# IOT Access control and Authentication Management via blockchain

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## IOT Access control and Authentication Management via blockchain

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Abstract. Securing Access to IOT devices needs specific requirements since they have special characteristics like low processing power, limited memory and energy. Because of their fast spreading and deployment, some significant disadvantages are appearing in the current authentication and access control mechanisms. This paper proposes a blockchain based solution that allows users to connect and authenticate securely to their IOT devices. It benefits from the positive features available in current solutions and overcome their disadvantages. The proposed approach provides accountability via tamper-proof records and the availability that is offered by design when using blockchain based technologies. The solution is designed in details, implemented, tested and analyzed dynamically and statically. Finally, future ideas and recommendations are given as a continuous effort to improve and secure authentication and access control solutions.

**Keywords:** Internet-of-Things, Blockchain, smart contract, authentication, access control

#### 1 Introduction

Internet-Of-Things concept can be defined as a system of connected computing devices in various fields and forms that collect and transfer data to each other to deliver a certain service. It presents the idea of autonomous devices that can be deployed everywhere. These devices can gather, share, communicate with other devices and process information [14]. According to experts from CISCO, Ericsson and other companies, by the year 2020, we will have over 50 billion devices connected to the INTERNET [3][20]. IOT devices are functioning in all fields nowadays: house appliances, medical area, personal accessories, etc. To allow such functionality, IOT devices must have certain characteristics. They should posses the abilities of operating using low energy and communicating with other heterogeneous devices. They should maintain stable connection with the back-end if existed and be able to receive patches when necessary.

Authentication and access control are key concepts to securely manage computer resources and networks. Based on the previously mentioned characteristics,

these concepts should be redefined in the context of IOT. Authentication techniques and access control policies need to take the limited resources drawback into consideration. A possible authentication solution is using elliptic curve cryptography for key agreement and digital signatures since it consumes less memory and processing power[12]. Likewise, when it comes to IOT conditions, classical approaches for access control like **ABAC** (Attribute-based access control) and **RBAC** (Role-based access control) are proven to be inflexible, unscalable and difficult to upgrade [7][15].

In addition, the centralized perception of authentication where all devices have to contact a certain entity may not apply to IOT devices. The reason is that those devices cannot be continually connected to the authentication server because of their functioning conditions and low energy consumption. This will harm the stability of the connectivity which is a key characteristic of IOT devices. Such disadvantages in the IOT design can be overcome using the blockchian technology.

Blockchain is known as the underlying technology for **Bitcoin**[10]. It can be defined as a growing chain of records. By design, the blockchain inherits effective characteristics in which the blocks of records are decentralized, tamper-proof and can be accessed by all nodes equally. This concept can be extended to all types of applications that require a trusted third party to validate records or transactions.

Building a system that depends on a trusted third party implies the assumption of a TTP that is always available and authentic. This creates a bottleneck around the trusted party that affects availability. Also, the model fails when the centralized entity is compromised. Additionally, the TTP can tamper records without accountability. **Blockchain** made it possible to replace the trusted third party with a transparent untampered block of records that is available via a distributed form, hence, the trust is moved from a single entity to a decentralized community of blockchain nodes.

An effective method that utilizes blockhain concept is the smart-contract. Smart-Contract was first defined in 1996 as a self-operating or self-executing program[18]. This method was reintroduced in Ethereum blockchain to facilitate the development of blockhain automated applications.

Events and logs are Ethereum blockchain features. An event is a reply (returned value) from the smart contract to the user interface interacting with it. The main goal of using events and logs is to ease the communication between smart contracts and programs communicating with them . Figure 1 shows a sample scenario for an Ethereum Smart Contract Application. It is important to note that the smart contract acts fully autonomously and the owner is not involved in any steps. This scenario is described as follows:

- The client requests access for a certain resource/asset from the smart contract.
- 2. The smart contract checks if the asset is free then books the fee from the client. For this example, the client is paying via Ethereum crypto-currency.
- 3. The smart contract reserves the resource for the current client.

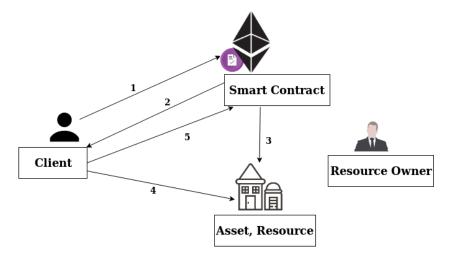


Fig. 1. A sample Ethereum Smart Contract Scenario.

- 4. The client uses the resource as approved.
- 5. If everything went according to the contract rules, the smart contract charges the client as agreed.

Because of the rapid growth of IOT devices, controlling and restricting their access is a rising problem. By running a simple search, attackers can compromise and control hundreds of thousands of IOT devices from anywhere in the world. In many occasions, the reason of such violation is poorly implemented authentication and access control. For example, a lot of devices contain only a root account and use default passwords or none at all. These faulty configurations lead to violation of privacy, absence of accountability and major attacks on Availability. The Largest DDOS attack was made possible because of such poor access management. 1.5 Million IOT devices were compromised because of known default credentials[4].

Securing access to IOT devices produces a Scalability problem. If each device requires its own credentials, the scalability of such approach will reduce the quality of the user experience. In other words, the user will have to login to each device individually. This will cause complexity to linearly increase.

In the next segments, The paper will review various implementations of IOT authentication solutions in section 2. Then, the detailed design of the proposed solution is explained in section 3. Next, the implementation phases, elements, technologies and techniques are clarified in section 4. After that, section 5 illustrates the tests performed on this paper's approach, and the outcome results and evaluation. Finally, the paper is concluded with the lessons learned and future plans that will help improving this solution in section 6.

## 2 Literature Review

This section presents different existing approaches to solve the problem of authentication management and access control in IOT devices. Section 2.1 will discuss traditional approaches used for authentication and access control in addition to their advantages and disadvantages. On the other hand, solutions presented in section 2.2 are distinguished by the fact that they all use blockchain as a backbone for their ideas. The additional features of the approach of this paper are argued in further sections. The comparison between the blockchain based solutions and the paper is detailed in section 5.3.

#### 2.1 IOT authentication traditional models

A basic approach is to authenticate to each device directly using username, password combination. This method provides decent access control because each authenticated user has his roles and permissions specified and stored on the device by the admin (owner). However, since the user must authenticate to each machine independently, this method produces an overhead and doesn't scale. This technique can be seen in classic IOT devices like IP cameras and Internet accessed home utilities.

Authenticating using single-sign-on protocols is a more advanced solution. For instance, when **oauth2** is deployed as an authentication method, users try to access a device by authenticating to a trusted oauth2 provider. This trusted third party can be GOOGLE, FACEBOOK, etc. If they successfully authenticate and have the required permissions, the trusted entity grants access. All devices managed by the same individual can be accessed by authenticating to the trusted entity [16].

Figure 2 illustrates an abstract of the Oauth2 protocol flow in the context of IOT. First, when the user tries to access the IOT device resources, the device act as the oauth2 client and sends an authorization request to the user. Second, the user grants the client the authority to communicate with the authorization server i.e. the oauth2 provider. Then, the IOT device contacts the oauth2 provider to access the user's information in order to check if such user is allowed to use its resources[16].

Using such approach saves time and effort since the user accesses multiple entities by authenticating to a single entity. Also, the oauth2 provider is usually a trusted third party with a high reputation which eases the integration of such solution[16]. On the other hand, trusting a centralized entity increases the threat of having a single point of failure which threatens the availability of the presented approach. Moreover, if the user's account or the centralized entity were compromised, the whole system is affected.

An essential attack vector that may lead to this model's failure is phishing which has a high successful rate. In addition, spear phishing campaigns are getting more intensive, precise and sophisticated nowadays which may even trick the educated users [2]. According to Symantec Latest Intelligence Report for June 2017, 76% of organizations came forward of being phishing victims in 2016[13].

#### **Abstract Protocol Flow**

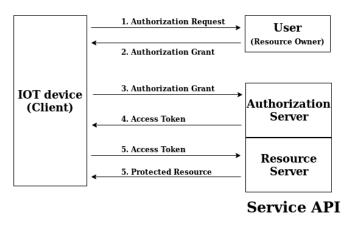


Fig. 2. An abstract for Oauth2 flow.

The approaches discussed so far present a valid implementation for IOT authentication. However, they suffer from some drawbacks that may affect scalability, performance and availability. The following approaches have the potential for an IOT authentication management and access control solution that uses blockchain technology.

#### 2.2 Blockchain based authentication models

Auth0 introduced a method to authenticate to a server via Ethereum blockchain using a challenge-response method. The drawback discovered in auth0 approach is the need of a 3rd party authentication server. It is a hybrid solution that combines the decentralization of blockchain with the centralization of a trusted third party. The problem of "Single Point of Failure" or "Single Point of Trust" will reappear with this approach. According to Auth0, the centralized server holds an essential role since it is involved in 62.5% of the whole operation. This increases the dependency on a centralized entity which contradicts the benefit of using blockchain technology[11].

**Blockstack** is presenting the concept of a new decentralized INTERNET. This network contains applications for authentication and storage. The system utilizes a user's keypair to authenticate in a similar manner to PKI. When a users is authenticated correctly, a unique JSON Web Token is created. The JWT permits access to all pre-authorized resources via the one authentication process validated previously.

On the downside, blockstack has many requirements to operate. The goal of this system is to shift to a newly decentralized network therefore, the first requirement is to use a blockstack browser. If not, then blockstack app should be installed on the user's machine. In addition, the system built an additional two layers on top of blockchain - peer network layer and storage layer - which increases the operational overhead. Finally, the entities interaction is based on a new domain name protocol called the **Blockchain Name System** as a replacement for traditional DNS[8]. BNS is one of many novel implementations that are aiming to replace classic domain name system. More examples include NameCoin and Ethereum Name Server[1].

**Agile** is a famous IOT development framework that is working on a blockchain based solution called **Jolocom**. Agile and Sir Tim Bernerers-Lee are planning to roll-out a solution that runs on the ethereum blockchain for decentralized authentication and storage applications to allow users to own their data and identity. However, this solution is still under development [22].

## 3 Systems Design and Architecture

The paper offers a blockchain based solution with distinct system architecture. It addresses the drawbacks of current solutions. Also, it should be portable and run on any network with minimum dependencies unlike **blockstack**. It is targeting IOT devices that lack strong processing power. It is also presenting the idea of Oauth implementation via smart contract to login once and control all the authorized devices without the need to login separately for each IOT device. In addition, the IOT devices can run smart contracts to become self profiting devices.

Section 5.1 will discuss the costs of this solution. Section 5.2 will go over the tests operated on a running prototype in addition to the test outcome. Tests will include performance experiments and crafted attacks against them. Then, section 5.3 will evaluate in terms of availability, scalability, decentralization, tamper proof and performance advantages and drawback.

There are many advantages for using Ethereum blockchain as a platform for this solution. Ethereum has a stable development framework with existing incentive for miners to solve challenge hashes. Also, Ethereum light client protocol can run on IOT devices with low processing power and memory which is essential for the proposed solution[9].

One time Authentication: Authenticate once directly to the blockchain then access the resource using Smart Contract tokens: In this scenario, the user authenticates to the smart contract which verifies his/her identity. The smart contract then determine if the user is allowed to access the resources. The authentication is performed in an isolated phase. When succeeded, the user can interact with the device in any preferred method e.g., ssh, http, https, etc. This accomplishes decentralized authentication in an efficient way. The evaluation of this solution will be discussed in section 5.

## 3.1 Assumptions

To implement such solution, the following assumptions must be taken into consideration:

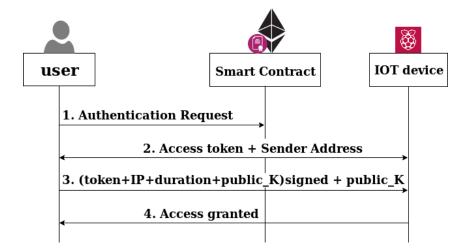


Fig. 3. The second solution authentication scenario.

- The user owns one or more IOT devices.
- The user's Ethereum keystore is not compromised i.e. the private key is protected.
- The user has an Ethereum account.
- The user and the IOT device are connected to the Ethereum blockchain
- The user will deploy his smart contract.\*

\*The system can budge the last assumption and work perfectly. A centralized smart contract that authenticate users to their respective IOT devices can be created. However, since one of the goals of this paper is to avoid depending on a central entity. It is more suitable to ask users to deploy their own smart contracts so they can achieve full control of their own systems. This will shape a system of decentralized smart contracts running on a decentralized blockchain where each user owns his/her smart contract.

#### 3.2 System Architecture

The message sequence diagram shown in figure 3 illustrates the steps of the authentication process as follows:

- 1. The user Authenticates to the smart contract using his Ethereum wallet address.
- If the user is valid, the smart contract broadcasts an Access token and the sender's ethereum address. The user and the IOT device receive the broadcasted information from the smart contract.
- 3. The user crafts a package that contains (Access token, User IP, Access duration and the ethereum public key). This package is signed using the ethereum private key then sent with the corresponding public key. The package can be

encrypted if wanted. However, It is not required for the protocol to operate. Integrity is what matters in this scenario hence the signing of the message.

- 4. When the IOT device receives the package, it checks the following:
  - If both received public keys are similar.
  - If the signed message was genuine.
  - If the public key belongs to the Sender's Ethereum address.
  - If the Access token is valid
  - If the IP in the message is similar to the sender's IP.

IF those arguments are validated, the IOT device grants access to the user from the sender's IP for the duration specified. Otherwise, if any of those checks fails, the request is dropped.

The smart contract completes its authentication task in the first step. It is noted that the IOT device needs to perform many verification steps. However, as discussed in section 5, this solution runs successfully on a standard raspberry Pie 3 Model B. More details on the technical specifications of the smart contract and the IOT server are explained in section 4.

## 4 Implementation and Deployment

Implementing the proposed solution can be compartmentalized to the separate phases that can be built individually then integrated accordingly. This will facilitate the developing process. Also, debugging will be easier once challenges are faced. The presented solution will be explained in two subsections. The first subsection will explain the Smart contract functionality and how it performs authentication as the first phase. The second subsection discusses the authentication interaction between the user and the IOT device after the first phase is successfully executed.

#### 4.1 Phase 1: Smart Contract

As mentioned in section 3, the first phase occurs when the user authenticates to the smart contract to prove he/she is a legitimate user. Pseudo-code below contains the source code of the smart contract. This version of the smart contract only considers the admin user as a legitimate user. In other words, the user who deployed this smart contract on the blockchain is the admin user. Adding more users can be achieved by adding an addUser() method to the smart contract.

When users want to authenticate, they use their Ethereum client to call method  $login\_admin$ . The  $login\_admin$  function requires no parameters and it is protected from public usage i.e only authorized users can call it because a modifier performs the verification of the sender's Ethereum address. If a verified user calls this function,  $login\_admin$  creates a random hash using function rand. Then,  $login\_admin$  creates a token by hashing the user's ethereum address, block time and the random hash created in the latest step. After that, an event is initiated to send the token and the authenticated user's address back to the IOT device and user to proceed with phase 2.

The smart contract of the proposed solution:

```
contract Login2
Declare Private owner, hash, token_raw, random_number
//begin constructor:
owner = msg.sender;
End Constructor

Private Function login_admin()
IF msg.sender == owner
    set random_number = random(1,100);
    set hash = keccak256(msg.sender,now,random_number);
    trigger even LoginAttempt(msg.sender, hash);
Endif
End Function
End Class
```

#### 4.2 Phase 2: User-IOT interaction

When phase 1 is completed successfully, the user and the IOT device receive an authentication token and the Ethereum address of the authorized user. Phase 2 connects the two entities together. Note that this solution assumes that the user knows the address - ip or domain name - of the IOT device. In case this wasn't true, the device address can be sent by event LoginAttempt.

User side implementation flow: First, by using nodejs and web3 Ethereum client, the user's script connects to the Ethereum blockchain listening for events coming from the deployed smart contract in phase 1. When the event arrives, the user's script accesses the keystore directory that contains the user's secret keys and extracts the private key. Note that the script needs the key pass in order to perform such action. Then, the script extracts the public key from the private key. The public key is hashed using keccak256 algorithm. The last 40 bytes of the resulting hash is the Ethereum address of the user. This Ethereum address is compared with the one received from the smart contract event. This is the formal method to obtain an Ethereum address from a keystore directory. Note that the public key usage is minimized and replaced by the Ethereum address since the address is shorter and easier to use. This is achieved using keythereum to access the private key and elliptic to derive the public key. Those nodejs libraries can be found online[19][5].

After assuring that the Ethereum address received from smart contract is the user's address. The script starts crafting the authentication message. The message can be described as following:

$$message = [token + src\_ip + Auth\_dur + Pub_K]$$
 (1)

Where:

- token: is the token received from the smart contract.
- **src\_ip**: is the ip address the user will connect from.
- Auth\_dur: is the duration for the authentication validity before it is revoked and another authentication is required.
- **Pubk**: is the public key of the user's ethereum account.

Finally, the message is signed using the private key of the user's ethereum account. The following authentication package is sent to the IOT device:

$$message + Signature + Pub_K$$
 (2)

IOT side implementation flow: The IOT device script starts in a similar manner to the user script. It connects to the smart contract deployed in phase 1 and listens for the desired event. When the event occurs, the script gets the authentication token and the Ethereum address of the authenticated user. The script waits for the user's authentication package to arrive. If the package arrived, the verification phase starts. If any of the verification steps fail to succeed, the authentication package is dropped to minimize the workload on the IOT device processing power. The process moves to the next step only if the current step is verified.

#### Verification phase steps:

- 1. Is the authentication package and message in the correct format as shown in equations 1 and 2?
- 2. Is the message signature valid? This is checked using the public key in equation 2
- 3. Is the public key in the authentication package 2 similar to the one in the message 1 ?
- 4. Is the token in message 1 similar to the token from the smart contract?
- 5. Is the source ip in message 1 similar to the source ip of the authentication package sender?
- 6. By hashing the public key in message 1 and taking the last 40 bytes .. Is the result similar to the Ethereum address from the smart contract?

If all those phases were verified, the user is authenticated. Otherwise, the authentication package is dropped. According to BigO standards, the IF-statement adds a linear execution complexity to the program depending on the input. It is denoted as:

$$O(kn) = O(n) \tag{3}$$

Where k is a constant.

## 5 Testing and Evaluation

After implementing the prototype of the proposed solution, this section discusses the tests performed to assure their security and functionality. Also, the system is evaluated against the other solutions discussed in section 2. In addition, the cost required to establish the communication between the user and the smart contract is covered. Note that generally, only "setter" functions will cost the user since they require miners to modify the blockchain where the "getter" functions don't cost any time or money.

#### 5.1 Costs

To modify smart contract attributes, a transaction should be made in the Ethereum blockchain. The fee is calculated in GAS and paid in Ether. When the smart contract is deployed, the owner has the choice to set the value of the amount of gas required. A higher gas price means this transaction is mined first. It is a trade-off between priority and cost. In December 2017 the price of "21K" gas used is \$0.01. This gas amount translates to **2 gwei** which is the standard speed to perform a transaction. This cost is arguably acceptable since it provides a decentralized authentication platform in addition to a tamper-proof block of records. Otherwise, the alternative solution would be to trust a centralized entity with your data where the threats of single point of failure and losing sensitive data increase. A third option is to manage a self-owned decentralized database which costs more for maintenance and management.

The fluctuating value of Ethereum price can raise a challenge for smart contract users. Since the deployment test of this paper's smart contract and according to **etherscan.io**, Ethereum value has peaked for certain interval then returned to the normal price. The fluctuating price of cryptocurrencies is a drawback that affects smart contract usage stability. However, this is planned to be solved in the future consensus algorithms proposed by Ethereum.

Table 1 illustrate the transaction cost, execution cost and the equivalent price in US dollars for deploying and using the smart contract. First rows show the price of deploying the smart contract which is only done once. It is clear that deploying the smart contract is more expensive since it writes it on the blockchain. On the other side, the login functionality is cheaper. The login function can be optimized to cost less. The reason for current price is that it generates the authentication token by hashing, generating a random number and retrieving the block hash. These prices represent the cost of using the traditional proof-of-work consensus protocol. With Ethereum moving to standardizing the proof-of-authority protocol, these costs will decrease noticeably since the miners' work load will decrease too.

### 5.2 Testing

The testing phase was divided into different subsections. First, manual tests are performed against the proposed solution to assure its robustness, security and

Function	Transaction Cost	Execution Cost	Total cost	Price in USD
Deployment	275153	170457	445610	\$0.212
login_admin	64089	42817	106906	\$0.051

**Table 1.** Gas Cost for Running functions

performance. Manual tests include malicious scenarios in additional to the ideal test cases. Second, static analysis tools are used to perform automated security assessment for the smart contracts.

Manual testing After running the solution prototype, the ideal scenario was tested first. A legitimate user calls the smart contract function:  $login_admin$  using his/her MIST Ethereum client. The smart contract sends the authentication token and the user's Ethereum address to the user and IOT device simultaneously. According to the test, the first phase was completed in less than 4 seconds on a private blockchain. Then, the user connects to the IOT device by sending the authentication package explained in 2.

Bypassing the verification steps in the IOT authentication script were tested by performing few malicious attacks as explained below:

- A replay attack failed since the attacker's source IP needs to be identical to the source IP in the signed authentication message.
- Modifying the signed authentication message failed since the script verifies the message signature.
- Injecting the attacker's own authentication package failed since the public key should lead to the Ethereum address of the legitimate user.
- A man-in-middle may be able to sniff outgoing authentication packages.
   However, integrity is protected since he/she cannot modify the signed authentication message.

The outcome of the test phase proves that this solution is secure as long as the user's keypairs are not compromised. The authentication tokens should be invalidated and replaced once the authentication is successfully completed. The next steps are outside the scope of this paper.

When testing the current solution, the test environment varies. First, most tests are conducted in a private ethereum blockchain. This eases the process of mining and validating transactions. After that, when the smart contract is tested in the public Ethereum blockchain test-net, it is recommended to use **Rinkeby** instead of **Ropsten** since it uses Proof-of-Authority instead of Proof-Of-Work which is used in **Ropsten**. This will also ease the public testing process.

The proof of work concept is the current method used in Ethereum main network and Ropsten network to confirm transactions. A miner solves a mathematical puzzle to validate the transaction for an incentive. This approach requires a lot of processing power to execute. On the other hand, the proof of authority implemented in the Rinkeby test-net depends on a set of explicitly authorized nodes instead of miners solving mathematical problems therefore, it is considered the future of mining techniques where mining doesn't require as much processing power[21].

Automated testing: Static Security Analysis Security assessment via static analysis was performed using mythril by ConsenSys. It uses concolic analysis to detect security issues in smart contracts. It can operate in both whitebox and blackbox testing scenarios. Since the smart contract source code is available, whitebox testing was performed on it. Mythril returned no issues.

In addition, a control flow graph is created for the smart contract source code to assure all possible paths are checked. The graph is created using Ethereum Laser Symbolic Virtual Machine.

Finally, another metric that can be proposed for future testing is performing formal method tests on the smart contract to verify that all possible execution paths are covered and anticipated. Current efforts are documented in [6][17].

#### 5.3 Evaluation

To assure the quality of the proposed solution, the next step is to compare it to previous solutions presented in section 2. The evaluation metric is based on whether the offered authentication scheme solved problems occurring in the other authentication mechanisms proposed for the IOT devices.

Table 2 shows a comparison between the proposed solution based on Availability, Scalability, decentralization and tamper proof. For this comparison, the evaluation metrics is defined more specifically. Availability is described as removing the bottleneck and functioning without a single point of failure. Scalability is used here to explain the added overhead to the usage of the application when more devices are added. Decentralization is the ability for the authentication application to run without depending on a central entity that may break the system if taken down. Tamper proof is the assurance that saved data and transactions cannot be tampered once registered in the logs of the system.

#### 6 Conclusion

To sum up, this paper shed the light on the authentication process in IOT devices and the challenges facing this field. The huge number of IOT devices deployed all around the world increases the importance of developing and improving solutions for the problems facing IOT devices authentication and access control. The paper discussed current available techniques for IOT authentication and access control while presenting their advantages and disadvantages. It was clearly stated that any solution to be proposed by this paper must reserve the advantages of current approaches and solve their disadvantages while adding more

	Auth/device	Oauth2	Auth0	Blockstack	paper sol.
Availability	<b>√</b>	X	X	X	<b>√</b>
Scalability	X	X	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>√</b>
Decentralization	<b>√</b>	X	X	✓	✓
Tamper Proof	X	X	X	✓	<b>√</b>

Table 2. Comparing and evaluating authentication solutions

functionality features and security. blockchain is a novel technology that can be used to solve IOT authentication and access control problems.

blockchain based solutions can provide tamper proof records and decentralization to improve current approaches. This paper smart contract based proposal can be used for IOT devices authentication and access control. The solution was designed and implemented in real life scenarios using available devices and technologies which implies they can be easily deployed when needed. The approach successfully authenticated legitimate users to access their IOT devices. Also, it withstood crafted attacks that were attempting to hijack legitimate sessions and brute force credentials.

#### 6.1 Future work

The solution can be modified to go to further lengths. Integrating the proposed approach with current IOT devices will ease the usage of it for everyone.

Also, deploying "Self Profiting Smart Contracts" is another suitable future plan. The user can provide access to the resources of his/her IOT device for a specified charge. As explained in section 1, Figure 1, a smart contract can autonomously control the access for a device for a certain fee during a specified period. For example, a user can rent his/her camera to share stream with customers from all over the globe for a certain charge. This revenue can be used to pay for charges needed when using smart contract to login.

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