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Expressing Information Flow Properties

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Expressing Information Flow Properties

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ABSTRACT

Industries and governments are increasingly compelled by regulations and public pressure to handle sensitive information responsibly. Regulatory requirements and user expectations may be complex and have subtle implications for the use of data. *Information flow properties* can express complex restrictions on data usage by specifying how sensitive data (and data derived from sensitive data) may flow throughout computation. Controlling these flows of information according to the appropriate specification can prevent both leakage of confidential information to adversaries and corruption of critical data by adversaries. There is a rich literature expressing information flow properties to describe the complex restrictions on data usage required by today's digital society. This monograph summarizes how the expressiveness of information flow properties has evolved over the last four decades to handle different threat models, computational models, and conditions that determine whether flows are allowed. In addition to highlighting the significant advances of this area, we identify some remaining problems worthy of further investigation.

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Introduction

1.1 Information Flow Properties for Today's Digital Society

With information comes responsibility: a responsibility to use information according to appropriate restrictions. Governments, for instance, need to obey legal policies on communicating collected information about private citizens between different departments. The Department of Health might be permitted to share patient data with the Department of Immigration only if a specific warrant has been issued. In recent years, the complexity of policies on information usage has also increased for corporations. Forced by regulations (e.g., GDPR¹) and public sentiment, technology companies are increasing the transparency of how personal data is used, allowing users to make more fine-grained decisions on how and where their information should flow.

Current systems often do not obey agreed upon *information security policies*, or simply *security policies*, that specify allowed usage of information. To ensure that a system satisfies the desired security policy, one first needs to interpret the security policy, which is expressed in a

¹Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data (General Data Protection Regulation).

high-level policy language, in terms of the system behavior. The result of this interpretation is a specific *property* of the system behavior. If the system satisfies this property, then it is expected that the system satisfies the initial policy, too.

Complex security policies on data usage can be interpreted as *information flow properties*. An information flow property is a mathematical specification of how information is allowed to flow between entities making up a system, such as programs, users, inputs, outputs, and storage locations. Consider, for instance, a social-network application where the advertisements shown to users might depend on the social interaction (e.g., joining a group, liking or sharing posts, pages, ads) of their “friends”. User Alice might want to specify the security policy that her coworkers (a subset of her friends) should not learn the groups she is a member of. Specifically, the choice of ads shown to her coworkers should not depend on which groups she is a member of. For example, when Alice joins the group “Broccoli Fans,” her boss should not start seeing ads about broccoli; otherwise, her boss might infer that there is a broccoli aficionado on staff. So, Alice’s initial high-level policy can be interpreted as a specific information flow property: changes in Alice’s group membership should not cause changes of ads shown to her coworkers. We refer later to this example property as the Alice-property.

This monograph attempts to match the demand of the digital society for expressing complex data-usage restrictions with the supply of information flow properties proposed in the literature. In doing so, we survey the wide variety of information flow properties that have been formulated within the last four decades, we compare their expressive power, and suggest research directions for a faster convergence between future technological demand and literature supply. Such a large-scale systematization of information flow properties has not been performed before.

1.2 Relation to Privacy, Access Control, and Cryptography

Privacy policies are primarily concerned with restricting the inference of information about individuals. Some privacy policies can be interpreted as information flow properties, which are concerned more broadly

with restrictions on how data may be handled. For example, *use-based privacy policies* (Mundie, 2014), which have the potential to formalize complex regulations (e.g., GDPR, HIPAA²), can be interpreted as information flow properties (Birrell and Schneider, 2017). *Differential privacy* (Dwork, 2006), which limits the influence of individual data-samples to the output of an aggregate function, and *contextual integrity* (Nissenbaum, 2010), which restricts information usage based on the context, could be regarded as special cases of use-based privacy (Birrell and Schneider, 2017), and thus be interpreted as information flow properties, too.

Computer systems often employ access control and cryptography to restrict access to sensitive data. However this might not be sufficient to enforce information flow properties. Considering our social-network example, one might attempt to enforce the Alice-property by preventing Alice’s coworkers from reading her group memberships. Such prevention can be accomplished by denying read accesses issued by Alice’s coworkers (i.e., an access control mechanism), or by encrypting these values with a key unknown to Alice’s coworkers (i.e., a cryptographic mechanism). However, preventing Alice’s coworkers from reading her group memberships is not enough to enforce the Alice-property. Alice’s coworkers should be additionally prevented from reading any value derived from her group memberships, otherwise they may learn something about these memberships. Neither access control nor cryptography can directly restrict access to all these derived values. In fact, one cannot even start addressing this enforcement problem if the information flow property is not made explicit. For this reason, this monograph emphasizes the formal specification of information flow properties, which can concretize the elusive notions of “allowed flow” and “forbidden flow” in terms of system behavior, and clarify when enforcement mechanisms—such as access control or cryptographic mechanisms—can successfully achieve these flow restrictions.

²Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.

1.3 Information Flow Properties are Hyperproperties

A property of system behavior is commonly a *trace property*: a predicate on a single system execution. A system is said to satisfy a trace property if every possible execution of the system satisfies that trace property. So, in principle, it suffices to examine system executions one-by-one to deduce if there is a “bad” execution that violates the property. For example, an *access control policy*, which stipulates allowed accesses on entities, is interpreted as a trace property, because one “bad” execution where a forbidden access is performed is enough to show that the system does not satisfy this property (and thus the access control policy).

An information flow property is not a trace property, because a single execution is not enough to exhibit a violation. Considering our social-network example, a system execution τ where Alice joins “Broccoli Fans” and her coworkers see broccoli ads does not constitute by itself evidence that Alice-property is violated. If for all other possible executions, Alice’s coworkers see those broccoli ads, independently of Alice’s group membership, then Alice-property is actually satisfied. But if, in a hypothetical execution τ' , Alice does not join “Broccoli Fans” and her coworkers do not see broccoli ads, then Alice-property is indeed violated. The set $\{\tau, \tau'\}$ of executions constitutes evidence that coworkers’ ads depend on Alice’s group memberships: information flowed from Alice’s group memberships to coworkers’ ads. Consequently, sets of executions (e.g., $\{\tau, \tau'\}$)—not a single execution—can constitute evidence for violating information flow properties. For this reason, an information flow property is a *hyperproperty* (Clarkson and Schneider, 2010a): a predicate on sets of executions.

1.4 Labels and Security Conditions

An information flow property can be expressed based on *labels*, which are associated with entities and indicate the intended uses of these entities. For example, an entity could be associated with label *Secret*, to signify that this entity stores secret information, and another entity could be associated with *Public*, to signify that it stores public information. Labels are commonly accompanied by a *flow relation*, which signifies how

information is permitted to flow between entities associated with these labels. For instance, a flow relation \sqsubseteq on labels, with $Public \sqsubseteq Public$, $Public \sqsubseteq Secret$, and $Secret \sqsubseteq Secret$, represents that information is allowed to flow from *Public* entities to *Public* entities, from *Public* entities to *Secret* entities, and from *Secret* entities to *Secret* entities. However information is not allowed to flow from *Secret* entities to *Public* entities. Such a flow relation on labels can be considered as a security policy that intuitively describes how flows of information should be restricted. However, this policy is still not precise enough to be rigorously enforced on a system. What is missing is an interpretation of these flow restrictions in terms of the system behavior, in the form of a predicate regarding system executions—an information flow property.

Considering, for instance, a system where inputs and outputs are labeled with *Secret* and *Public*, the information flow restrictions imposed by the above flow relation can be precisely expressed by the following information flow property: Whenever two executions of the system agree on the *Public* inputs (and possibly differ on *Secret* inputs), they should also agree on the *Public* outputs. As desired, this information flow property—a specific predicate on system executions—forbids *Secret* inputs from flowing to *Public* outputs, while it allows all other flows (from *Public* inputs to *Public* outputs, from *Public* inputs to *Secret* outputs, and from *Secret* outputs to *Secret* outputs).

This information flow property is an instantiation of *noninterference* (Goguen and Meseguer, 1982). Noninterference stipulates that information should not flow between entities that are associated with unrelated labels. Noninterference is a *security condition*, since it can be parameterized with different systems, labels, and flow relations. When noninterference is instantiated with a particular system, set of labels, and flow relation, then the result is an information flow property for that system, called an *instantiation of noninterference*. For brevity, one might simply say that a system satisfies noninterference, instead of an instantiation of noninterference.

1.5 Enforcing Information Flow Properties

Information flow control (IFC) mechanisms are used to ensure that a system satisfies an information flow property, which is usually based on a set of labels and a flow relation. Assuming entities are associated with specific labels, a conventional IFC mechanism enforces such a property by propagating labels from one entity to another, along the flow of information. If this label propagation meets an inconsistency (e.g., *Secret* is about to be propagated to an entity associated with *Public*), then the mechanism reports an error. In the general case, enforcing information flow properties is an undecidable problem (Sabelfeld and Myers, 2003b), and thus, an IFC mechanism might conservatively report an error for a system that actually satisfies the desired property.

A wide variety of IFC mechanisms has been presented in the literature. IFC has been extensively studied in the context of programming languages, because restrictions on information usage are ultimately mapped to restrictions on how information flows throughout program executions. In particular, IFC has been applied to functional (e.g., Heintze and Riecke, 1998) and imperative (e.g., Volpano *et al.*, 1996) programming languages, including assembly languages (e.g., Costanzo *et al.*, 2016). IFC has also been used in object-oriented (e.g., Myers and Liskov, 1997), declarative (e.g., Schultz and Liskov, 2013), and concurrent (e.g., Smith and Volpano, 1998) programming languages. For strongly typed programming languages, IFC is usually implemented as part of the compiler, and thus it is statically invoked. For weakly typed programming languages, such as JavaScript, IFC is dynamic (e.g., Austin and Flanagan, 2009) or hybrid (e.g., Moore and Chong, 2011). Model checking methods for IFC have been developed, too (e.g., Clarkson *et al.*, 2014). Sabelfeld and Myers (2003b) discuss information flow properties and enforcement mechanisms in the context of programming languages.

Because programming languages can model a variety of systems, intuition for enforcing information flow policies have been transferred from programs to computer systems more broadly. Hence, IFC has been studied at the hardware level (e.g., Amorim *et al.*, 2014), within operating systems (e.g., Zeldovich *et al.*, 2006) and web browsers (e.g.,

Chong *et al.*, 2007). Also, techniques from IFC are used in the context of distributed systems (e.g., Zeldovich *et al.*, 2008; Liu *et al.*, 2009), blockchains (e.g., Cecchetti *et al.*, 2021), and cyber-physical systems (e.g., Akella *et al.*, 2010).

This monograph does not focus on IFC mechanisms; instead we mainly discuss information flow properties. Focusing mainly on information flow properties is sensible, because an information flow property is usually expressed independently of the enforcement mechanism. This means that the same information flow property can be enforced in several different ways. The rich literature on IFC mechanisms warrants its own survey.

1.6 Scope of the Monograph and Terminology

In general, the formulation of an information flow property for a system involves the selection of the following:

- The entities under consideration, and
- The conditions under which flows between these entities are allowed or forbidden.

The entities are chosen based on the *computational model* and *threat model* for that system: The computational model indicates the entities that are manipulated during system executions; the threat model indicates the entities with which the adversaries interact. So, specifying allowed or forbidden flows between entities amounts to stipulating allowed or forbidden flows between the system and the adversaries. We explore the space of information flow properties by varying the computational model, the threat model, and the expressiveness of the conditions employed to specify restrictions on information flows between entities.

We summarize here the terminology that this monograph employs to systematically discuss the covered literature:

- A *security policy* is a high-level description of desirable system behavior. It is usually specified using a policy language.

- A *label* is a syntactic object that is *associated* with an entity in a system and denotes intended uses of that entity.
- A *flow relation* between labels represents allowed flows between entities associated with these labels. Flow relations usually constitute the language for specifying *information flow policies*, a subset of security policies.
- A *security condition* is a statement parameterized with the labels, the flow relation, and the behavior of the system to specify allowed or forbidden flows between system entities associated with certain labels.
- An *information flow property* is a hyperproperty of the system. It can be the result of instantiating a security condition with certain labels, flow relation, and system.
- An *information flow control mechanism* is an enforcement mechanism that ensures the behavior of a system satisfies an information flow property.

Although we aspire for the above terminology to become lingua franca for the community, researchers have used these terms differently in the past. Some authors (e.g., Denning, 1976) use *security level* or *security class*, instead of label, to refer to syntactic objects that denote intended use for the associated entities. Other authors use term *policy* for the decision to associate certain labels with entities in the system (e.g., Li and Zdancewic, 2005a), or the flow relation between labels (e.g., Sabelfeld and Sands, 2005), or even the way that the flow relation is allowed to change during execution (e.g., Broberg *et al.*, 2015).

For the information flow properties discussed in this monograph, we do not always present exactly their original definition, but rather adapt them to a common formalism. We strive to capture the key ideas and differences, but some subtleties of the definitions may differ due to the change in formalism.

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