The Sony hack: how it happened, who is responsible, and what we've learned  By Timothy Lee for Vox, 12-18-14

Last month, hackers infiltrated the computer network of Sony Pictures Entertainment, a major Hollywood movie studio. The attackers stole a huge number of confidential documents, which are now being downloaded (primarily by journalists) from file-sharing networks. Since then, journalists have been poring through the files looking for interesting revelations.

The hackers are widely believed to be backed by the North Korean government, which is furious at Sony for producing The Interview, a movie that depicts the assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. On Wednesday, a terrorism threat against theaters showing the film caused Sony to cancel its planned Christmas Day release.

Read on to learn how the hacks happened, who might be responsible, and what we've learned as a result.

What happened to Sony?

When Sony Pictures employees got into the office on Monday, November 24, they discovered that their corporate network had been hacked. The attackers took terabytes of private data, deleted the original copies from Sony computers, and left messages threatening to release the information if Sony didn't comply with the attackers' demands. Someone claiming to be a former Sony employee posted this screenshot, which (allegedly) shows the message that appeared on Sony employees' computer screens (at right).

Sony's network was down for days as administrators struggled to repair the damage. Staff were reportedly forced to work on whiteboards to do their jobs.

But the greater damage was from all the confidential information that got leaked to the public. The hackers posted five Sony movies (four unreleased) to file-sharing networks. And they also leaked thousands of confidential documents — everything from private correspondence among Sony executives to salary and performance data about Sony employees. Those documents were password protected, and whoever is behind the hack provided said password only to journalists. But it's likely only a matter of time before they break out into the world at large.

As reporters have pored over the huge cache of documents, we've gotten a steady stream of minor scoops about potential movie projects (like a Spider-Man movie crossover), conflicts between Sony executives and Hollywood celebrities (one executive called actor Kevin Hart a "whore"), and the company's management practices (16 of the company's 17 top-paid executives are men).

Some people have blamed North Korea for the attacks. Were they responsible?

We don't know for sure, but it's looking increasingly likely that that North Korea was behind the attacks. On
Wednesday, multiple media organizations reported the US government has concluded that the regime was responsible.

And there is some other circumstantial evidence linking the attacks to the North Koreans. Forensic analysis has found that the methods used against Sony are similar to those used in a 2013 attack on South Korean companies last year. Some security experts suspect those attacks were carried out by North Koreans operating from China.

The reclusive nation was furious at Sony because the studio was about to release The Interview, a comedy in which Seth Rogen and James Franco play characters who attempt to assassinate North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

A message claiming to be from the hackers demanded that Sony "stop immediately showing the movie of terrorism which can break the regional peace and cause the War." The hackers threatened to launch 9/11-style attacks against American movie theaters that showed the film.

And the terrorism threat got Sony to drop the film?

Yes it did. Theaters became nervous about the possibility that the attackers — whoever they were — would follow through on the threats. Or, perhaps, that fears of terrorism would keep moviegoers away from the theaters. Either way, some theaters asked Sony for permission to drop the film from their lineups.

Sony relented on Tuesday, and several theater chains quickly announced they would no longer show The Interview on December 25. Then on Wednesday, Sony announced it was suspending the film's release altogether, citing the theaters' pullout for their decision. At this point, it appears the film may not get released at all.

What are the lessons of the Sony attack?

First and foremost, lots of companies should be investing more in network security. Companies like Sony tend to under-invest in locking down their networks because it seems like a needless expense until disaster strikes. Cleaning up the mess from this latest attack will cost Sony millions; hopefully that will inspire other large companies to hire additional security experts.

Second, companies should make sure they're well-prepared to respond to attacks. For example, making regular backups can allow a company to recover in the event that hackers delete important data.

Finally, corporate executives should bear in mind that their decisions might be unexpectedly exposed to the light of day. If you're a senior executive at a big company, it's a good idea to avoid sending overly embarrassing emails or having embarrassingly lopsided pay scales.

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Possible response options:

- Is it all right, in your opinion, to make a movie portraying the assassination of a currently living head of state? Explain.
- Based on what we know about the lack of coding education in the USA, do you predict that there will be enough people to fill cyber security jobs in the next 10 years? Does this make you want to look into cyber security as a career field? Explain.
- Should Sony have cancelled the release of the film? Explain.