

ECS 235B Module 53

Analyzing Covert Channels

Analyzing Covert Channels

- Policy and operational issues determine how dangerous it is
 - What follows assumes a policy saying all covert channels are a problem
- *Amount* of information that can be transmitted affects how serious a problem a covert channel is
 - 1 bit per hour: probably harmless in most circumstances
 - 1,000,000 bits per second: probably dangerous in most circumstances
 - Begin here . . .

Measuring Capacity

- Intuitively, difference between unmodulated, modulated channel
 - Normal uncertainty in channel is 8 bits
 - Attacker modulates channel to send information, reducing uncertainty to 5 bits
 - Covert channel capacity is 3 bits
 - Modulation in effect fixes those bits

Formally

- Inputs:
 - A input from Alice (sender)
 - V input from everyone else
 - X output of channel
- Capacity measures uncertainty in X given A
- In other terms: maximize

$$I(A; X) = H(X) - H(X | A)$$

with respect to A

Noninterference and Covert Channels

- If A , V are independent and A noninterfering with X , then $I(A; X) = 0$
- Why? Intuition is that A and X are independent
 - If so, then only V affects X (noninterference)
 - So information from A cannot affect X unless A influences V
 - But A and V are independent, so information from A does not affect X
- But noninterference is not necessary

Example: Noninterference Not Necessary

- System has 1 bit of state; 3 inputs I_A, I_B, I_C ; one output O_X
- Each input flips state, and state's value is then output
 - System initially in state 0
- w sequence of inputs corresponding to output $x(w) = \text{length}(w) \bmod 2$
 - I_A not noninterfering as deleting its inputs may change output
- Define terms
 - W random variable corresponding to length of input sequences
 - A random variable corresponding to length of input sequences contributed by I_A ; V random variable corresponding to other contributions; A, V independent
 - X random variable corresponding to output state

Two Cases

- $V = 0$; then as $W = (A + V) \bmod 2$, $W = A$, and so A, W not independent; neither are A, X . So if $V = 0$, $I(A, X) \neq 0$
- I_B, I_C produce inputs such that $p(V=0) = p(V=1) = 0.5$; then

$$p(X=x) = p(V=x, A=0) + p(V = 1 - x, A = 1)$$

Because A, V independent, this becomes

$$p(X=x) = p(V=x, A=0) + p(V = 1 - x)p(A = 1)$$

and so $p(X=x) = 0.5$. Also,

$$p(X=x \mid A=a) = p(X = (a + x) \bmod 2) = 0.5$$

establishing A, X independent; so $I(A, X) = 0$

Meaning

- Note A, X noninterfering, and $I(A; X) = 0$
- So covert channel capacity is 0 if either of the following hold:
 - Input is noninterfering with output; or
 - Input comes from independent sources, all possible values from at least one source are equally probable

Example (More Formally)

- If A, V independent, take $p=p(A=0)$, $q=p(V=0)$:
 - $p(A=0, V=0) = pq$
 - $p(A=1, V=0) = (1-p)q$
 - $p(A=0, V=1) = p(1-q)$
 - $p(A=1, V=1) = (1-p)(1-q)$
- So
 - $p(X=0) = p(A=0, V=0) + p(A=1, V=1) = pq + (1-p)(1-q)$
 - $p(X=1) = p(A=0, V=1) + p(A=1, V=0) = (1-p)q + p(1-q)$

Example (*con't*)

- Also:
 - $p(X=0 | A=0) = q$
 - $p(X=0 | A=1) = 1-q$
 - $p(X=1 | A=0) = 1-q$
 - $p(X=1 | A=1) = q$
- So you can compute:
 - $H(X) = -[(1-p)q + p(1-q)] \lg [(1-p)q + p(1-q)]$
 - $H(X|A) = -q \lg q - (1-q) \lg (1-q)$
 - $I(A;X) = H(X) - H(X|A)$

Example (*con't*)

- So $I(A; X) = - [pq + (1 - p)(1 - q)] \lg [pq + (1 - p)(1 - q)] - [(1 - p)q + p(1 - q)] \lg [(1 - p)q + p(1 - q)] + q \lg q + (1 - q) \lg (1 - q)$
- Maximum when $p = 0.5$; then
$$I(A; X) = 1 + q \lg q + (1 - q) \lg (1 - q) = 1 - H(V)$$
- So, if $q = 0$ (meaning V is constant) then $I(A; X) = 1$
- Also, if $q = p = 0.5$, $I(A; X) = 0$

Analyzing Capacity

- Assume a noisy channel
- Examine covert channel in MLS database that uses replication to ensure availability
 - 2-phase commit protocol ensures atomicity
 - *Coordinator* process manages global execution
 - *Participant* processes do everything else

How It Works

- Coordinator sends message to each participant asking whether to abort or commit transaction
 - If any says “abort”, coordinator stops
- Coordinator gathers replies
 - If all say “commit”, sends commit messages back to participants
 - If any says “abort”, sends abort messages back to participants
 - Each participant that sent commit waits for reply; on receipt, acts accordingly

Exceptions

- Protocol times out, causing party to act as if transaction aborted, when:
 - Coordinator doesn't receive reply from participant
 - Participant who sends a commit doesn't receive reply from coordinator

Covert Channel Here

- Two types of components
 - One at *Low* security level, other at *High*
- Low component begins 2-phase commit
 - Both *High*, *Low* components must cooperate in the 2-phase commit protocol
- *High* sends information to *Low* by selectively aborting transactions
 - Can send abort messages
 - Can just not do anything

Note

- If transaction *always* succeeded except when *High* component sending information, channel not noisy
 - Capacity would be 1 bit per trial
 - But channel noisy as transactions may abort for reasons *other* than the sending of information

Analysis

- X random variable: what *High* user wants to send
 - Assume abort is 1, commit is 0
 - $p = p(X=0)$ probability *High* sends 0
- A random variable: what *Low* receives
 - For noiseless channel $X = A$
- $n+2$ users
 - Sender, receiver, n others that act independently of one another
 - q probability of transaction aborting at any of these n users

Basic Probabilities

- Probabilities of receiving given sending
 - $p(A=0|X=0) = (1-q)^n$
 - $p(A=1|X=0) = 1-(1-q)^n$
 - $p(A=0|X=1) = 0$
 - $p(A=1|X=1) = 1$
- So probabilities of receiving values:
 - $p(A=0) = p(1-q)^n$
 - $p(A=1) = 1-p(1-q)^n$

More Probabilities

- Given sending, what is receiving?
 - $p(X=0 | A=0) = 1$
 - $p(X=1 | A=0) = 0$
 - $p(X=0 | A=1) = p[1-(1-q)^n] / [1-p(1-q)^n]$
 - $p(X=1 | A=1) = (1-p) / [1-p(1-q)^n]$

Entropies

You can compute these:

- $H(X) = -p \lg p - (1-p) \lg (1-p)$
- $H(X|A) = -p[1-(1-q)^n] \lg p - p[1-(1-q)^n] \lg [1-(1-q)^n] + [1-p(1-q)^n] \lg [1-p(1-q)^n] - (1-p) \lg (1-p)$
- $I(A;X) = -p(1-q)^n \lg p + p[1-(1-q)^n] \lg [1-(1-q)^n] - [1-p(1-q)^n] \lg [1-p(1-q)^n]$

Capacity

- Maximize this with respect to p (probability that *High* sends 0)
 - Notation: $m = (1-q)^n$, $M = (1-m)^{(1-m)}$
 - Maximum when $p = M / (Mm+1)$

- Capacity is:

$$I(A;X) = \frac{Mm \lg p + M(1-m) \lg (1-m) + \lg (Mm+1)}{(Mm+1)}$$

Quiz

True or false: covert channels are always a threat to security