

liblzma - OSS and Backdoors

Exploring the xz-utils Backdoor, its Emergence and its Impact on FOSS and OSS

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Abstract

In recent years, several vulnerabilities in the open-source software supply chain were discovered. The most recent being the intentionally placed backdoor in the compression library named *liblzma*. This paper aims to explore the implementation of said backdoor while highlighting the insertion of the backdoor and the inserters use of social engineering enabling their placement in the leadership of the project. Furthermore ways of preventing similar attacks are presented and evaluated on the example of the *liblzma* situation.

1 Introduction

FOSS¹ is generally defined as software the user can “[...] run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve [...]” [2]. This requires the source to be available and enables the dependence of other software on subsets or the entirety of the code. On the other hand, source available or OSS² are distinct from FOSS software. Some licenses do not require the resulting product to be licensed under the same license as its dependencies, such as the

MIT license³. It therefore differs from the GPL⁴ and software licensed with the MIT-Licence can therefore not be referred to as free open-source software, but rather as open-source software.

Most OSS-projects accept contributions from individuals and enterprises. This is wanted and required to support the actuality of said software. Most OSS projects accept changes matching their pre-defined contribution guidelines and credit the contributor for their addition. These contributors often use the software they are contributing to and therefore make changes they care for, such as adding drivers for new devices to the Linux kernel [5].

However, other independent OSS contributors are abusing the contribution system by exploiting the trust the unpaid maintainers have in the quality of the submitted changes. Specifically, this refers to manipulating maintainers and inserting oneself into the group of by applying pressure on said group. As was the case with *liblzma* or the *xz-utils* OSS library.

¹Free and Open-Source Software [1]

²Open-Source Software

³Requires the license to be present in “all copies or substantial portions of the Software” [3]

⁴Requires all copies of the software to be licensed as GPL [4]

1.1 Dependence on FOSS and OSS

Open source software is often divided into reusable components, such as libraries or toolkits implementing a specific feature, and built upon by other software. The goal is to use tried and tested components in the creation of new OSS, thus building on field tested and established software found in the OSS community.

Not only does OSS depend on other libraries from the OSS ecosystem. Proprietary software also makes use of said OSS components, while being forced to adhere to their terms, as declared in their respective licenses [6].

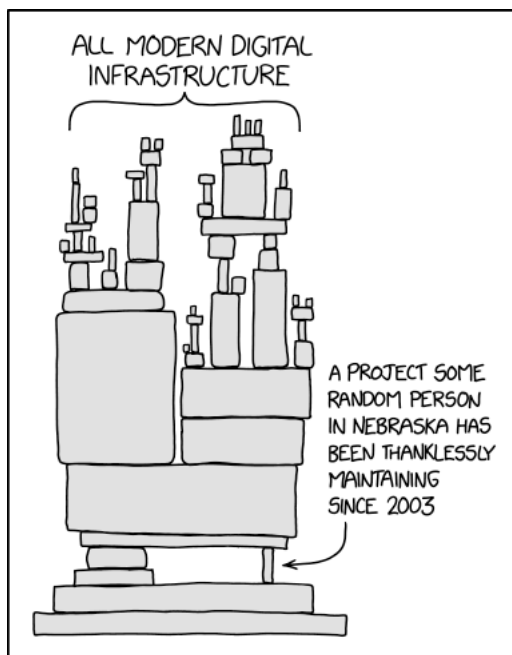


Figure 1: Dependency [7]

Commonly used examples for said libraries are `libcurl`, which provides multiprotocol file transfers [8], `raylib` which is a library for videogames programming [9] and the `sqlite` library, that implements a in process database [10]. These library examples are so widely used, a vulnerability in them would impact the security of the whole software space.

1.2 Supply Chain Security

[11]

1.3 xz-utils and liblzma

[12]

2 Backdoor Exploration

2.1 Implementation

2.2 Social Engineering

2.3 Pressure on OSS Maintainer

2.4 Affected Systems

3 Response

3.1 Patches

3.2 Releases on Hold

3.3 Vetting Source Code

4 Prevention

4.1 Funding FOSS and OSS

4.2 Vetting Dependency

4.3 Appreciation for FOSS Maintainers

References

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Appendix