)	The threat actor mentioned specific files on a victim’s file server.
	Network Share Discovery (T1135)	The threat actor mentioned specific files on a victim’s file server.
	Account Discovery (T1087)	The threat actor provided information on the number of hosts on the victim’s network.
Collection	Email Collection: Remote Email Collection (T1114.002)	The threat actor sold access data, including for Exchange servers.
	Data from Network Shared Drive (T1039)	The threat actor sold data obtained from a file server.

SHERIFF

📅 Active	April 2020 — March 2021
👤 Number of victims	30+ companies
🌐 Attack geography	5 countries
💰 Estimated earnings	\$837,800

Another broker of initial access to corporate networks is an infamous Russian-speaking forum user known as **SHERIFF**, who focuses on financial service organizations. The broker first became active on the Exploit dark-web forum in 2017. SHERIFF was last seen on the forums as an active seller in March 2021.

The threat actor started out in the card theft business, selling data dumps of bank cards, databases and gift cards until 2019.

From early 2019, SHERIFF moved on to gaining access to vulnerable websites using tools such as the SIB service, X-MapAdmin, and OWASP ZAP. The hacker then started selling access to admin consoles and databases. Nearly all their victims were US-based online stores. Moreover, in 2020 the threat actor actively exploited RCE vulnerabilities linked to the Citrix RDP protocol.

In April 2020, SHERIFF advertised access to a major IT company (which may have been an MSP). The threat actor’s post suggested that the company had customers in architecture, construction, financial consulting, and the maritime and aviation industries, as well as in several banks, with one based in Switzerland.

Fig. 37. SHERIFF’s first post offering access for sale

The screenshot shows a forum post on a platform with a header for 'IT service company maintaining of 60 networks' by user SHERIFF, dated April 6, 2020. The post content describes access to an IT support company with 60 networks and 1200 desktops, listing various clients like a bank of Switzerland, architectural firms, and event agencies. It also mentions server counts, revenue figures (\$5 billion and \$18 billion), and details about the auction process, including a \$200,000 start price and a 24-hour deadline after the last bid.

In the same month, SHERIFF created another post offering 20 sets of access credentials to corporate servers. Since the description was similar to information in their earlier post, we have reason to believe that the hacker had gained access to the networks belonging to the IT company's clients. It is also unclear whether any of the access credentials were actually sold.

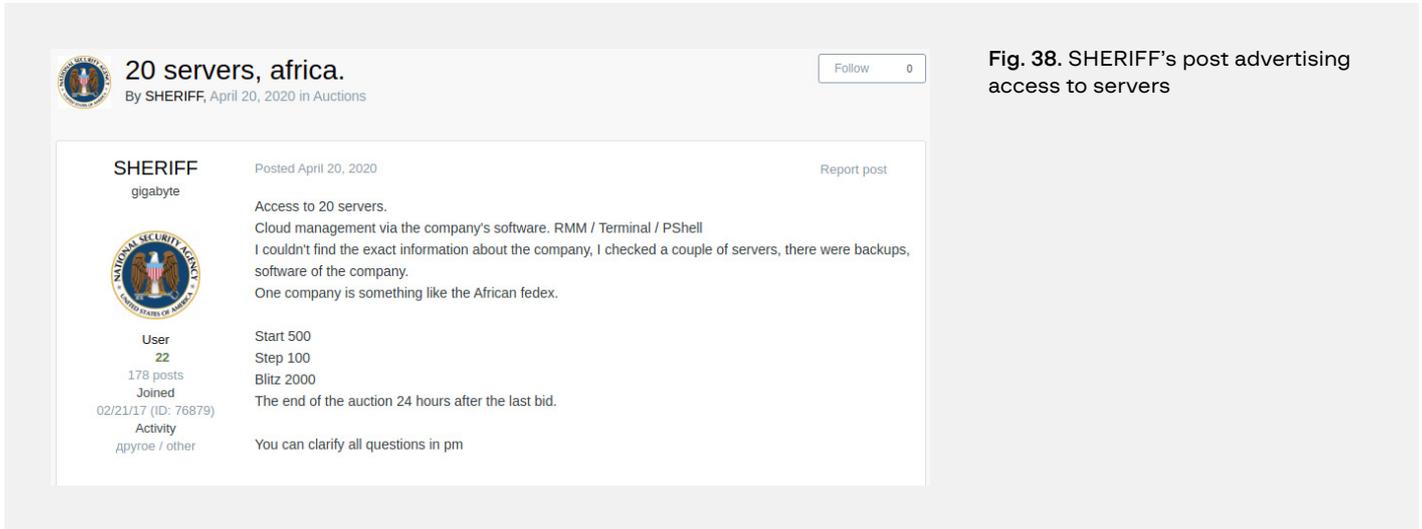


Fig. 38. SHERIFF's post advertising access to servers

In August 2019, SHERIFF started a topic on the forum asking other users to suggest ways to monetize data from an investment website that contained IBAN, BIC and SWIFT codes. The threat actor put the data up for sale two days later, asking for **\$35,000**.

Further suggesting that SHERIFF focuses on the financial services industry, the threat actor's victims included a POS terminal manufacturer. According to a message from September 16, 2019, the manufacturer serves major US corporations, colleges, and hotels. Moreover, the message author said that hackers could change the customer IP port of payment processing terminals in the victim's admin console to intercept data.

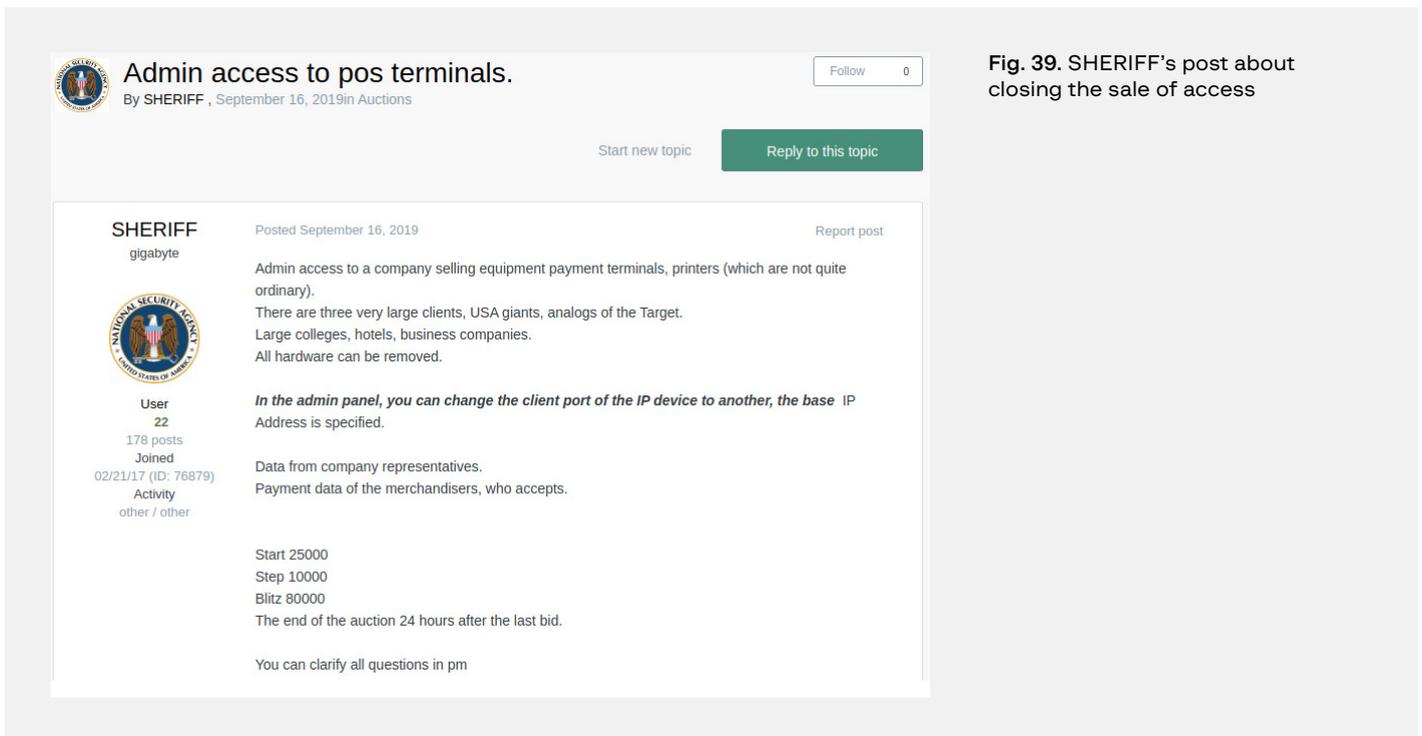


Fig. 39. SHERIFF's post about closing the sale of access

SHERIFF actively sought potential business partners and collaborators on underground forums. The threat actor also tried to purchase data (gathered by information stealers) from other participants at auctions. For example, SHERIFF attended an auction for selling “logs” of compromised data obtained using the AZORult stealer.

One of SHERIFF’s most notable activities was their partnership with members of the hacker group **REvil**. The latter repeatedly purchased access data from SHERIFF, using **UNKN** and **unknown** as their aliases, which are known to belong to REvil members, who use similarly named ransomware in their cyberattacks.

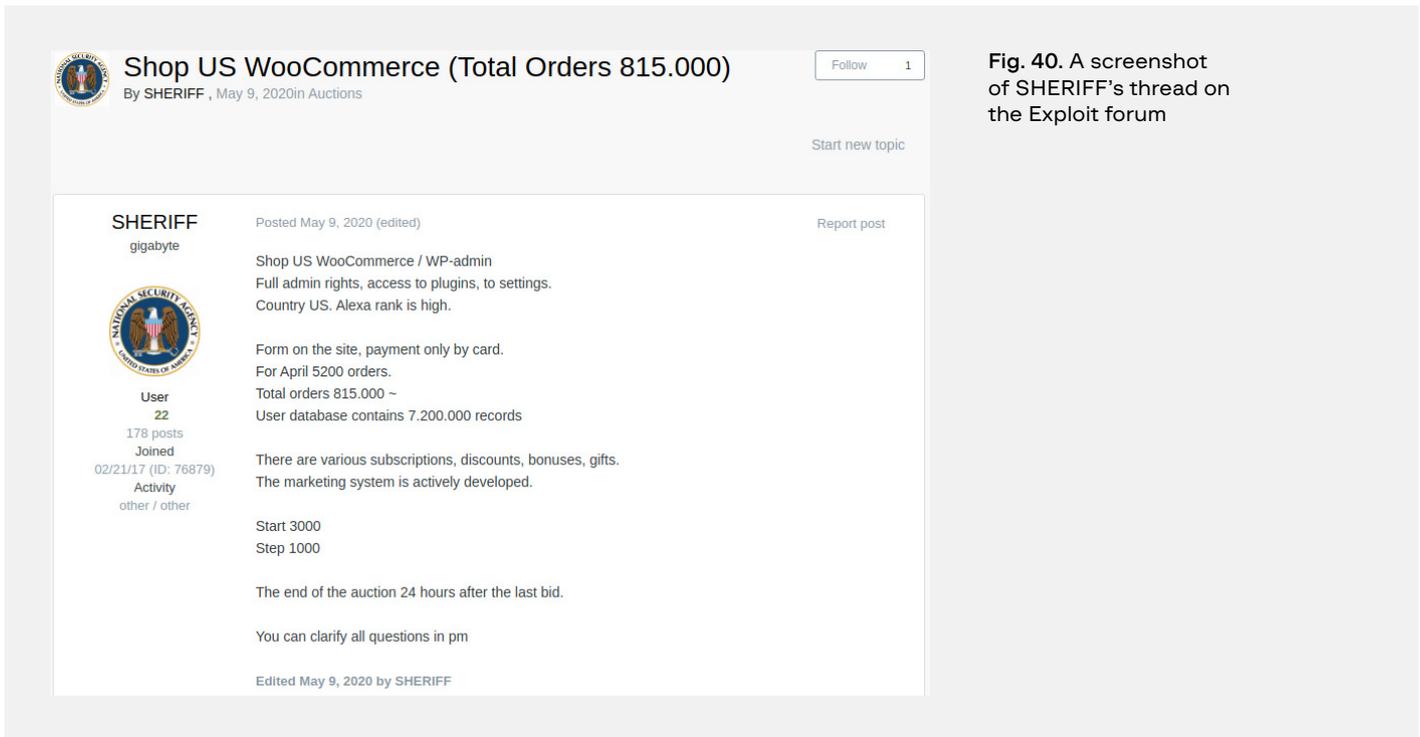


Fig. 40. A screenshot of SHERIFF’s thread on the Exploit forum

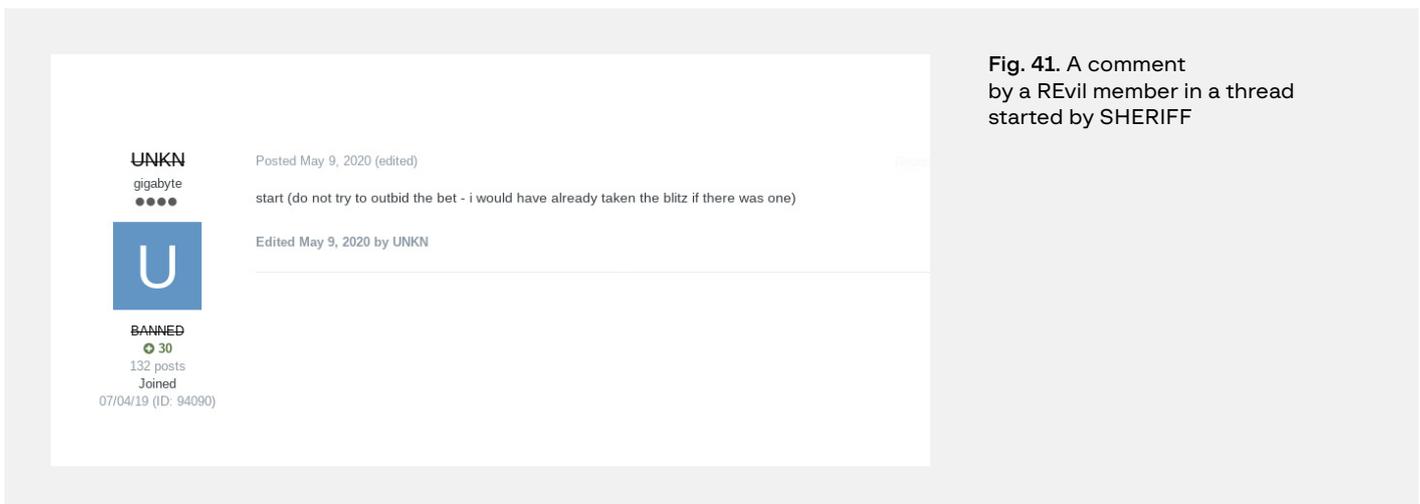
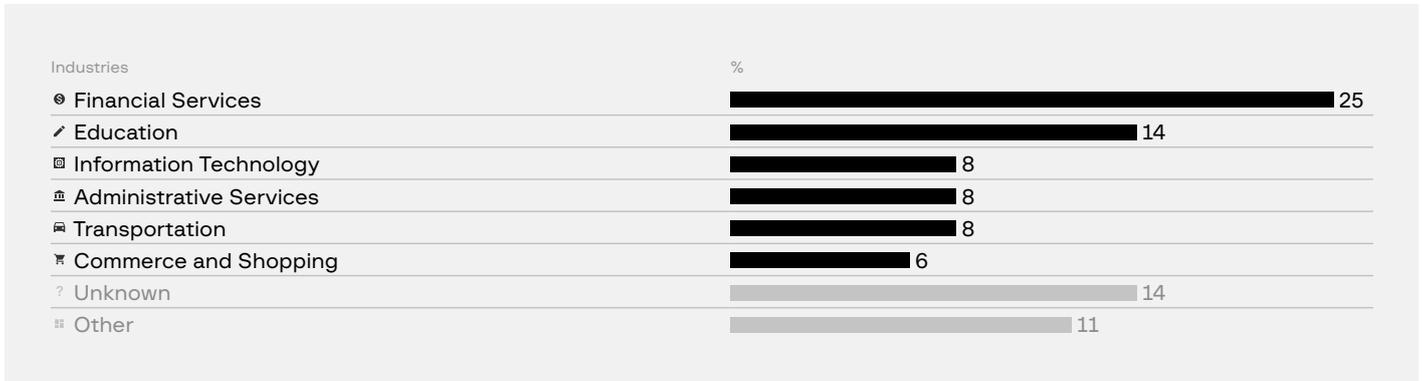


Fig. 41. A comment by a REvil member in a thread started by SHERIFF

In 2020-2021, SHERIFF advertised 33 sets of access credentials for corporate networks. It is impossible to be absolutely certain how much the threat actor made from selling the data because most of the threads do not contain comments confirming the sale. Group-IB Threat Intelligence experts estimate that they could have made at least **\$837,800**.

SHERIFF rarely specified what countries their victims were based in, so it is impossible to be sure which countries the threat actor attacked most often. From the information SHERIFF did provide in their posts, we can reasonably conclude that they focused on companies based in Asia and the US, with some victims based in Europe, Australia, and Canada.

The chart below breaks down SHERIFF’s attacks by industry.



It is impossible to identify the countries SHERIFF focused on most often, as the threat actor never provided detailed information about the access data they were selling.

ATT&CK Matrix for Enterprise (SHERIFF)

TACTICS	TECHNIQUES	DETAILS
Reconnaissance	Active Scanning: Vulnerability Scanning (T1595.002)	The threat actor scanned websites for vulnerabilities (using X-MapAdmin).
Initial access	External Remote Services (T1133)	The threat actor sold Citrix and RDP access data.
	Valid Accounts (T1078)	The threat actor used compromised accounts to obtain access to remote services and websites.
Credential access	Brute Force (T1110)	The threat actor sold account access data obtained through brute-force attacks.
Discovery	Account Discovery (T1087)	The threat actor provided information on the number of hosts on the victim’s network.
Command and Control	Remote Access Software (T1219)	The threat actor took advantage of hidden TeamViewer.

Nei (aka Rakuda)

📅 Active	March 2021 - present
👤 Number of victims	55 companies
🌐 Attack geography	7 countries
💰 Estimated earnings	\$24,000 — \$36,000

Nei (aka **Rakuda** and **Asatru**) is a threat actor who focuses on selling VPN-RDP access data. Nei has been active on the forums Exploit and XSS since March 2021. The threat actor’s most recent activity was in October 2021.

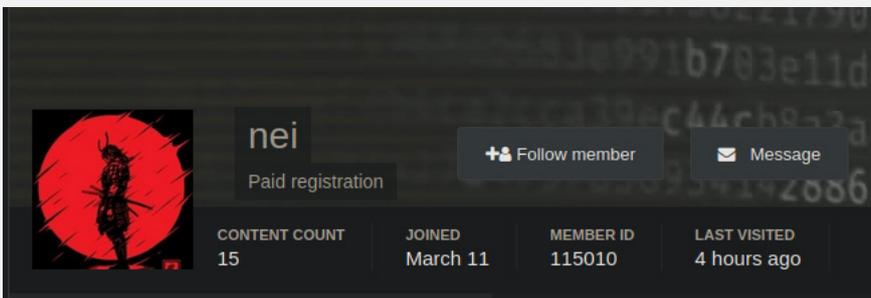


Fig. 42. Nei's profile on Exploit

In addition to selling access data on Exploit, Nei also actively takes part in discussions with other cybercriminals on XSS. For example, the threat actor left comments with tips on bypassing anti-fraud systems and attacking websites.

In published threads, Nei indicated that 42 of the 55 sets of access credentials they had put up for sale were sold. Although the threat actor’s prices are lower than other brokers, Group-IB experts estimate that Nei’s proceeds amount to between **\$24,000 and \$36,000**.

It is not 100% certain what methods Nei has used to gain access to corporate networks. What we do know is that they have used tools such as Masscan to identify large pools of new potential victims. This suggests that the threat actor actively searches for open RDP and VPN servers worldwide.

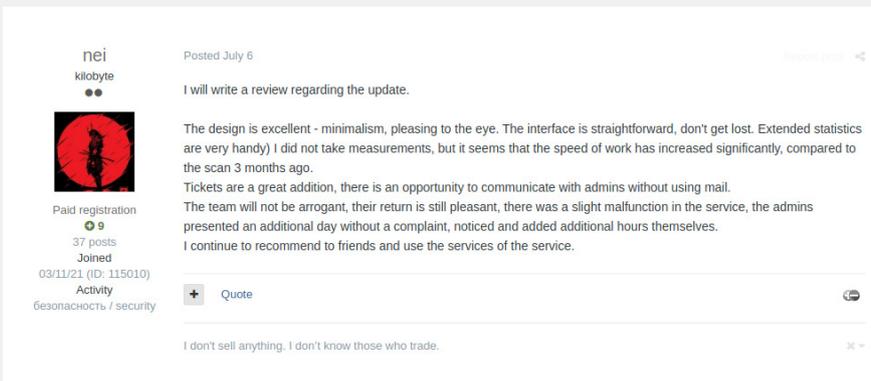
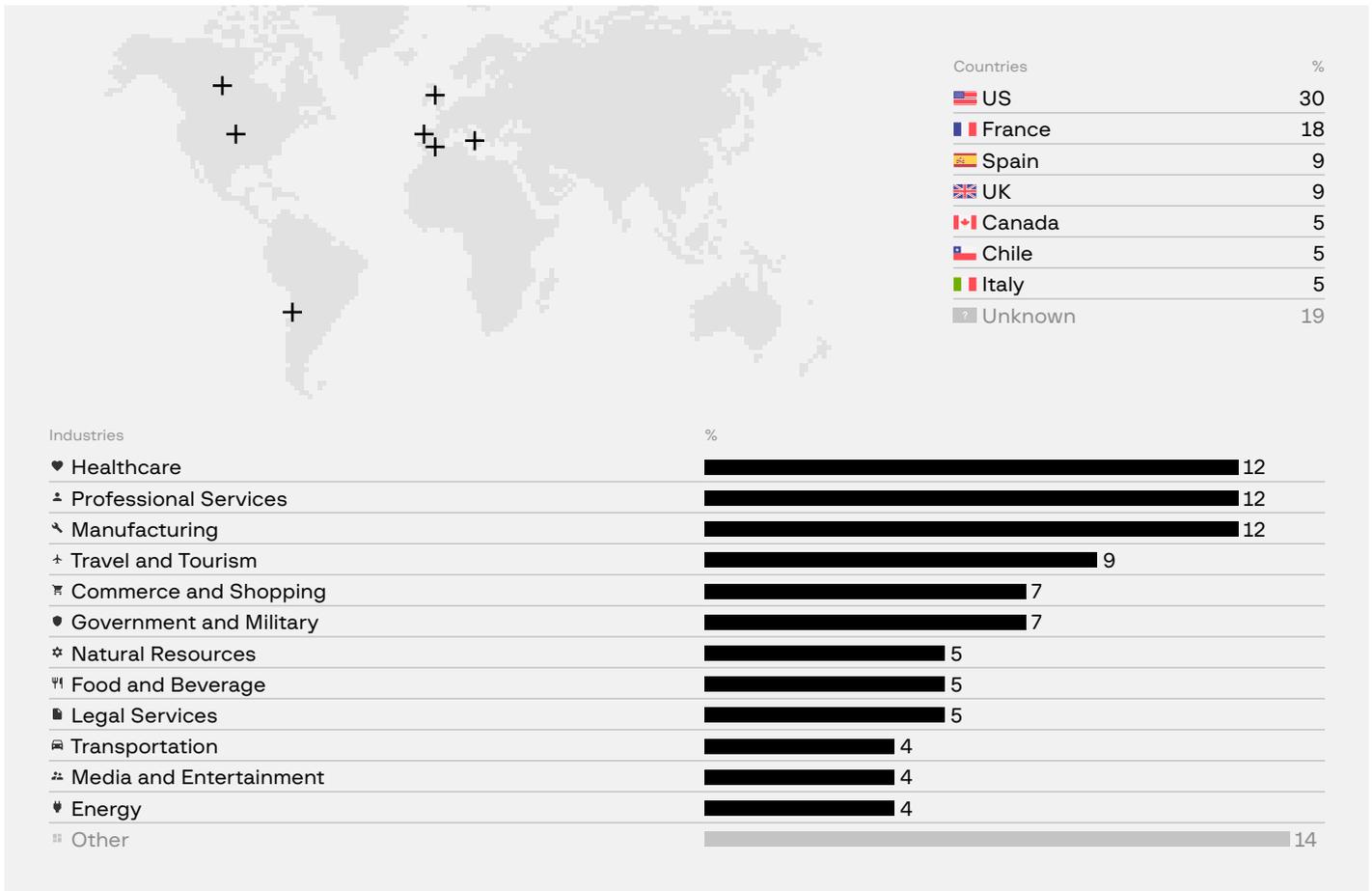


Fig. 43. Nei's comment in a thread discussing Masscan updates

After creating an account on XSS, Nei repeatedly expressed interest in new information stealer malware that was becoming available, including by taking part in discussions about Raccoon Stealer.

In the diagram below, Nei’s attacks are broken down by industry. The threat actor focused on healthcare providers, service companies, and manufacturers. Another main category was “Other,” which includes companies whose sectors have not been identified.

A breakdown of Nei’s victims by country shows that the threat actor focused on companies based in the US and France, which account for half of their victims.



ATT&CK Matrix for Enterprise (Nei)

TACTICS	TECHNIQUES	DETAILS
Reconnaissance	Active Scanning: Scanning IP Blocks (T1595.001)	The threat actor used Masscan to search for open ports.
Initial access	Exploit Public-Facing Application (T1190)	The threat actor looked for vulnerabilities on WordPress websites.
	External Remote Services (T1133)	The threat actor used RDP and VPN to access corporate networks.
Execution	User Execution: Malicious File (T1204.002)	The threat actor relied on malware to obtain compromised user account data.

TACTICS	TECHNIQUES	DETAILS
Credential access	OS Credential Dumping (T1003)	The threat actor relied on malware to obtain compromised user account data.
Discovery	Account Discovery (T1087)	The threat actor provided information about the number of hosts on the victim's network.

network

Active	November 2019 — May 2020
Number of victims	54 companies
Attack geography	17 countries
Estimated earnings	\$400,000

The user hiding behind the alias **network** was another IAB who was active on Exploit between November 2019 and May 2020.

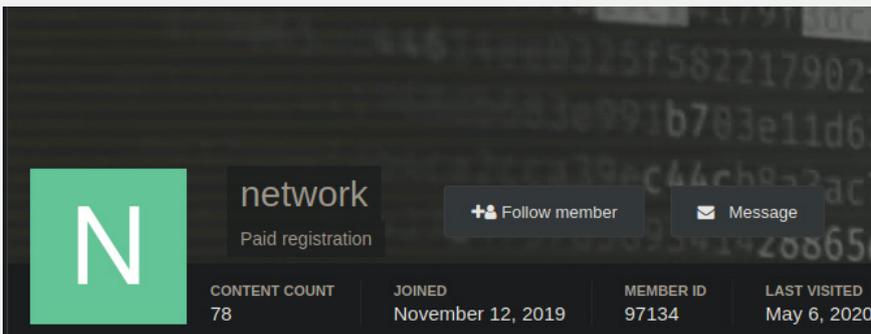
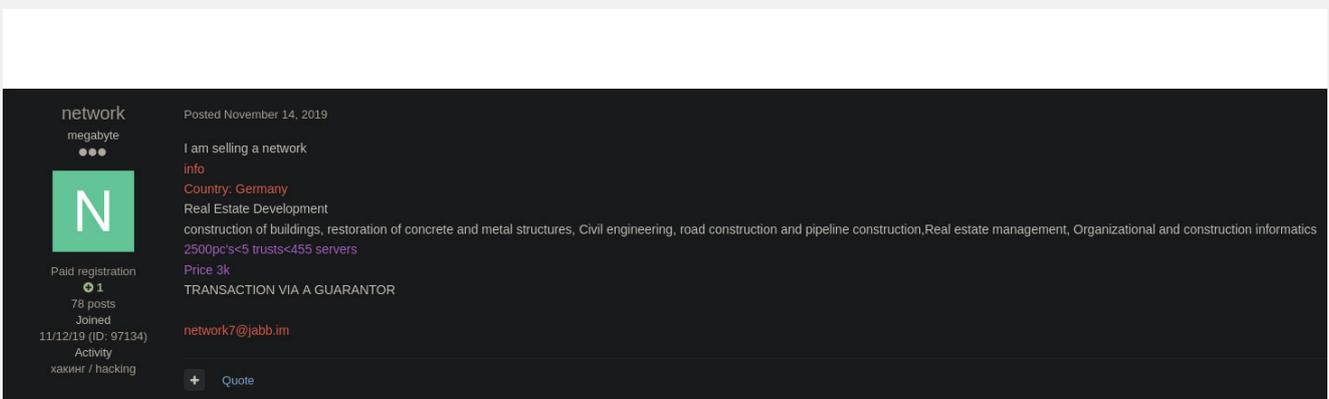


Fig. 44. Network's profile on Exploit

Network posted their first access ad just two days after creating their account, on November 14, 2019. The threat actor advertised access to a German real estate company for \$3,000.

Fig. 45. Screenshot of network's first post offering access for sale



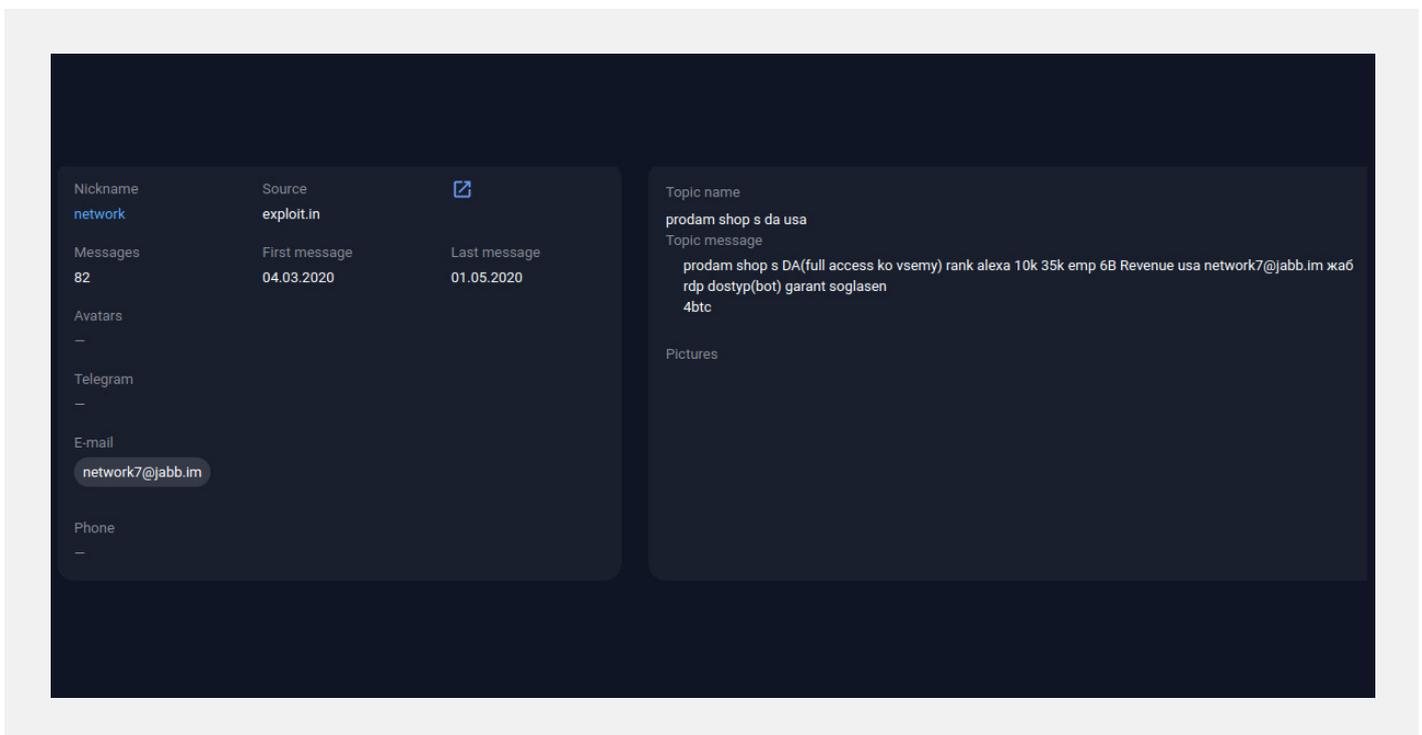
The IAB consistently posted ads in small batches of three to four per day. They usually sold two types of access: domain admin accounts and session access, which could indicate that the threat actor relied on Cobalt Strike or Armitage to obtain data.

After 12 months of nearly constant activity, network abruptly stopped posting on May 1. The threat actor’s last sale involved access to a US online store with \$6 billion in revenue. The post was later deleted from the forum.

Unlike other brokers, network did not indicate in their threads whether the access credentials had been sold or not; the threat actor deleted their forum posts from time to time. This could mean that access either was sold or became unavailable.

However, even though the author deleted their posts, the posts are still available through Group-IB Threat Intelligence & Attribution. Group-IB TI&A helps find out exactly how many sets of access credentials for corporate networks the threat actor put up for sale. Group-IB’s system also made it possible to recover the message about the sale of access for the aforementioned US-based company. A screenshot of network’s message is provided below.

Fig. 46. Network’s message in Group-IB Threat Intelligence & Attribution

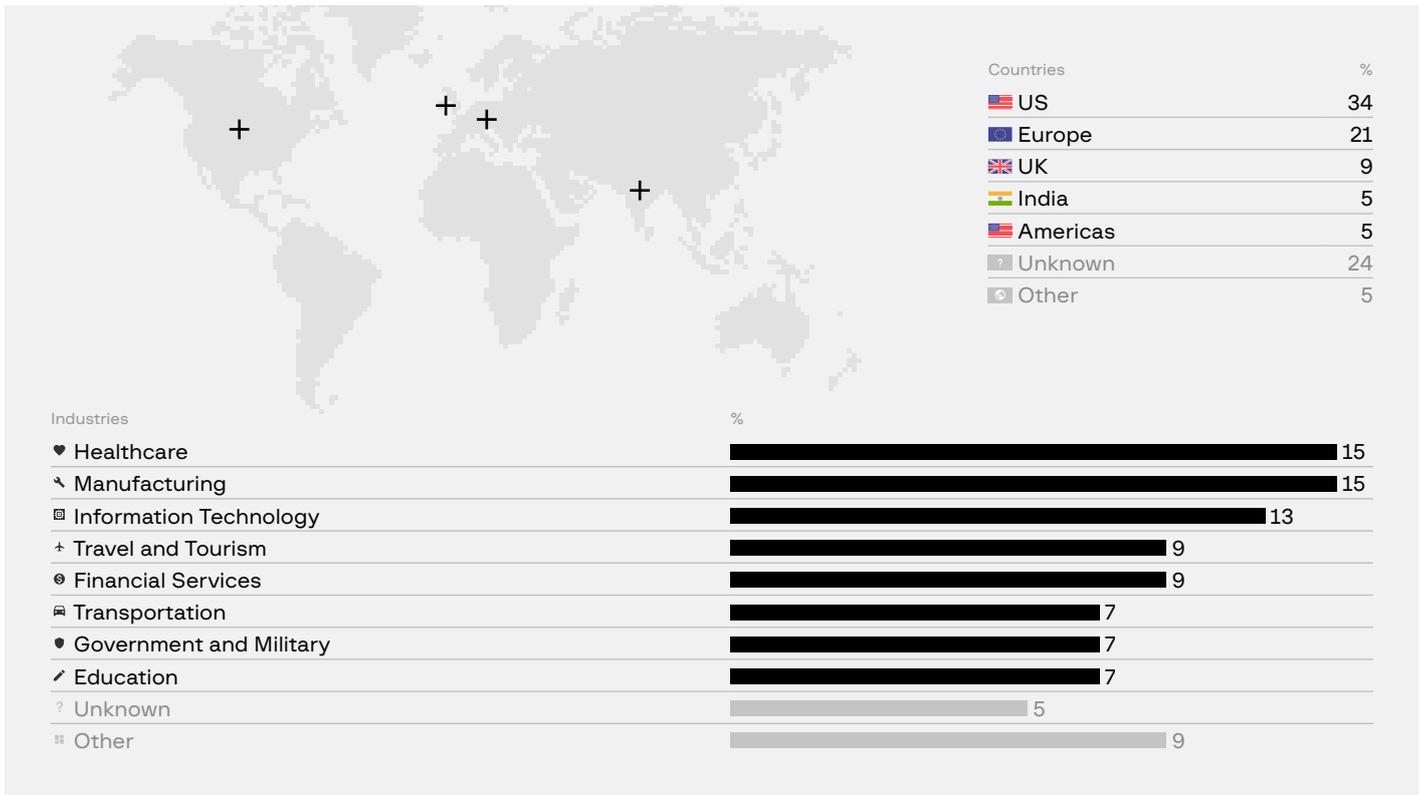


As noted above, network rarely announced when access had been sold, which makes their proceeds difficult to ascertain. Based solely on the price quotes, however, we can estimate that the overall value of the access credentials the threat actor put up for sale was more than **\$400,000**.

Although network’s career was brief (at least under that username), they managed to obtain access to more than 50 companies across 17 countries.

The figure below breaks down the threat actor’s victims by country. Looking at the country data, we can conclude that network mainly targeted the United States, followed by the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe. Moreover, many sets of access credentials could not be definitively attributed to a country and were therefore included in the “Unknown” category. The category accounts for a significant share of their posts at 21%.

Network mainly targeted the following sectors: healthcare, manufacturing, software development, and travel and tourism.



ATT&CK Matrix for Enterprise (Network)

TACTICS	TECHNIQUES	DETAILS
Initial access	External Remote Services (T1133)	The threat actor used RDP accounts to access networks.
Discovery	Account Discovery (T1087)	The threat actor provided information about the number of hosts on the victim's network.

barf

Active	December 2020 – May 2021
Number of victims	145 companies
Attack geography	9 countries
Estimated earnings	\$49,000

The user became active on underground forums in 2017 and continued posting until May 2021. From 2018, the hacker began posting ads selling RDP servers on other underground forums using **barf** as a username.

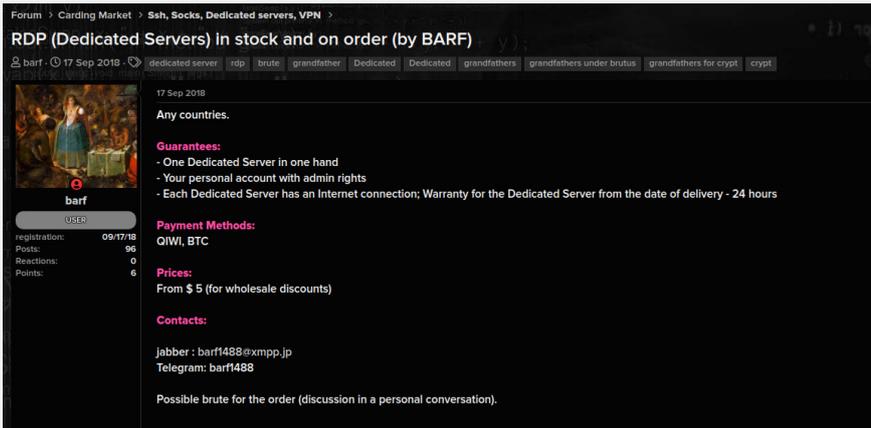


Fig. 47. One of barf's threads from 2018 selling dedicated servers

In January 2019, barf advertised a malware subscription for gaining SSH, RDP and VNC access through a brute-force attack created by z668, another threat actor active at the time. According to barf, they themselves had been using this specific malware for some time, but later changed their focus and thus stopped using the malware.

It is likely that barf switched to selling access credentials for corporate networks in July 2020, when they created an account on the popular underground forum Exploit. It was on this forum that the threat actor posted all their ads selling access credentials.

After creating an account, barf started a thread in which they said they were looking for a developer able to write software for brute-force RDP attacks that would check for access with admin permissions, the OS version, and other details.

The threat actor created their first thread selling network access on Exploit in December 2020. In their post, barf advertised access to a corporate network belonging to a US-based charity.



Fig. 48. Barf's first post about selling network access

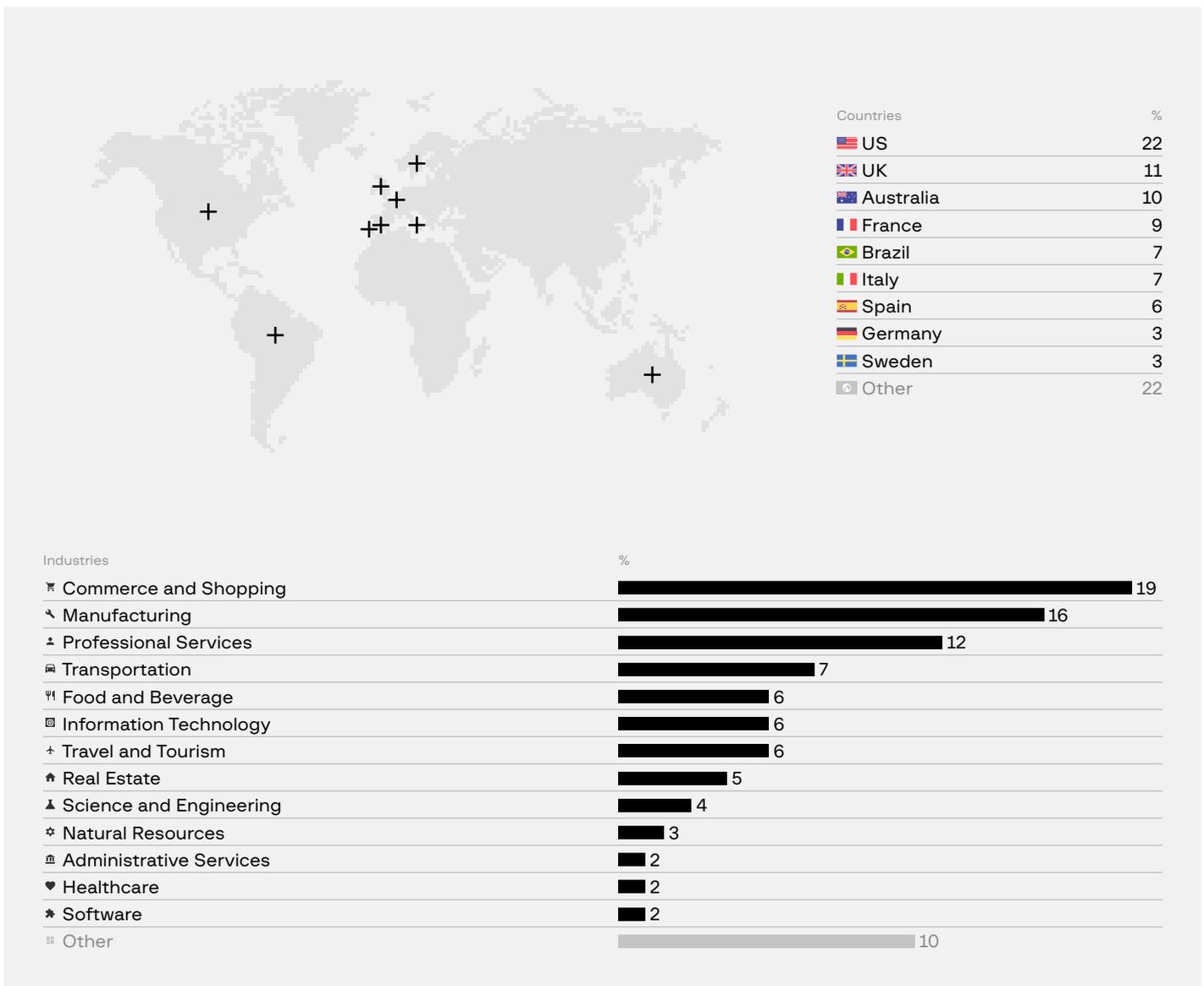
Unlike most other IABs, barf's posts often included the first two octets of their victims' IP addresses, which suggests that the threat actor might have been using an IP scanner.

Based on their forum activity, barf seems to focus on selling access to corporate networks using RDP only.

In the period spanning H2 2020 and H1 2021, barf was one of the most active sellers of access to corporate networks.

Throughout their active phase, barf posted for-sale ads for 145 instances of RDP access on Exploit. The chart below shows that most of barf’s victims are based in the US, followed by the UK and Australia. The “Other” category includes access credentials for companies based in other countries not shown in the chart. Each represents 2% or less of the total number of access offers made by barf.

The threat actor’s main industry focus appears to be retailers, manufacturers, and service industry players. However, it would be difficult to claim that barf was interested in any specific industry, given the sheer volume of their for-sale posts.



Barf’s lowest asking price was \$10 and the highest was \$5,000. We estimate that, throughout their active phase starting in December 2020, barf could have made approximately \$49,000 by selling RDP access to corporate networks.

The table below shows the TTPs that barf presumably used.

ATT&CK Matrix for Enterprise (barf)

Tactics	Techniques	Details
Reconnaissance	Active Scanning (T1595)	The threat actor scanned devices running public RDP services.
Initial access	External Remote Services (T1133)	The threat actor used RDP accounts to access networks.
Credential access	Brute Force (T1110)	The threat actor used malware for a brute-force attack on RDP.
	Brute Force: Credential Stuffing (T1110.004)	The threat actor presumably took advantage of previously compromised user accounts for a brute-force attack to gain access to corporate networks.
Discovery	Network Service Scanning (T1046)	The threat actor obtained information about Drake Software installed on the victim's host.
	Account Discovery (T1087)	The threat actor provided information about the number of hosts on the victim's network.

babam

📅 Active	May 2020 – September 2021
👤 Number of victims	37 companies
🌐 Attack geography	15 countries
💰 Estimated earnings	\$25,000

The hacker known as **babam** is one of the most well-known and prolific brokers of initial access to networks. The threat actor was first seen on Exploit on January 23, 2015. Their most recent activity was recorded on September 28, 2021, after which they were banned from the forum.

Although babam has been active on underground forums since 2015, their first offer to sell initial access to a corporate network was posted on May 11, 2020. The poster was selling Citrix XenApp access to an Algerian telecommunications company.

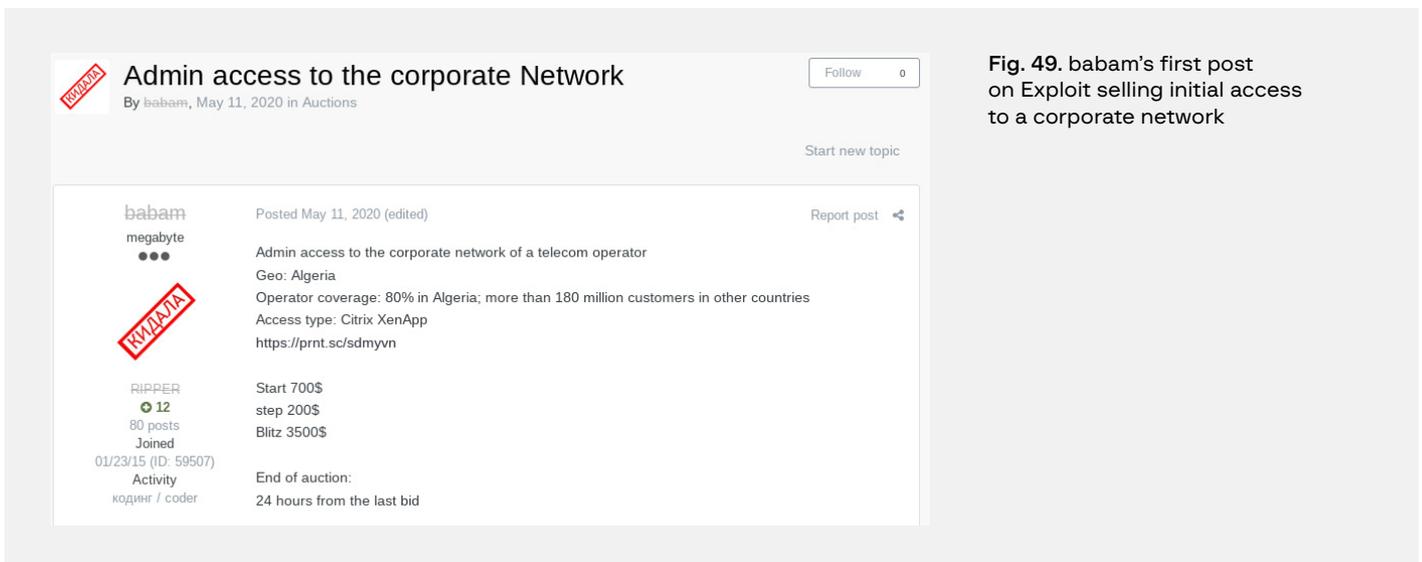
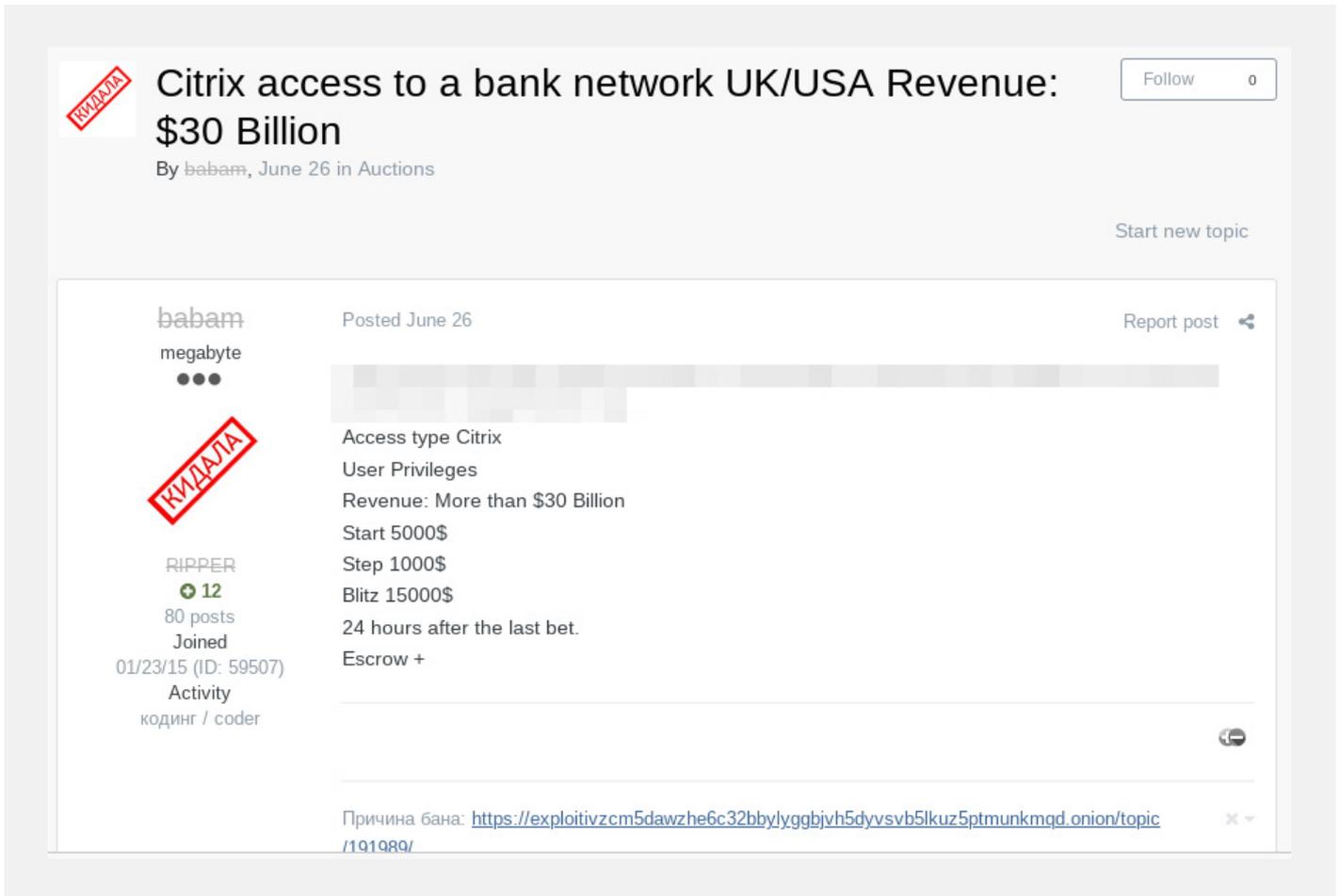


Fig. 49. babam's first post on Exploit selling initial access to a corporate network

In March 2021 the threat actor mentioned that they had used Mimikatz to extract data from a session dump.

On June 26, 2021, babam started a new topic on Exploit offering to sell Citrix access to a network belonging to a major bank with \$30 billion in annual revenue. The user noted that the bank was based in the UK and the US.

Fig. 50. A post advertising Citrix access to a major bank's corporate network



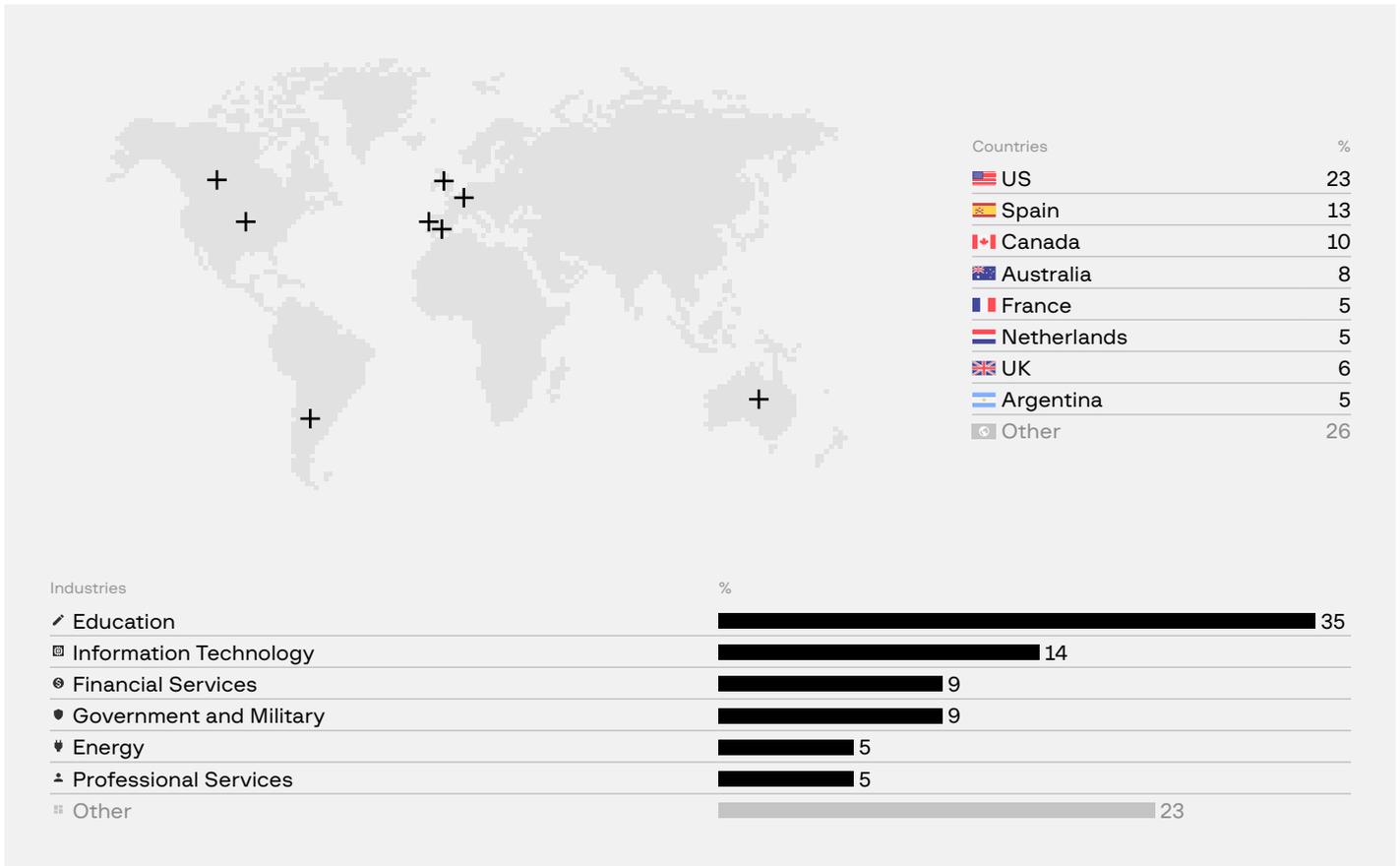
This victim was one of the largest entities to which babam had ever offered access. On June 28, 2021, the threat actor announced that the sale had been closed.

The hacker was most likely using an RDP brute-force tool created by z668, another forum user. Babam expressed their wish to purchase the tool in relevant threads in June 2017 and October 2020. As such, we assume that babam scanned vulnerable ports and brute-forced them using the RDP brute-force tool or a similar one.

Group-IB experts discovered that babam posted **37** ads on underground forums advertising initial access to corporate networks. We estimate the total value of the access offers at **\$25,000** or more. They included Citrix, RD Web, RDP, VPN, and Cisco VPN access with both admin or user permissions.

Most of the threat actor's victims are based in the US, other parts of the Americas, and Europe. The chart below breaks down all the identified instances of access. The threat actor attacked victims in 18 countries.

Looking at the breakdown of their victims by industry, babam appears to have focused on education (which accounts for 35% of all the victims), followed by IT and financial services.



ATT&CK Matrix for Enterprise (babam)

TACTICS	TECHNIQUES	DETAILS
Initial access	External Remote Services (T1133)	The threat actor used RDP, VPN, and Citrix accounts to access networks.
	Valid Accounts: Domain Accounts (T1078.002)	The threat actor used compromised domain accounts to access networks.
	Valid Accounts: Local Accounts (T1078.003)	The threat actor used compromised local accounts to access networks.
Credential access	OS Credential Dumping (T1003)	The threat actor used Mimikatz to extract data from a session dump.
	Brute Force (T1110)	The threat actor used malware to brute-force RDP.
Discovery	Account Discovery (T1087)	The threat actor provided information about the number of hosts on the victim's network.

As the number of IABs has increased, so has the number of TTPs they use. Based on available information about TTPs, we recommend the following steps:

1. **Configure account access blocking.** To gain access, hackers often perform brute-force searches for account passwords. The number of authentication attempts in a brute-force attack is many orders of magnitude higher than the number of attempts by a user who makes a typo when entering the password. To prevent such attacks, set up account locking for a specified amount of time, which activates when the limit of unsuccessful authentication attempts is reached.
2. **Check public data leaks for sets of credentials.** Hackers often use compromised data from various leaks (so-called combo lists, i.e. sets of credentials) to put together dictionaries for brute-force attacks. As such, a preventative check for leaked user data makes a successful attack much less likely. Group-IB Threat Intelligence & Attribution makes it easy to run such checks.
3. **Take preventative measures to identify leaks advertised on the dark web.** To ensure a timely response to possible data leaks, Group-IB experts recommend using threat intelligence solutions to track any signs of corporate data appearing on the dark web, which helps take steps to secure data and identify the potential source of the leak.
4. **Install dedicated software to track and identify server anomalies.** Such software makes it easy to track traffic anomalies, new accounts being created, and attempts to gain unauthorized access to data.
5. **Allow whitelists for IP addresses.** Limit access to remote servers to a list of specific IP addresses. If any employees work remotely, configure a corporate VPN.
6. **Disable or block unused remote services.**
7. **Use multifactor authentication** for remote service accounts. This limits opportunities for using compromised credentials.
8. **Use unique strong passwords.**
9. **Utilize least privilege access principles** for service accounts, which restricts permissions to processes with potential vulnerabilities that hackers can take advantage of.
10. **Install software updates on a regular and timely basis** to eliminate any identified vulnerabilities.

11. **Analyze security and test for breach vulnerabilities** to identify network weaknesses and possible attack vectors.
12. **Take stock of the external network perimeter**, network firewall rules, and network address broadcasting rules to minimize the likelihood of making any services public by mistake.
13. **Ban internet access for any easily compromised devices** such as video surveillance equipment, smart home devices, office equipment (printers, scanners, multifunctional printers), and storage devices and media (such as SOHO-segment NAS servers).
14. **Do not allow external network perimeter access** to OS direct remote access services (such as RDP, SSH, VNC, and SMB/RPC).
15. **Limit network access** for specific tasks (e.g., contractors should get access only to servers that they need to carry out their work, rather than a whole network segment or the entire network).
16. **Add an “expires at” field** to user accounts and access privileges for situations when manually revoking remote access could fail.
17. **Identify signs of initial access**, gaining persistence, and progress across the network. Although most techniques used by attackers are primitive and can be detected even with an untrained eye, regular proactive threat hunting helps prevent and combat sophisticated attacks.
18. **Regularly scan the corporate infrastructure** to detect signs of compromised network access.
19. **Ban users from signing up to third-party services** using their corporate email address, as many people use the same password (or a version thereof) across multiple services. If a password is leaked from one service, hackers could attack the entire company.

Requirements for data security protection:

20. **Scan for signs of popular post-exploitation frameworks.**
21. **Scan for anomalous activity in legitimate software** installed within the organization, such as launching atypical processes; creating files; modifying the file system or registry, which is typical for persistence-gaining techniques; and so on.

Over the past 12 months, the number of access offers on the market has tripled, while in dollar terms the market size has increased by only 14%. Group-IB Threat Intelligence experts believe that this situation is the result of a steep rise in the number of IABs (which has also tripled year after year), increasing competitive pressures. When a hacker lacks the skills to gain persistence in a network or when access is used improperly, access to that network may be lost. In such cases, threat actors may try to sell network access as quickly as possible and accept a price below the market value. To do so, hackers often reduce their price to a few hundred US dollars, which practically guarantees that they will close the sale. The trend is likely to reduce the price of access credentials in the future, which should make them an even more attractive commodity.

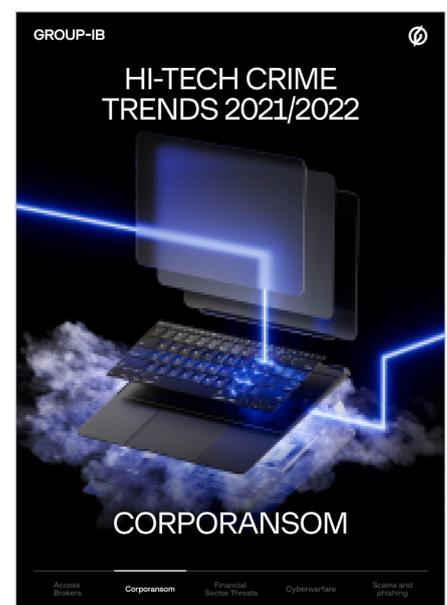
There seems to be a direct correlation between access value and the victim company's revenue: the higher the revenue, the higher the price, which makes large multinationals especially vulnerable to attacks. Unless steps are taken to secure a corporate network, it is probable that it will eventually become compromised, potentially causing substantial damage to the company's business.

The popularity of the access credentials market largely depends on the popularity of ransomware. Group-IB experts have concluded that many ransomware operators have been actively using (and are possibly still using) the services of popular IABs, thereby increasing demand for illicitly obtained access credentials on the dark web. According to the Group-IB report entitled **Corporansom**, the trend of ransomware being increasingly used should continue, resulting in a rising number of attacks on businesses worldwide.

RaaS is currently the main avenue for monetizing access to corporate networks. Increased demand for ransomware should also encourage new threat actors to enter the access market, which would further increase the overall number of IABs.

Robust growth in the initial access market gradually helped brokers reach a common understanding of their roles and a shared concept of their businesses. In turn, this mutual understanding helped determine initial access pricing and informed IABs how popular specific target countries were with the buyers. Hackers will likely remain most interested in obtaining access to companies based in the US, the Middle East, and the APAC region, while interest in the former Soviet Union and Africa should remain low or decline.

Corporansom



Concealing certain data in their ads is how hackers have reacted to the efforts of threat researchers who warn companies that access to their network is for sale on the dark web. Given that the market has been active for years, the most influential IABs are likely to have regular clients to whom they can sell access credentials directly, thereby bypassing the forums. Hackers are also likely to create dedicated private dark-web resources for selling access credentials.

Our final forecast is the emergence of new access points to corporate networks. These could be new remote access and virtualization solutions, computer network building platforms, cloud services, or products already available on the market. All of them could have vulnerabilities enabling easy access from devices with older software missing essential updates, as was the case with Citrix, FortiGate, and Pulse Secure.

As an example, businesses are increasingly shifting to using SSO with cloud single sign on accounts, so it is reasonable to assume that it might become the new vector for attacks as hackers gain access to apps and services available through this solution.

Group-IB

A global leader in high-fidelity Threat hunting and Intelligence, best-in-class fraud prevention solutions, and high-profile cyber investigations.

Group-IB's mission: **Fight Against Cybercrime**

Interpol and Europol

Partner and active collaborator in global investigations

APAC TOP 10

Ranked among the Top 10 cybersecurity companies in the APAC region according to APAC CIO Outlook

Group-IB Threat Intelligence and Research Centers

- Globally distributed cybercrime monitoring infrastructure
- Digital Forensics & Malware Analysis laboratory
- Incident Response and High-Tech Crime Investigations
- CERT-GIB: 24/7 monitoring centers and Computer Emergency Response Team

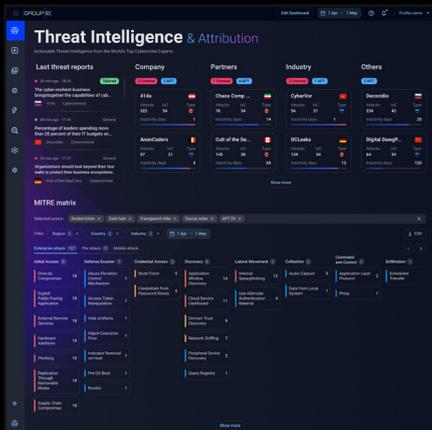


- Europe
- Russia
- Middle East
- Asia-Pacific

Group-IB's technologies & innovations

Group-IB's experience in performing successful global investigations with state-of-the-art threat intelligence and detecting cybercriminals at every stage of attack preparation has been fused into an ecosystem of highly sophisticated software and hardware solutions designed to monitor, identify, and prevent cyber threats.

Group-IB's technologies are recognized by the world's leading research agencies



Threat Intelligence & Attribution

System for analyzing and attributing cyberattacks, threat hunting, and protecting network infrastructure



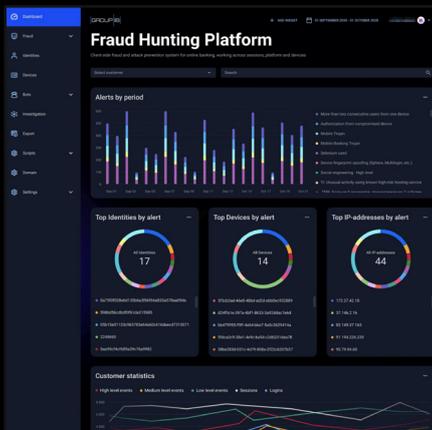
Threat Hunting Framework

Adversary-centric detection of targeted attacks and unknown threats within the infrastructure and beyond



Digital Risk Protection

AI-driven platform for digital risk identification and mitigation



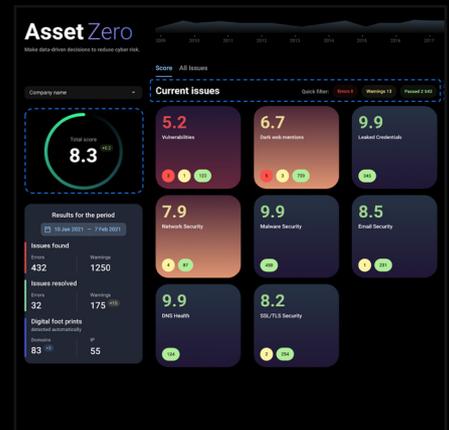
Fraud Hunting Platform

Real-time client-side digital identity protection and fraud prevention



Atmosphere: Cloud Email Protection

Patented email security technology that blocks, detonates and hunts for the most advanced email threats



AssetZero

Intelligence-driven attack surface management that continuously discovers all external-facing IT assets

Group-IB Expertise

600+

world-class experts

70,000+

hours of incident response

1,300+

successful investigations worldwide

18 years

practical experience

Intelligence- driven services

Group-IB's technological leadership and R&D capabilities are built on the company's 18 years of hands-on experience in performing successful cybercrime investigations worldwide and the 70,000 hours of cybersecurity incident response accumulated in our leading forensic laboratory and CERT-GIB.

Prevention

- Security Assessment
- Compliance Audit
- Red Teaming
- Pre-IR Assessment
- Compromise Assessment
- Cyber Education

Response

- Managed Incident response
- Managed detection and threat hunting

Investigation

- Digital Forensics
- Investigations
- Financial Forensics
- eDiscovery



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FIGHT AGAINST CYBERCRIME

**PREVENTING
AND RESEARCHING
CYBERCRIME
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