

Virtual Private Networks

Bogdan Ionescu

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Contents

1	Virtual Private Networks	2
1.1	Importance of VPNs	2
1.2	What Is a VPN?	4
1.3	Tunneling Protocols	6

Chapter 1

Virtual Private Networks

1.1 Importance of VPNs

In this day and age, networking is everywhere, especially considering the exceedingly fast expansion of the Internet. The Internet, the ultimate network of networks, has radically changed our day-to-day life. Just several years ago, simple everyday habits, such as quickly searching for a piece of information on Google, online shopping, streaming your favorite songs or paying your bills with just a few clicks would have seemed possible only in a distant future. And yet here we are today, achieving even more impressive tasks, making use of all kinds of networks available within our laptops, phones, tablets and even home electronics, thanks to the IoT.

Unfortunately, the Internet's rapid development also comes with a few important drawbacks which are regrettably often overlooked — the most significant one being cybersecurity. *Cybersecurity* is the protection of computer systems and networks from the theft and damage of hardware, software or electronic data, as well as from the disruption of the services they provide.¹ Most often, networks, full of information, are the first frontier when trying to exploit systems, which is why network security represents such an important key aspect against cybercrime.

Inevitably, when having any communication over the Internet, a significant amount of data is being sent between you (more precisely, your device) and the other party, commonly a server or another person's device. Although this data can sometimes be quite harmless, such as a quick Google search for a cake recipe or just streaming some music, in some cases it may contain more sensitive and valuable information than you can think of. Personal messages while chatting with a close friend, credit card information when making an

¹Wikipedia definition, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computer_security

online payment, passwords used when logging in to different websites, the video feed recorded by your webcam when having an online conference — these are only just a few examples of what kind of information leaves your private home network when accessing the Internet. Since the Internet is a public network, such data can be easily intercepted by other parties before reaching its destination, which often leads to catastrophic consequences.

By now you might think that if you are using an application which encrypts its data, you should be safe on the Internet. Unfortunately, this is often not the case, as there are many places where things can go wrong. For example, in many messaging systems, messages pass through intermediary parties, such as the application's servers, which store them, from where they are retrieved by the recipient. In such scenarios, data is generally encrypted only in transit — from the sender to the server, and from the server to the destination. Even if the servers encrypt the data at rest (which, surprisingly, does not always happen), they still must have access to the cryptographic keys used in this process, therefore information is still being vulnerable in case the actual servers are being targeted. Moreover, this allows the third party, or any other organization which has a backdoor to these servers, to freely recognize our data. Such invasion of privacy is prevented by using end-to-end encryption, a system where only the communicating users can read the messages, denying any other third party to access the cryptographic keys needed to decrypt the information.

Even if such encryption is used, with strong cryptographic ciphers, unlikely to be broken in attacks, we still might experience some troubles. Application data that leaves our home network, in order to be routed over networks, will have an Internet Protocol (IP) header added to it, which contains our public IP address and the destination IP address. These are unique, ISP-issued addresses which can be used to monitor and censor traffic, since every service we try to access will be identified by its IP address. This could also lead to IP address-based geo-blocking and IP range ban, methods often employed by media companies, governments, intelligence agencies and many others.

So far we have only talked about the consequences from the point of view of a casual user, but damages rise significantly in the case of cyber attacks against major businesses, usually leading to huge amounts of loss in revenue. In fact, Juniper Research estimated in 2015 that cybercrime will have cost businesses over \$2 trillion by 2019 [2]. In order to mitigate cyber attacks, they usually maintain one or more private networks inside their offices and only from within these controlled networks employees can access necessary resources. Such resources can actually be part of the same network, thus making transfer of data safe, since everything happens inside

the private network, but inevitably some resources, such as cloud services, will be accessed through the Internet. Some employees must also be able to connect to the private network through the Internet even if they are part of another network, in order to access its resources, possibly in case of time-critical emergencies or just to work remotely from their homes. Therefore, many companies need a technology that allows secure communication between their private network and another host across a public network, or even to another different private network, such as communication between two private networks owned by different offices of the same company, located in distant regions.

The solution to all the aforementioned problems, and to many other vulnerabilities while using a public network, is a Virtual Private Network (VPN).

1.2 What Is a VPN?

Security over networks is usually described by three components: confidentiality, integrity and authenticity. Confidentiality, often achieved by encryption, guarantees that data can only be understood by authorized entities. Integrity ensures that the data has not been modified between these endpoints. Finally, authenticity proves that data originated from an authorized party, and not from another source. Apart from these three, another concept which is often massively desired over public networks refers to anonymity, which assures that information we send out does not divulge our identity. All of these can be achieved by VPNs, if implemented correctly.

A Virtual Private Network (VPN) extends a private network by allowing hosts which are not part of it to send and receive data over a public network, usually the Internet, as if they are directly connected to the private network. VPNs are built by establishing a virtual link of communication between two nodes, one being part of the private network. The second node will forward its traffic to it, the first node acting like a proxy, therefore appearing as the traffic actually originated from within the private network from which it is part of. Since encryption is a common, yet not an inherent part of a VPN connection, this channel of communication is usually called a *tunnel* — only the two endpoints being able to understand the data passing through it.

Classified by the type of topology of connections, defined by the location of the two endpoints, VPNs usually are of three types: site-to-site, point-to-point (sometimes also called host-to-host), which are the most common, and a combination of the two, point-to-site.

Site-to-site VPNs, illustrated in figure 1.1, establish a tunnel between two whole networks, thus allowing any authorized host in any of the two networks

to make use of it. Such architecture is frequently used by businesses to securely connect networks owned by the same company in different regions.

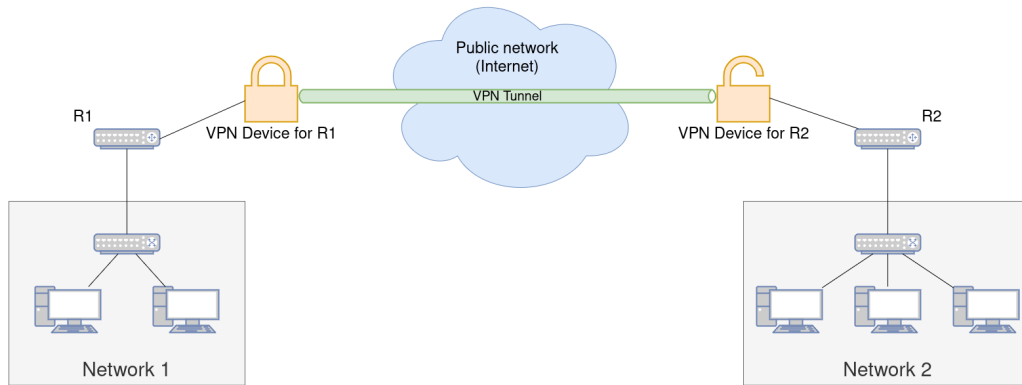


Figure 1.1: In this site-to-site architecture, the two VPN devices establish a secure tunnel through the public network. Since traffic must be encrypted from one site to another, the two VPN endpoints, placed in this case after the routers, are responsible for securing data before it crosses the public network. VPN technology can also be directly embedded in routers, removing the need for two additional devices.

Advantages of site-to-site VPNs include scalability, being quite straightforward to add another site, or more devices inside one of the networks, and high availability, as the VPN tunnel does not depend on a device inside the network to initiate and maintain the secure connection. However, for regular users who wish to remain as private as possible, site-to-site VPNs have a quite serious disadvantage. Since traffic is secured just as it leaves the site, by the VPN device or router, data is still vulnerable in the network until it reaches this point, or after it was decrypted, at the other site. As a result, anyone who can intercept our traffic at these stages is a potential threat. Although this scenario is not likely to happen in a business office, it is very probable, for example, for someone who wishes to secure his data from a public place which offers free Internet connection, such as a coffee shop or restaurant.

Point-to-point VPNs (figure 1.2) establish a secure tunnel between two single hosts in usually separate networks, encryption and decryption taking place only at these points, therefore eliminating the aforementioned risk present with site-to-site architectures.

Point-to-point VPNs are used to form traditional consumer VPNs, where a user establishes a secure tunnel between his device and a server, which is then used as a proxy to access resources, possibly again through the Internet.

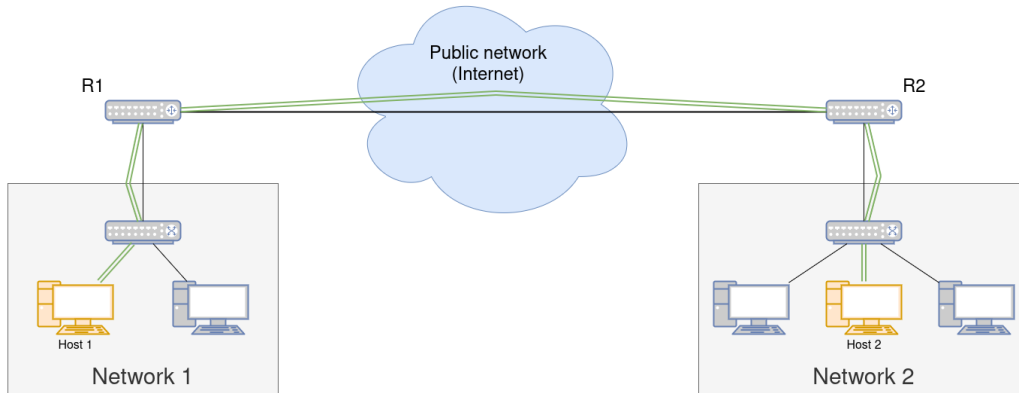


Figure 1.2: A point-to-point VPN tunnel between two hosts. If one of the endpoints is down or unreachable, no tunnel can be established.

If this traffic is intercepted, its origin could only be traced back to the proxy server, not the authentic source, which is the other endpoint of the tunnel. This can only be identified by those who have access to the proxy server, in addition to all the decrypted traffic routed through it. Although some VPN service providers claim that they do not log such traffic when clients use their servers, this sometimes is hard to believe. Such risks, along with the fact that VPN providers charge for their services, prompt users to rely on self-hosted VPNs, in which they own the proxy server. In this case, it is the user's job to install and manage the VPN software on both the proxy server and the other endpoint.

1.3 Tunneling Protocols

The two endpoints of a VPN tunnel do most of the work, being responsible with managing the tunnel and making sure that communication through it is possible. In order for it to actually function, they must modify the regular network packets received from the clients, making sure they are routed to the other endpoint, not to their actual destination, and also provide encryption, if desired. From an original network packet only important information is kept, usually either the network or the transport layer, discarding other layers. This fragment is often called the payload packet, because it is then used as a payload for the final packet. If encryption is used, some portion or the entire payload packet can be modified. This process of encapsulating a packet inside another packet is called *tunneling*, achieved by *tunneling protocols*.

For example, IP in IP is a tunneling protocol which encapsulates an IP

datagram within another IP datagram, as shown in figure 1.3. The source IP in the outer IP header will correspond to the entry point of the tunnel, while the destination IP will reveal the exit point, therefore guaranteeing that the packet will be routed to the other VPN endpoint. Except to the encapsulator decrementing the TTL field in the inner IP header, the packet payload remains unchanged during its delivery to the tunnel exit point[1]. Once there, decapsulation takes place, removing the outer IP header and reconstructing the original packet, which will be sent to its original destination.



Figure 1.3: IP in IP encapsulates the IP layer (IP header and payload) from the original packet within another IP packet. To differentiate between the two IP headers, the first one is often called the outer IP header.

Bibliography

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- [2] S. Smith. Cybercrime will cost businesses over \$2 trillion by 2019. *Retrieved from Juniper Research: <https://www.juniperresearch.com/press/pressreleases/cybercrime-cost-businesses-over-2trillion>*, 2015.