

Rendezvous: toward a distributed secure storage model

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ABSTRACT

We describe a distributed anonymous filesharing network based on insight from studying the efficacy and usability of anonymity-providing services. First we justify two related pillars of our approach: security built in from the start everywhere possible, and realizing the implications of usability (or lack thereof). We detail related literature and our take-aways from others' failures and successes.

Our work originates with prior study of the construction of the Tor network's performance, the onion protocol, and interaction between Tor clients and hidden services. We do not use Tor itself as the foundation for our system due to performance and protocol concerns. We also incorporate design lessons from currently widespread implementations of peer-to-peer filesharing systems, distributed databases such as Kademlia and Pastry, and key management systems such as public files and functionally trusted third parties.

Recently we have begun considering implications of Byzantine failure and other potential faults for our system. In light of these concerns, the third pillar of our system is simplicity. This means reducing the number of technologies and techniques used, without compromising our other priorities, characteristic security and usability. The fourth pillar of our completed system design will be modularity, as in the familiar Unix philosophy. Each element should work as a cog in the greater system without disrupting the user's experience of the system as a seamless entity. Components will be independently testable and secured, composable, and re-usable as needed as stand-alone modules in future work.

We detail the implementation to date and possible issues in our continued execution of our design. We conclude with analysis of possible threats to our system and design as it currently stands, and a brief description of continuing work.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." [23]

Security

The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights details certain freedoms to which all human beings are entitled. Its twelfth and nineteenth articles in particular, similarly to the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and Section 2b of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, state that all humans should have the right to freedom of expression and opinion and should not be subject to arbitrary interference with their assembly and privacy.

While the Internet is a multinational, borderless entity, its cultural heritage is based in the expectation of being able to speak freely and exchange ideas and information with anyone, at any time. Services such as Tor [13], Freenet [7], and I2P [45], which all claim to allow their users to transfer and/or receive information without needing to expose real-world credentials such as legal names and IPs, are available nearly worldwide. This speaks to a strong desire for uncensored communication.

If free speech in particular is to be effectively realized, security and user privacy must be top considerations at all levels of application design. When security is not a bolt-on afterthought but rather is included in the specification from the beginning [39], it is much more difficult to compromise. In the interest of the continuation of a free and open web [22], we consider this the most important principle our design is based on.

Usability

Our second concern is the ability of our users to easily understand and employ our service [3] [48] without accidentally revealing personally identifiable information or other sensitive data. Our system should offer the fewest (unpleasant) surprises possible to the user both in terms of how the interface works and how the underlying system operates [36].

The general public expects the convenience of being able to launch any sort of application with little fuss. Additionally, popular virtual private storage / storage as a service providers such as Dropbox and Apple's iCloud do nothing to dissuade the general belief that properly securing data is trivial, or that one's data will be secure once entrusted to the service provider.

We argue that neither of these suppositions are currently

true, especially in light of the high-profile breaches [27] [31] of such services that have occurred in the last few months, spreading the ‘private’ data of public figures across the internet. However, if a service requires extra effort and time compared to ‘the usual’, it is unlikely that most human beings will put in that effort even if it is understood that they *should* (e.g. avoiding dentist appointments, and similar sociological phenomena).

While Tor and similar services were designed with some measure of usability in mind [11], we argue that it is possible to do better [20], especially considering recent events: hidden service operators and certain users likely lacking the technical knowledge and/or desire to read and understand parts of the Tor specification relevant to configuring their torrc file and software properly have had their anonymity and privacy compromised.

Simplicity

Snowden argues that some possible adversaries are capable of a trillion hashes per second [19], so it is logical to use as much layered, strong encryption as we can manage without overcomplicating the user experience or the back end code. File storage and retrieval is entirely based on whether one has the right PGP keypair [30], and all information entrusted to the system is encrypted with source and final destination in mind before it is temporarily stored in the cloud. Encrypted transit protocols are also employed both to/from the system and between storage nodes within the system itself.

During the beginning of the implementation process, we realized our design at the time used a lot of moving parts simply because the technology was interesting, new, or partially did one thing we needed. Byzantine failure is more likely to occur in a more complicated system [11]: there are more parts that might potentially fail. Furthermore, the simpler and more sturdy a system and its parts are [40], the easier it is to extend that system and reuse its components for other projects. The simpler, more flexible, and more extensible a system is, the more likely we are to convince others to hack on and improve it.

Modularity

After simplifying as much as we could at the time, we realized we had considered the current wants and needs of the user and the author, but had failed to account for future individuals who might want to pick up this project or some part of it and make use of it in other ways. Therefore, we include the concept of modularity [36] as our final underlying design concern. Each component should do just one thing [2], should be composable, and should be designed and tested with limited reliance on elements belonging to other components. These modular units should compose to create the foundation of a system that fits the following problem statement and is additionally extendable.

Design Overview

Alice should be able to easily exchange important information with Bob without allowing anyone else knowledge of what is being transferred or where the data are located at any point during the process. Neither Alice or Bob should need extensive low-level technical knowledge to properly configure and use the service in a secure, correct fashion. Neither the adversary nor Bob should know Alice’s geolocation or IP. Neither Alice nor the adversary should know Bob’s geolocation or IP.

The ideal is an accessible service that allows the general public to share files once (or multiple times) using at least some level of encryption and randomization to keep the adversary from having knowledge of the mapping between *any* users’ personal information such as location and real name, and the encrypted data temporarily stored within the service in a randomized fashion.

We believe further exploration in this space is necessary and that anonymity is not a solved problem, especially given the number of possible attacks on Tor [24] [28] [5] [9] [25] employed lately by governments and other entities. Many have attempted to create a reasonably reliable, secure method for information transfer and have partially succeeded, standing upon the shoulders of those who tried and did not succeed quite so well previously. We propose yet another partial solution: a secure service that is simple to use and to extend, fulfilling the general expectation that data entrusted to the cloud is well protected. We wish to facilitate anonymous, distributed sharing of encrypted information in a peer-to-peer fashion. Perhaps future work, possibly even building on this, will come closer to realizing freedom of speech and information.

2. RELATED WORK

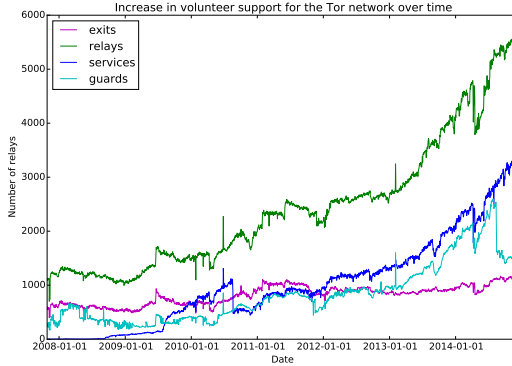
2.1 Tor and the onion protocol

Tor [13] is a widely used, well documented project claiming to provide more security than its users would have otherwise conducting business on the open web. The Tor FAQ [46] states that simple filesharing is not desired within the Tor network, especially using P2P protocols, which are not anonymized by Tor and SOCKS proxies in general, so we chose not to create another layer on top of Tor.

In direct contradiction to methods employed by Onionshare [29], Anonabox [10], and similar services deployed as layers on top of the existing Tor system, we chose to roll our own underlying system, reimagining and integrating only the features we really needed from Tor, mainly the hidden service/introduction point model and the anonymity given by the latest iteration of onion routing.

We argue that slowness of Tor compared to the open web [14] is due more to an imbalance [18] between users and certain kinds of contributors (and additionally, in part, to load balancing issues [1]) than to overhead from the anonymity precautions. Due (we hypothesize) to the Tor system’s no-

tority and additionally the general public’s lack of understanding of what Tor really is and how it works, the percentage of those using Tor and similar systems for anonymity who also contribute back [34] by running a relay or an exit node or improving the codebase is much smaller than the number of people who want to use the service. The percentage of volunteers running an exit node, a critical part of the infrastructure, is currently smallest of all [35].



Furthermore it has been shown [6] using the Cisco traffic analysis tool Netflow that it is possible to uncloak around 81% of Tor users, especially in cases where the users did not have enough deep knowledge of the inner workings of the service. While we strongly advocate for an improved Tor, since it is already in widespread use, we propose a single-purpose partial alternative that addresses some of Tor’s limitations.

Despite hope that Tor might one day be free of the bottleneck of having fewer than the optimal number of exit nodes, we cannot count on volunteers signing up to support Tor by running exit nodes soon enough or in large enough number to meet demand for anonymous information sharing that requires less bandwidth *and* additionally support the general public sharing files over Tor as over tracked torrent clients.

Not implementing our service over Tor gives us the freedom to use UDP at the transport layer where desired and also to employ specially tailored peer-to-peer protocols for communication among our “directory servers” and also for uploading and downloading files from the network.

Tor offers users the ability to set up rendezvous points known as “hidden services”, or alternatives to sites on the open web offering anything servable over a SOCKS proxy. While the idea is that operating such a service would be anonymous in that the operator’s IP address and physical location should never be revealed, it has been proven that this assumption is flawed in some cases [9]. Tor hidden services, by way of a “hidden service descriptor”, which consists of the service’s public key and a summary of its introduction points, advertise themselves in a globally available distributed hash table directory. The descriptor is what’s first found when a user types the service’s DESC.onion address into their Tor browser’s URL bar. The “DESC” is a base-32

encoding of a 10-octet hash of the service’s public key.

Tor uses an incremental path-building design, which means that each successive hop in a circuit (a path between a user’s Tor client’s entry point into the network and her destination) has to negotiate its own session keys. We include this kind of temporal modularity in our design; transport of a given chunk of data within the database is modelled after Tor circuits. Tor multiplexes many TCP streams on a single circuit to allow for a noisier background and also provide more efficiency than just one stream on a circuit would have. Therefore the next step from the client point of view in navigation to DESC.onion once the service descriptor has been fetched from a randomly chosen hidden service directory is as follows. The client picks one of the service’s introduction (rendezvous) points, and establishes a rendezvous circuit which will facilitate connection to that introduction point. Once the introduction point has been established by the client, the *service* builds itself a new Tor circuit ending at that point as well. The rendezvous point authenticates and relays cells between the client circuit and the server circuit. We also incorporate the idea of rendezvous points into our design in two places.

2.2 I2P

Somewhat like Tor, I2P [26] is an anonymous network based around the *I2P router*. I2P is designed to safeguard typical internet functions such as email, file sharing, messaging, and so on, mainly within a separate network called the *darknet* which is built on top of the bespoke UDP and TCP-like protocols SSU and NTCP. These protocols run on top of the peer-to-peer network, which itself runs on top of IP.

Unlike Tor and similar architectures, the peer-to-peer network that is I2P’s ground-floor layer is completely decentralized. Decentralization implies better scalability, and of course no central trusted authority which may be potentially compromised. All peer and service metadata is instead stored in a distributed hash table called *netDB*. Network database records are stored in another Kademlia-like DHT [32] *flood-fill*. Since netDB is run alongside regular I2P nodes, it may be considered less a trusted *group* of authorities than functionally interwoven in the network.

All connections inside the darknet are end-to-end encrypted; the router multiplexes these connections over paired, single-direction *I2P tunnels*, which are (when taken as a paired connection from server to client) analogous to Tor’s circuits. These tunnels are constructed with the onion protocol. All participants are meant to be anonymous.

However, in practice this does not always appear to be the case. I2P is a much smaller project than Tor; this means fewer users providing white noise around one’s traffic, fewer developers, and fewer volunteers running services.

2.3 Freenet

Freenet [7] is a location-independent peer-to-peer distributed

filesystem of nodes that collaborate to store and retrieve encrypted files, which are named by 160-bit SHA-1 hashes that do not depend on the files' location. Each user maintains their own local datastore as a portion of their hard drive which might otherwise go under-utilized. Freenet maintains a *hops-to-live* limit on active requests for files, which is decremented at each node the request reaches, to prevent infinite cycling through the system. We repurpose the *time-to-live* concept detailed by the IP specification and employed by Freenet to limit the number of downloads that can take place before the space dedicated to a file's chunks and identifier will be repurposed to hold other information (Freenet uses an LRU caching policy to determine what gets deleted from an individual node when there is not enough available space). Further, we do not store information locally on users' machines—our system requires obtaining a virtual private storage space to contribute instead.

2.4 Why Johnny can't stay anonymous

2.5 Tracked and untracked single-peer and peer-to-peer transactions

Cooperative peer-to-peer services like BitTorrent [8], Gnutella [37], uTorrent [47], Freenet [7], and more experimental distributed architectures attempt to meet this goal. However, in the case of services based on the BitTorrent protocol and similar, a tracking server or some other method of keeping a list of users' IPs and ports is necessary. Every user whose torrent client requests a list of peers from which to obtain pieces of the file in question is not anonymous to those peers; nor are those peers anonymous to the user in question. Distributed information stores related to the peer-to-peer model such as Pastry [38], Chord [41], Kademlia [32], Comet [17] and so on have advantages over widely used peer-to-peer services including greater consistency and fault tolerance, but none provide the kind of intrinsic, heavy-duty modular security we envision.

3. METHODS AND ARCHITECTURE

Our system has two main parts: a public key,value store similar to Tor relay directories, and a (secure) distributed database [12] [33] called a *rendezvous*. The rendezvous consists of a layer of encryption and randomization for data over storage space located on VPS platforms and contributed to the database as a requirement for uploading one's own data, pay-to-play style. These two parts will both operate on the P2P-style assumption that *data is only sent when it is asked for by the receiver* [4].

Control interface: the client

We propose a dual model for the client interface: a minimal browser extension that will work on both ordinary Firefox and the Tor browser bundle (which is based on Firefox), and a web site optimized for touchscreen (as well as keyboard) use. We do not wish to create actual client-side applications

that run at a deeper layer than appended to the browser, if possible, to minimize any need for porting across platforms.

Rendezvous point operators should be able to see how much of their total space is being used, how many P2P connections they currently have open, and how much bandwidth that's taking up. Furthermore, the key,value store operator will have additional functionality (similar to that of the rendezvous operator) that allows him to keep an eye on the store and make sure it isn't being overwhelmed.

A snapshot of this information could be provided in JSON format from the key,value store as part of the response to adding oneself to the network in order to upload a file, or it could be available only upon request in keeping with the theme that no action of automated parts of this system shall happen without a single, authorized human request to facilitate it.

Control interface: GET, PUT, DELETE

Key storage and distribution

The storage of clients' public keys mapped to available files is handled by the key,value store, a functionally trusted entity which is entirely public and may at a later date become distributed similarly to the rendezvous store itself. Those who have made an upload of their credentials to the store (analogous to an HTTP PUT) are allowed to run an operation analogous to HTTP GET to see if their public key is a match against any data available in the rendezvous.

Suppose Alice wants to send a file to Bob. She first registers an identifier [21] which, for our purposes, consists of a PGP public key either previously in use and uploaded to Alice's client application, or generated for her by the client. A .onion address [43] (that isn't currently in use) is the base-32 encoding of a 10-octet SHA-3 hash of this public key. If she would also like to upload content, the hash of the (encrypted) file in question is also calculated.

Assuming Alice has the public key(s) of her file's recipient(s), she can add them to the hash of her key with the file she is publishing. Data given a destination in this fashion cannot be reassembled and pulled out of the store without a public key that, hashed with some file and origin point, matches the hash value attached to the file (and that data additionally cannot be decrypted without the matching private key). Data cannot even be *found* without knowledge of the public key belonging to its origin.

There is some possibility for malicious users who have their own data in the store to pull out random public keys from the directory and try to get those users' files, but as long as the malicious users' keys don't match the destination hatch, the unsuspecting "good" users' data should remain safe. Data without destination should naturally not be as sensitive as data directed at a specific entity. In the client interface, the default option is to add a destination (or multiple destinations – which turn the single hash into a list of possible hash matches); the option to upload data without a specific recipient will be available but slightly less visible.

Alice’s .onion address, her full public key, and a list of hashes of her onion address, the hash of the file, and the public key(s) of any recipients are sent

```
PUT { id : id_A,
      address : .onion_A,
      dest: { h( h(f), .onion_A, .onion_B),
              h( h(f), .onion_A, .onion_C),
              ...
            },
      TTL : x
    }
```

to our public-facing key,value store. TTL, which stands for time to live, is an eight-bit number historically indicating the time an IP datagram can exist in an internet system. For instance, when using the *ping* network utility, each ICMP packet sent out has a certain number of hops between routers it can make before it is discarded. Our version of the TTL value accounts for the number of downloads that can take place before the shards of Alice’s file will be unconditionally written over. The default TTL will be one. If the TTL is blank, the destination list must also be blank. If both of these are true, the file will be considered open for public download until its originator sends a DELETE command on the hash of the file to be deleted to the key,value store. The list of destination hashes, the time-to-live value, and Alice’s address will also be attached to fragments of the file such that each can be retrieved from its rendezvous point.

Efficient uploading to temporary data storage and crude randomized load balancing

When Alice’s public key and the hash(es) of her files with their destination(s) are loaded into the key,value store, the actual data upload to the rendezvous can take place.

The store chooses a set of destination points from its list of currently available rendezvous(es). Since each person who is allowed to upload data is also running their own storage node, for example, Alice’s .onion address indicates (from the viewpoint of the datastore nodes) her storage node and, from the viewpoint of other clients connected to the network, the public key to which data destined for Alice should be sent when Alice opens a request.

The choice of destination points for file chunks is as random as possible given certain factors like storage space available on the chosen nodes and number of nodes currently on the network. We select a simple random sample of n destinations, where n is the number of file shards. We re-select from the list of nodes currently up in the case that a given possible destination’s storage space is occupied up to the high-water mark. It is possible that a chunk of Alice’s file could end up in Alice’s storage node, though hopefully by using multiple random number generators and several selection steps, most of the file will be stored elsewhere.

Destination points are randomly assigned, using a different random number generator from the one used for node se-

lection, from the list to shards of data. Ideally, a mixture of data chunks from many sources would be stored on Alice’s node. Once upload of all shards is complete, the key,value store returns a confirmation to Alice as well as a reasonably current estimate of service-wide statistics.

When Bob wants to retrieve the file Alice has left for him, he issues a $GET(id_A, id_B, .onion_B)$ to the key,value store. The store returns the .onion where each file shard is located, and the hash $h(h(f), .onion_A, .onion_B)$. Bob’s client is now armed with the information needed to retrieve the full file. Bob opens a GET on each .onion address provided along with his hash, which starts a *trackerless* peer-to-peer download from each relevant node of the rendezvous directly to Bob of the encrypted file. As Bob’s storage node acquires each file chunk, he checks against his hash to ensure he’s got it all correctly. Potentially the rendezvous point already did the same when Alice was uploading the file as an integrity check. This also would eliminate the possibility of Alice sending a file to the rendezvous point that does not match the hash she already registered with the network.

Node entry, exit, and information loss

Layered encryption

PGP

Individual-node space checks and the high-water mark

Virtual private storage

Rendezvous points will mostly be run by volunteers who use the service regularly. This model could easily be extended to multiple stores which are updated through P2P every time someone uploads their information tuple to the store most convenient to them. A shared-nothing (no storage space is common to any two nodes) multiple-node model would provide both greater fault tolerance and additionally reduce the number of hops needed to query the network, hopefully adding efficiency. We also propose a study on what proportion of rendezvous points to regular users to key,value stores would make this architecture most efficient.

4. PRELIMINARY RESULTS

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

We present some justification for and description of a service that allows anyone to protect the privacy of their data while sharing it as desired.

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