Vetting Mobile Applications for Federal Agencies: NIST AppVet and DHS Carwash

Steve Quirolgico
Computer Security Division
Information Technology Laboratory
National Institute of Standards and Technology

Doug Hansen, Chris Drew, Anthony Glynn
Enterprise Systems Development Office
Office of the Chief Information Officer
Department of Homeland Security

FCSM
January 28, 2016
Agenda

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  • App Vetting
  • System Overview
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• DHS Carwash
  • Overview
  • Transition of AppVet to Carwash
  • Using Carwash
DARPA Transformative Applications (TransApps)

DARPA TransApps focused on the use of smartphone applications (apps) for tactical use.

TransApps applications:

- Provided mission-critical, leading-edge capabilities:
  - Weaponry/Munitions
  - Medical/First-Aid
  - Cultural/Language
  - Mapping/Recon/Logistics
  - Tactical Information Sharing
- Significantly improved combat operations
- Saved the lives of U.S. soldiers
Security of smartphone technologies was crucial for protecting sensitive information and ensuring proper operation.

Security needed to prevent:

- Unauthorized access to PII, geolocation, or other sensitive data
- Unauthorized network communication
- Unauthorized audio/video recording
- Unintended app or device behavior
- Resource (memory, CPU, etc.) exhaustion
- Shortened battery life
- Mission failure
Two Efforts:

• Hardware/OS
• Software Applications (Apps)
Hardware/OS Security

Focused on the development of hardened COTS Android devices (referred to as PANTHR devices).

- Modified Android OS
- Hardware Security Stack
  - CVE Patched Linux Kernel
  - Data At Rest Protections
  - Data In Transit Protections
  - Device Integrity Checks
  - Device Authentication
Software Application (App) Security

Focused on securing software applications for tactical use.

Three Efforts:

• **Functional Testing:** Assess that apps performed only their intended functionality

• **App Vetting (NIST):** Assess the security* of apps

• **Acquisition:** Develop an app store for downloading only vetted apps onto secure PANTHR devices.

*Determining the security of an app may help to determine the app’s reliability, efficiency, etc.
What is App Vetting?

App vetting is a process for assessing the security of an app for deployment on an organization’s devices.

Two main focuses:
1. Assess the security of an app through vulnerability testing
2. Assess the compliance of an app with organizational security policies (usually regarding usage)
App Vulnerabilities Overview

- Vulnerabilities, if exploited, can result in serious security-, reliability-, and efficiency-related issues.
- Thousands of vulnerabilities exist for both Android and iOS apps.
- On average, an app contains approximately 14 vulnerabilities.*
- Vulnerability types include those related to:
  - Incorrect Permissions
  - Exposed Communication
  - Dangerous Functionality
  - Traditional Software Vulnerabilities

App Vetting

App Compliance with Security Policies

- App compliance determined by examining organizational vetting criteria against organizational security policies.

- Organizational vetting criteria includes:
  - Information about an app’s capabilities/functionality
  - Information about the organization’s target users, deployment environments, etc.

- Example organizational security policies:
  - Social media apps are not permitted on any device
  - Apps that record audio or video are not permitted in secured areas (e.g., SKIF)
  - Classified apps must only be used by classified personnel
App vetting comprises 5 activities:

1. **App Submission**: Submission of app from Admin/MDM to an Analyst who manages the app vetting process.

2. **App Testing**: Testing of app by an Analyst through multiple Analyzers (standalone tools, online testing services, etc.).

3. **Report and Risk Auditing**: Inspection by Auditors of reports and risk assessments generated by Analyzers. Auditors also examine app’s compliance to organizational requirements to provide a recommendation for app approval/rejection.

4. **App Approval/Rejection**: Examination by Approver of recommendations provided by Auditors. Approver provides official organizational approval/rejection.

5. **App Deployment**: Deployment of app by Admin/MDM based on approval from Approver.
AppVet is a system for managing and automating the app vetting process

- Automates most app vetting activities
- Defines APIs and protocols for integrating third-party, distributed online testing services and clients (e.g., app stores)
- Support storage management of artifacts
- Supports enterprise-level management
- Provides a web-based user interface for manually managing app vetting activities
AppVet System Overview

1. App Submission
2. App Testing
3. Report & Risk Auditing
4. App Approval/Rejection
5. App Deployment

Actors:
- Administrator/MDM
- User
- Approver
- Auditor

Artifacts:
- App
- Approved App
- Recommendation
- Reports/Risk Assessments
- All Artifacts

Networks:
- App Store
- Web Site
- Repository
- Developer

Online Tools:
- NIST AppVet

Org Policies, Vetting Criteria
AppVet User Interface*

*UI is currently being revised.

AppVet Mobile App Vetting System

Search Capability

Apps List

App Management Toolbar

Selected Tool

Tool Reports And Risk Assessments
AppVet Impact on USG Operations

- Vetted apps deployed on >3000 devices for military and security-related operations:
  - Afghanistan (2011-Present)
  - Presidential Inauguration (2013)
  - Boston Marathon (2013-2014)
  - Other USG operations (2011-Present)

- Helped enable the detection of numerous vulnerability, reliability, and power consumption issues in commercial, open-source, and USG-developed apps

- Helped enable the DOD to deploy modified commercial solutions, reduce development costs, and enhance combat capability for U.S. troops
DHS Carwash Overview

- Provides government development teams with a continuous integration build, testing, source code management, and issue tracking for building applications
- Working to tie into federal Mobile Device Managers (MDMs) to help provide vetted applications and provide a monitoring service to provide updates to customers about new app versions and vulnerabilities of apps
- Supports a number of COTS, open source, and USG-developed app testing tools
- Sponsored by DHS OCIO
- Fully accredited system with Authority to Operate (ATO)
- Open to all federal agencies
AppVet Transition to DHS Carwash

• AppVet will provide complementary app vetting capabilities to DHS Carwash

• Transition Phases:
  – Development, Integration, and Customization:
    • Integrate into DHS Carwash environment
    • Develop and customize to support DHS requirements
  – Testing:
    • Security
    • 508 Compliance
    • Performance, reliability, efficiency, and functionality
  – Deployment

• Full Transition Date: TBD
• **Is Carwash open to all federal agencies?** Yes, in a limited-use capacity. Use outside of DHS is approved on a case by case basis.

• **What is the cost of using Carwash?** In its current configuration, there is no cost for DHS users. DHS currently has agreements with a limited number of other USG agencies to provide this service. The only costs that would be passed to customers would be for COTS licenses for specific scanning tools that the agency wants to use.
• **What platforms will be supported?** Android and iOS. Additional platforms may be supported dependent on need and likely requires funding.

• **Is there a limit on the number of apps that can be submitted for processing?** This is determined on a case by case basis and depends on the agreement with the customer/agency.

• **Will DHS certify an app as “safe”?** No. Carwash provides test results back to the user, and the risk determination is the responsibility of the requester and their organization.
• **Will users require a special account to access Carwash?** Yes, users will require accounts to access Carwash. New organizations and projects must establish a Letter of Intent (LOI) and populate a new project request. This requires a federal lead/sponsor and security POC for the project.

• **Will results for my app be available to other agencies?** Not unless allowed by app owneruploader.
• Website (Note, you must have an OMB MAX account to access):

https://community.max.gov/pages/viewpage.action?spaceKey=DHSExternal&title=DHS+Carwash

• Contact:
  Doug Hansen
  DHS/OCIO/MGMT/ESDO
  Doug.Hansen@HQ.DHS.GOV
  Or
  Carwash@hq.dhs.gov