The Byzantine Postman Problem
A Trivial Attack Against PIR-based Nym Servers

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Abstract. Over the last several decades, there have been numerous proposals for systems which can preserve the anonymity of the recipient of some data. Some have involved trusted third-parties or trusted hardware; others have been constructed on top of link-layer anonymity systems or mix-nets.

In this paper, we evaluate a pseudonymous message system which takes the different approach of using Private Information Retrieval (PIR) as its basis. We expose a flaw in the system as presented: it fails to identify Byzantine servers. We provide suggestions on correcting the flaw, while observing the security and performance trade-offs our suggestions require.

1 Introduction

Several proposals have been made for the use of private information retrieval (PIR) [6] primitives to build secure, fault-tolerant pseudonymous mail retrieval systems [7, 3, 12, 16].

PIR-based pseudonym (or *nym*) servers have several significant advantages over nym servers based on other technologies. PIR protocols can be designed to offer *information-theoretic security*, i.e., assuming that the system is correct, an attacker with unlimited computational power cannot defeat the system merely by virtue of being able to perform calculations which reveal the private information. Other PIR protocols merely offer computational security: in Computational PIR systems [5], the privacy of the PIR query is protected only against an adversary restricted to polynomial-time computational capability.

The most recent proposal for a nym server based on PIR with information-theoretic security, the Pynchon Gate [16], offers greater robustness, stronger anonymity assurances, and better traffic analysis resistance than previously proposed pseudonym systems. However, it contains a serious flaw in its protocol which can be used to launch a denial of service attack against the system, rendering it unusable. Furthermore, the attack is not merely limited to decreased utility of the system; due to the network-effects properties of anonymity systems, denying service to one set of users can effectively weaken the anonymity provided to a different set of users [1]. We identify this denial of service attack, evaluate the extent of the problem, and briefly consider solutions which may be considered as a means of making the protocol immune to the attack.

2 Background on Nym Servers

Pseudonymous messaging services allow users to send messages that originate at a pseudonymous address (or "nym") unlinked to the user, and to receive messages sent to that address, without allowing an attacker to deduce which users are associated with which pseudonyms. These systems can be used for parties to communicate without revealing their identities, or as a building-block for other systems that need a bi-directional anonymous communication channel, such as Free Haven [10].

3 The Pynchon Gate

To address the reliability problems of silent node failure, as well as the serious security problems of statistical disclosure and end-to-end traffic analysis, Sassaman et al. propose a complete architectural design of a PIR-based pseudonym service offering information-theoretic protection, called the Pynchon Gate [16].

3.1 Architecture overview

The architecture consists of an Internet-facing component referred to as the "nym-server", which receives messages addressed to users of the system and acts as a gateway between the pseudonym service and other Internet services such as email. Behind the nym-server is a component known as the "collator", which structures the incoming messages in the form of a three-level hash tree, which is then replicated to a series of mutually untrusted distribution databases referred to as "distributors".

Email addressed to a specific pseudonym is stored in a specific location in the database, such that the owner of the pseudonym knows what information to request to obtain his message. Using the PIR protocol described in Section 3.2, the user submits a PIR query to ℓ distributors, and his message is returned with none of the distributors able to deduce any information about the user's query unless all ℓ distributors collude.

3.2 The Pynchon Gate PIR Protocol

The protocol runs as follows: after choosing distributors, the client establishes an encrypted connection to each (e.g., using TLS [9]). These connections must be unidirectionally authenticated to prevent man-in-the-middle attacks, and can be made sequentially or in parallel.

The client sends a different "random-looking" bit vector $\nu_{s\beta}$ to each distributor s for each message block β to be retrieved. Each bit vector has a length equal to the number of message blocks in the database. Each distributor s then computes $R(\nu_{s\beta})$ as the exclusive-OR of all message blocks whose positions is set to 1 in $\nu_{s\beta}$. The resulting value is then returned to the client.

Thus, in order to retrieve the β'th message block, the client need only choose the values of $\nu_{s\beta}$ so that their XOR is 0 at every position except β. (For security, $\ell - 1$ of the vectors should be generated randomly.) When the client receives the corresponding $R(\nu_{s\beta})$ values, she can XOR them to compute the message block's contents.

3.3 Byzantine Server Protection

In a distributed-trust anonymity system such as the Pynchon Gate, there exists the possibility that some servers may be *Byzantine*, i.e., they may behave incorrectly, either due to intentional malice or simple error.[1] In the case of the Pynchon Gate, the Byzantine behavior we are concerned with is the incorrect response to a PIR query of a distributor's database.

All n distributors in the system have the exact same copy of the database, and the system is designed such that any attempt by a Byzantine server to modify its response to the PIR query will be detected by the user when he verifies the root of the hash tree. This is crucial to preserving the anonymity properties of the system, for if an attacker may alter a message or observe the cleartext of a message, he may potentially be able to later link an input message with a given output retrieved by the nym holder.

The Pynchon Gate's message and link encryption prevents an attacker from observing the cleartext of a message. Active attacks that are dependent upon the attacker's ability to alter some of the data being transmitted to the user such that the attacker may later link the user to his pseudonym based either on a variance in the user's response to altered versus unaltered data, or by simply recognizing the product of the altered data as it is processed by the system (collectively known as *tagging attacks* [11]) are ineffective, as TLS protects data integrity on the wire. Thus, any tagging attacks an attacker wished to attempt against a user would have to occur through the use of a corrupt distributor. To protect against the case where a distributor provides (intentionally or otherwise) an incorrect response to the PIR query, the client verifies that the hash of the message block it has received can be authenticated through the hash tree with the verified hash root.

3.4 A Remaining Byzantine Server Attack

There exists a remaining attack not prevented with the hash tree verification system. A corrupt distributor can, through malice or error, create a denial of service attack on the system by responding with incorrect data to a client's query. While the client will detect that the message block is invalid after performing the final step of the PIR protocol in Subsection 3.2, and thus can conclude that *some* server was Byzantine, the client cannot determine *which* server or servers returned the incorrect response. The client cannot safely pass the message block

[1] This concern is present in many other anonymity systems, including Chaumian mixnets [4, 15, 8] and systems built on top of them [14, 13].

contents (assuming they consist of anything other than garbage) to the user, lest tagging attacks become possible.

Furthermore, if attacks on portions of the pseudonymity infrastructure affect some users differently than others, an attacker may exploit such attacks on components of the system to facilitate an intersection attack against a user of the system as a whole. In the Pynchon Gate, if a Byzantine distributor selectively performed denial of service attacks against certain users by returning garbage results to their queries, but correctly responded to other users' queries, the attacker would increase his chances of learning the identity of certain users, based on which users responded to messages that were successfully delivered.

4 Byzantine Server Detection

Ideally, there would exist a way to identify a Byzantine server, without modifying the existing threat model or positive security properties of the Pynchon Gate. This is a challenging problem to solve with the existing XOR-based PIR protocol, which makes verifying the results of a PIR query to a distributor impossible. (The client does not know what a "correct" response $R(\nu_{s\beta})$ from any given distributor should look like; only that

$$R(\nu_{s_1\beta}) \oplus R(\nu_{s_2\beta}) \oplus \cdots \oplus R(\nu_{s_\ell\beta}) = \beta' th \text{ message block}$$

and thus, cannot identify which of the responses were invalid.)

4.1 Checksums on each message block

Applying traditional hashes or checksums to each message block is not a viable approach, for it is not the message blocks themselves, but the XOR of all the blocks requested from a given distributor that is returned by that distributor.

If there exists a commitment verification function g such that $g(f(A), f(B)) = g'(A \oplus B)$ (and g can take an arbitrary number of arguments, and g' is predictable based on g), it may be possible for the collator (already trusted with the creation and signing of the hash root) to perform the commitment f on each block, and publish that value. When encountering a corrupt message block, the client could obtain all f's corresponding to the 1's in the bit vectors it sent to the distributors, calculate $g(f(A), f(B), \cdots, f(n))$ for each bit vector sent to each distributor in turn, and identify which distributor was Byzantine by observing which calculation of g did not match the corresponding calculation of g'.

We know of no such function, nor do we know if such a function would increase the cost of operating the Pynchon Gate system prohibitively, either through excess computation, bandwidth, or storage.

4.2 Alternative PIR schemes

There exist PIR schemes that incorporate Byzantine recovery as part of the protocol, such as the scheme presented by Beimel and Stahl [2]. Such protocols could theoretically be used in lieu of the XOR-based scheme in the Pynchon Gate and the other PIR-based pseudonym systems referenced. These protocols have the additional property of *Byzantine recovery*, where a user can still reconstruct a message block from the responses he has received, as long as some threshold of servers are not Byzantine.

These alternate protocols we have considered are k-out-of-ℓ polynomial interpolation based schemes, and therefore have a significant drawback in that the security offered by the Pynchon Gate must be weakened. In these schemes, the threshold of nodes which must collude to break the security of the system decreases compared to the simple XOR scheme in the Pynchon Gate. In a k-out-of-ℓ scheme, if *any* k servers collude, the privacy of the user is lost. As the difference of $\ell - k$ must be at least 1 in order to provide any Byzantine robustness, the best assurance the system can offer the user is protection as long as two of the distributors are honest (and this is in the weakest configuration for Byzantine robustness!) Therefore, the threat of Byzantine servers must be weighed against the probability that an adversary may control a large enough coalition of servers to satisfy k in a polynomial interpolation based PIR scheme, and the protocol parameters chosen accordingly.

Furthermore, these, like most PIR protocols, have only been evaluated for security and privacy-preserving properties. Additional considerations apply when selecting a primitive for use in an anonymity system; considerations which may not have been part of the design criteria for these protocols. Before implementing an alternate PIR-scheme as the basis for a pseudonymity service, one must consider possible attacks on the protocol which are only of concern when it is used for anonymity purposes.

5 Conclusions and Future Work

We have evaluated the security of the Pynchon Gate, a PIR-based pseudonymous message system, and identified a weakness in its protocol which prevents users from identifying Byzantine servers. We have described how this limitation in the system can lead to a denial of service attack or potentially be used to compromise the anonymity of the system's users.

We have offered suggestions on potential solutions to the problems in the existing system; however, we have not provided a known solution which maintains the other security properties of the original scheme. Additional work must be done on the development of Private Information Retrieval protocols as anonymity primitives.

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