Linux Authentication and PAM

Face Recognition

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2024-02-16

Abstract

In computer security, authentication is the process of confirming someone is who they claim to be when attempting to access any kind of computer system through the confirmation of something they have, something they know, or something they are. It is important to always maintain and improve the integrity of computer systems' authentication schemes as new security threats arise. The Linux kernel invokes the standard Unix authentication process across the majority of its applications. However, as new forms of authentication are developed, it is inefficient to individually reconfigure applications such that the desired authentication scheme is incorporated. The PAM (Pluggable Authentication Module) mechanism in Linux integrates various low-level authentication schemes into a high-level API, allowing programs that require some form of authentication to be developed independently from the desired authentication scheme. This integrated research aims to demonstrate the function and importance of PAM in Linux authentication with the invocation of a face recognition PAM security module. Real-time face detection and recognition is performed using the Haar Cascade Classifier and the LBPH (Local Binary Patterns Histograms) feature-based face recognition method.

Introduction

The Linux kernel invokes the standard Unix authentication process across most of its applications (e.g., common-auth, sshd, su, and sudo). When developers are creating and updating applications, it would prove quite inefficient to individually reconfigure application logic such that it aligns with the newly desired authentication scheme. This would mean restructuring code and requiring other dependencies. With this in mind, developers need a way to invoke authentication schemes independently from applications, allowing for a more modular approach. This enables programs to run separately. Much like it's father kernel (Unix) the Linux kernel invokes these modular authentication schemes via the PAM (Pluggable Authentication Module) mechanism. One might think of this as a multitool. Just as a multitool can have different tools for various purposes like cutting, screwing, or opening, PAM provides different authentication methods for Linux. Depending on what you need to authenticate—be it through passwords, biometrics, or other means—you can plug in the appropriate tool/module into PAM to handle the authentication process effectively. This integrated research aims to display this function with the creation of a modular authentication scheme—face recognition.

Overview of Linux Authentication

Linux authentication involves several components. Centrally are the /etc/passwd and /etc/shadow files. In '/etc/passwd', user account information such as usernames, user IDs, group IDs, and home directories are stored. The tangible passwords are more securely stored in '/etc/shadow'. It is here where there are hashed passwords and other security-related information. Each line in '/etc/shadow' represents a user account and includes uniquely populated fields like usernames, encrypted passwords, password aging and expiration details, and account lockout information. When any user attempts to login to the machine, the system hashes the entered password using the same algorithm as the one stored in /etc/shadow. If the hashed passwords match, access is granted to the user. More specifically, hashing involves the conversion of a password into a fixed-length string of

characters using a cryptographic hash function. This process is irreversible, meaning the original password cannot be easily derived from the hash. Another additional measure of security that is implemented in the hashing process is salting. Salting is where a random value (a salt) is added to the password before hashing. This prevents attackers from using precomputed hash tables, also known as rainbow tables, to crack passwords. These unique fields in the /etc/shadow file are separated by colons, with each field serving a specific purpose. These fields may typically include the username, the hashed password, the last password date, the minimum and maximum password age, the password warning period, the password inactivity period, the account expiration date, and the account expiration date warning. To summarize, the integrity of the Linux authentication process relies on secure data storage of hashed passwords, salting for additional security, and an automated management system of user account information. As this relates to PAM, the invoked module (found in the directory /lib/*/security) is the primary logic to which the input password is hashed and compared to the corresponding hash in the /etc/shadow file; it is then followed by either a success or failure being return to the PAM mechanism.

Hashing

Hashing plays a pivotal role in Linux authentication mechanisms, safeguarding user credentials stored on the system. In Linux, password hashes are typically generated using cryptographic hash functions such as SHA-256 or SHA-512. When a user sets or updates their password, the system computes the hash of the password and stores it in the system's password file (‘/etc/shadow‘). When a user attempts to log in, the system hashes the provided password using the same algorithm and compares it with the stored hash in the password file. If the hashes match, access is granted. Otherwise, access is denied. This process ensures that even if an attacker gains access to the password file, obtaining the original passwords is exceedingly difficult due to the one-way nature of cryptographic hashing. According to Doe and Smith (2020), hash functions are crucial for data integrity verification in authentication systems, emphasizing properties like collision resistance, which are essential for robust security implementations.

Salts

Salts are key in enhancing the security of password storage in Linux. When a user sets or changes their password, a random salt is generated and combined with the password before hashing. This salt is then stored alongside the hashed password in the system's password file. The purpose of the salt is to prevent attackers from using precomputed hash tables, such as rainbow tables, to quickly determine the original password from its hash. By adding a unique salt to each password before hashing, even if two users have the same password, their hashed values will be different due to the different salts used. Consequently, rainbow table attacks become impractical, as attackers would need to generate a new table for each unique salt value. This significantly increases the complexity and time required for password cracking attempts. Salting effectively mitigates various password-based attacks, thereby strengthening the overall security of the Linux authentication system Smith (2021).

PAM Configuration

Pluggable Authentication Modules (PAM) constitute a critical component of Linux systems, providing a flexible framework for authentication management. PAM enables system administrators to configure authentication policies independently of the applications requiring authentication, thus promoting modularity and security. Central to PAM's functionality are its configuration files located in ‘/etc/pam.d/‘, which define the authentication rules for specific services or applications. These configuration files specify the modules to be invoked during authentication, such as password verification, account validation, and session management. Each module performs a specific authentication task, allowing administrators to tailor authentication mechanisms according to their security requirements. PAM modules can employ various authentication methods, including traditional password-based authentication, token-based authentication, biometric authentication, and multi-factor authentication. Additionally, PAM's modular design allows for the inclusion of custom authentication modules located in ‘/lib/*/security‘, enabling further customization and integration with external authentication services, such as LDAP or Kerberos. This flexibility, coupled with PAM's extensibility, makes it a cornerstone of Linux security, facilitating robust authentication mechanisms that can adapt to diverse

system architectures and security policies (Jones and Smith (2022)).

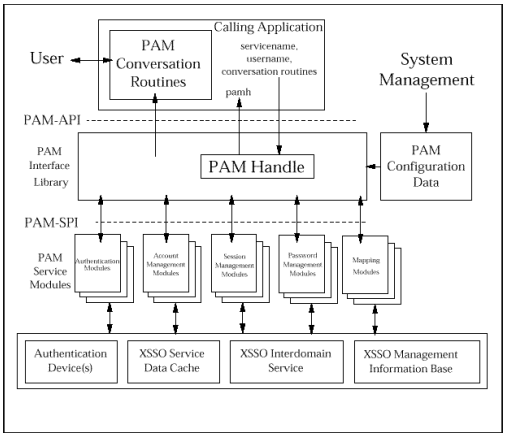

Figure 1: PAM System Framework

Biometrics

Biometrics, a field at the intersection of computer science and biology, offers innovative solutions for identity verification and access control. It involves the measurement and analysis of unique physical or behavioral characteristics to establish an individual's identity. Unlike traditional authentication methods like passwords or tokens, which can be lost, stolen, or forgotten, biometric traits are inherently linked to a person and are difficult to replicate. Biometric systems typically capture data from various sources, including fingerprints, iris patterns, facial features, voice patterns, and even behavioral traits like gait or typing patterns. These biometric data are then processed and converted into mathematical representations, often referred to as templates or biometric signatures. During authentication, a user's biometric data is captured and compared against the stored template in a database. If the biometric features match within an acceptable threshold, access is granted. The use of biometrics offers several advantages, including increased security, convenience, and resistance to fraud. However, challenges such as privacy concerns, accuracy, and susceptibility to spoofing techniques remain significant areas of research and development in the field. Nonetheless, with advancements in technology and algorithms, biometrics continues to gain traction in various domains, including law enforcement, border control, banking, and mobile devices Wang and Li (2023).

References

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