Malicious URL Detection using Machine Learning

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Abstract— In today's interconnected digital landscape, the rapid expansion of the internet has brought unprecedented convenience and accessibility to users worldwide. However, alongside these benefits, there exists a pervasive and ever-evolving threat: malicious Uniform Resource Locators (URLs). Cybersecurity is presented with a major challenge by these crafted URLs that are used in perpetrating phishing attacks, distributing malware and other forms of fraudulent activities. Still, this proliferation of malicious URLs poses a huge threat to cybersecurity because they are utilized for various forms of online scams including carrying out phishing attacks or distributing malware among others. Traditional methods for detecting such threats are overwhelmed as blacklists and rule-based systems have difficulties keeping up with the fast-evolving nature of such risks. The detection of malicious URL can be improved using machine learning. The use of machine learning is an excellent route in this field given its ability to process extensive data volumes while identifying subtle signs pointing to ill will. Such malintent can be easily differentiated from normal by training ML models on different features extracted from urls. Machine Learning (ML) models learn numerous features from various URLs which enable them to categorize benign and malicious ones with high precision. This method improves upon traditional methodologies, with higher detection rates and less false positive results. Our implementation involves collection of labelled URLs as a dataset, feature extraction and training several ML algorithms. Evaluations on the models are based on performance metrics such as precision, recall and F1 score The findings show that machine learning-based detection systems can efficiently identify malicious URLs to scale up cybersecurity defenses against changing internet threats.

Index Terms- Machine learning, Decision Tree, Random Forest, K-Nearest Neighbors, Logistic Regression

I. INTRODUCTION

Malicious url is a site that houses some unwanted elements with the aim of acquiring personal information or downloading malicious files into a user's device. Typically, some response from the user side is required, but in the case of a drive-by download, the malware is downloaded and installed without the user's consent. It is not easy to prevent such attacks because being careful sometimes is not enough. It can possible for attackers to exploit vulnerabilities in web applications to inject and execute code without the owner's consent. Initially, legitimate websites, which are visited by users, may turn into a threat for the latter. Browsers and antiviruses are supposed to protect a user from getting to such websites. The URL is typically the first and least expensive information we have regarding a website. Hence, it would only make sense to design and create methods that could distinguish between a malicious URL and a normal one. Furthermore, the use of the website involves time consuming process of accessing and downloading the content of the website and other problems implicated in downloading contents that can contain virus. The preferred strategy that is commonly applied to address this issue is blacklisting. The list of 'bad URLs' is created and the browser does not allow the user to open them. The main drawback of such approach is the absence of completeness of a blacklist where URL will appear only if the same URL was reported earlier. This is why we require a more proactive solution that will assist us in identifying patterns in malicious URLs. In this thesis, our concern is on the issue of identifying URLs that contain malicious information through the use of machine learning technologies. First we developed and integrated a tool that crawls and preprocesses the URL features and stores them in a format that machine learning models are trained on. Second, we trained and evaluate models. The performance of the models in terms for efficiency and the accuracy of the predictions is evaluated and analyzed.

The intention of this project is to improve automated identification of malicious URLs through the utilization of machine learning techniques. Decisions Trees, Support Vector Machines (SVM) and Logistic Regression are some of the ML models evaluated for

their ability to differentiate benign from malignant URLs by means of analyzing various features including URL structures, contents characteristics and historical behavior. The main objective is to improve accuracy in detections as well as speed that in turn enhances cybersecurity defenses against new threats. Consequently, results show good performance metrics indicating potential use of ML–based systems for complementing traditional cyber security measures.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the existing research on malicious URL detection highlights the timeline of the approaches, starting from the simplest methods based on the traditional approach and growing into more complex ones based on advanced approaches to threat detection. Doe and Smith (2018) proposed a detection system using signature-based that was tested and proved to have high accuracy against known malicious URLs while at the same time showing its weakness to new threats. Blum et al. (2010) also discussed heuristic based detection methods but pointed out that periodic updating is imperative because it is subjected to attackers' tactic innovations. From the study conducted by Markowetz et al. (2008), authors acknowledged that blacklist-based detections have some drawbacks especially in the environment where threats are more dynamic in nature. The use of machine learning has been adopted for the flexibility it offers in the analysis of URLs. Later on, Ma et al. (2009) presented a system that incorporated both lexical and host features that produced higher detection of spam emails. Alshboul et al. (2021) used decision trees and random forests in lexical analysis thus introducing high accuracy in the classification of benign and malicious URL links. Hence, Stringhini et al. (2013) and Yue and Ma (2014) concentrated on content analysis with using HTML structure and JavaScript code for detection of phishing pages and other malicious resources. Zhang et al. (2016) and Le et al. (2018) highlighted the need for behavioral analysis, concentrating on temporal patterns and user engagement to build better models for detection. Verma et al. (2018) and Zhang et al. (2020) have studied the technique called ensemble learning showing how multiple models can improve the detection.

Deep learning has been another subject of recent research, and Saxe and Berlin (2017) demonstrated that deep learning models such as CNNs and RNNs do not require feature engineering and can learn appropriate features from raw URLs and achieve better results than traditional machine learning techniques. Vinayakumar et al. also showed the effectiveness of deep learning in identifying complex and new malicious URLs that were not included in the training data set, pointing to the cybersecurity potential of these advanced models.

several limitations have been identified in different approaches. It is rather efficient for known threats but performs poorly on the recognition of new or slightly modified URLs and is susceptible to new attacks. Heuristic-based methods use fixed rules that need frequent updates, which in turn contribute to high false positives and lack of ability to detect complex threats. While in terms of blacklist-based detection, it has a disadvantage of not being in real time.

These attacks are often easily avoided by an attacker if they can manipulate the structure of the URL or the host information and they may have problems with sometimes long or obfuscated strings. While content-based analysis provides a deeper understanding of the content classified by a webpage, it is time-consuming and cannot be implemented in real-time detection.

While the methods combine multiple models and yield higher accuracy, they do complicate the system and may cause overfitting of data for poor performance when faced with new inputs. At last, developmental models, though robust and highly efficient learning mechanisms, suffer the dilemma of being data-intensive in training and the interpretational complexity of their decision-making patterns in the security context. It is in this regard that this review has demonstrated the need for further development of the method and the adoption of a combination of approaches to ensure that a reliable and effective system for detecting plagiarism is developed and implemented.

III. PROPOSED SYSTEM

The machine learning model for detecting malicious URLs is comprised of Training and testing phases. For

each of these models, we have taken SVM, decision tree, KNN, ensemblers and identified the best parameters that will improve the accuracy, precision and recall. And we have also included 2 classes; benign and malicious.

Training phase: To identify malicious URLs a collection of malicious and clean URLs are brought together. Proper attribution extraction follows after this stage. This will be very valuable in deciding whether a URL is safe or not., this The dataset has been split into two separate portions.: Test data for the test method and training data for the machine learning algorithm.

Testing phase: Testing phase is when every input URL goes through it. First thing first, the URL is subjected to attribute extraction process. Then classifier uses these attributes to determine if it can't pose any risk at all or not.

IV. DATA PREPROCESSING

The set of both the malicious and the clean URLs are collected to facilitate the identification of the former. These URLs are correctly tagged before the process of attribute extraction is performed on them. This feature will be very useful in defining whether URL is safe or malicious. The dataset has been split into two separate portions.The type of data to be used in the test method and the data to train the machine learning algorithm. This way, each input URL is passed through the testing phase. The URL would then be subjected to feature extraction. The classifier will then use these properties to decide on whether the URL is risky or not.

Feature Selection

Feature selection or feature subset selection in general is one of the most important steps in machine learning. Galleries that do not significantly or have only a small relation to outcomes overburden the features vector in terms of size. It is also recommended to use properties which are too time consuming to obtain in case they do not contribute much to the performance as compared to them.

Training and Testing Split

The next operation, called data splitting, involves the division of the dataset into training and testing sets. We have divided the dataset into 80:20 i. e. 80% data have been used for training the machine learning models whereas the remaining 20% data have been used for the testing of the model. Randomly dividing the dataset into train and test may divide different categories almost equally, which will have a high impact on the performance of the machine learning model. Hence to keep the same variable proportions of the target stratification is required. This stratify parameter does a split so that the proportion of the values that is being generated in the sample will equal to the proportion of the values passed to the parameter stratify.

Model Selection

Choosing the right model for the identification of the malicious URLs depends on the given performance metrics of the machine learning models. The textual analysis has been carried out using the following models.

Decision Trees: These models are understandable and can work with both metrics and nominal attributes. However, they might overfit onto the data used in training.

Random Forest: A combination technique where decision trees are formed in a forest through an iterative process and their predictions are aggregated. It gives better accuracy compared to a single decision tree and helps in minimizing the overfitting problem.

Logistic Regression: It is a simple linear model which is easy to apply and analyze. This is especially effective in binary classification problems as in the case of the detection of malicious URLs.

K-Nearest Neighbors: KNN should be used for classification since it is easy to understand, implement, highly flexible especially when dealing with non-linear data, does not assume any distribution of the data and can work with different data types depending on the distance measure.

Model Evaluation
Accuracy: Total number of true positives and true negatives in relation to the total number of samples tested.

Accuracy = ((Total true positives + Total true negative)/(Total true positive + Total true negative + Total false positive + Total false negative)) × 100 / 100
Precision: The proportion of true positives over all those that are correctly diagnosed as positive including false positives and true positives. What it reveals is the number of correct positive predictions out of the total number of positive ones that was announced.

Precision = (T P / (T P + F P)) x 100%
Recall (Sensitivity): True positive divided by the total of true positive and false negatives = sensitivity. It determines how much the model recognizes positive samples.

Recall = ((Total positives)/(Total positives + False negatives)) x 100%
F1 Score: The average of precision and recall this is obtained through the use of the harmonic mean. In this work, it has an advantage of better accuracy and recall rate.

F1 – score = 2 x ((Precision x Recall)/(Precision + Recall)) x 100%
Confusion Matrix: A table that can be used for the evaluation of classification model. It provides the description of the true positive, false positive, true negative, and false negative predictions.

Model Prediction
Therefore, in this last step, we will predict the malicious URL from calculated features using the best model out of all the models i. e. Random Forest.

V. RESULT

The table compares the performance of machine learning models-decision tree, random forest, logistic regression, and K-Nearest Neighbors in detecting malicious URLs with the random forest model that outperforms the others a maximum accuracy of 99.7% detection, with precision and recall of 1.00 for negative URLs and 1.00 and 0.99 for malicious URLs, respectively Both decision tree and logistic regression models showed good performance density, each at 99.6%. accuracy is, and showed equal accuracy and recall for negative URLs, and slightly lower values for negative URLs The KNN model, although still valid, showed the lowest accuracy at 95.9%, with slightly lower accuracy and recall values, especially for malicious URLs For cases where recall is reduced to 0.85 across the board, cross-validation results(with K=5, 10, and 15 states)is accurate, indicating the robustness of the model. These results reveal that random forest models are the most reliable for this task, with decision tree and logistic regression models also providing robust alternatives, while KNN may need to be developed additional changes to ensure accurate identification.

Model	Classification	Precision	Recall	F1-score	Cross validation			Accuracy
					K=5	K=10	K=15	
Decision tree	Benign	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.996	0.996	0.996	99.6%
	Malicious	0.99	0.99	0.99				
Random forest	Benign	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.997	0.997	0.997	99.7%
	Malicious	1.00	0.99	0.99				
Logistic regression	Benign	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.996	0.996	0.996	99.6%
	Malicious	0.99	0.99	0.99				
K-nearest neighbors	Benign	0.96	0.99	0.97	0.954	0.956	0.956	95.9%
	Malicious	0.97	0.85	0.91				

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates the effectiveness of various machine learning models in detecting malicious URLs. The results indicate that the Random Forest classifier achieved the highest accuracy of 99.7%, outperforming other models such as the Decision Tree, Logistic Regression, and K-Nearest Neighbors (KNN). The Random Forest model also exhibited superior performance across all evaluation metrics, including precision, recall, and F1-score. The Decision Tree and Logistic Regression models also performed admirably, achieving accuracy levels of 99.6%. However, the KNN model, while still effective, showed slightly lower performance, with an accuracy of 95.9%.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of selecting appropriate machine learning models for cybersecurity tasks such as malicious URL detection. The high precision and recall scores across the models indicate their robustness in distinguishing between benign and malicious URLs, which is critical for

reducing false positives and false negatives in practical applications.

FUTURE SCOPE

This research can be expanded by exploring deep learning models, such as Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) or Recurrent Neural Networks (RNNs), to potentially enhance the accuracy of detecting more complex URL patterns. Additionally, further advancements in feature engineering could lead to the discovery of new, more effective features, improving the model's detection capabilities. There is also significant potential in integrating this model into a real-time URL scanning system, which would involve optimizing it for speed and efficiency in live environments. Implementing adaptive learning mechanisms would allow the model to continuously learn from new data, making it more resilient to evolving threats. Finally, developing hybrid models that combine the strengths of different machine learning approaches and ensuring the system's scalability for deployment in large-scale cybersecurity frameworks could further enhance its practical application in protecting against cyber threats.

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