



Host-based intrusion detection using signature-based and AI-driven anomaly detection methods

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ABSTRACT:

Cyber-attacks are becoming more sophisticated, posing even greater challenges to traditional intrusion detections methods. Failure to prevent the intrusions could jeopardise security services' credibility, including data confidentiality, integrity, and availability. Anomaly-based Intrusion Detection Systems and Signature-based Intrusion Detection Systems are two types of systems that have been proposed in the literature to detect security threats. In the current work a taxonomy of current IDSs is presented, a review of recent works is performed, and we discuss some of the most common datasets used for evaluation. Finally, the survey concludes with a discussion of future IDS research directions and broader observations.

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1. Introduction

In the context of information systems, an intrusion can be defined as any attempt to gain unauthorised access and potentially cause damage to any given system. This means that any attack that may pose a threat to the confidentiality, integrity, or availability of information meets the definition of an intrusion.

Intrusion detection is a mechanism that acts as a first line of defence and whose goal, as the name implies, is to detect harmful activity occurring on a computer or a network. A variety of intrusion detection systems (IDSs) have been designed and developed due to the importance of intrusion detection to the research communities but also the industrial ones, since IDSs are a great asset in the proactive approach towards achieving the much desired digital resilience. Developing new intrusion detection methods, techniques, and tools present a great research interest, especially if we consider the fact that the variety of IDSs have grown in both number and complexity. (Milenkoski et al. 2015).

Because the capabilities of an IDS are primarily dependent on the data that is available to it, the location of the IDS is an important architectural decision. This is also the main difference between network-based intrusion detection systems (NIDS) versus host-based intrusion detection systems (HIDS). Both approaches are presented, albeit the latter are the ones that we mainly focus on in this study.

In more detail, in Section 2 we present the most common types and detection methods used by IDSs, the types of data used and the available datasets, as well as the challenges faced. In Section 3, we present the recent advances in the field, which are mainly related with the adoption of Neural Network and Deep Learning solutions and to a lesser extent with feature engineering. In the same section, we also propose some future research directions, based on the current state of the literature and the challenges that need to be addressed. In Section 4, we examine existing surveys related to IDSs, and in Section 5 we present our conclusions.

2. Intrusion Detection Systems

2.1 Types of IDS

It is common practice for an IDS to be classified according to the information source that it utilises as well as its location within the network infrastructure (Mishra et al. 2017).

2.1.1 NIDS

NIDS in general are standalone devices that exist on the same network with the system being monitored, and in their typical deployment, monitor many separate systems on a common network. As a result, the NIDS is frequently completely transparent to the systems it is monitoring, allowing for excellent isolation and making NIDSs significantly less susceptible to interference from an attacker. However, because these systems are agnostic to the internal state of the systems being monitored, detection can be a more challenging task. Furthermore, encrypted network traffic is becoming the norm, which may pose a problem for NIDS (Kovanen, David, and Hämäläinen 2016). However, we should point out that “break-and-inspect” capabilities are becoming increasingly common in practice, allowing encryption of all traffic while providing visibility to network appliances (Bridges et al. 2019). Figure 1 illustrates a typical NIDS architecture where two sensors are deployed and are sending their captured data to a centralised NIDS Management system.

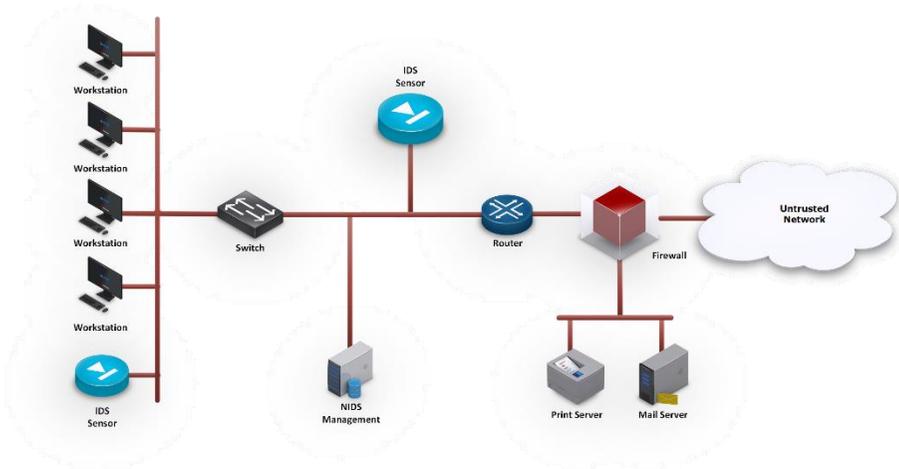


Figure 1: A typical network topology of a NIDS

2.1.2 HIDS

On the other hand, HIDSs are software components that are installed on the monitored system and usually are responsible for the monitoring of a single system, providing them with a great overall overview of the system state but

poor isolation from the system itself, which means that a malicious actor with access to the system can disable or tamper the HIDS as a result of the poor isolation. Additionally, host-based data is frequently context-rich, allowing for a more in-depth understanding of processes and activities (Bridges et al. 2019). However, this collection and management of potentially large and sensitive datasets from these hosts comes at the cost of additional complexity and overhead.

Figure 2 illustrates a typical HIDS architecture where each workstation has an agent collecting system information and sending it to a centralised HIDS Management system.

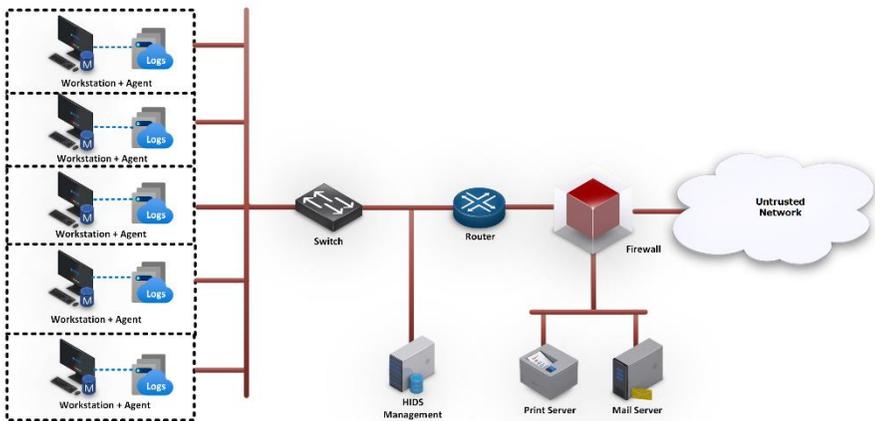


Figure 2: A typical network topology of a HIDS

2.2 Types of detection

During the detection stage, two approaches can be used: signature and anomaly. The signature-based approach involves searching the received events for well-known attack patterns, whereas the anomaly-based approach seeks to detect new and unknown attacks by modelling the activities that are considered normal within a system and identifying potential attacks from behaviours that deviate from the known normal behaviour patterns (Sommer and Paxson 2010).

2.2.1 Signature-based

Signature intrusion detection systems (SIDS) use pattern matching techniques to detect a known attack; these are also referred to as Knowledge-based Detection or Misuse Detection (Khraisat et al. 2019). Matching methods are used in SIDS to locate a previous intrusion triggering an alarm signal whenever an intrusion signature matches one from a previous intrusion existing in the signature database. The most well-known SIDS currently available are Snort (Kumar and Sangwan 2012; Roesch 1999), Suricata (Alhomoud et al. 2011), NetSTAT (Vigna and Kemmerer 1999) and Bro (Paxson 1999)

For previously known intrusions, SIDS typically provides excellent detection accuracy and are still more popular (Aldwairi, Abu-Dalo, and Jarrah 2017) however, they have difficulty detecting zero-day attacks because no matching signature exists until the signature of the new attack is extracted and stored. Traditional SIDS approaches examine network packets and attempt to match them against a signature database. However, these techniques are incapable of detecting attacks that are either intentionally fragmented across multiple packets. Due to the sophistication of modern malware, extracting signature information across multiple packets may be necessary. This necessitates the IDS recalling the contents of previous packets. In terms of creating a SIDS signature, there have been a variety of methods where signatures are created as state machines or semantic conditions (Lin, Lin, and Lai 2010; Meiners et al. 2010). Because no prior signature exists for any such attack, zero-day attacks have rendered traditional SIDS progressively less effective. Polymorphic malware variants and an increase in targeted attacks may further undermine the efficiency of this traditional paradigm (Viegas, Santin, and Oliveira 2017).

2.2.2 Anomaly-based

The anomaly-based approach, on the other hand, aims to detect new (unknown) attacks by modelling the activities that are considered normal within a system and identifying potential attacks from behaviours that deviate from the known normal behaviour pattern (Zaman and Lung 2018).

Statistical analysis and machine learning methods have been used for this purpose. The goal of machine learning in this context is to classify an event (e.g., normal or attack/intrusion). The first events captured from the environment are stored in a database during the process. A set of features is extracted and stored in a dataset from each event in the database. The dataset is then used by a machine learning algorithm to infer a pattern and create a model that represents such behaviour.

There are various types of data sources that have been considered in order to perform host-based intrusion detection. System log files contain information related with warnings, errors and system failures. System audit data are produced by the applications and contain more granular information than system logs, which is related to user sessions (such as command line actions, login times, privilege escalations, etc.). Both of the above types of data are costly to collect (Bridges et al. 2019). For this reason, system call data, which do not require any pre-processing, are currently a more popular source of information. A system call trace is a sequence of all the system calls produced by a process or application in a specific time interval. Finally, Windows registry and file systems have also been used as sources of information, although more seldom.

The application of anomaly-based methods relies upon the existence of data of one of the above types. Nowadays, there are some available datasets, which also make the comparison of different methods easier. The ADFA Linux Dataset (ADFA-LD12), presented in (Creech and Hu 2013) has been used in order to evaluate machine learning and deep learning methods in many research papers and is a system call dataset that has been collected in a Linux environment. Furthermore, two Windows-based datasets, ADFA-WD and ADFA-WD:SAA were presented in (Haider et al., 2016) and they consist of audit data selections. More recently, (Haider et al., 2017) presented a synthetic dataset, named NGIDS-DS (Next-Generation IDS Dataset), which consists of both network traffic and host system logs data, reflecting the critical cyber infrastructures of different enterprises. In addition, the AWSCTD dataset (Ceponis and Goranin, 2017) contains system call data created in a Windows host (including system calls arguments and return values). In some cases, datasets that are mainly intended to be used for NIDS such as NSL-KDD have also been used for the development and evaluation of HIDS systems (Besharati, Naderan and Namjoo, 2019).

A challenge for the anomaly-based detection approaches is that they typically yield high false-alarm rates (FAR), which means that a relatively high number of normal sequences of data are characterized as anomalous. This evaluation metric is most commonly referred to as False-Positive Rate (FPR).

3.Recent Developments and Future Directions

3.1 Recent Developments

As the data used in the anomaly-based methods are of a sequential nature, and most of the approaches attempt to capture this sequential information, Hidden Markov models have been frequently used in the past. One can refer, for example, to (Hoang, Hu and Bertok 2009). However, such approaches have been proven insufficient, as they fail to capture long-term dependencies among system calls.

Recent research in anomaly-based HIDS algorithms has focused on the application of Neural Networks (NNs) and Deep Learning (DL) algorithms with the purpose of system call language-modelling, in order to predict if a sequence of system calls is normal or anomalous. Such language models determine a probability distribution for the next system call given the sequence of previous system calls and then the probability of a sequence occurring is estimated using these distributions.

In (Kim et al. 2016), LSTM units (Hochreiter and Schmidhuber 1997) are used (following an embedding layer), in order to better capture long-range dependences between system calls. The output is the normalized probability values of the possible calls that will follow in the sequence. Given a new sequence of system calls, if it is one with an average negative log-likelihood above a threshold, it is classified as abnormal, while if it has an average negative log-likelihood below this threshold, it is classified as normal. In the aforementioned paper, the authors also attempt to tackle the problem of high false-alarm rates by using an ensemble method of multiple thresholding classifiers, using the rectified linear units (ReLU) method (Maas, Hannun, and Ng 2013). They compare three LSTM solutions (with varying number of layers and cells) with a k-nearest neighbour (kNN) and a k-means clustering (kMC) classifier and the results show the superiority of their method.

In (Chawla et al. 2018), multiple 1-dimensional (1D) convolutional networks (CNNs) are deployed as a pre-processing step before an RNN layer made up of Gated Recurrent Units (GRUs) (Bengio et al. 2003), following the architecture of (Wang, Jiang, and Luo 2016). They compared variations of this architecture (using six, seven and eight 1D CNNs and a varying number of GRU units) with RNN architectures (with LSTM and GRU implementations). The proposed CNN/GRU architecture is significantly faster than the LSTM solution. In addition, the addition of CNN layers before the GRU layer yielded better accuracy. Specifically, a solution with CNN and 600 GRU units yielded 100% True Detection Rate and 60% False Alarm Rate, which they claim to be better than a False Alarm Rate between 50% and 60% of (Kim et al. 2016).

GRUs are also used in (Lv et al. 2018) for their system call prediction model. Their model is an RNN implementation of the encoder-decoder framework (Bahdanau, Cho, and Bengio 2014). They experiment with a varying number of hidden layers (one, two and three) and learning rates. They use the BLEU score, the TF-IDF model and the cosine values between the semantic encoding vectors of the predicted sequences and the true ones (called the target sequences) to evaluate the quality of the predictions. The results show that the architecture with the single hidden layer did not perform well, in contrast to the other solutions. An evaluation of the predicted sequences on the task of anomaly detection with sequence classification is also performed, using classification algorithms such as CNNs, RNNs, SVM and Random Forest. The effectiveness of using the predicted sequences on this task is demonstrated.

The applicability of some more complex, dual-flow Deep Learning models, such as long short-term memory fully convolutional network (LSTM-FCN) (Karim et al. 2017) and GRU-FCN (Elsayed, Maida, and Bayoumi 2018) is investigated in (Ceponis and Goranin 2020). Compared to more simple models, which are more efficient in training and testing times, they are not producing better results. A relatively simple CNN solution with static value of kernels parameter performed the best among the models considered, while a CNN-GRU model had the best False Positive Rate.

The application of NN and DL algorithms is not the only area of research interest, since other recent works focus on feature engineering. In (Besharati, Naderan and Namjoo, 2019), where a host-based IDS is designed to be deployed in hypervisors in a cloud environment, feature selection is performed before the application of an ML-based classifier. Specifically, the most important features for each class (the normal and each of the different attack types) are determined with logistic regression and only those features are used to distinguish the corresponding class from the rest. In (Liu et al. 2020), a novel feature extraction method is presented that aims to produce a platform independent feature set. Their method relies on the transformation of system calls into frequency sequences of n-grams and the extraction of statistical features of those frequency sequences.

In Table 1, we present the aforementioned works with the datasets that were used in order to evaluate the methods, as well as the evaluation metrics.

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Table 1. Summary of the recent solutions, with the datasets and metrics used for their evaluation.

Publication	Dataset	Metrics
Kim et al. 2016	ADFA-LD	ROC curve
Chawla et al. 2018	ADFA-LD	AUC, True Detection Rate, FPR
Lv et al. 2018	ADFA-LD	ROC curve
Ceponis and Goranin 2020	AWSCTD	accuracy, confusion matrix, precision, recall, F-score, FPR, False Negative Rate, classification error
Besharati, Naderan and Namjoo, 2019	NSL-KDD	accuracy, precision, recall, FPR, error rate, F-score
Liu et al. 2020	ADFA-LD, ADFA-WD, NGIDS-DS	AUC

3.2 Future Directions

The aforementioned inherent deficiency of anomaly-based methods with regard to the FPR evaluation metric indicates the importance of the inclusion of this metric in the evaluation process of those methods. In addition, this metric can also be used in the optimization process of the proposed intrusion systems. For example, in (Besharati, Naderan and Namjoo, 2019), TPR and FPR diagrams are used to determine the optimal number of features for each class.

As far as the NN and DL approaches are concerned, we can assume that the advances that are currently made in the NNs and DL field will be further adopted in the domain of host-based IDS, resulting to more successful solutions. Still, the combination of such approaches with feature engineering, or even with signature-based techniques, is an even more intriguing prospect.

Last but not least, the application of HIDS in domains such as cloud computing and the IoT imposes requirements for more efficient approaches (Deshpande, Sharma and Peddoju 2018) that will need to be addressed. For example, in the aforementioned paper, audit logs of only the failed processes are analysed for the cases of users other than the root.

4. Related Work

In the literature, there are some surveys about host-based IDSs. In (Bridges et al. 2019), the emphasis is given on the data sources and the types of data that are leveraged by the various intrusion detection methods. (Liu et al. 2018) surveys previous work that rely on system calls data. Challenges such as the high FPR values and some possible directions for their mitigation are discussed, while an analysis of the available datasets is also presented. Another related work is (Jose et al. 2018), where a taxonomy of anomaly-based methods is presented, but the methods presented are mainly not recent enough.

In this work, we present some recent advances in the methods that are applied on the task of intrusion detection, specifically the application of NNs and DL approaches.

5. Conclusions

In this work, we presented a taxonomy of host-based IDS solutions. We have also presented the available datasets that are used for the implementation and evaluation of the data-driven approaches in the literature. We focused on the more recent approaches, the majority of which are based on NN and DL techniques, expecting that the application of such approaches in the domain will be continued in the future. Finally, we have provided some future research directions.

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