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.

Overview

- Three case studies
  - Collecting and sharing network packet traces
  - Analyzing software
  - Running infected hosts
- 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)

- Wiretap Act (18 U.S.C. § 2510-22)
  - 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

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

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 \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.

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"

- "'[E]lectronic 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, Code of Federal Regulations
- Samuelson Clinic at UC Berkeley School of Law (http://www.samulesonclinic.org/)
- Toward a Culture of Cybersecurity Research (http://ssrn.com/abstract=1113014)
  - In-depth analysis of applicable privacy laws and proposal for a research exception to the ECPA