Legal and Ethical Issues Facing Cybersecurity Researchers
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The Problem

• A complex and sometimes unclear body of U.S. law constrains cybersecurity research activities:
  – Communications privacy
  – Copyright
  – Contracts
  – Computer fraud & abuse
• Ethical obligations may impose further constraints.
• Conversely, ethical experiments might be illegal!
Overview

• Network Data Collection
  – Collecting and sharing network packet traces
  – Running infected hosts
  – Institutional review boards (IRBs)
• Analyzing software
• Identify and explain legal issues in each case
• Identify individual, institutional interests that influence ethical considerations

DISCLAIMER

These materials provide a general discussion of legal issues facing cybersecurity research. This discussion is not intended to provide individualized legal advice.
Definitions

- “Laws” include statutes, regulations, court decisions.
- “Ethics” is concerned with what one should or should not do, regardless of whether it is legally permissible.
  - Understanding the interests protected by law and organizational (i.e., a researcher’s university or employer) interests can help guide ethical decisions.

Example 1: Obtaining Data from Networks

- Two separate concerns:
  - Collecting network measurement data (e.g., packet traces)
  - Publishing data
- Legal issues
  - Communications privacy laws
- Ethical issues
  - Respecting users’ privacy
  - Respectful uses of published traces
Electronic Communications Privacy Act (ECPA)

  - Prohibits real-time interception of communications contents
- Stored Communications Act (18 U.S.C. § 2701-110) (“SCA”)
  - Prohibits certain disclosures of content and noncontent/addressing information
- Pen Register/Trap and Trace statute (18 U.S.C. § 3121-27) (“Pen/Trap”)
  - Prohibits real-time interception of noncontent/addressing information

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No Research Exceptions in ECPA!

- Some trace collection permitted by:
  - Consent of users or
  - “Provider” exception (allowing network operators to monitor networks to defend them)
- Limitations
  - Individual consent hard to get
  - Blanket consent (e.g., as part of a network’s terms of service) may provide little information about data collection, use
  - Provider exception requires collaboration with operational IT staff

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How ECPA Affects Cybersecurity Research (1)

- Activity: Collecting full-packet traces in real-time
  - Relevant law: Wiretap Act
  - Applies to any network (government, enterprise, WiFi, university, etc.)
  - Need consent or sufficient link to operational network protection for provider exception
  - Wiretap Act continues to cover traces after they are recorded \( \text{If collection violates law, disclosure probably does too.} \)

How ECPA Affects Cybersecurity Research (2)

- Activity: Collecting packet-header traces in real-time
  - Relevant law: Pen/Trap statute
  - Consent, provider exceptions available
  - Also an exception for network “operation, maintenance, and testing”
  - Legally stored data become subject to SCA
How ECPA Affects Cybersecurity Research (3)

- **Activity: Sharing or publishing packet traces**
  - Relevant law: SCA
    - Applies only to “public” service providers: commercial ISPs but not businesses
  - Full-packet traces: disclosure prohibited without consent, subpoena
  - Packet header traces: disclosure allowed unless given to “governmental entity”
    - Much broader than law enforcement; hampers some public releases

Ethical Dimensions of Trace Collection and Analysis

- ECPA extends 4th Amendment right protecting individuals against unreasonable government searches to non-government actors.
  - Communications records can reveal a huge amount of information about individuals.
- Many users expectations’ of privacy protection from network providers sometimes outstrip legal protections.
Impact of Communications
Privacy Ethical Considerations

• Data collection/sharing plans should go beyond legal issues to consider:
  – De-identifying data (and possibilities of re-identifying it) to protect individuals;
  – Costs, benefits of limited disclosure versus unrestricted publication;
  – How to enforce limited disclosure agreements; and
  – Effects on the researcher’s organization (e.g., compliance with privacy policies)

• Summary: It is essential to vet plans with IT and legal officials from the host organization.

SHOULD THE ECPA HAVE A RESEARCH EXCEPTION?

• Issues to consider:
  – What are the social costs and benefits?
  – What kinds of research would be eligible?
  – How to structure oversight?
    • IRBs . . .

• Political reality
  – Research networks (GENI, Internet2, Planetlab), DHS aware of problems
  – Little possibility of “surgical” amendment
IRBs

• A brief history
• When you need to submit protocols
• What IRBs are concerned about

BRIEF HISTORY OF IRBs

• Mid 1900s: gross abuses of human subjects
  – Nazi Germany
  – Tuskegee
• HHS Regulations
• 1979: Belmont Report
• 1991: “Common Rule”
BELMONT REPORT: ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

- Respect for persons
  - Individuals are autonomous \ get consent
  - Protect those with diminished autonomy
- Beneficence
  - Benefits to participants outweigh risks
  - Common Rule: Benefits do not include “long-range effects of applying knowledge gained in the research”
- Justice
  - Fair distribution of risks to participants

YOU NEED IRB APPROVAL WHEN . . .

- Conducting “research”
- Funded or supervised by federal govt.
- Involving a “human subject” yielding
  - Data through intervention/interaction or
  - “identifiable private information”
IRB Mechanics

• Composition
  – ≥ 5 members
  – Mix of subject matter experts, outsiders
• Keep records of protocols, consent
• Report problems up the chain
• IRBs can suspend or withdraw approval
• Institutional failures \ suspend funding

NETWORK MEASUREMENTS IN THE IRB FRAMEWORK

• Is the collection legal?
• Are you getting data about human subjects through interaction, or getting private info?
• What are the harms?
• What are the benefits?
• Could blanket consent (e.g., in network TOU) be good enough?
• Is debriefing beneficial? Is it even possible?
Example 2: Security Analysis of Software

Software Analysis: Legal Issues

• Issues
  – Finding software vulnerabilities
  – Publishing results

• Relevant laws:
  – Contract law (EULAs, clickwrap/shrinkwrap licenses)
  – Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA)
Software Analysis: Contract Issues

- EULAs typically prohibit reverse engineering, other processes that reveal vulnerabilities
- Courts usually enforce them . . .
- . . . but important issues remain unsettled:
  - Pre-emption by patent law
  - Tension with First Amendment

Software Analysis: DMCA Issues

- “No person shall circumvent a technological measure that effectively controls access to a work protected” by the Copyright Act
- But: courts, U.S. DOJ have found that the DMCA does not prohibit conducting research on or publishing papers about software vulnerabilities.
- Caveats:
  - Publishing actual circumvention software might violate DMCA.
  - Restrictions in EULAs still apply
Ethical Issues in Software Analysis

- Whether (and when) to notify software vendor
- How much detail to publish

Example 3:
Running Infected Hosts
Running Infected Hosts: Legal Issues

• Contexts
  – Running malicious code in testbeds
  – Running honeynets to interact with attackers
• Legal Issues
  – Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA)
  – Child pornography possession

Testbeds: Legal Issues

• Concern: What if worms, viruses escape testbed containment?
• CFAA (18 U.S.C. § 1030) prohibits *knowingly* obtaining unauthorized access to an Internet-connected computer
  – Unclear whether accidents involving testbeds meet this standard of intent
Honeynets: Legal Issues

1. Remote attackers use honeynet hosts in attacks.
   • CFAA is a concern:
     • “Ostrich” defense (willful ignorance) doesn’t work
2. Attackers plant contraband data, e.g., child pornography.
   • Mere possession raises serious legal issues; contact institution and legal counsel immediately
3. Research hosts, subnets might avoid ECPA issues because there are no actual users.

Honeynets: Ethical Issues

• Host organization reputation
  – Could honeynet activity look like bad network management to others?
• Can attackers learn from you (and how much)?
SCA: Content

• “[A] person or entity providing an electronic communication service to the public shall not knowingly divulge to any person or entity the contents of a communication while in electronic storage by that service.” (18 USC § 2702(a)(1))
• Exceptions: compulsory process, consent, provider protection

“Electronic Communication”

• “‘Electronic communication’ means any transfer of signs, signals, writing, images, sounds, data, or intelligence of any nature transmitted in whole or in part by a wire, radio, electromagnetic, photoelectronic or photooptical system that affects interstate or foreign commerce” (with some exceptions) (18 USC § 2510(12))
SCA: Noncontent Disclosure

• “[A] provider of . . . electronic communication service to the public shall not knowingly divulge a record or other information pertaining to a subscriber to or customer of such service . . . to any governmental entity.”
• Exceptions: Compulsory process, consent, provider protection, non-governmental recipient.

Resources

• Legal Information Institute (http://www.law.cornell.edu/)
  – Open access to US Constitution, US Code
• Common Rule
• Samuelson Clinic at UC Berkeley School of Law (http://www.samulesonclinic.org/)
• Reforming the ECPA to Enable a Culture of Cybersecurity Research (http://jolt.law.harvard.edu/)
  – In-depth analysis of applicable privacy laws and proposal for a research exception to the ECPA