

BASICS OF CRYPTOGRAPHY -II

Cryptography

Data that can be read and understood without any special measures is called plaintext or cleartext. The method of disguising plaintext in such a way as to hide its substance is called encryption. Encrypting plaintext results in unreadable gibberish called ciphertext. You use encryption to ensure that information is hidden from anyone for whom it is not intended, even those who can see the encrypted data. The process of reverting ciphertext to its original plaintext is called decryption. Cryptography is the science of using mathematics to encrypt and decrypt data. Cryptography enables you to store sensitive information or transmit it across insecure networks (like the Internet) so that it cannot be read by anyone except the intended recipient. While cryptography is the science of securing data, cryptanalysis is the science of analyzing and breaking secure communication. Classical cryptanalysis involves an interesting combination of analytical reasoning, application of mathematical tools, pattern finding, patience, determination, and luck. Cryptanalysts are also called attackers. Cryptology embraces both cryptography and cryptanalysis.

Conventional Cryptography

In conventional cryptography, also called secret-key or symmetric-key encryption, one key is used both for encryption and decryption. The Data Encryption Standard (DES) is an example of a conventional cryptosystem that is widely employed by the Federal Government. Figure 1-1 is an illustration of the conventional encryption process.

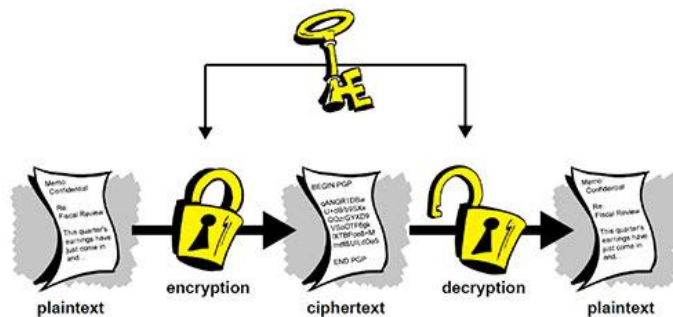


Figure 1-1 : Conventional Encryption

Conventional encryption has benefits. It is very fast. It is especially useful for encrypting data that is not going anywhere. However, conventional encryption alone as a means for transmitting secure data can be quite expensive simply due to the difficulty of secure key distribution. Recall a character from your favorite spy movie: the person with a locked briefcase handcuffed to his or her wrist. What is in the briefcase, anyway? It's probably not the missile launch code/biotoxin formula/invasion plan itself. It's the key that will decrypt the secret data. For a sender and recipient to communicate securely using conventional encryption, they must agree upon a key and keep it secret between themselves. If they are in different physical locations, they must trust a courier, the Bat Phone, or some other secure communication medium to prevent the disclosure of the secret key during transmission. Anyone who overhears or intercepts the key in transit can later read, modify, and forge all information encrypted or authenticated with that key.

Public key Cryptography

The problems of key distribution are solved by public key cryptography, the concept of which was introduced by Whitfield Diffie and Martin Hellman in 1975. Public key cryptography is an asymmetric scheme that uses a pair of keys for encryption: as shown in Figure 1-2 public key, which encrypts data, and a corresponding private, or secret key for decryption. You publish your public key to the world while keeping your private key secret. Anyone with a copy of your public key can then encrypt information that only you can read. Even people you have never met. It is computationally infeasible to deduce the private key from the public key. Anyone who has a public key can encrypt information but cannot decrypt it. Only the person who has the corresponding private key can decrypt the information.

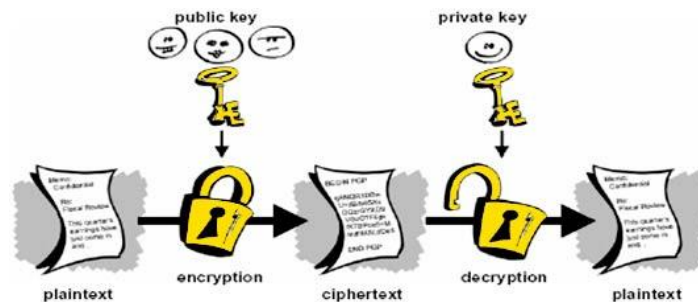


Figure 1-2 : Public key Cryptography

Key

A key is a value that works with a cryptographic algorithm to produce a specific ciphertext. Keys are basically really, really, really big numbers. Key size is measured in bits; the number representing a 1024-bit key is darn huge. In public key cryptography, the bigger the key, the more secure the ciphertext. However, public key size and conventional cryptography's secret key size are totally unrelated. A conventional 80-bit key has the equivalent strength of a 1024-bit public key. A conventional 128-bit key is equivalent to a 3000-bit public key. Again, the bigger the key, the more secure, but the algorithms used for each type of cryptography are very different and thus comparison is like that of apples to oranges. While the public and private keys are related, it's very difficult to derive the private key given only the public key; however, deriving the private key is always possible given enough time and computing power. This makes it very important to pick keys of the right size; large enough to be secure, but small enough to be applied fairly quickly. Additionally, you need to consider who might be trying to read your files, how determined they are, how much time they have, and what their resources might be. Larger keys will be cryptographically secure for a longer period of time. If what you want to encrypt needs to be hidden for many years, you might want to use a very large key. Of course, who knows how long it will take to determine your key using tomorrow's faster, more efficient computers? There was a time when a 56-bit symmetric key was considered extremely safe. Keys are stored in encrypted form. PGP stores the keys in two files on your hard disk; one for public keys and one for private keys. These files are called keyrings. As you use PGP, you will typically add the public keys of your recipients to your public keyring. Your private keys are stored on your private keyring. If you lose your private keyring, you will be unable to decrypt any information encrypted to keys on that ring.

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