Open Pluggable Edge Services
Internet-Draft
Expires: November 23, 2006

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May 22, 2006

Integrity, privacy and security in OPES for SMTP
draft-ietf-opes-smtp-security-00

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Abstract

The Open Pluggable Edge Services (OPES) framework is application agnostic. Application specific adaptations extend that framework. Previous work has focussed on HTTP and work for SMTP is in progress. These protocols differ fundamentally in the way data flows and it turns out that existing OPES requirements and IAB considerations for OPES need to be reviewed with regards to how well they fit for SMTP adaptation. This document analysis aspects about the integrity of SMTP and mail message adaptation by OPES systems and privacy and security issues when the OPES framework is adapted to SMTP and lists

requirements that must be considered when creating the "SMTP adaptation with OPES" document.

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1. Terminology

The keywords "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in [1]. When used with the normative meanings, these keywords will be all uppercase. Occurrences of these words in lowercase comprise normal prose usage, with no normative implications.

2. Introduction

2.1 Differences between unidirectional and bidirectional application protocols

The IAB listed considerations for Open Pluggable Edge Services (OPES) in [2] and OPES treatment of those considerations has been discussed in [3]. Both documents make use of HTTP as an example for the underlying protocol in OPES flows and focus on web protocols that have requests and responses in the classic form (client sends request to server that replies with a response of the same protocol within a single protocol transaction).

RFC 3914 [3] already indicates that other protocols may not fit in this context, for example in section 5.3: "Moreover, some application protocols may not have explicit responses...".

When using SMTP there are still client and server applications and requests and responses handled within SMTP, but email messages are sent by the data provider to the recipients (data consumers) without a previous request; on that abstraction layer, email delivery via SMTP is a unidirectional process and different from the previously handled web protocols such as HTTP. For example: Bypass has been defined for OPES so far by allowing the data consumer to request an OPES bypass by adding information to the application protocol request; the OPES system can then react on the bypass request in both the application request and response; for SMTP the data consumer (email recipient) cannot request in-band the OPES bypass of his messages.

The IAB considerations need to be revisited and special requirements may be needed for OPES handling of SMTP.

2.2 Non standardized SMTP adaptations at SMTP gateways

A large number of email filters is deployed at SMTP gateways today; in fact all usecases listed in "OPES SMTP Use Cases" [6] are already deployed, often in non standardized ways. This opens a number of integrity, privacy and security concerns that are not addressed and SMTP itself does not provide effective measures to detect and defend against compromised implementations.

OPES will most likely not be able to solve these issues completly but at least might be able to improve the situaton to some extend.

2.3 Non-OPES issues of SMTP

The SMTP specifications [4] require that NDRs (Non Delivery Reports)

are sent to the originator of an undeliverable mail that has been accepted by an SMTP server. But it became common practice that some sort of mail (spam, worms) is silently dropped without sending an NDR in violation of that MUST statement of SMTP (see section 3.7 of [4]). While the user of a web protocol notices if a resource cannot be fetched, neither the email sender nor email recipient may notice that an email was not delivered. These kind of issues already exist and are not introduced by OPES.

2.4 Opportunities of OPES/SMTP to address some issues

Adding SMTP adaptations with OPES, allows to define a standardized way for SMTP gateway filtering, to offload filtering services to callout servers and address a number of the integrity, privacy and security issues. OPES offers methods to add OPES tracing information and to request bypass of filtering and by that can make email gateway filtering a more reliable and standardized function. But OPES won't make email delivery via SMTP a reliable communication.

2.5 Limitations of OPES in regards to fixing SMTP issues

The biggest concerns when adding OPES services to a network flow are that compromised OPES systems may change messages in a way that the consumer cannot longer read them or that messages are not longer delivered at all.

Defining a standard way to mark mails that are handled by OPES systems is fairly simple and does not require new techniques by SMTP gateways that already today MUST leave tracing information by adding "Received" headers to mails. Therefore, recipients receiving broken mail have a fair chance to find the compromised OPES system by using the trace information. There is still no guarantee as the email may be broken in a way that makes even the tracing information unreadable; but the chance will be even better than with other protocols such as HTTP because most email clients allow the user to display mail headers while many browsers have no instrument to show the HTTP headers that may include tracing info.

Email that cannot be delivered because a compromised OPES system prevented the delivery of legitimate mail MUST result in a an NDR to be sent to the originator of the mail according to the SMTP specifications [4]. OPES should not be forced to fix the issue that NDRs are no reliable medium of SMTP.

3. Integrity, privacy and security considerations

3.1 Tracing info in OPES/SMTP

Tracing is an important requirement for OPES systems. Tracing information added to mails, following a similar syntax and structure as defined for OPES/HTTP in HTTP Adaptation with Open Pluggable Edge Services [5] and with the same guidelines as the SMTP specifications [4] define for the "Received" headers.

Trace information is then seen by mail recipients when the mails reach the recipient. Mail that cannot be delivered or that is blocked by the OPES service will either be rejected or cannot be delivered after it has been accepted by an SMTP server. In the latter case SMTP specifications [4] require that a NDR MUST be sent to the originator; OPES requires that if a NDR is sent that report MUST also contain information about the OPES system so that the sender gets informed. If an email is rejected, an OPES system MUST also include trace data to the SMTP response so that the originator can find out why and where the mail was rejected.

3.2 Bypass in OPES/SMTP

If a mail was rejected or could not be delivered (and a NDR was sent), the originator of the message may want to bypass the OPES system that blocked the message.

If the recipient of a message receives a mail with OPES trace information, he may want to receive a non-OPES version of the message. Although there is no direct in-band request from the recipient back to the OPES system, the recipient can contact the sender and ask her to send the message again and to add a bypass request for the OPES system.

An OPES system MAY also define out-of-band methods to request a bypass, for example a web interface or an email sent to itself which results in the creation of a white list entry for the sender/ recipient pair. Examples for these out-of-band methods are email systems that keep a copy of the original email in a quarantaine queue and only send the recipient a block notification plus either a direct link or a digest notification with the ability to retrieve the original message from quarantaine.

OPES MUST implement methods to request a bypass but there cannot be a guarantee that the bypass request will be approved. The security needs of the receiver or the receiver's network may demand that certain filters must not by bypassed (such as virus scanners for example). In general, the receiver should be able to configure a

client centric OPES system, i.e. the receiver should be able to indicate if she wants to receive a non-OPES version if the OPES service would result in rejection of the email.

Bypass requests could be added to the mail message or within the SMTP dialog. Bypass request data added to the mail message cannot bypass OPES services that operate on other SMTP dialog commands, which are sent before the mail message has been received (such as RCPT commands).

Bypass request data sent at the beginning of a SMTP dialog may not reach the OPES system if intermediate SMTP relays do not support those bypass request commands and don't forward that information.

3.3 Compatibility with end-to-end encryption

End-to-end email encryption is a proven technology although still the majority of mails are sent unencrypted. Encrpyting and signing email is done on the content of mails and transparent for SMTP. Encrypted mails can either be used to prevent OPES systems to inspect or modify the content or it can be used as an explicit approval to filter the mail by the OPES system, if keys for decryption of the message are made available to the OPES system. Signing of mails can be used to trace whether content has been changed by intermediates.

There are security risks associated with storing cryptographic keys which must be addressed by implementors. Beause this is not a simple task, it is only suggested as an option, not as a requirement for OPES/SMTP.

4. Requirements for OPES/SMTP

In addition to other documents listing requirements for OPES, the discussion in this document implies specific requirements for designing and implementing SMTP adaptations with OPES:

- OPES Systems MUST add tracing headers to mail messages
- If an email that has been accepted by an OPES system cannot be delivered, the non delivery report MUST include trace information of the OPES system.
- OPES/SMTP MUST define a bypass request option that can be included in mail messages
- OPES/SMTP MUST define a bypass request option as an extension for SMTP dialogs

5. Security Considerations

The document itself discusses security considerations of OPES/SMTP.

Section 3.3 about compatibility with end-to-end encryption mentions that an OPES system could be approved to inspect encrypted mails by making keys available for decryption. It must be noted that an implementation of the decryption key handling raises security issues (such as availability and storage of cryptographic keys) that must be addressed by the implementer.

6. References

6.1 Normative References

[1] Bradner, S., "Key words for use in RFCs to Indicate Requirement Levels", BCP 14, RFC 2119, March 1997.

[2] Floyd, S. and L. Daigle, "IAB Architectural and Policy Considerations for Open Pluggable Edge Services", RFC 3238, January 2002.

[3] Barbir, A. and A. Rousskov, "Open Pluggable Edge Services (OPES) Treatment of IAB Considerations", RFC 3914, October 2004.

6.2 Informative References

[4] Klensin, J., "Simple Mail Transfer Protocol", RFC 2821, April 2001.

[5] Rousskov, A. and M. Stecher, "HTTP Adaptation with Open Pluggable Edge Services (OPES)", RFC 4236, November 2005.

[6] Stecher, M. and A. Barbir, "Open Pluggable Edge Services (OPES) SMTP Use Cases", RFC 4496, May 2006.

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Funding for the RFC Editor function is currently provided by the Internet Society.