Systematic Detection of Capability Leaks in Stock Android Smartphones

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed a meteoric increase in the adoption of smartphones. To manage information and features on such phones, Android provides a permission-based security model that requires each application to explicitly request permissions before it can be installed to run. In this paper, we analyze eight popular Android smartphones and discover that the stock phone images do not properly enforce the permission model. Several privileged permissions are unsafely exposed to other applications which do not need to request them for the actual use. To identify these leaked permissions or capabilities, we have developed a tool called Woodpecker. Our results with eight phone images show that among 13 *privileged permissions examined so far,* 11 *were leaked, with individual phones leaking up to eight permissions. By exploiting them, an untrusted application can manage to wipe out the user data, send out SMS messages, or record user conversation on the affected phones – all* without *asking for any permission.*

1 Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a meteoric increase in the adoption of smartphones. According to data from IDC [24], smartphone manufacturers shipped 100.9 million units in the fourth quarter of 2010, compared to 92.1 million units of PCs shipped worldwide. For the first time in history, smartphones are outselling personal computers. Their popularity can be partially attributed to the incredible functionality and convenience smartphones offered to end users. In fact, existing mobile phones are not simply devices for making phone calls and receiving SMS messages, but powerful communication and entertainment platforms for web surfing, social networking, GPS navigation, and online banking. The popularity of smartphones is also spurred by the proliferation of feature-rich devices as well as compelling mobile applications (or simply apps). In particular, these mobile apps can be readily accessed and downloaded to run on smartphones from various *app stores* [2]. For example, it has been reported [22] that Google's Android Market already hosts 150,000 apps as of February, 2011 and the number of available apps has tripled in less than 9 months. Moreover, it is not only official smartphone platform vendors (e.g., Apple and Google) that are providing app stores that host hundreds of thousands of apps; third-party vendors (e.g., Amazon) are also competing in this market by providing separate channels for mobile users to browse and install apps.

Not surprisingly, mobile users are increasingly relying on smartphones to store and handle personal data. Inside the phone, we can find current (or past) geo-location information about the user [3], phone call logs of placed and received calls, an address book with various contact information, as well as cached emails and photos taken with the built-in camera. The type and the volume of information kept in the phone naturally lead to various concerns [13, 14, 27, 42] about the safety of this private information, including the way it is managed and accessed.

To mediate access to various personal information and certain advanced phone functions, smartphone platform vendors have explored a number of approaches. For example, Apple uses a vetting process through which each third-party app must be scrutinized before it will be made available in the app store. After installing an app, Apple's iOS platform will prompt the user to approve the use of some functions at run-time, upon their first access. From another perspective, Google defines a permission-based security model in Android by requiring each app to explicitly request permissions up-front to access personal information and phone features. The requested permissions essentially define the capability the user may grant to an Android app. In other words, they allow a user to gauge the app's capability and determine whether or not to install the app in the first place. Due to the central role of the permission-based model in running Android apps, it is critical that this model is properly enforced in existing Android smartphones.

In this paper, we systematically study eight popular Android smartphones from leading manufacturers, including HTC, Motorola, and Samsung and are surprised to find out these stock phone images do not properly enforce the permission-based security model. Specifically, several privileged (or dangerous) permissions that protect access to sensitive user data or phone features are unsafely exposed to other apps which do not need to request these permissions for the actual use. For simplicity, we use the term *capability leak* to represent the situation where an app can gain access to a permission without actually requesting it. Each such situation essentially leads to a violation of the permission-based security model in Android.

To facilitate exposing capability leaks, we have developed a system called *Woodpecker*. By employing data flow analysis on pre-loaded apps, Woodpecker systematically analyzes each app on the phone to explore the reachability of a dangerous permission from a public, unguarded interface. To better examine possible capability leaks, our system distinguishes two different categories. *Explicit capability leaks* allow an app to successfully access certain permissions by exploiting some publicly-accessible interfaces or services without actually requesting these permissions by itself. *Implicit capability leaks* allow the same, but instead of exploiting some public interfaces or services, permit an app to acquire or "inherit" permissions from another app with the same signing key (presumably by the same author). Consequently, explicit leaks represent serious security errors as they subvert the permission-based security model in Android while implicit leaks could misrepresent the capabilities available to an app.

We have implemented a Woodpecker prototype to uncover both types of capability leaks in Android-based smartphones. Our current prototype focuses on 13 representative privileged permissions that protect sensitive user data (e.g., geo-location) or phone features (e.g., the ability to send SMS messages). We have used our prototype to examine eight popular Android phones: HTC Legend/EVO 4G/Wildfire S, Motorola Droid/Droid X, Samsung Epic 4G, and Google Nexus One/Nexus S. Our results show that among these 13 privileged permissions, 11 were explicitly leaked, with individual phones leaking up to eight permissions.[1] In particular, by exploiting these leaked capabilities, an untrusted app on these affected phones can manage to wipe out the user data on the phones, send out SMS messages (e.g., to premium numbers), record user conversation, or obtain user geo-locations – all *without* asking for any permission.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 and Section 3 describe our system design and implementation, respectively. Section 4 presents the detailed evaluation results from our study of eight Android smartphones. Section 5 discusses the limitations of our approach and suggests possible improvement. Finally, Section 6 describes related work and Section 7 summarizes our conclusions.

2 System Design

We aim to identify *capability leaks*, i.e., situations where an app can gain access to a permission without actually requesting it. Each such situation essentially sidesteps Android's permission-based security model. In this work, we choose to focus on those permissions used by the pre-loaded apps as a part of an Android phone's firmware, since the firmware has access to some permissions that are too privileged to be granted to third-party apps. For simplicity, we use the terms "permissions" and "capabilities" interchangeably.

Figure 1 provides a high-level overview of our system. To detect the two different kinds of capability leaks (i.e., explicit and implicit), our system performs two complementary sets of analysis. Specifically, to expose explicit leaks of a capability, our system first locates those (pre-loaded) apps in the phone that have the capability. For each such app, our system then identifies whether a public interface is exposed that can be used to gain access to it. (This public interface is essentially an entry point defined in the app's manifest file, i.e., an *activity*, *service*, *receiver*, or *content provider*.) In other words, starting from some public interface, there exists an execution path that can reach some use of the capability. If this public interface is not guarded by a permission requirement, and the execution path does not have sanity checking in place to prevent it from being invoked by another unrelated app, we consider the capability leaked. Our system then reports such leaks and further provides evidence that can be used to fashion input to exercise the leaked capability.

On the other hand, implicit capability leaks arise from the abuse of an optional attribute in the manifest file, i.e., "`sharedUserId`." This attribute, if defined, causes multiple apps signed by the same developer certificate to share a user identifier. As permissions are granted to user identifiers, this causes all the apps sharing the same identifier to be granted the *union* of all the permissions requested by each app. To detect such leaks in an app that shares a user identifier, our system reports the exercise of an unrequested capability, which suspiciously has been requested by another app by the same author. We stress that an implicit leak requires a certain combination of apps to be installed: an app seeking to gain unauthorized capabilities can only do so if another app, with the same shared user identifier and

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[1] Since April, 2011, we have been reporting the discovered capability leaks to the corresponding vendors. So far, Motorola and Google have confirmed the discovered vulnerabilities related to their phones. However, we experienced major difficulties with HTC and Samsung. Our experience is similar to others [6], echoing "the seven deadly sins of security vulnerability reporting." [32]

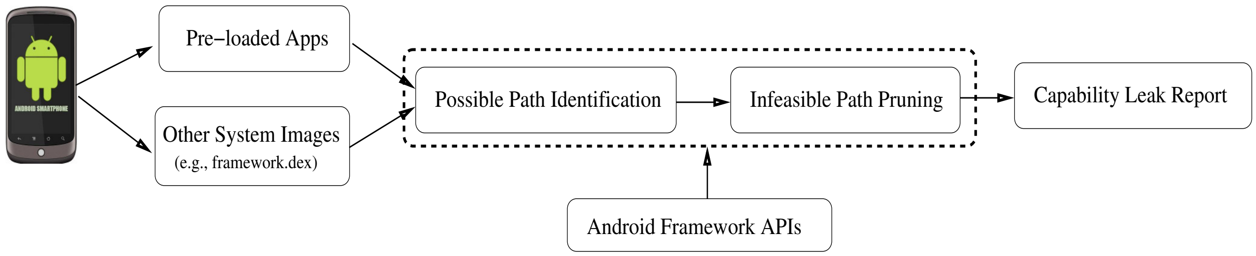

Figure 1. An overview of Woodpecker

signing key, is installed to grant the additional permission. In the context of the pre-loaded apps on the phone, we can identify whether such a colluding app exists. However, due to the fact that we cannot rule out the possibility of a colluding app being installed at a later time, its mere absence does not indicate such an implicit leak is "safe" and may not occur later.

In this work, we consider the scenario where a smartphone user has installed a third-party app on the phone. The author of the third-party app has the necessary knowledge of the phone's system image, and aims to maliciously perform some high-privilege activities (e.g., recording the user's phone conversations) through Android APIs that are protected by permission checks. To do that, the attacker chooses to not request the required permissions to elude detection or these permissions cannot be granted to third-party apps. (Examples include those permissions defined as `signature` or `signatureOrSystem` [17]). Meanwhile, we limit the attacker's scope by assuming the Android framework (including the OS kernel) is trusted. Also, we assume that the signing key to the system image has not been leaked to the attacker. Given these constraints, a malicious app will not be able to directly access the high-privilege APIs. However, since many pre-loaded apps have the corresponding permissions, the malicious app will have gained access to a high-privilege capability if it can cause one of these apps to invoke the desired API on its behalf.

2.1 Explicit Capability Leak Detection

Explicit capability leaks may occur in any pre-loaded app that has requested a capability of interest in its manifest file. To detect these leaks, our system analyzes each such app in two steps. The first step, *possible-path identification* builds a control-flow graph to identify possible paths from a well-defined entry point (in the manifest file) to some use of the capability. After that, the second step, *feasible path refinement* employs field- and path-sensitive inter-procedural data flow analysis to determine which of these paths are feasible.

2.1.1 Possible Path Identification

Given a pre-loaded app under inspection, our system first extracts its Dalvik bytecode, and then builds a control-flow graph (CFG) to locate possible execution paths. Since constructing a CFG is a well-studied topic, we in the following focus on those Android-specific aspects that make our task complicated.

The first issue stems from indirect control-flow transfer instructions in Dalvik bytecode. Dalvik targets a hypothetical machine architecture, which does not support most forms of indirect control-flow transfer. In fact, the only indirect transfer in Dalvik's machine language is due to the Java equivalent of pointers: object references. However, object references are rather commonly passed as arguments within an app method, and due to inheritance it is often not possible to unambiguously determine what concrete class a reference represents. During our analysis, object references will also naturally require type resolution of related objects. In our current prototype, we take a conservative approach. Specifically, when analyzing an app's Dalvik bytecode, our system maintains a comprehensive class hierarchy. When an ambiguous reference is encountered, we consider all possible assignable classes. This is a straightforward approach, but one that will not introduce any false negatives (Section 5).

Another problem arises from Android's event-driven nature. In particular, due to the large number of callbacks used by the Android framework, app execution often passes through the framework to emerge elsewhere in the app. For a concrete example, consider the `java.lang.Thread` class. This class is used to implement native threads, which Android uses in abundance to achieve better UI responsiveness. A developer can simply extend this class, implement the `run()` method, and then call the `start()` method to schedule the thread. However, if we analyze only the code contained within the app, the `run()` method does not appear to be reachable (from `start()`), despite the fact that after the `start()` method is called, control flow goes through the Dalvik VM to the underlying thread scheduler and eventually to the `run()` method. In other words, Android's event-driven nature will unavoid-

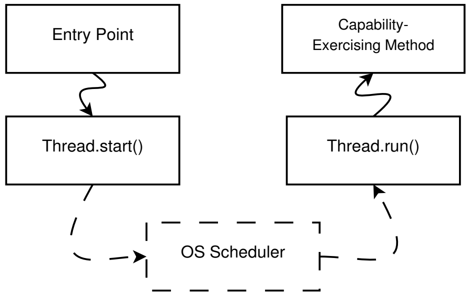

Figure 2. A discontinuity in the control flow introduced by the Android framework.

ably cause some discontinuity in the CFG construction if we only focus on analyzing the app code (Figure 2). Fortunately, beyond CFG construction, this intervening framework code is of no particular value to our analysis, and its behavior is well-defined in the Android framework APIs. Therefore, we leverage these well-defined semantics to link these two methods directly in the control flow graph, resolving the discontinuity in the process. We have applied this strategy to a number of other callbacks, such as those for message queues, timers, and GPS position updates.

Android's use of events is so core to the platform that it is even reflected in the structure of Android apps. This leads to a final complication, because an Android app does not necessarily have only one entry point. Instead, rather than a traditional "main method" of some kind, an Android app contains one or more components defined in its manifest file. Each component can potentially define multiple entry points accessible through the Binder IPC mechanism. To take these factors into account, our prototype iterates through each entry point defined in the manifest file to build the CFG. Within each CFG, we then locate possible paths, each indicating the reachability from a known entry point to a point that exercises a specific permission of interest.

2.1.2 Feasible Path Refinement

The previous step produces control-flow graphs which may represent a tremendous number of potential paths. Among these possible paths, not all of them lead to a dangerous call that exercises a permission of interest, and of those that do, not all are feasible. Therefore, we employ inter-procedural data flow analysis to find paths that are both feasible and result in a dangerous call.

Specifically, we use symbolic path simulation, a path-sensitive data flow analysis technique. The underlying intuition is that a path of program execution can be modeled as a set of program states, each dependent on the last. For this set of states to be feasible, each program point (or instruction) must follow from the preceding ones. Similar to other data flow analysis techniques, symbolic path simulation implements an iterative algorithm that converges on a fix-point. At each program point, the set of input states are fed through a transfer function (representing the operation performed by that instruction) to produce a set of output states. However, before these output states are used as input states for that program point's successors, we verify that their constraints are consistent. In this way, infeasible paths are not fed forward through the analysis.

```
Input: entry points, known method summaries
Output: a set of capability leaks
foreach entry point ∈ entry points do
    $worklist$ = initial state: start of the entry point
    $states$ = initial state
    $summaries$ = known method summaries
    foreach $state \in worklist$ do
        remove $state$ from $worklist$
        if state's instruction is a method call then
            if a summary does not exist for the target
            then
                summarize(target, summaries);
            end
        end
        $worklist+ = \delta(state) - states$
        $states+ = \delta(state)$
    end
    if a dangerous-call state is flagged then
        report the state as a capability leak
    end
end
```

Algorithm 1: Capability leak detection

As a field- and path-sensitive symbolic simulation algorithm (summarized by Algorithm 1), our approach considers multiple similar concrete paths through a program at once, and condenses methods into parameterized summaries that relate their inputs to their outputs. Each state in the analysis encodes the value of data fields with constraints, allowing some similar states to be joined with one another. Particularly, the algorithm operates in the standard fashion for data flow analysis: a worklist is maintained of actively-considered states, and a transfer function (δ) is used to generate new states from a given state. Only new states are added to the worklist, so eventually the algorithm converges on a solution that represents all the feasible states reachable from a given entry point.

By considering certain properties of the Android platform, we can optimize our algorithm in a number of aspects. For example, we accelerate the process by using method summaries to avoid recursively considering the same method-call chains multiple times. To save space, *joining* (rather than simply adding) new states to the worklist and visited-state list make the algorithm scale better both in terms of time and memory. Our implementation recognizes the value constraints placed on each memory item, and will aggressively merge similar states where possible. As an example, if two states are joined that only differ by whether a boolean value is true or false, the resulting state will simply remove any constraint on the boolean value. In this way, fewer states need to be remembered, and fewer successors calculated using the transfer function δ.

Moreover, since an Android app can define multiple entry points, there is a need to produce a separate set of potential paths for each. These paths do not include any executed instructions in the app prior to the entry point, which excludes such code as any constructors that set the initial state of the app. Due to the fact that the entry points in an app can be invoked in any sequence, we opt to take a conservative approach by assuming that a field might contain any assignable value. As that field is used along a path of execution, the list of possible values shrinks each time it is used in a way that renders some candidate values impossible. When reducing infeasible paths, we also face the same type inference problem experienced in the first step. Fortunately, the set of inferences built up by symbolic path simulation naturally mitigates the path explosion caused by our first step. Specifically, object instances can be tracked during the path simulation, and some paths will become infeasible after the system infers the object's type somewhere along a path. Certain Dalvik bytecode operations, especially type-carrying instructions, can also greatly help. For instance, the `check-cast` opcode establishes that its operand can be assigned to the supplied type, or an exception is thrown.

In addition, the execution of our algorithm also involves handling Android framework APIs or methods that do not belong to the app. Specifically, the app under inspection may invoke certain APIs that are exported by the Android framework. In our algorithm, the transfer function for a method invocation opcode is a *method summary*, which essentially phrases the method's outputs in terms of its inputs. Without statically analyzing the code for an external method – and all of its dependencies – we cannot build such a summary. Yet analyzing the entire Android framework would easily lead to state explosion and scalability issue. To address that, we again leverage the well-defined API semantics of the Android framework. Specifically, it contains a remarkably robust set of predefined libraries, which reduces the need for developers to pull in third-party libraries to support their code. By summarizing these built-in classes ahead of time, we can avoid paying the time, space, and complexity costs associated with doing so each time during application analysis. In our prototype, we find that this approach allows us to phrase some functions more succinctly than the algorithm would, as we can trim out unimportant details from the summaries.

During this infeasible path pruning step, we also need to account for explicit permission checks within the identified path. An app might allow any caller to invoke its entry points, yet deny unprivileged callers access to dangerous functionality by explicitly checking the caller's credentials before any dangerous invocations. Such an arrangement would not constitute a capability leak, and so should not be reported. A naïve solution would be to mark any path encountering an interesting permission check as infeasible. However, our approach does not know what kind of dangerous call lies at the end of the path beforehand. Allowing unrelated permission checks to mark whole paths as infeasible would therefore introduce false negatives. Instead, we model the permission system within our artificial method summaries. Explicit permission checks set a flag along their "true" branch; if that path of execution later encounters a corresponding dangerous call, it is not reported as a capability leak.

A side benefit of performing this kind of analysis is that it models all data flow assignments, not just those relating to branch conditions. As a result, we can trace the provenance of any arguments to the dangerous method. With such information, we can characterize the severity of the capability leak. A capability leak that directly passes through arguments from the external caller is obviously worse than one that only allows invocation with constant values, and this design can distinguish between the two. Given that path feasibility is undecidable, our design errs on the side of caution: it will not claim a feasible path is infeasible, but might claim the reverse is true. As a result, this argument information is valuable, as it can be used to generate a concrete test case that verifies the detected capability leak.

2.2 Implicit Capability Leak Detection

When detecting explicit capability leaks, we focus on those apps that request permissions of interest in their manifest files. If an app has a `sharedUserId` in its manifest but does *not* request a certain (dangerous) permission, we also need to investigate the possibility of an implicit capability leak.

To detect implicit capability leaks, we employ a similar algorithm as for explicit leaks with necessary changes to reflect a fundamental difference in focus. Specifically, explicit capability leak detection assumes the caller of an app's exposed API is malicious, while implicit capability leak detection assumes the app itself might be malicious. Accordingly, instead of only starting from the well-defined entry points in the explicit leak detection, there is a need to broaden our search to include the app's initialization.

Unfortunately, modeling the initialization process in an Android app is somewhat complicated. Specifically, there are two kinds of constructors to handle: (1) *Instance* constructors that are explicitly invoked in the Dalvik bytecode with the `new-instance` bytecode operation and (2) *Class* constructors or `static` initialization blocks that are implicitly invoked the first time a class is used. Accordingly, instance constructors are relatively straightforward to handle as they need to be explicitly invoked. However, class constructors are more complicated. In particular, a class constructor may be invoked in a number of scenarios: it is instantiated with the `new` keyword, a `static` member of the class is referenced, or one of its subclasses is likewise initialized. This means that this type of initialization can occur in a variety of orders. In our prototype, we treat all of the relevant instructions as branches, and take into account the class loading order to determine the path feasibility. Also, in our system, we consider a capability to have been implicitly leaked if there is *any* way to exercise it, which is different from explicit capability leak detection. (This has implications in changing method summaries used for pruning infeasible paths – Section 2.1.2.)

Finally, once we have identified that an implicit capability leak exists, we can perform an additional step to determine whether that leak may actually be exercised. In the context of a phone's system image, we can determine the runtime permissions granted to each shared user identifier by crawling the manifest files of all the packages in the image. We union the permissions granted to each application with a given shared user identifier, which yields the set of permissions given to each of them. We report any implicitly leaked permissions contained within that set.

3 Implementation

We have implemented a Woodpecker prototype that consists of a mixture of Java code, shell scripts and Python scripts. Specifically, our static analysis code was developed from the open-source `baksmali` disassembler tool (1.2.6). We could have developed Woodpecker as a set of extensions to an existing Java bytecode analysis tool (e.g., Soot [4] or WALA [5]). Given concerns over the accuracy of existing Dalvik-to-Java bytecode translators, we opted to operate directly on `baksmali`'s intermediate representation. To detect possible capability leaks in an Android phone, our system first leverages the Android Debug Bridge (`adb`) tool [1] to obtain access the phone's system image, mainly those files in the `/system/app` and `/system/framework` directories. These directories contain all of the pre-installed apps on the device, as well as any dependencies they need to run.

After obtaining the phone image, we then enumerate all pre-installed apps. For each app, our system decompresses the related Android package (`apk`) file to extract its manifest file (`AndroidManifest.xml`) and then pairs it with the app's bytecode (either `classes.dex` or its `odex` variant). A standalone script has been developed to extract all the pre-installed apps and disassemble them to extract their bytecode for subsequent analysis. Depending on the number of apps installed on the device and the complexity or functionality implemented in these apps, this process typically takes on the order of ten minutes per smartphone image.

After extracting the app manifest files, we further comb through them for two things: requests for any permissions of interest and the optional `sharedUserId` attribute. Apps that are granted related permissions are checked for explicit capability leaks, while those with the `sharedUserId` attribute set are checked for implicit capability leaks. Naturally, we also compute the actual set of permissions granted to each pre-loaded app by combining all the permission requests made with the same `sharedUserId`.

3.1 Control-Flow Graph Construction

We iterate through each selected pre-loaded app to detect possible capability leaks. As there are tens of dangerous permissions defined in the Android framework, instead of building a specific control-flow graph (CFG) for each permission, we choose to first build a generic CFG to assist our static analysis.

In particular, we start from each entry point and build the respective CFG. The generic whole-program CFG will be the union of these CFGs. There is some subtlety in Android involved in mapping the components defined in the manifest file to their actual entry points. Some entry points are standard and can be readily determined by the type of components contained within the app. Specifically, there are in total four types, and each has a predefined interface to the rest of the system. For instance, any "receiver" defined in the manifest file must subclass `android.content.BroadcastReceiver`. In such cases, inspecting the class hierarchy allows to determine that the "`onReceive(Context, Intent)`" method is an entry point (as per the specification).

Moreover, among these four types, three of them solely take data objects as inputs through their entry points, but services can be different. In particular, Android defines a CORBA-like binding language, the Android Interface Definition Language (AIDL), which allows services to expose arbitrary methods to other apps. `aidl` files are used at compile-time to manufacture Binder stubs and skeletons that encapsulate the necessary IPC functionality. At run-time, the component's `onBind(Intent)` method is called by the system, which returns an `android.os.Binder` object. The methods contained within this object are then exported to callers that have a compatible skeleton class. Since we only analyze the bytecode and do not

Table 1. The list of 13 representative permissions in our study (†: we omit *android.permission.* prefix in each permission)

Permission†	Capability
ACCESS_COARSE_LOCATION	Access coarse location (e.g., WiFi)
ACCESS_FINE_LOCATION	Access fine location (e.g., GPS)
CALL_PHONE	Initiate a phone call (without popping up an UI for confirmation.)
CALL_PRIVILEGED	Similar to CALL_PHONE, but can dial emergency phone numbers (e.g., 911)
CAMERA	Access the camera device
DELETE_PACKAGES	Delete existing apps
INSTALL_PACKAGES	Install new apps
MASTER_CLEAR	Remove user data with a factory reset
READ_PHONE_STATE	Read phone-identifying info. (e.g., IMEI)
REBOOT	Reboot the device
RECORD_AUDIO	Access microphones
SEND_SMS	Send SMS messages
SHUTDOWN	Power off the device

have access to the original `aidl` files used to define the interface, there is a need to further parse and infer the internal structure of the `Binder` object. Each such object contains an `onTransact()` method that is passed a parcel of data that encodes which method to call. We can then treat this method as an entry point in order to build our CFG. However, once the graph has been built, it is more semantically accurate to treat the embedded method calls in `onTransact()` as entry points for the purposes of our feasible path refinement stage.

From another perspective, Android apps essentially expose a set of callbacks to the system instead of a single "main method." Our system leverages the knowledge of how these callbacks are defined in Android to identify them. In addition, the Android framework defines many other callbacks at run-time, which will similarly cause discontinuities in the CFG generation. One example is the previous `Thread.start()`→`run()` scenario. In our prototype, instead of statically analyzing the entire Android framework, we opt to use knowledge of the framework's semantics to connect the registration of a callback to the callback itself. To automate this process, we provide a boilerplate file that represents knowledge about the framework. This file contains simplified definitions for any explicitly-modelled method in the framework, written in the `dex` format; it is fed into our system alongside the app's code to facilitate CFG construction.

3.2 Capability Leak Detection

With the constructed CFG and the set of entry points, we then aim to identify possible execution paths from one of the entry points to some use of an Android API that exercises a permission of interest. If the path is not protected by the appropriate permission checks and its entry point is publicly accessible, an explicit capability leak is detected. Due to the large number of sensitive permissions defined in the Android framework, our study chooses thirteen representative permissions marked `dangerous`, `signature` or `signatureOrSystem`. These permissions are summarized in Table 1 and were chosen based on their potential for abuse or damage. For example, the `SEND_SMS` permission is a favorite of malware authors [18]: it can be used to send messages to costly premium numbers, which pay the culprit for each such text.

For each chosen permission, our first step is to identify the list of related Android APIs that might exercise the permission. However, such a list is not easy to come by. In fact, we found out that though Android's permission-based security model might be comprehensive enough in specifying the permissions required to access sensitive data or features, the available API documentation is incomplete about which APIs a permission grants access to. Specifically, when dealing with various apps in the system image, we encountered numerous permissions not meant for general consumption – and that therefore do not even have formally specified APIs. One example is "`android.permission.MASTER_CLEAR`," which allows an app to perform a factory reset of the smartphone. This permission is marked as `signatureOrSystem`, so only apps included in the system image can request it; it is intended to be implemented by the vendor and only used by the vendor, so none of the APIs listed in the API documentation check this permission.

For each related permission and the associated Android APIs, our next step then reduces the generic CFG to a permission-specific CFG. Within the reduced CFG, we can then apply the Algorithm 1 to locate possible execution paths from an entry point to the associated Android APIs. For each identified path, we further look for the presence of certain permission checks. Our experience indicates that some permission checks are already defined in the manifest file (and thus automatically enforced by the Android framework). However, many others will explicitly check their caller's permissions. In our prototype, we resort to the Android Open Source Project (AOSP) to find explicit permission checks in the framework. There are also some cases that do not fall under the AOSP. For them we have to apply `baksmali` to representative phone images and then manually examine each explicit permission check. Using the previous example of "`android.permission.MASTER_CLEAR`," Android provides an interface, `android.os.ICheckinService` that declares the `masterClear()` method. The Samsung Epic 4G's factory reset implementation contains a class `com.android.server.FallbackCheckinService`. This class implements this Android interface, whose `masterClear()` method explicitly checks the "`android.permission.MASTER_CLEAR`" permission.

To facilitate our static analysis, our prototype also includes a fictitious `dangerous` class that has many static permission-associated member fields. Each identified Android API call, if present in an execution path being analyzed, will update the member field related to the associated permission. As a result, we can detect dangerous calls by simply listing the related member fields in this class. Similarly, to model the impact a caller's permissions have on whether a dangerous call can succeed, we use another fictitious `permission` class. This class contains a number of member fields and an artificial method definition for `Context.checkCallingPermission()`. This method sets these member fields dependent upon the permission it is called with. In other words, each member field flags whether a path of execution has checked a particular permission. During an explicit capability leak analysis run, we only consider a capability to have been leaked if a state exists that contains a dangerous-call field modification (maintained in `dangerous` class) and does not have the corresponding permission-check flag set (in `permission` class). Implicit capability leak analysis does not need to be concerned about the value of the permission-check flags. Instead, it is sufficient to have a dangerous call field modification (in `dangerous` class).

4 Evaluation

In this section, we present the evaluation results of applying Woodpecker to eight smartphones from four vendors, including several flagship phones billed as having significant additional bundled functionality on top of the standard Android platform. We describe our methodology and tabulate our results in Section 4.1. In Section 4.2, we present a case study for each type of capability leak, explicit and implicit. Lastly, Section 4.3 consists of a performance measurement of our system, both in terms of the accuracy of its path-pruning algorithm and its speed.

Table 2. Eight studied Android smartphones

Vendor	Model	Android Version	# Apps
HTC	Legend	2.1-update1	125
	EVO 4G	2.2.2	160
	Wildfire S	2.3.2	144
Motorola	Droid	2.2.2	76
	Droid X	2.2.1	161
Samsung	Epic 4G	2.1-update1	138
Google	Nexus One	2.3.3	76
	Nexus S	2.3.3	72

4.1 Results Overview

In order to assess capability leaks posed in the wild, we selected phones representing a variety of manufacturers and feature sets. Table 2 shows the phone images and their versions we analyzed using Woodpecker. These phones span most of the 2.x version space, and as shown by the app count for each phone image, some are considerably more complex than others.

Running Woodpecker on each phone image produces a set of reported capability leak paths. For each reported path, we then manually verify the leak by tracing the path through the disassembled Dalvik bytecode. For explicit capability leaks whose paths seem plausible, we then craft a test application and run it on the actual device, where possible. The results are summarized in Table 3.

After identifying these capability leaks, we spent a considerable amount of time on reporting them to the corresponding vendors. As of this writing, Motorola and Google have confirmed the reported vulnerabilities in the affected phones. HTC and Samsung have been really slow in responding to, if not ignoring, our reports/inquiries. Though the uncovered capabilities leaks on the HTC and Samsung phones have not been confirmed by their respective vendors, we have developed a test app to exercise and confirm all the discovered (explicit) capability leaks on the affected phones.

We believe these results demonstrate that capability leaks constitute a tangible security weakness for many Android smartphones in the market today. Particularly, smartphones with more pre-loaded apps tend to be more likely to have explicit capability leaks. The reference implementations from Google (i.e., the Nexus One and Nexus S) are rather clean and free from capability leaks, with only a single minor explicit leak (marked as $\checkmark^2$in Table 3) due to an app `com.svox.pico`. This app defines a receiver, which can be tricked to remove another app, `com.svox.-`

Table 3. Capability leak results of eight Android-based smartphones (E: explicit leaks; I: implicit leaks)

Permission	HTC						Motorola				Samsung		Google			
	Legend		EVO 4G		Wildfire S		Droid		Droid X		Epic 4G		Nexus One		Nexus S	
	E	I	E	I	E	I	E	I	E	I	E	I	E	I	E	I
ACCESS_COARSE_LOCATION	✓	✓	✓	✓	·	✓	·	·	✓	·	·	·	·	·	·	·
ACCESS_FINE_LOCATION	✓	·	✓	·	·	✓	·	·	✓	·	·	·	·	·	·	·
CALL_PHONE	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	✓	✓	·	·	·	·
CALL_PRIVILEGED	·	·	·	·	·	✓[1]	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·
CAMERA	✓	·	✓	·	✓	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·
DELETE_PACKAGES	✓[2]	·	✓[2]	·	✓[2]	·	✓[2]	·	✓[2]	·	✓[2]	·	✓[2]	·	✓[2]	·
INSTALL_PACKAGES	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·
MASTER_CLEAR	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	✓	·	·	·	·	·
READ_PHONE_STATE	·	✓	·	✓	·	✓	·	·	✓	·	·	✓	·	·	·	·
REBOOT	·	·	✓	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·
RECORD_AUDIO	✓	·	✓	·	✓	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·
SEND_SMS	✓	·	✓	·	✓	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·
SHUTDOWN	·	·	✓	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·	·
Total	6	2	8	2	4	4	1	0	4	0	3	2	1	0	1	0

`langpack.installer` by any other third-party app.[2] Our data also show that these capability leaks are not evenly distributed among smartphones – at least for the 13 permissions we modelled. For example, those smartphones with system images (i.e., the Motorola Droid) close to the reference Android design (i.e., the Nexus One and Nexus S) seem to be largely free of capability leaks, while some of the other flagship devices have several. Despite this general trend, we caution against drawing any overly broad conclusions, as some devices (e.g., the Motorola Droid X) with higher app counts nevertheless contained fewer capability leaks than substantially simpler smartphones (e.g., the HTC Legend).

4.2 Case Studies

To understand the nature of capability leaks and demonstrate the effectiveness of our system, we examine three scenarios in depth. These scenarios were selected to illustrate some of the patterns we encountered in practice, as well as how our system was able to handle them.

4.2.1 Explicit Capability Leaks (Without Arguments)

The simplest scenario, from Woodpecker's perspective, involves an entry point calling a dangerous capability that is not influenced by any arguments. These capabilities tend to have simpler control flows, as there are no arguments to validate or parse. The Samsung Epic 4G's `MASTER_CLEAR` explicit capability leak is of this type, which once exploited, allows for unauthorized wiping of user data on the phone.

To understand how Woodpecker detects this explicit capability leak, we first explain the normal sequences when the `MASTER_CLEAR` capability is invoked. Specifically, the Samsung Epic 4G's phone image has a pre-loaded app, `com.sec.android.app.SelectiveReset`, whose purpose is to display a confirmation screen that asks the user whether to reset the phone. The normal chain of events has another system app broadcast the custom `android.intent.action.SELECTIVE_RESET Intent`, which the `SelectiveResetReceiver` class (defined in the pre-loaded app) listens for. When this class receives such an intent, it opens the user interface screen (`SelectiveResetApp`) and waits for the user to confirm their intentions. Once this is done, the `SelectiveResetService` is started, which eventually broadcasts an intent `android.intent.action.SELECTIVE_RESET_DONE`. The original `SelectiveResetReceiver` class listens for this `Intent` and then calls `CheckinService.masterClear()`.

Our system detects the last part of the above chain starting after the broadcasted intent `android.intent.action.SELECTIVE_RESET_DONE` is received in the same pre-loaded app. In particular, the intent arrives at one entry point defined in the app's manifest file (i.e., the `onReceive(Context, Intent)` method within `SelectiveResetReceiver`), which then executes a rather straightforward `Intent`-handling code sequence: (1) determines that the received `Intent` is an `android.intent.action.SELECTIVE_RESET_DONE` operation; (2) gets the `CheckinService` that contains the master clear functionality; (3) checks whether it was retrieved successfully; and (4) calls `CheckinService.masterClear()` in a worker thread. Since `CheckinService.masterClear()` takes no argu-

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[2] This `com.svox.pico` app implements a text-to-speech engine that the accessibility APIs use to talk. However, it exports a public receiver interface, `com.svox.pico.LangPackUninstaller` for `android.speech.tts.engine.TTS_DATA_INSTALLED` intents. If such an intent is received, this app will blindly remove another app, `com.svox.langpack.installer`, whose name is hard-coded in the implementation.

ments, no additional dataflow analysis needs be performed to characterize the capability leak.

In our experiments, we also found other capability leaks of the same nature, including the `REBOOT` and `SHUTDOWN` leaks on the HTC EVO 4G. On the same phone, we also found a new vendor-defined capability `FREEZE` exposed by a system app, which disables the phone's touchscreen and buttons until the battery is removed. In those cases, there is literally no control flow involved, making these capability leaks trivial to exploit. We point out that analyzing explicit capability leaks that involve arguments works in much the same fashion. Regardless, another explicit capability leak case study is included (Section 4.2.2) that accounts for the presence of arguments.

4.2.2 Explicit Capability Leaks (With Arguments)

Looking beyond simple imperative capability leaks, we consider more complicated cases that involve argument-taking capabilities. For example, Android's SMS API consists of three methods, each of which takes five or six arguments. The HTC phones have an explicit leak of this capability that entails significant preprocessing of these arguments, which we examine as an additional case study to illustrate how our system works.

On these phones, the general `com.android.mms` messaging app has been extended to include a non-standard service, `com.htc.messaging.service.SmsSenderService`, which is used by other vendor apps to simplify sending SMS messages. This service can be started with an `Intent` that contains a number of additional data key-value pairs, known as `Extras`. Each `Extra` contains some data about the SMS to be sent, such as the message's text, its call-back phone number, the destination phone number, and so on.

The `SmsSenderService` service (Figure 4.2.2) processes these fields in its `onStart(Intent, int)` entry point, ensuring that the mandatory key-value pairs exist, including the message body and destination phone number. If they do, the `Intent` is bundled into a `Message` and sent to the `SmsSenderService$ServiceHandler` class via the Android message-handling interface. This interface is designed to allow different threads of execution to communicate using a queue of `Messages`. The typical paradigm uses a subclass of `android.os.Handler` to poll for new `Message` objects, using a `handleMessage(Message)` method. Such `android.os.Handler` objects also expose methods to insert `Messages` into their queue, such as `sendMessage(Message)`.

When building possible paths and pruning infeasible paths, our system will diligently resolve the super- and sub-class relationships that bracket the message-passing code. In this case, the initial `SmsSenderService$ServiceHandler.sendMessage(Message)` call fully specifies the class that `sendMessage(Message)` will be called upon, but `SmsSenderService$ServiceHandler` does not contain a definition for that method. Looking to its superclass, `android.os.Handler`, Woodpecker finds an artificial method definition of the appropriate signature. This definition in turn calls the `android.os.Handler.handleMessage(Message)` method, which is extended by the `SmsSenderService$ServiceHandler` class. In this case, our design has no difficulty resolving these relationships, because the first call fully specifies the `SmsSenderService$ServiceHandler` class. This type information is then carried forward through the call chain as a constraint on the arguments to each call, as a class' methods are associated with an object instantiating that class via an implicit argument (the `this` keyword).

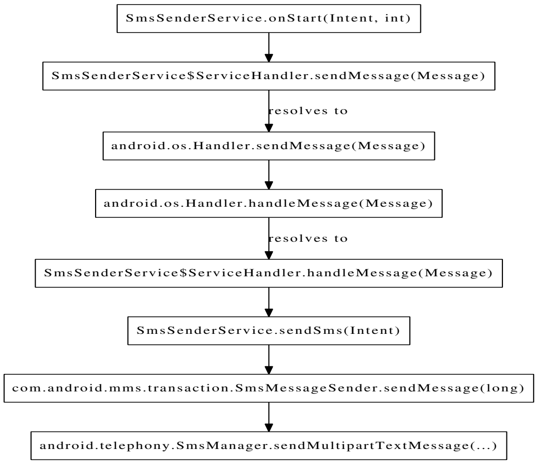

Figure 3. The `SEND_SMS` capability leak as a call graph.

Ultimately, the app execution flow will reach `SmsManager.sendMultipartTextMessage()`, a method that exercises the dangerous `SEND_SMS` permission. The arguments by this point have been transformed: the destination address remains the same, but the call-back number may not have been provided by the `Intent`'s data, and the message body might have been chunked into SMS-sized pieces if it is too long. When processing this execution path, Woodpecker reports this path as feasible and thus exposing the exercised permission `SEND_SMS`. Since the exercised capability took a number of arguments, our system also reports the provenance of each related argument to the Android API, which allows for straightforwardly linking the API arguments back to the original `Intent` passed to the entry point at the very beginning. In other words, by simply including a premium number in the intent, the built-in app will start sending SMS messages to this premium number!

Our experience indicates most capability leaks we detected are of this form. For example, the explicit leak of `CALL_PHONE` capability in Samsung Epic 4G involves passing a component a "technical assistance" phone number, which it calls after considerable processing. Similarly, all the tested HTC phones export the `RECORD_AUDIO` permission, which allows any untrusted app to specify which file to write recorded audio to without asking for the `RECORD_AUDIO` permission.

4.2.3 Implicit Capability Leaks

Explicit leaks seriously undermine the permission-based security model of Android. Implicit leaks from another perspective misrepresent the capability requested by an app. In the following, we choose one representative implicit leak and explain in more detail. Specifically, the HTC Wildfire S has a built-in MessageTab app, `com.android.MessageTab`, which uses the `CALL_PRIVILEGED` capability (marked as ✓^{1}in Table 3) without declaring it in its manifest. This MessageTab app is intended to manage the phone's SMS messages, allowing the user to review sent messages and send new ones. For the sake of convenience, this app links messages sent to contacts with the appropriate contact information, allowing the user to dial contacts directly through a "contact details" screen. However, this app does not declare the correct permissions to call phone numbers, as it only requests SMS-related permissions: neither the `CALL_PHONE` nor `CALL_PRIVILEGED` permission occur in its manifest. On the other hand, MessageTab does declare a `sharedUserId` attribute: "`android.uid.shared`." This user identifier is used by a number of core Android apps, including `com.android.htcdialer` – which has both phone-dialing permissions.

When analyzing this app, Woodpecker reports an implicit leak in the `com.android.MessageTab.ContactDetailMessageActivity2` activity component. Specifically, this component has a `onResume()` method – an entry point called when the activity is displayed on the screen. In this case, it is used to instruct on how to build a list of contacts to display on the screen, by calling `com.htc.widget.HtcListView.setOnCreateContextMenuListener()` with a callback object (`ContactDetailMessageActivity2$3`). When the user long-presses one of these contacts, that callback object's `onCreateContextMenu()` method is called. This method then calls `ContactDetailMessageActivity2.addCallAndContactMenuItems()` to make the contacts' context menus. A call to a helper method, `android.mms.ui.MessageUtils.getMakeCallDirectlyIntent()`, builds the `Intent` to send to dial a contact. This helper method builds the actual `android.intent.action.CALL_PRIVILEGED Intent`, which will be broadcasted when the user clicks on the contact. From the disassembled code, the `addCallAndContactMenuItems()` method also registers an `ContactDetailMessageActivity2$MsgListMenuClickListener` object as a callback for the click-able contact. This object's `onMenuItemClick(MenuItem)` method is then called, which takes the `Intent` associated with the contact and calls `com.android.internal.telephony-ITelephony.dialWithoutDelay(Intent)` with it, which immediately dials a phone number.

Note that this implicit capability leak traversed a number of callbacks that either require user intervention or are very visible to the user. These callbacks would normally not be considered useful for an explicit capability leak, which assumes a malicious caller. However, as implicit capability leaks assume that the app itself may be malicious, our algorithm simply reports them by not making such value judgments when considering possible execution paths.

4.3 Performance Measurement

Next, we evaluate the performance of our prototype, in terms of both the effectiveness of its path pruning algorithm and the amount of time it takes to process a smartphone's system image.

To measure how well Woodpecker's path pruning algorithm eliminates infeasible paths, we consider its output from the experiments with a single permission, `android.permission.SEND_SMS`. In particular, we run only the possible-paths portion of the algorithm (i.e., with no pruning) and identify how many paths may possibly leak a dangerous capability. Our results show that for each phone, Woodpecker will report more than 8K possible paths. This surprisingly large number is due to the conservative approach we have taken in resolving an ambiguous reference to assignable classes. Fortunately, our re-run of the full system by pruning the infeasible paths immediately brings the number to the single digits. Specifically, our system only reports capability leaks in the HTC phones, especially 2, 3, 2 for the HTC Legend, EVO 4G, and Wildfire S respectively. Among the reported leaks, we then manually verify the correctness of the pruned paths. The results show they are all valid with no false positives. Note that the presence of one single path is sufficient to leak the related capability. We do not measure false negatives due to the lack of ground truth in the tested phone images. However, because of the conservative approach we have been taking in our prototype, we are confident in its low false negatives.

For the processing time, we measure them directly by running our system multiple times over the tested smartphone images. We analyze each image ten times on an

Table 4. Processing time of examined smartphone images

Vendor	Model	Processing Time	# Apps
HTC	Legend	3366.63s	125
	EVO 4G	4175.03s	160
	Wildfire S	3894.37s	144
Motorola	Droid	2138.38s	76
	Droid X	3311.94s	161
Samsung	Epic 4G	3732.56s	138
Google	Nexus One	2059.47s	76
	Nexus S	1815.71s	72

AMD Athlon 64 X2 5200+ machine with 2GB of memory and a Hitachi HDP72502 7200 rpm hard drive. The mean of these results are summarized in Table 4. Each phone image took at most a little over an hour to process. We believe the average time (~ 51.0 minutes) per image to be reasonable given the offline nature of our tool, which has not yet been optimized for speed.

5 Discussion

Our system has so far uncovered a number of serious capability leaks in current smartphones from leading manufacturers. Given this, it is important to examine possible root causes and explore future defenses.

First of all, capability leaks essentially reflect the classic confused deputy attack [21] where one app is tricked by another into improperly exercising its privileges. Though one may easily blame the manufacturers for developing and/or including these vulnerable apps on the phone firmware, there is no need to exaggerate their negligence. Specifically, the permission-based security model in Android is a capability model that can be enhanced to mitigate these capability leaks. One challenge however is to maintain the integrity of those capabilities when they are being shared or opened to other unrelated apps. In other words, either the capability-leaking app needs to ensure that it will not accidently expose its capability without checking the calling app's permission, or the underlying Android framework needs to diligently mediate app interactions so that they do not inappropriately violate the integrity of a capability. However, such inter-app interactions are usually application-specific, so it is hard for the Android framework to infer the associated semantics.

Second, to avoid unsafely exposing capabilities, we can also develop a validator tool and release it together with the Android SDK. Note that such a validator tool needs to handle the various ways an app can interact with the Android permission model. Specifically, Android uses string identifiers to represent permissions, and permission information can be encoded in either the app's manifest or code, which indicates that the permission model cannot be considered type-safe. Accordingly, conventional Java source code analysis tools are not aware of the impact permissions have on program execution.

Woodpecker represents our first step towards such a validator tool for capability leak detection. Though it has identified serious capability leaks in current Android phones, it still has a number of limitations that need to be addressed. For example, other than tightening the underlying implementation and incorporating latest development of accurate, scalable points-to analysis [8, 34, 35], our current prototype now handles only Dalvik bytecode and needs to be extended to accommodate native code. In doing so, the issue of dynamically loaded code would be raised, which is a limitation for purely static approaches. Also, our current prototype only handles 13 permissions that are defined by the framework itself. However, many more exist, and apps are free to define new ones. Extending the system to handle more predefined permissions is expected to produce much the same results, but adding support for app-defined permissions would lead to another class of capability leaks: *chained capability leaks*. To illustrate, consider three apps: `A`, `B`, and `C`. `C` has the `CALL_PHONE` capability, which it safely exposes to `B` by defining a new `MY_CALL_PHONE` permission. This new permission is acquired by `B`. For a chained leak to occur, `B` opens up the new permission unsafely to `A`. As a result, there is a call chain `A`→`B`→`C`, which could leak the `CALL_PHONE` capability. Since the new permission `MY_CALL_PHONE` can be arbitrary and specific to a particular implementation, we need to explore innovative ways to extend our prototype to accommodate such chained capability leaks.

Finally, our study only examines capability leaks among pre-loaded apps in the phone firmware. We also expect the leaks could occur among third-party user apps. Note that phone images are relatively homogeneous and static with usually a somewhat infrequent update schedule. Capability leaks, especially explicit ones, on phone images are of great interest to malicious third parties. Implicit leaks, on the other hand, appear to be relatively rare, which we assume are more software engineering defects than a real security threat. However, for third-party apps, implicit leaks could constitute collusion attacks that directly undermine the app market model. Specifically, app markets do not report the actual permissions *granted* to an app. Instead they report only the permissions an app requests or embodied in the manifest file. As a result, a cohort of seemingly innocuous apps could conspire together to perform malicious activities and the user may not be informed of the true scope of their permissions within the system. Meanwhile, we hypothesize that explicit leaks in user-installed apps may be less common and useful, as an app must have both a sizable installed base and unwittingly expose some interesting functionality in order for an attacker to derive much benefit from exploiting the leaked capabilities. In future work, we plan to apply Woodpecker to assess the threat posed by capability leaks in user apps.

6 Related Work

Smartphones have recently attracted considerable attention, especially in the context of privacy. Accordingly, much work has been devoted to analyzing smartphone apps, either statically or dynamically. For example, TaintDroid [14] applies dynamic taint analysis to monitor information-stealing Android apps. Specifically, by explicitly modeling the flow of sensitive information through Android, TaintDroid raises alerts when any private data is going to be transmitted from the device. A follow-up work [15] developed a Dalvik decompiler `ded` to statically uncover Java code from the Dalvik bytecode of popular free Android apps. The uncovered Java code is then fed into existing static analysis tools to understand or profile the app's behavior. DroidRanger [41] uses both static and dynamic analysis techniques to develop behavior profiles for scalable malware detection, with a focus on scanning large numbers of third-party apps (i.e., a whole market) for malicious behavior. DroidMOSS [40] detects repackages apps in third-party Android marketplaces. Woodpecker is different from these efforts with its unique focus on statically analyzing pre-loaded apps in smartphone firmware to uncover possible capability leaks.

From another perspective, researchers have also developed static analysis tools for privacy leak detection. For example, PiOS [13] is a representative example, which constructs a control-flow graph for an iOS app and then looks for the presence of information-leaking execution through that graph. Specifically, PiOS tries to link sources of private information to network interfaces. In comparison, Woodpecker was developed for the Android platform and thus needs to overcome platform-level peculiarities for the control-flow construction and data flow analysis (e.g., control-flow discontinuities in Section 2). Most importantly, Woodpecker has a different goal in uncovering unsafe exposure of dangerous capability uses, including both explicit and implicit ones. In particular, implicit leaks do not make use of any public interfaces to "inherit" the permissions. In the same vein, work by Chaudhuri et al. [9, 20] formalizes data flow on Android so that a data flow policy can be formally specified for an Android app, which can then be checked against the app code to ensure compliance. A SCanDroid system [20] has been accordingly developed to extract such specifications from the app's manifests that accompany such applications, and check whether data flows through the app are consistent with the specification. Note that SCanDroid requires accessing the app's Java source code for the analysis, which is not available in our case for capability leak detection.

Felt *et al.* [19] propose the notion of permission re-delegation in the generalized contexts applicable for both web and smartphone apps. Our work is different from it in three key aspects. First, permission re-delegation is related to the explicit capability leak, but *not* implicit capability leak (that does not make use of any public interface for permission inheritance). Second, in order to identify capability leaks, our system needs to address both object inheritance and control-flow discontinuity through callbacks, which are not being handled in [19]. Third, we apply our system in stock smartphone images rather than third-party apps, which reflect the difference of focus on Android permissions (such as `systemOrSignature` permissions) as well as the evaluation results (Table 3). Another related work, Stowaway [17], is designed to detect overprivilege in Android apps, where an app requests more permissions than it needs to function. The implicit capability leak detection in Woodpecker instead focuses on *underprivilege* in Android apps, which pose a more direct threat to security and privacy.

On the defensive side, TISSA [42] argues for a privacy mode in Android to tame information-stealing apps. AppFence [23] couples such a privacy mode with taint tracking to allow for expressive policies. Kirin [16] attempts to block the installation of apps that request certain combinations of permissions with deleterious emergent effects. A development of that system, Saint [30], empowers the app developer to specify additional constraints on the assignment of permissions at install-time and their use at runtime. Apex [28] modifies the permission framework to allow for selectively granting permissions and revoking permissions at runtime. MockDroid [7] allows privacy-sensitive calls to be rewritten to return "failure" results. In the .NET framework, Security by Contract [11] allows an application's behavior to be constrained at runtime by a contract. Such contract-based systems might represent a defense against implicit capability leaks, though none of these share the same goal of exposing capability leaks in smartphone firmware.

As discussed earlier, capability leaks essentially reflect the confused deputy attack [21]. Other researchers also warn of similar attacks in Android [10, 12, 29]. For example, Davi *et al.* [10] show a manually-constructed confused deputy attack against the Android Scripting Environment. QUIRE [12] allows apps to reason about the call-chain and data provenance of requests, which could be potentially helpful in mitigating this attack. Nils [29] manually analyzed the HTC Legend's system image looking for possible permission abuses. The problem is certainly not unique to the Android platform; for example, in 1999, Smith found that PC manufacturers bundled vulnerable ActiveX controls in their custom Windows installations [33]. In comparison to these previous efforts, our work aims to systematically detect such capability leaks. More importantly, by addressing the challenges for possible path identification (Section 2.1.1) and feasible path refinement (Section 2.1.2), our system automates the majority of necessary tasks to explore and discover potential capability leaks. In fact, the only manual effort comes from the need to verify the detected leaks. Meanwhile, note that some Android malware such as Soundcomber [31] were developed by requesting certain Android permissions. Our research shows that these requests could be potentially avoided as the permissions might have already been leaked (e.g., `RECORD_AUDIO`).

More generally, a number of systems that target desktop apps have been developed to detect system-wide information flow or confine untrusted app behavior. For example, TightLip [38] treats a target process as a black box. When the target process accesses sensitive data, TightLip instantiates a sandboxed copy, gives fuzzed data to the sandboxed copy and runs the copy in parallel with the target for output comparison and leak detection. Privacy Oracle [26] applies a differential testing technique to detect the correlation or likely leaks between input perturbations and output perturbations of the application. Also, system-level approaches such as Asbestos [36], HiStar [39], Process Coloring [25], and PRECIP [37] instantiate information flow at the process level by labeling running processes and propagating those labels based on process behavior. While we expect some of these approaches will be applicable on resource-constrained mobile phone environments, they are more focused on detecting information leaks instead of capability leaks (and their applicability to the smartphone setting still remains to be demonstrated).

7 Conclusions

In this paper, we present a system called Woodpecker to examine how the Android-essential permission-based security model is enforced on current leading Android-based smartphones. In particular, Woodpecker employs inter-procedural data flow analysis techniques to systematically expose possible capability leaks where an untrusted app can obtain unauthorized access to sensitive data or privileged actions. The results are worrisome: among the 13 privileged permissions examined so far, 11 were leaked, with individual phones leaking up to eight permissions. These leaked capabilities can be exploited to wipe out the user data, send out SMS messages (e.g., to premium numbers), record user conversation, or obtain the user's geo-location data on the affected phones – all *without* asking for any permission.

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