

# 1

# Physical Security

What normally comes to mind, when hearing about or discussing computer security, is either viruses or some of the many security issues that have to do with networks, such as loss of privacy, identity theft, or how to secure sensitive data sent on a network. Computer security, however, is a vast discipline that also includes mundane topics such as how to physically protect computer equipment and secure it against fire, theft, or flood. This chapter is a short discussion of various topics that have to do with physical security.

## 1.1 Side-Channel Attacks

In order to whet the reader's appetite we start with a new, exotic area of physical threats termed *side-channel attacks*. At the time of this writing there aren't many references for this area, but [Shamir and Tromer 04] discuss several aspects of this topic.

A sensitive, secret computer installation may be made very secure. It may be surrounded by high electrified fences, employ a small army of guards, be protected by powerful firewalls complemented by watchful system programmers working three shifts, and run virus detection software continuously. Yet, it is possible to spy on such an installation "from the side" by capturing and listening to information that is continuously and unintentionally leaked by electronic devices inside. The basis of this approach is the well-known fact that people are nosy and machines are noisy.

First, a bit of history. One of the earliest side-channel attacks took place in 1956 when Britain's military intelligence (MI5) executed operation ENGULF that tapped (perhaps among others) the telephone of the Egyptian embassy in London to record the sound from its Hagelin cipher machines. The sound was used to determine the settings on the Hagelin machines [Wright 89]. A better-known side-channel attack was published

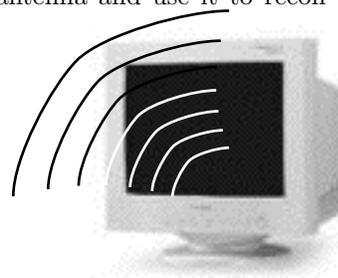
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by Wim Van Eck [van Eck 85] in 1985, that showed how to eavesdrop on a CRT by detecting its electromagnetic emission.

The following story (heard by this author back in the 1970s) illustrates the power of a side-channel attack.

In the early days of computing, punched cards were the main way to input data into a computer, and printers were the main output. Then came terminals with keyboards and printers, followed by terminals with keyboards and monitor screens. A CRT monitor works like a television tube. An electron beam is directed to a glass plate (the screen) that's coated with a phosphor compound. When the electrons hit the screen, their kinetic energy is converted to light, and a small dot flashes momentarily on the glass. The beam is then moved to another point on the screen, and the process continues until all the required information is displayed on the screen. The process is then repeated in order to refresh the glow on the screen.

An anonymous electronics engineer had an idea. He knew that an accelerated (and also decelerated) electric charge radiates, so he decided to try to detect and receive the radiation from a monitor screen with a small antenna and use it to reconstruct the information displayed on the screen. He drove a van full of his equipment next to an office building where workers were hunched at their computers and many monitors glowed, and within half an hour, a monitor screen in the van showed the data displayed on one of the screens in the building. This was a classic example of advanced electronic eavesdropping applied in industrial spying. For further discussion of this threat, see [Zalewski 05].



Modern monitors use LCDs or plasma screens that presumably don't radiate, but in the past, the only countermeasures to side-channel attacks were to either surround a computer room with a conductive material, to block any electromagnetic radiation from escaping, or to have a guarded, empty area around the entire building and move the parking lots away from the building.

The information that emanates naturally from a computer consists of electromagnetic radiation, sound, light from displays, and variations in power consumption.

It is intuitively clear that an idle CPU (i.e., a CPU that has executed a HLT instruction) requires less power than a busy CPU. Thus, measuring the power consumption of a CPU can tell a spy whether the CPU is busy or idle. Even more, power consumption depends on the instruction being executed, so while the CPU executes a loop it consumes a certain amount of power, and when it comes out of the loop its power consumption may change.

Our computers are electronic. They work by moving electrons between the various parts of the computer. A working CPU therefore emits electromagnetic radiation that can be detected outside the computer, outside the computer room, and even outside the computer building. A spy who knows the type of CPU being spied on can execute many programs on the same type of CPU, measure the radiation emitted, and thus associate certain patterns of radiation with certain types of computer operations, such as loops, idle, or input/output. Once such an association has been established, the spy

can train a computer program to analyze radiation emitted by a spied computer and draw conclusions about the activity of the spied CPU at various times.

A CPU is an integrated circuit (IC, or a chip) enclosed in a ceramic or plastic container and has no moving parts. Yet, inside the container there are several parts (a cavity for the CPU chip, the chip itself, wires, and printed connections) and they vibrate, thereby generating sound. This type of acoustic emanation can be detected by a sensitive microphone and analyzed, similar to electromagnetic radiation, to provide clues on the state of the CPU. Experiments suggest that each type of CPU operation produces a characteristic sound—a typical acoustic signature. Thus, listening to the sound produced by a CPU that’s busy all day encrypting secret messages may yield the encryption key (or keys) used by the operator; a significant achievement.

A CPU is normally part of a larger enclosure that has many other electronic parts and fans. These also emit sound waves and the computer room may also be noisy. This background noise complicates the analysis of sound waves emitted by the CPU, but it has been discovered that the latter sound is mostly above 10 kHz, whereas other sounds generated in and out of a computer are of much lower frequencies.

The sound created by a CPU depends on the CPU type, on the temperature inside the computer box, and on other environmental factors such as humidity. This fact complicates the analysis of sound waves from the CPU, but experiments conducted in various environments indicate that it is still possible to obtain useful information about the status of a CPU by analyzing what can be termed its *audio output*.

It is possible to absorb the sound emanated by a CPU by enclosing the computer box with a sound dampening material. An alternative is to generate artificial high-frequency sound outside the computer, to mask the sound that the spy is trying to capture and record. A more sophisticated technique is to absorb the sound emanated by the CPU and have another CPU running a different program to generate sound to foil any spy who may be listening outside. These considerations apply also to electromagnetic radiation emitted by the CPU.

A hard disk also generates sound because its head assembly moves in a radial direction to seek various cylinders. However, there is only a loose association between CPU input/output operations and the movements of the head, because of the use of cache memories and the fact that many CPUs work on several programs simultaneously (multitasking).

Researchers in this field feel that acoustic emanations are important and should be studied and fully understood, because it is harder to stop sound than to absorb electromagnetic waves. A common cold-war spying technique was to listen to a conversation in a closed room by directing a laser beam at a window and measuring its reflection from the glass pane that vibrates because of the sound waves inside.

An important class of side-channel attacks is the so-called *timing attacks*. A timing attack uses the fact that many important computational procedures take time that depends on the input. Thus, by measuring the time it takes to complete a procedure, a spy can learn something about the input to the procedure. An important example is the RSA encryption algorithm (Section 12.9). Part of this algorithm computes an expression of the form  $a^b$  where  $b$  is the encryption key. A simple method to compute an exponentiation is to multiply  $a$  by itself  $b - 1$  times, so measuring the time it takes

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to compute  $a^b$  may give a spy an idea of the size of  $b$  and thus help in breaking a code. For a reference on timing attacks, see [Boneh and Brumley 04].

The idea of a side-channel attack is not limited to emanations from the CPU. The next section discusses an application to keystrokes, and there have also been attempts to exploit the sounds made by certain types of printers to reconstruct the information being printed. For a reference, see [Kuhn 04].

It has long been a dream of cryptographers to construct a “perfect” machine... The development in the last twenty years of electronic machines that accumulate data, or “remember” sequences of numbers or letters, may mean that this dream has already been fulfilled. If so, it will be the nightmare to end all nightmares for the world’s cryptanalysts. In fact, the people who live in the vicinity of the National Security Agency think that there already are too many cipher and decoding machines in existence. The electronic equipment plays havoc with their television reception.

—From [Moore and Waller 65].

### 1.1.1 Acoustic Keyboard Eavesdropping

Chapter 9 mentions keystroke loggers (or keystroke recorders) among other examples of spyware. A keystroke logger is a program that records every keystroke the user makes, and stores this data or transmits it to its owner (the spy). A similar concept is a screen capture, a program that periodically takes a snapshot of the monitor screen and saves it or transmits it outside. There are programs that identify and delete spyware, but spying on a computer can also be done physically. A crude idea is to try to spy on a computer user by looking behind their shoulder, but a more practical, more sophisticated technique is to install a miniature radio transmitter inside a keyboard, to transmit keystrokes to a nearby spy (See exercise Intro.3). Such a transmitter is a physical threat and cannot be detected by Spyware-removal software.

An even more sophisticated spying technique records keystrokes by listening to the sounds that individual keys make when pressed. Old timers in the computing field may remember that pressing a key on an old keyboard often resulted in two or more copies of the key read from the keyboard due to bouncing of the keys. In a modern keyboard, the keys are placed on top of a plastic sheet and different areas of this sheet vibrate differently (and therefore create different air vibrations, sounds) when a key is pressed. Thus, striking different keys generates different sounds (also the timing of keys varies, an *A* may take the keyboard slightly longer to produce than a *B*). The ear is not sensitive enough to hear the differences between sounds generated by different keys, but a good quality microphone is.



The idea of acoustic keyboard eavesdropping is for a spy to hide a microphone as close as possible to a keyboard, to record the sound made by the keys when pressed, to digitize the sound, and to send the audio samples to a computer program controlled by the spy. Experiments have demonstrated that a sensitive parabolic microphone can record keyboard sounds reliably from distances of up to 50 feet (about 17 meters) from the keyboard even in the presence of background noise.

Once the program learns to distinguish the individual sounds, it has to be trained so it can tell which key produces a given sound. In principle, the spy has to use another method, such as a keystroke logger, to capture many keystrokes, then feed the (ASCII codes of the) keys and the corresponding sounds to the program. In practice, however, it has been discovered that keyboards of the same make and model produce very similar sounds. Once the spy knows the kind of keyboard used by the victim, he may train his program on a keyboard of the same type, then feed it the sounds created by the poor victim's keyboard. If the program can recognize, say, 80% of the keystrokes of that keyboard, the spy can use his intelligence to guess the remaining keystrokes and employ this information to train the program further.

◇ **Exercise 1.1:** Is it enough for a spy to detect 80% of a password?

Currently, such spying is exotic and (we hope) rare, but it is a dangerous development in the field of computer security because it is a physical threat and it cannot be recognized and blocked by software. Future developments may bring this type of spying to the attention (and the price range) of many would-be eavesdroppers, with unforeseen (and perhaps disastrous) consequences. A spy can often get to within 50 feet of his target's house by parking a car in the street, renting a room in a nearby house or adjacent apartment, or planting the microphone in a plant in the backyard. (Many front- and backyards have low-voltage lines to light the perimeter of the house at night, and this electricity may be tapped into to power the microphone.) In a place of work it may be easy to install a microphone in a desk next to the victim's desk or in an office adjacent to the victim's office, and such spying may be extremely difficult to detect.

At present it seems that computer hackers and criminals are not aware of this threat and continue to break into computers by means of viruses and by breaking firewalls. Admittedly, someone who wants to control a vast number of computers cannot use this method, but it may prove attractive to certain spies, especially those who currently install and use spyware. A list of potential spyware users can be found at the beginning of Chapter 9.

This vulnerability of keyboards can be eliminated by redesigning keyboards such that all keys would generate the same sound or very similar sounds. The technique of acoustic eavesdropping, however, is not limited to keyboards.

For a recent reference on this approach, see [Asonov and Agrawal 04].

The idea of eavesdropping on a typewriter keyboard, mentioned as coming from Dmitri Asonov ("Acoustic Keyboard Eavesdropping"), was anticipated decades ago by the National Security Agency. The radio waves created each time a key is struck on the keyboard of a teletypewriter or an electrical cipher machine differ from letter to letter. These can be detected and discriminated, thereby enabling the eavesdropper to understand the message before it is encrypted for transmission. The technique is code-named Tempest.

—David Kahn, *The New York Times*, 23 January 2005.

## 1.2 Physical Threats

- Surges in electrical power, often caused by lightning, may burn out electronic components in the computer. Solution: Use an uninterruptible power supply (UPS). Such a device regulates the incoming voltage and produces a clean output signal. If the voltage gets high, the UPS trims it. If the voltage drops, the UPS uses its internal battery to supply the computer with power for a few minutes, enough to either turn off the computer (typical for a home computer) or to start a generator (typical in a large installation, especially an installation that has to operate continuously, such as a hospital or a telephone exchange).

◇ **Exercise 1.2:** What can go wrong if power to the computer is suddenly turned off?

- Physical security of computer facilities. We constantly hear of damage done by computer viruses and other malicious programs, but the best virus protection software cannot prevent a home personal computer from being stolen (although it can help in its recovery, see Section 1.3). Thus, computer security starts by protecting the facilities that house computers and computer data. This problem is especially acute in industry. Many a company can be wiped out if its computers or especially if its sensitive data are stolen or damaged. Damage can be intentional, inflicted by a criminal or a disgruntled employee, or accidental, caused by fire, power failure, or broken air conditioning.

The solution is to physically protect this sensitive asset. A home should have an alarm system and power to the computer should go through an uninterrupted power supply (UPS). A commercial entity should have a secure computer facility, with controlled access, heavy doors, card-operated locks, security cameras, and an automatic fire system (using gas instead of water if possible). In addition, special care should be given to unconventional entry points, such as attics and air conditioning ducts. A modern office building often has a large attic above the ceiling of each floor. This space is handy for stringing wires inside the building, but can be used by a person to crawl into an otherwise secure room. A wide air-conditioning duct can be used for the same purpose and should therefore be secured by a heavy screen.

Other items, such as emergency lights, fireproof containers (for storing disks and papers), and proper training of personnel, are also important.

- Traditionally, fire is suppressed by water, but this causes damage to structures and equipment that may exceed the damage caused by the fire. For a while, a gas known as halon was used to extinguish fires in sensitive environments, but this was later found to deplete the ozone layer in the atmosphere. Modern replacements for water and halon are certain fluids that look like water but evaporate quickly. An example is the chemical NOVEC 1230 made by 3M [3M 04]. It can be used to protect delicate objects and electronic equipment from fire without damaging the items themselves.

Heat is only one type of damage caused by a fire. Smoke and soot particles resulting from a fire can compound the damage by contaminating removable disks, ruining the delicate mechanisms of magnetic disk and optical drives, and dirtying the electrical connections in keyboards. A case in point is the explosive eruption of Mount St. Helens

in 1980, whose volcanic ash damaged computer equipment at large distances from the mountain.

**Case study.** The Pentagon is the United States' military headquarters. Located near Washington, D.C., the Pentagon has many computers and extensive networking equipment. Back in the 1970s, someone forgot to turn off a 300-watt light bulb in a vault where computer tapes were stored. The small bulb generated heat that had nowhere to go and started heating up the room and smoldering the ceiling. When the door was finally opened, the fresh air rushing into the room turned the high temperature to fire. The fire spread to several adjoining rooms and caused damage in the millions of dollars.

- Theft should especially be mentioned, because personal computers are getting smaller and lightweight all the time and are therefore easy to steal. There is a school of thought in law enforcement that says that if you want to catch a thief, you should think like one. We hear about sophisticated hackers who write viruses and spyware, but an unsophisticated thief can cause much harm by stealing computers, because all the data in the computer disappears with the computer. Such data may be slow and expensive to replace and may also be private and sensitive. We should always keep in mind the simple, straightforward brute-force approach that computer thieves often adopt. Simply sneak in, take what you find, and get away quickly.

- A facility that uses electronic locks and keys or other physical-identification devices to restrict access to certain areas should consider the following problem, known as piggybacking or tailgating. An intruder may wait at a locked door, perhaps holding disks, paper or other innocuous-looking stuff with both hands, trying to look legitimate and waiting for the door to open. When someone comes out of the restricted room, the intruder slips in while the door is still open. A guard can prevent such a problem, but this is an expensive solution. An alternative is to install a turnstile, or even a mantrap. The latter device is a two-door entrance where a person has to pass through two doors in order to enter or exit a restricted room. To enter, a person must pass through door *A* to a small space, the mantrap, and then open door *B* to the restricted room. The point is that door *B* will not open until door *A* is fully closed.

Figure 1.1 shows a possible design for a secure and safe computer installation. The operators' room (area 2) has a mantrap-controlled access to the outside and to the other rooms. The processor room (area 4) is easy to keep clean because access to it is through the network router room. Area 5, the disk and tape drives room, is kept even cleaner because access to it is through area 4. This is important because those drives have many moving parts. A lazy Susan (the circle) provides access to tapes and disks from their storage (area 6). Area 7 is a storage room for papers, forms, and spare parts. It also serves as temporary trash storage and houses the all-important shredders. The printers (and perhaps also binders, copiers, and collators), with their noise and paper particles, are insulated in area 8. The only area that contributes to weak security is the loading dock (area 9), because it has another outside access. However, access to the outside is important in cases of emergency, so this outside door is another example of the tradeoff between security and convenience.

- ◇ **Exercise 1.3:** Basements are easier to protect against unwanted entry. With this in mind, why is a basement a bad choice for a computer facility?

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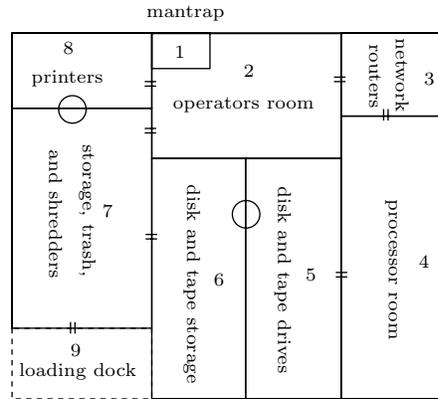


Figure 1.1: A Design For a Computer Installation.

- Magnetic fields. Hard disks are magnetic storage. Data is recorded in small magnetic dots on the disk and is therefore sensitive to magnetic fields. (In contrast, CDs and DVDs are optical storage and are not sensitive to magnetism.) Experience shows that it is not enough to place a small magnet in your pocket and walk in a computer room, hoping to harm computers and data. Stronger fields are needed in order to adversely affect magnetic storage, but such fields exist. An old story, from the 1960s, tells of a computer tape storage room where tapes were always going bad. It took months until someone observed that the trouble affected only the tapes stored on the lower shelves. It turned out that the floor was cleaned periodically with a powerful vacuum cleaner that affected only those tapes.
- A related concern is static electricity. Walking on a carpet often results in static electricity collected on shoes and clothing. This electricity is discharged when touching a conductor and may damage delicate electrical equipment. A computer room should have a tiled floor or at least anti-static carpeting.
- User tracking. Imagine a facility with many computers and many workers, where a user may perform a task on a computer, move away to do something else, then step to the nearest computer to perform another task. A good example is a hospital with doctors and nurses treating patients and updating patient records all the time. Another example is a lab where tests (perhaps blood tests or forensic tests) are performed by workers, and a worker has to enter the results of a test into a computer. In such a situation, it is important to keep track of which employee used what computer, when and for what purpose. The simplest solution is to assign each user a password. The user has to log into the computer, perform a task, then log off. In the hospital example, where emergencies may and do occur often, such a procedure is too time consuming and unrealistic.  
A more sophisticated solution is to provide each user with a special, unique identification card (a key) and install in each computer special hardware (a lock) that can recognize such cards. The lock and key communicate by means of low-power radio trans-

missions, and each key contains a large (typically 32 bits) identification code. When a user arrives at a computer and starts using it, the lock recognizes the code on the key and immediately logs the user on. When the user walks away, the lock senses the loss of contact and immediately logs the user off. When no user is logged on, the computer cannot be used. In a sensitive environment, such as a military installation, this type of lock can be made even more secure by asking the user to provide a password in addition to carrying the key card. A commercial implementation of this technique, called *XyLoc*, is described in [ensuretech 04].

- Physical protection of data. Data is normally stored on devices that are easily damaged or destroyed. Paper, magnetic disks, CDs and DVDs are sensitive to fire, magnetic fields, or scratches. Data stored on such devices deteriorates even under ideal storage conditions. Thus, data has to be physically protected, and this can be achieved by backing up sensitive data periodically, so a fresh backup is always at hand. A home computer should have two external disks (or rewritable CDs or DVDs), one kept at home and the other kept in a different location, such as a friend's home. Periodically, perhaps once a week, the computer owner should backup the data into the external disk located at home, and swap the two backup disks. This way, there is always a fresh (i.e., at most one week old) copy of the data kept at a remote location.

An even better strategy is to backup data every time a file is modified. Imagine a computer user, at home or in an office, working on a document that consists of text, numerical data, and illustrations. A word processor is used to create and edit the text, a spreadsheet may be used to construct and edit tables of data, and an illustration or painting program is the natural choice for creating digital images. Several of these files are modified by the user each day, and the safest way to work is to stop from time to time and back these files up on a small, temporary storage device, such as a zip disk or a flash memory. Once the weekly backup is done, the files on the temporary storage can be deleted. Backups are discussed in Section 6.4.

A company that depends on its digital data should also back it up on a regular basis, but may often use its local area network for this task. Data from an office or location *A* may be sent through the local network to another office *B* where it is stored as a backup, while at the same time data from *B* may be backed up in *A*.

In general, a computer user, whether an individual or an organization, should have a disaster-recovery plan based on regular and complete data backups. The plan (Section 1.4) should specify what to do if all the physical facilities are destroyed. New facilities may have to be rented in a hurry, new computers may have to be purchased or rented immediately, and all the lost data restored from backups. Experience shows that a detailed disaster-recovery plan may help even a large organization, such as a bank, recover from a terrible disaster (fire, earthquake, flood, terrorism, computer virus) in a short period of time. [Maiwald and Sieglein 02] is one of many references that discuss such a plan and how to implement it.

An armed society is a polite society. Manners are good when one may have to back up his acts with his life.

—Robert A. Heinlein

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■ **Hard copy.** The media has been touting the paperless office for several decades, but we still use paper. In fact, we use it more and more. Security workers know that criminals often collect papers thrown away carelessly and scrutinize them for sensitive information such as credit card numbers and passwords to computer accounts. This behavior is part of the general practice of dumpster diving. The solution is to shred sensitive documents, and even not-so-sensitive papers. See Chapter 10 and especially Section 10.2 for more on shredding and related topics.



■ **Spying.** Spyware, an important threat, is the topic of Chapter 9, but spying can also be done in the traditional way, by person. You, the reader probably haven't walked around your neighbor's or your ex-spouse's house at night, trying to look in windows and catch a glimpse of a computer screen with passwords, bank statements, or forbidden pictures, but others do that all the time. Industrial espionage and spying conducted by governments are very real. A commercial organization often decides that spying on its competitors is the only way for it to stay active, healthy, and competitive. Spying on computer users can be done by looking over someone's shoulder, peeping through a keyhole, setting a small security camera, planting spyware in a computer, and also in other ways, as described in Section 1.1.

■ **Data integrity.** Digital data consists of bits. Text, images, sound, and movies can be digitized and converted to strings of zeros and ones. When data is stored, in memory or on a storage device, or when it is transmitted over a communication line, bits may get corrupted. Keeping each bit at its original value is referred to as data integrity and is one aspect of computer security.

Before we look at solutions, it is important to discuss the significance of this problem (see also exercise 2.11). Text is represented in a text file as individual characters, each coded in ASCII (8 bits) or Unicode (16 bits). Thus, each bad bit in a text file changes one character of text to another character. Quite often, this is not a problem. If the file is the text of a book, a personal letter, or someone's homework, one bad character (or even a few bad characters) isn't considered a serious problem. If, however, the file is a legal, medical, or commercial document, the change of even one character may change the meaning of a sentence and may significantly alter the meaning of a paragraph or even the entire document.

A photo may change its meaning according to who is looking at it.  
—John Berger

An image consists of small dots called pixels (from picture element). Each pixel is represented as a number, the code of the pixel's color. A bad bit therefore changes the color of one pixel. If the bit is one of the least significant (i.e., it is on the right-hand side of the number) the change in color may be insignificant. Even if the color of one pixel is changed significantly, a viewer may not notice it, because the entire image may have millions of pixels. Thus, in general, a few bad bits in an image do not pose a problem, but there are exceptions. An X-ray image or an image taken by a spy satellite may be examined carefully by experts who may draw important conclusions from the color of

individual pixels. Such images must therefore keep their integrity when transmitted or stored. A movie is a string of images, so one bad bit affects one pixel in one frame of the movie. It may be noticeable as a momentary flicker and may not be a serious problem. An audio file consists of audio samples, each a number that relates to the intensity of the sound at a certain moment. There are typically about 44,000 audio samples for each second of sound, so one bad sample, caused by one bad bit, may be audible, but may not detract from the enjoyment of listening to music or prevent a listener from understanding spoken text.



The conclusion is that the amount of data integrity that's required depends on the data in question and ranges from no integrity at all (for unimportant data or data that can easily be reacquired) to maximum integrity (for crucial data that cannot be replaced). Data integrity is provided by error-detecting and error-correcting (in general, error-control) codes, and the basic principles of this discipline are described in many texts.

- The three principles of security management. Three simple principles can significantly reduce the security threats posed by employees in a large computer installation. Perhaps the most important of the three is the separation of duties. This principle, employed by many spy, anti-spy, and secret organizations, says that an employee should be provided only with the knowledge and data that are absolutely necessary for the performance of their duties. What an employee does not know, cannot be disclosed by him or leaked to others. The second principle is to rotate employees periodically. An employee should be assigned from time to time to different shifts, different work partners, and different jobs. Also, regular annual vacations should always be mandatory for those in security-related positions. Every time a person is switched to another job or task, they have to be retrained, which is why this principle adversely affects the overall efficiency of the organization. Also, when an employee is switched from task *A* to task *B*, they have to be given the data and knowledge associated with both tasks, which contradicts the principle of separation of duties. In spite of this, it is important to rotate employees because a person left too long in the same position may get bored with it and a bored security worker is a potentially dangerous worker. The third security management principle is to have every security-related task performed by an employee and then checked by another person. This way, no task becomes the sole responsibility of one person. This principle allows one person to find mistakes (and also sabotage) made by another. It slows down the overall work, but improves security.

Duty is what one expects from others. —Oscar Wilde
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## 1.3 Laptop Security

A laptop computer is handy. Those thin, small, lightweight machines are truly portable and can increase a person's productivity. Unfortunately, they also increase the appetite of thieves. You may have asked yourself why so many people eye your laptop when you carry it in public. As many know from their misfortune, one common answer is: people consider a laptop a target. Thus, securing a laptop is a (physical) computer security problem.



Perhaps the most secure solution is to chain the laptop to your wrist, so it becomes your Siamese twin. Although very safe, this solution is uncomfortable, especially during meals and bathroom visits, and may be rejected out of hand (out of wrist?) by most laptop users. The next best thing is to tie the laptop to a large, heavy object, often a desk, with a lock such as a bicycle lock (but if the lock opens with a combination instead of a key, make sure you set it to a random number and not to 123, 666, or another, easy to guess number).

A laptop has a security slot that takes one side of the lock's chain or cable in such a way that breaking the slot causes much damage to the computer and thus renders it useless (or at least less desirable) to a thief. An alternative is to glue an attachment to the computer case, and attach the chain to it. A more sophisticated (or shall we say, more paranoid) owner might consider a motion sensor alarm that chirps or beeps when the computer is moved.

The goal was to bring the world to the students of Miramar High School. The first lesson they got was about crime.

In late October, 2,800 laptops were given to the students at the school—one of four to participate in a pilot program run by the Broward County Public School District (in Florida).

Since then, seven laptops have been stolen from students walking home from school, two by force and five at gunpoint. No students were injured in the robberies.

Another six laptops were stolen from inside the school. On Wednesday, two students were taken into custody.

—From *Sun-Sentinel*, a Florida Newspaper (18 November 2004).

Some software makers offer theft tracking or tracing software combined with a service that can help in tracking any stolen computer, not just a laptop. You purchase the software, install it, and give it an email address to report to. Every time the computer is started or is reset, it sends a stealth message with the computer's current IP number to that address. If the computer is stolen, there is an excellent chance that the thief would connect to the Internet, so its new IP number will be sent to that email address. Both the software maker and the police are then notified and try to locate the computer from its IP number.

◇ **Exercise 1.4:** How is this done?

The whole point about such software is that it somehow has to be embedded “deep” in the hard disk, such that formatting the hard drive (even a low-level formatting) or reinstalling the operating system would not erase the software. Current examples of such security software for both Windows and the Macintosh platforms are [PCPhone-Home 04], [sweetcocoa 05], and [absolute 05]. Because the security software is on the hard drive, replacing the drive removes this protection.

[business.com 04] has a list of various security devices and software for computers. The PDF document at <http://www.rufy.com/laptop.pdf> offers useful information on protecting a Macintosh.

A good idea is to encrypt all sensitive software on a laptop, just in case.

The following simple precautions go a long way in securing your computer so it remains yours:

- With an electric engraving pen, write your name and either your permanent email or telephone number (but not your social security number or address) on the computer case. For a large computer, write it in several places. The thief knows from experience that selling such a marked machine takes time, so they may try to steal someone else’s computer. A car is sometimes stolen for its parts, but computer parts are generally inexpensive enough to deter a thief from the effort of stealing, taking the machine apart, and selling individual parts.
- A laptop can be hidden when traveling if it is carried in a nonstandard case, especially one with a distinctive color that makes it noticeable.
- When traveling by car, place the laptop on the floor in the passenger side and throw a rag or a towel over it. This place has the most comfortable temperature in the car, and the rag may camouflage the laptop so it does not attract the attention of passers by. Generally, a computer should not be left in a car for a long period because cars tend to get hot even when the outside temperature is not high.
- When flying, take the laptop with you. Never check it in as luggage. There is much information on the Internet about airport scams where a team of two or more criminals confuse you at the x-ray checkpoint and end up with your bag(s).
- Certain versions of the Windows operating system make it possible for the computer owner (administrative user) to prevent starting the computer from a floppy disk or a CD. (This is done with the CMOS setup program). When such a computer is stolen, the thief is forced to replace the hard drive before he can start the computer.

**Mac hacking.** It has been known that the Macintosh computer suffers much less from hacking and security related problems (except theft) than computers running the Windows or Unix operating systems. One plausible explanation for this is that there are relatively few Macintosh computers (only 3–4% of the total number of personal computers, according to some estimates). One reason for a hacker to spend time and effort on hacking activities is the satisfaction of breaking into many computers and being able to brag about it (if only under a pseudonym). Macintosh hacking can never result in breaking into many computers, thereby giving hackers a disincentive. Another theory for the relative safety of the Macintosh is that its operating system has always

been more secure than Windows and Unix. This feature, if ever true, has changed since the introduction of the Macintosh OS X, which is based on Unix. Attacking version X of the Macintosh operating system isn't much different from Unix hacking, and may attract intruders. The following quotation, from [theinquirer 04] in October 2004, may turn out to be true.

“... However according to people in hacking circles it is only a matter of time. One Hamburg hacker told the INQ: ‘It would be nice to wipe the smug smiles off the faces of Apple people... you tell a hacker that you are invulnerable and it just makes people want to try that much harder.’

We believe this emotion is known in English as *schadenfreude* [gloating or malicious glee].

He said that what had kept his group, which is linked to others in Eastern Europe, from going for the Mac was not that it was particularly secure, it was just that people were still having too much ‘fun’ with Windows.” (End of quote.)

Paul Day has a 40-page document [Day 04a] on hardening Macintosh security in OS 10.3. This is accompanied by a 36-page slide presentation [Day 04b]. If you cannot find these documents on the Internet, look for them in this book's Web site.

## 1.4 Disaster Recovery Planning

A disaster recovery plan is an important part of any organization, whether commercial, charitable, or governmental. It details the steps required to quickly restore technical capabilities and services after a disruption or a disaster. The idea in such a plan is to minimize the impact that a catastrophic event will have on the organization.

The details of such a plan depend on the nature of the organization and are different for different emergencies, but they have to touch upon the following aspects of the organization:

1. Operation. The plan should provide for continuous operation of the organization. In certain emergencies there may be periods where the organization will not function, but they should be minimized.
2. Reputation. The name, brand names, trademarks, products, and image of the organization should be preserved by the plan.
3. Confidence. A well-thought-of plan should increase the confidence of employees, clients, investors, and business partners of the organization.

Developing such a plan consists of the following key steps:

1. The basic components of the organization, such as human resources, equipment, real estate, and data should be identified and assigned monetary values.
2. The basic components thus identified should be ranked according to importance and qualified personnel should be assigned to each element. Those people should develop recovery details for their component of the organization and should carry out the recovery plan in case of a disaster.
3. Once the plan is in place, it should be disseminated to all employees and should be practiced and rehearsed on a regular basis. Several times a year, management should

reserve a day where a certain emergency will be simulated, and the recovery plan carried out as realistically as possible.

The result of a fully developed and rehearsed plan is at least peace of mind and at most, a quick and full recovery from disasters.

One moment of patience may ward off great disaster.  
 One moment of impatience may ruin a whole life.  
 —Chinese Proverb

## 1.5 Privacy Protection

In this age of computers, huge data bases, the Internet, and E-commerce, we are all concerned about losing our privacy. Network and communications experts agree that once an item of information is placed on the Internet, it cannot be deleted because many copies are made almost immediately. Virtually everything found on the Internet, useless or useful, good or bad, big or small, is immediately discovered by search engines and gets copied, mirrored, and preserved by them and by other bodies and organizations.

This section describes two approaches to protecting privacy, the first is based on sophisticated lying and the second is based on perturbing a random variable.

Social researchers and marketers often give away small gifts in return for personal information such as shopping habits. Those tempted by the gift may resort to lying, so the first approach to maintaining privacy is to learn to lie convincingly.

Just lying to a social researcher isn't very useful and may not serve any purpose. It may also sound wrong and may raise suspicion. Why would anyone agree to give out personal information and then invent wrong data about themselves? The answer is, to receive a gift. No one is going to give away their household income level for a song, but many are willing to provide information on their online shopping habits for a free popular song or for large, free disk space on some company's computer. Often, people provide wrong information, a habit which this author does not condone, but if you insist on lying, at least do it properly. Here is how.

Take a sheet of paper and choose a fictitious name, address, income level, year of birth and occupation, then open a free email account. (It will be used as a disposable email address or DEA.) You are now in business and can supply wrong (but consistent) information about your alternate identity in return for a gift. Use this information for a while, then close the email account, discard the fake personal data, and start all over again. One exception is your (fake) income level. This is used by marketers to send you offers of merchandise. If you are interested in high-end, expensive items, declare high income. A low income level will get you offers of cheap, often useless freebies.

Statisticians tell us that people don't lie well. An effective method for deciding on a fake name and address is to use a people search service such as Intelius ([intelius 05], not free). First, search under last name **Smith** and select at random one of the many first names that will be found. Then search under first name **John** or **Jane** and select one of the many last names at random. Finally, search for a street name in a town, and select a nonexistent number. Information obtained in this way looks convincing and will not jeopardize anyone.

## 30 1 Physical Security

Now, for the second approach. When we buy a product, it always includes a registration card that asks for our name, address, age (or age group), family income, and other personal information. People often fill out this card and mail it, or register online, lest they lose the product's warranty. On the other hand, afraid to surrender their privacy, they often lie about their personal data. The point is that the manufacturer doesn't need to know the age of every buyer and user of a product. All that the maker of a product would like to know is the *statistical distribution* of the ages; how many users are 18 years old, how many are 19, and so on. This is the basis of the second approach.

When a user inputs personal data into a program that will send it to a manufacturer, a social researcher, or a government agency, the program adds a random number to it (or subtracts such a number from it). The original data is *perturbed* in this way by the random numbers. Thus, if a data item is 35 (perhaps an age), the program may add 18 and send the sum 53 to the requestor of information.

At the destination, the sum  $S$  (53) is received and there is no way to convert it to the original age  $A$  (35) and the random number  $R$  (18). However, the point is that there is no need to know any specific age. All that the data requestor needs is the distribution of the ages. Thus, this is a statistical problem that can be stated as follows: Given a random variable  $S$  that is the sum of another variable  $A$  (whose distribution is unknown) and a random variable  $R$  (whose distribution is known), find the distribution of  $A$  as accurately as possible.

This method is due to Rakesh Agrawal and Ramakrishnan Sirkant who provide detailed algorithms to accurately estimate the original distribution. Unfortunately, these algorithms require a detailed knowledge of statistics and are beyond the scope of this book. The interested reader is referred to [Agrawal and Sirkant 04].

The distribution of the random numbers is important, but knowing this distribution may help a hacker to break this method of privacy protection and to estimate the original data fairly accurately. Suppose that the random numbers are distributed uniformly in an interval  $[a, b]$ . A hacker may repeatedly ask a person for a data item (say, an age). If the person doesn't lie, they provide the same age, say, 35, again and again, and the hacker receives sums  $35 + R$  that are uniformly distributed between  $a + 35$  and  $b + 35$ . Knowledge of  $a$  and  $b$  and approximate knowledge of  $a + 35$  and  $b + 35$  makes it easy to compute, or at least estimate, the value 35.

This is an old technique. I first heard about it many years ago when it was used in a survey about sexual practices. The respondent would mentally answer the Y/N question truthfully and then flip a coin. On heads he would record his answer truthfully but on tails he would reverse his answer. Thus anyone reading the survey would have no idea whether the respondent's Yes answer was true or not but the statistics for all the respondents would accurately match the surveyed population.

—David Grant (in response to hearing of this method).

- ◇ **Exercise 1.5:** Assuming that the random numbers are distributed normally with mean  $m$ , explain how a hacker can estimate the original data by repeatedly asking for it.

## 1.5 Privacy Protection 31

The solution to this weakness is to ask the individuals being queried to give each item of information only once (or only a small number of times).

The man who looks for security, even in the mind,  
is like a man who would chop off his limbs in order to  
have artificial ones which will give him no pain or trouble.

—Henry Miller



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