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Modeling and Analysis of Advanced Persistent Threats in Cyber Space

by

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Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I, Xu Wang declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology at the University of Technology Sydney. This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise reference or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. I certify that the work in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as a part of the requirements for other degree except as fully acknowledged within the text. This thesis is the result of a research candidature jointly delivered with Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications as part of a Collaborative Doctoral Research Degree. This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents.

This stands as a testimony for their endless support and love.

To my supervisors, for the academic guidance.

To my friends, for their encouragement.

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List of Publications

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- J-2. **X. Wang**, W. Ni, K. Zheng, R. P. Liu and X. Niu, “Virus Propagation Modeling and Convergence Analysis in Large-scale Networks,” *IEEE Transactions on Information Forensics and Security*, vol. 11, no. 10, pp. 2241-2254, Oct. 2016 (Chapter 4).
- J-3. **X. Wang**, B. Song, W. Ni, R. P. Liu, Y. J. Guo, X. Niu and K. Zheng, “Group-based Susceptible-Infectious-Susceptible Model in Large-Scale Directed Networks,” *Security and Communication Networks*, vol. 2019, Article ID 1657164, 2019 (Chapter 5).
- J-4. **X. Wang**, G. Yu, X. Zha, W. Ni, Y. J. Guo, X. Niu and K. Zheng, “Capacity of Blockchain based Internet-of-Things: Testbed and Analysis,” *Elsevier Internet of Things*, vol. 8, 100109, 2019.
- J-5. B. Song, **X. Wang**, W. Ni, Y. Song, R. P. Liu, G. Jiang and Y. J. Guo, “Reliability Analysis of Large-Scale Adaptive Weighted Networks,” *IEEE Transactions on Information Forensics and Security*, vol. 15, pp. 651-665, 2020.
- J-6. **X. Wang**, X. Zha, W. Ni, R. P. Liu, Y. J. Guo, X. Niu and K. Zheng, “Survey on Blockchain for Internet of Things,” *Computer Communications*, vol. 136, pp. 10-29, 2019.
- J-7. X. Zha, W. Ni, **X. Wang**, R. P. Liu, Y. J. Guo, X. Niu and K. Zheng, “The Impact of Link Duration on the Integrity of Distributed Mobile Networks,” *IEEE Transactions on Information Forensics and Security*, vol. 13, no. 9, pp.

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- J-8. X. Zha, **X. Wang**, W. Ni, R. P. Liu, Y. J. Guo, X. Niu and K. Zheng, “Blockchain for IoT: The Tradeoff Between Consistency and Capacity,” *Chinese Journal on Internet of Things*, vol.1, no.1, pp.21-33, 2017.
- J-9. Y. Hu, K. Zheng, **X. Wang** and Y. Yang. “WORM-HUNTER: A Worm Guard System using Software-defined Networking,” *KSII Transactions on Internet and Information Systems*, 11, no. 1, 2017.
- J-10. Y. Xu, C. Wu, K. Zheng, **X. Wang**, X. Niu, and T. Lu., “Computing Adaptive Feature Weights with PSO to Improve Android Malware Detection,” *Security and Communication Networks*, vol. 2017, Article ID 3284080, 14 pages, 2017.

Published Conference Papers

- C-1. **X. Wang**, K. Zheng, X. Niu, B. Wu and C. Wu, “Detection of Command and Control in Advanced Persistent Threat based on Independent Access,” *IEEE International Conference on Communications*, 2016, pp. 1-6, (Chapter 6).
- C-2. **X. Wang**, Y. Ping, G. Yu, W. Ni, R. P. Liu and Y. J. Guo, “A High-Performance Hybrid Blockchain System for Traceable IoT Applications,” *International Conference on Network and System Security*, Springer, Cham, 2019: 721-728.
- C-3. **X. Wang**, X. Zha, G. Yu, W. Ni, R. P. Liu, Y. J. Guo, X. Niu and K. Zheng, “Attack and Defence of Ethereum Remote APIs,” *IEEE Globecom Workshops*, 2018.
- C-4. G. Yu, **X. Wang**, X. Zha, J. A. Zhang and R. P. Liu, “An optimized round-robin scheduling of speakers for peers-to-peers-based byzantine faulty tolerance,” *IEEE Globecom Workshops*, 2018.
- C-5. X. Zha, **X. Wang**, W. Ni, R. P. Liu, Y. J. Guo, X. Niu and K. Zheng, “Analytic model on data security in VANETs,” *International Symposium on Communications and Information Technologies (ISCIT)*, Cairns, QLD, 2017, pp. 1-6.

Patents

- P-1. R. P. Liu, **X. Wang**, G. Yu, J. Baird, “A Machine Type Communication System or Device for Recording Supply Chain Information on a Distributed Ledger in a Peer to Peer Network,” 2019901683, filed on 17 May 2019..
- P-2. **X. Wang**, R. P. Liu, X. Zha, G. Yu, “Secure image capture and storage on blockchain,” 2019903089, filed on 23 Aug 2019.

ABSTRACT

Modeling and Analysis of Advanced Persistent Threats in Cyber Space

by

Xu Wang

Advanced Persistent Threat (APT), a professional cyber threat as indicated by its name, has become a type of significant risk in modern society. APT attackers employ various advanced attack technologies to carry out attacks in multiple stages over a long period of time. Due to its complexity, APT research is challenging and incomplete. This thesis proposes a series of models to analyze key processes of APT, i.e., social attack, propagation, and remote control. To be specific, game theoretic models are proposed to describe social network attacks, and epidemic models based on the susceptible-infected-susceptible process are developed to capture the propagation process; machine learning methods are adopted to detect the remote control traffic.

The main contributions of this thesis can be summarized as follows.

- This thesis proposes infinitely repeated games to capture the interactions between a message publisher and the administrator to suppress social attack messages. Critical conditions, under which the publisher can be disincentivized to send any attack messages, are identified. Closed-form expressions are established to give the maximum number of attack messages from an attacker in the absence or presence of misclassification on genuine messages.
- This thesis proposes a new approach to model the propagation of APT across non-trivial networks. A discrete-time absorbing Markov process of epidemic model is first developed based on the adjacency matrix of the network. Asymptotically accurate bounds of the virus extinction rate are derived. We propose

a practical approach for the estimation of the extinction rate in large networks. Our proposal has been proved theoretically and validated via simulations.

- This thesis proposes a group-based propagation model to analyze the propagation process of APT in large-scale networks. The proposed model is efficient and accurate. The network nodes are divided into groups according to their connectivity. A continuous-time Markov susceptible-infectious-susceptible model is developed. The propagation threshold, under which the propagation will eventually stop, is derived based on the spectral radius of the collapsed adjacency matrix. Simulation results validate the model accuracy and the analytical epidemic threshold.
- This thesis proposes a method of traffic feature analysis to detect the remote control traffic of APT. Based on the independent access feature of APT network traffic, concurrent domains in the domain name service are selected to detect APT domains from domain name system records. The proposed traffic features and detection process are then validated using public datasets.

Contents

Certificate	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
List of Publications	v
Abstract	viii
List of Figures	xiv
List of Tables	xviii
Abbreviation	xix
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Background	2
1.1.1 APT Attack Case Studies	6
1.1.2 APT Attack Stages	8
1.2 Research Objectives	10
1.3 Thesis Organization	13
2 Literature Review	17
2.1 General APT Models	18
2.2 Social Attack and Defense Models	19
2.3 Propagation Models	22
2.4 Remote Control Models and Detection	25

2.5 Chapter Conclusion	27
3 Social Attacks Modeling and Analysis	28
3.1 Introduction	28
3.2 Network Model	31
3.3 Games of Forged Messages	35
3.3.1 Misclassification-free Infinitely Repeated Game	35
3.3.2 Infinitely Repeated Game with Message Misclassification	41
3.4 Numerical results	45
3.5 Conclusion	53
4 Markov-based Accurate Propagation Model	54
4.1 Introduction	54
4.1.1 Problem Statement	55
4.1.2 Our Contributions	56
4.1.3 Organization and Notations	57
4.2 Discrete-time Markov model for Virus Propagation in Computer Networks	58
4.3 Extrapolation of Markov Epidemic Modeling to Large Networks	64
4.3.1 Virus Extinction Rate	65
4.3.2 Closed-form Bounds of R	69
4.3.3 Epidemic Lifetime	74
4.3.4 Approximate Infected Population and Infection Probability . .	75
4.4 Simulation and Numerical results	76
4.4.1 Model Validation	78
4.4.2 Large Network Analysis	84

4.5	Summary	90
5	Group-based Fast Propagation Model	91
5.1	Introduction	91
5.2	The Directed Network Model	93
5.3	Group-based Mean-field SIS Model	96
5.4	Simulation and Numerical Results	102
5.5	Summary	108
6	Remote Control Modeling and Detection	109
6.1	Introduction	109
6.2	Remote Control Detection Method	111
6.2.1	Features of Remote Control in APT	111
6.2.2	Remote Control Detection Details	114
6.3	Performance Evaluation	117
6.3.1	Data Set	117
6.3.2	Experiment Details	118
6.3.3	Experiment results	119
6.4	Discussions and Summary	123
7	Future Works	125
7.1	Future Works on Propagation Models	125
7.1.1	New Propagation Processes	125
7.1.2	Propagation in Adaptive Networks	126
7.1.3	Propagation in Multi-layer Networks	126
7.2	Cyber-Attack Detection	127

7.2.1	Detection of New Attacks	127
7.2.2	Artificial Intelligence-based Detection	127
7.3	Blockchain-based Security	128
7.3.1	Introduction of Blockchain	128
7.3.2	Blockchain-based Security Service	129
8	Contributions	130
	Bibliography	132

List of Figures

1.1	The number of reports about active APT attack groups in 2018 [1].	5
1.2	The distribution of victim industries [1].	6
1.3	Lifecycle of APT Attacks.	8
1.4	Research targets, key research point and chapters.	11
3.1	An illustration on the subscription services in OSNs, where there are a network administrator \mathcal{A} , publisher \mathcal{P} , and subscribers (including followers, fans and bots). \mathcal{P} can publish either genuine or forged messages. The subscribers check the messages and give their feedback to \mathcal{A} . The bots are hired by \mathcal{P} to always give positive feedback to \mathcal{A} . Based on the feedback from the subscribers, \mathcal{A} can take either a <i>trust</i> or <i>distrust</i> strategy against \mathcal{P}	33
3.2	The cumulative payoff and the number of forged messages of \mathcal{P} , where $p_1 = 0.03$, $N_r = 90$, $N_n = 10$, $N_t = 10$, $C_1 = 10$, and $C_3 = 10$. $C_2 = 10, 50$ and 120 . The payoff is the average of 5,000 independent simulations.	46
3.3	The visualization of Theorems 1 and 3.	47
3.4	The auxiliary continuous functions $\tilde{g}_i(x)$, indicating the extra payoffs from forged messages with the growth of x , where $N_r = 90$, $N_n = 10$, $N_t = 10$, $C_1 = 10$, $C_3 = 5$, $p_1 = 0.1$, and $p_2 = 0.5$. Two C_2 , i.e., 50 and 80, are considered. Every dot is the average extra payoff of 1,000 independent simulations.	48

3.5	The maximum number of forged messages of a malicious \mathcal{P} with the growth of C_1 , where $N_r = 90$, $N_n = 10$, $C_2 = 80$, $C_3 = 5$, $p_1 = 0.1$, and $p_2 = 0.5$. Two values of N_t , i.e., 0 and 30, are considered.	49
3.6	The maximum number of forged messages of \mathcal{P} , i.e., x_{u_1} and x_{u_2} , by publishing forged messages, where $N_r = 90$, $N_n = 10$, $C_1 = 30$, $C_2 = 50$, $C_3 = 5$, and $p_2 = 0.5$. $N_t = 0$ and 100, are considered.	50
3.7	The maximum extra payoff of \mathcal{P} in the misclassification-free game with the growth of N_t , where $N_r = 90$, $N_n = 10$, $C_2 = 50$, $p_1 = 0.5$. Every dot is an average result of 2,000 independent runs.	51
3.8	The maximum number of forged messages with the growth of the ratio of fans, i.e., $\frac{N_n}{N_r+N_n}$, where $N_r + N_n = 100$, $N_t = 10$, $C_1 = 30$, $C_3 = 5$, $C_2 = 50$ and $p_1 = 0.1$	52
4.1	An example of the BA-2 graph.	59
4.2	Flow chart to construct the transition matrix of the Discrete-time Markov model	61
4.3	A graph demonstrates the problem that which state has a larger $p_{i,0}$. State \mathbf{s}_g contains 1 infected node with 3 susceptible neighbors. On the contrary, state \mathbf{s}_h contains 4 infected nodes with 1 susceptible neighbor. Which one is larger, $p_{g,0}$ or $p_{h,0}$?	70
4.4	Model Validation	79
4.5	Evaluation of the proposed bounds of the virus extinction rate, where BA-2, ring and regular graphs are considered	81

4.6	The actual achievable convergence rate R vs. the convergence rate requirement where complete graphs of N nodes are considered ($N = 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11$), $\beta = 0.5$ and δ is adaptively calculated using the upper bound of Theorem 6 under any given convergence rate requirement.	82
4.7	The actually achieved extinction rate versus the target mean extinction rate, where a 5000-node network with topology of complete graph \mathcal{K}_{5000} is considered, and $\beta = 0.5$	85
4.8	The actually achieved virus lifetime versus the target mean virus lifetime, where a 5000-node network with topology of \mathcal{K}_{5000} is considered and $\beta = 0.5$	86
4.9	Virus lifetime versus network connectivity, where a 5000-node network with topology of regular graph is considered, the degree of the regular graph increases from 20% to 100% of the remaining nodes (e.g., d ranges from 1000 to 4999 for 5000-node networks). . . .	87
5.1	An example of networks we considered where 7 nodes are categorized into three groups according to the connection between them.	95
5.2	An example of $[ABC]_{ijk}$ and $[ABC]'_{ijk}$	96
5.3	The growth of infection density where a complete graph with 1000 nodes is considered. $\beta = 0.0005$ and $\delta = 0.1$. The analytical results are obtained based on (5.6) by evenly dividing the nodes into 1, 2, 5, 10, 25 and 50 groups.	103
5.4	The infection density with the growth of time where a complete graph with 1000 nodes is considered. The analytical results are obtained based on (5.6) by evenly dividing the nodes into 5 groups where $\tau = \frac{\beta}{\delta} = 0.002, 0.0015, 0.0011$ and 0.001 , respectively.	104

5.5	The validation of epidemic threshold given by (5.20), where the y -axis is the infection density at $t = 1000$. Three networks with 500 nodes are considered. δ is set to be 0.1. $\alpha = 4, 6, 8$ is used to adjust the number of edges.	106
5.6	The validation of epidemic threshold, where the y -axis is the infected population at $t = 1000$. Different scales of networks ($N=100, 200$ and 300 , respectively) are considered. δ is set to be 0.1.	107
6.1	The number of CODDs of some popular domains	114
6.2	Generative process of the feature vector	117
6.3	Distribution of Average Number	121
6.4	Distribution of the Highest Confidence level	122

List of Tables

3.1	Notations Used in Chapter 3	31
3.2	The payoff matrix to \mathcal{P} per round in the case of misclassification-free game/situations	35
3.3	The payoff matrix of \mathcal{P} per round in the game/situations with misclassification	41
3.4	The confusion matrix for detection results	41
4.1	Notations Used in Chapter 4	58
4.2	The average running time of simulating a single virus propagation process (in seconds), corresponding to Fig. 4.9	89
5.1	Notations Used in Chapter 5	94
6.1	Notations Used in Chapter 6	110
6.2	Remote Control Detection Rules	119
6.3	Confusion Matrix of Classification	120

Abbreviation

AN : Average Number

APT : Advanced Persistent Threat

CIA : Confidentiality, Integrity and Availability

CODD : Concurrent Domains in DNS Records

CPU : Central Processing Unit

DDoS : Distributed Denial of Service

DNS : Domain Name System

HC : Highest Confidence

HTTP : HyperText Transfer Protocol

HTTPS : HyperText Transfer Protocol Secure

IoT : Internet of Things

IP : Internet Protocol

IRC : Internet Relay Chat

LANL : Los Alamos National Laboratory

OSN : Online Social Network

P2P : Peer-to-peer

SI : Susceptible-Infected

SIR : Susceptible-Infected-Recover

SIS : Susceptible-Infected-Susceptible

SLD: Second-Level Domain

TCP : Transmission Control Protocol

TTL : Time to Live

URL : Uniform Resource Locator

