Hey, You Have a Problem:
On the Feasibility of Large-Scale Web Vulnerability Notification

Ben Stock
29th Annual FIRST Conference
Motivation of our Work

• Large-Scale (Web) Vulnerability Detection
  • Drupaggedon SQLi, Joomla! Object Deserialization, Client-Side XSS, Execute After Redirect on Ruby, …

• Focus previously on Detection, not Notification

• Our work: understand how notifications can work at scale
  • What are suitable communication channels for such a campaign?
  • Does such a campaign affect the prevalence of the notified vulnerabilities?
  • What might inhibiting factors be?

• Today’s talk: get insights from the CERT community
Study Setup
Types of Vulnerabilities

• Well-known vulnerabilities for WordPress (43,865 domains, Top 1M)
  • Reflected Cross-Site Scripting in PIUpload flash component (CVE-2013-0237)
  • Client-Side Cross-Site Scripting in Genericons Example Code (CVE-2015-3429)
  • XMLRPC Multicall Vulnerability
    • allows attacker to try multiple user/password combinations in a single HTTP request
    • Existing patches for all of them

• Previously-unknown Client-Side XSS vulnerabilities (925 domains, Top 10K)
  • Site-specific flaws
  • No existing patches
Communication Channels

• Direct Communication Channels
  • Web contact forms
  • Generic email addresses (info@, security@, webmaster@, abuse@)
  • Domain WHOIS information (registrant or technical contact)

• Indirect Communication Channels
  • Vulnerability Reward Programs
  • Hosting providers (abuse contacts for the hosting IP range)
  • Trusted Third-Parties
    • regional CERTs (e.g., CERT US, CERT-Bund)
    • FIRST
    • trusted community Ops-Trust
Notification Procedure

• Split up data set of vulnerable domains into five groups of equal size
  • Generic, WHOIS, Provider, TTP, and Control

• Notification via email with link to our Web interface
  • alternatively: access via email using token

• Aggregated Disclosure to providers and TTPs

• Bi-weekly emails
  • January 14th, January 28th, February 11th
We, researchers from the Center for IT-Security, Privacy and Accountability, Saarland University, are conducting a large-scale notification of vulnerable Web applications. To enable the affected parties to fix their sites, we aim to notify them about discovered vulnerabilities in their applications.

This page contains a list of distinct flaws discovered on the domain and its subdomains. To access the technical details, please follow the view report link.

In case you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us at contact@notify.mmci.uni-saarland.de.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Subdomain</th>
<th>Vulnerability Id</th>
<th>Last verified at (GMT)</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DOMXSS</td>
<td></td>
<td>1501</td>
<td>July 21, 2016, 8:56 a.m.</td>
<td>view report</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Problem
From our analysis, your web site suffers from a DOM-based Cross-Site Scripting vulnerability. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time this vulnerability is disclosed to you. For further information on this type of vulnerability and the common errors, please refer to this paper.

Impact
Cross-Site Scripting is a vulnerability which allows an attacker to inject malicious client-side script in the web application. An attacker can exploit a Cross-Site Scripting vulnerability by luring his victim to a page with a crafted URL. The injected script is executed within the victim’s browser and can be abused to steal confidential information and impersonate the victim.

For further information, please refer to Wikipedia.

Proof of Concept
We verified that your web site suffers from this vulnerability, allowing an attacker to inject malicious code. To verify this yourself, follow the link below, which will open an alert box showing your domain name.

```html
<script>alert(document.domain)</script>
```

If you do not trust to click on the above link, you can reproduce the attack by copying the string

```html
<script>alert(document.domain)</script>
```

to the address bar of your browser.

Please note: This proof of concept might only work in Chrome and Internet Explorer due to browser-specific encoding behaviour. Also, since both browsers use a Cross-Site Scripting filter, the filter might be blocking the execution.

Remediation
Since this vulnerability specific for your web site, there is no generic way of fixing it. To assist you in spotting the flaw, we provide the source, the sink, and all involved HTML and JavaScript files hosting the vulnerable code in the following.

Source: location.href
Sink: document.write
Files: common/js/dojowww.js
Reachability Analysis

• Mailbox and accessed reports to classify domains
  • reached: report viewed or email acknowledged
  • bounced: all emails for this domain bounced
  • unreachable: no WHOIS contact, no provider abuse mail, or redirect to Web interface
  • unknown: all others
  • indirect channels: first step of the chain measured
Global Impact of Notification
Fixed Sites over Time

### WordPress

- **Generic**: 0% to 25% over time.
- **Domain Cont. Provider**: 0% to 25% over time.
- **TTP**: 0% to 25% over time.
- **Control**: 0% to 25% over time.

**+280 (+3.1%) domains**

### Client-Side XSS

- **Generic**: 0% to 25% over time.
- **WHOIS**: 0% to 25% over time.
- **Provider**: 0% to 25% over time.
- **TTP**: 0% to 25% over time.
- **Control**: 0% to 25% over time.

**31 (16.8%) domains**

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„Although the notifications for both WordPress and Client-Side XSS showed significant improvements over the control group, the number of domains which were fixed is unsatisfactory (25.8% and 12.6%, respectively).“
Communication Channel Analysis
Reachability of Direct Channels

- **Bounced**
- **Unreachable**
- **Unknown**
- **Reached**
- **Viewed**

550 WHOIS domains report reads, but only 280 fixed.
Reachability of Indirect Channels

- **Bounced**
- **Unreachable**
- **Unknown**
- **Reached**

![Chart showing reachability of indirect channels for different scenarios: Provider WordPress, Provider Client-Side XSS, TTPs WordPress, TTPs Client-Side XSS. The chart indicates the percentage of reachability for each scenario.]
Reachability of Indirect Channels

- Bounced
- Unreachable
- Unknown
- Reached
- Viewed

70 TTP domains report reads, but only 31 fixed.
Time to Fix after Report View

Same rate as the control group after day 5.

WordPress

Client-Side XSS

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%
% fixed domains after view

0 days 5 days 10 days 15 days 20 days

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%
% fixed domains after view

0 days 5 days 10 days 15 days 20 days

- Generic
- WHOIS
- Provider
- TTP
Key Insights and Follow-Up Questions
Establishing Communication Channels

• Direct channels are hard to reach
  • generic emails perform really bad for average Web sites
  • WHOIS helps, but is incomplete (~18.5% without entry)

• Indirect channels are easier to „reach“
  • Often do not forward the information
  • top 5 providers (~25% of domains) did not react

• How can the security community come up with reliable means of establishing communication channels between researchers and affected parties?
Need for Reminders and Time to Fix

- Reminders helped especially for direct channels
- Once report was viewed, fix ratio was ~25-30%
  - after five days, WordPress fix rate equaled control group
- Future notification campaigns should make frequent use of reminders
- *How can we improve on the fix ratio?*
Sender Reputation

• Previous work found that sender reputation does not matter

• Our work begs to differ
  • German CERT more inclined to forward information
  • Providers more inclined to act upon German CERT info

• What is the impact of the sender reputation, especially when using intermediaries, on the success of a notification campaign?
User Distrust

- Our experiments required users to click a link
  - or send an email with a token
- Community trains users not to click/react
- Notified control group with full disclosure email
  - results only differed significantly for WordPress
  - BUT: performed worse than with links!
- Potential issue in the message length
- *To what extent does the message tone, content, and length influence the success of notification campaigns?*
Results Generality

• Results appear to be dependent on the domain
  • Providers worked best for Network vulns and Heartbleed

• Even within the same domain, results differ
  • e.g. Generic on WordPress v. Client-Side XSS

• Are campaigns more successful if the vulnerabilities gained attention in the media (such as Heartbleed)?

• Does it matter who needs to fix the vulnerability, be it a network admin, Web site developer, or end-user?
Connecting with the FIRST Community

• Is it feasible to notify WordPress at scale?
• Should we use different formats, endpoints, ..?
• How could we make the reports more useful?
• What else can the research community do to ensure that vulnerability notifications can work at scale?
Conclusion

• Conducted first analysis into notifications for Web vulnerabilities at scale
  • two data sets: well-known (WordPress) and previously-unknown (Client-Side XSS) flaws
  • four communication channels: direct (generic emails, WHOIS) and indirect (providers, TTPs)

• Results show statistically significant improvement caused by our campaign
  • WHOIS worked best for WordPress, TTP best for Client-Side XSS

• Overall improvement was unsatisfactory
  • 74.5% of all domains in data set vulnerable at the end of our experiments

• Main problem is reaching administrators in the first place
  • 30% fix rate within five days (WordPress) / 25% (Client-Side XSS)