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A Hybrid Model of File Integrity Monitoring: Combining Traditional Methods with Machine Learning

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Abstract: *In today's rapidly evolving cybersecurity landscape, file integrity monitoring (FIM) remains a critical line of defence against data breaches, malicious attacks, Third party interruption, loss of sensitive data and lack of internal data security. Traditional FIM techniques, such as Tripwire and Advanced Intrusion Detection Environments (AIDE), have long been trusted for detecting unauthorized changes in files. However, these methods often suffer from limitations such as high false-positive rates and inefficiencies in handling large-scale, dynamic environments. In this paper, we propose a hybrid model of File Integrity Monitoring that combines traditional methods with advanced machine learning techniques to enhance detection accuracy and reduce operational overhead. Also, we try to improve the limitations of traditional techniques by making a hybrid of Traditional FIM techniques & advanced machine learning techniques to improve and make a secure environment. By leveraging the strengths of both approaches, the hybrid model addresses key weaknesses in conventional systems, improving both real-time detection capabilities and adaptability in diverse computing environments, including cloud and virtualized infrastructures. The proposed model demonstrates significant improvements in file integrity monitoring, providing a robust, scalable, and efficient solution for modern cybersecurity challenges.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The integration of traditional methods with machine learning in file integrity monitoring presents a multifaceted approach to enhancing cybersecurity, particularly in the context of the Internet of Things (IoT) and industrial control systems (ICS). The literature on this subject reveals a progressive shift towards utilizing advanced machine learning techniques to address the limitations of conventional security measures. In 2019, [1] introduced the DEMISE model, emphasizing the necessity of combining traditional security technologies with adaptive approaches that leverage machine learning and behavioral analytics. Their study highlighted the challenges posed by the computational constraints of IoT devices, advocating for interpretable models that maintain performance while ensuring transparency in security applications. Building on this foundation, [2] conducted a systematic review focusing on security and privacy issues in the Internet of Medical Things (IoMT). They explored various machine learning techniques for malware detection, revealing that while many approaches achieved high detection rates, they often fell short in terms of energy efficiency and accuracy. This highlights the need for a more nuanced application of machine learning that considers the unique demands of healthcare environments. [3] further advanced the discussion by proposing a federated learning architecture tailored for cybersecurity. Their work emphasized the importance of timely attack detection and the role of continuous learning in adapting to evolving threat vectors. The incorporation of feedback from network security operators is crucial for identifying novel attacks, thereby reinforcing the argument for a hybrid approach that combines traditional and machine learning methods. [4] addressed the critical issue of data quality in machine learning-based intrusion detection systems (IDS). They underscored the significance of high-quality training data in developing effective IDS, suggesting that the performance of machine learning models is heavily reliant on the integrity of the input data. This perspective aligns with the need for robust feature selection and data curation in the context of file integrity monitoring.

In 2022, [5] research illustrated the application of conventional machine learning techniques within the IoT environment, focusing on the identification and classification of cyberattacks. While their findings indicated a promising ability to detect malicious traffic, the study also pointed out limitations in dataset diversity and the need for extensive testing across various attack types. [6] furthered the conversation by exploring behavior-based approaches for intrusion detection in ICS. Their findings highlighted the potential of machine learning to automate detection processes, yet they also called attention to the necessity for high-fidelity benchmark datasets to enhance model performance and reliability.

[7] introduced a stacked unsupervised federated learning approach for generalizing intrusion detection across heterogeneous networks. Their work demonstrated the adaptability of machine learning methods to detect zero-day attacks, emphasizing the potential for collaborative learning in enhancing cybersecurity measures. In the same year, [8] proposed FEMA-FS, a novel feature selection approach aimed at improving anomaly detection in computer networks. Their results suggested that effective feature selection could significantly enhance detection accuracy, a critical component for any hybrid model of file integrity monitoring. The exploration of machine learning in digital forensics by [9] further illustrated the expanding role of these techniques in managing the complexities of cybercrime investigations. Their systematic review identified challenges and opportunities for integrating machine learning into digital forensics, reinforcing the importance of these methods in contemporary cybersecurity practices. Finally, [10] highlighted the value of machine learning in cybersecurity research, particularly in developing frameworks like the Security Assessment Model (SAM) for evaluating software vulnerabilities.

Their findings underscored the role of machine learning in automating the identification of security deficiencies, further supporting the argument for a hybrid approach combining traditional methods with advanced machine learning techniques.

In the digital age, the integrity of files is paramount for both individuals and organizations. Unauthorized modifications to critical files can lead to data breaches, loss of sensitive information, and significant financial and reputational damage. Traditional file integrity verification methods rely heavily on cryptographic hash functions, such as MD5 and SHA256, to detect changes by comparing file hashes. While effective in identifying alterations, these methods do not provide context regarding the nature or potential threat of the modifications. The rise of sophisticated cyber threats necessitates more intelligent and adaptive security measures. Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) have emerged as transformative technologies in cybersecurity, offering capabilities to analyze patterns, predict threats, and automate responses. Integrating AI into file integrity verification systems can bridge the gap between simple change detection and comprehensive risk assessment. This research aims to enhance a traditional File Integrity Checker by incorporating a machine learning model to assess the risk associated with file modifications.

The proposed system not only detects changes but also evaluates their potential threat levels, enabling proactive security measures. By analyzing file attributes such as size, type, and modification frequency, the AI-driven system provides users with actionable insights, reducing false positives and enhancing overall security posture. The significance of this study lies in its potential to advance file integrity verification tools, making them more intelligent and responsive to evolving cyber threats. The subsequent sections will review existing literature, outline the methodology, present the results, and discuss the implications of integrating AI into file integrity systems.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

File Integrity Monitoring (FIM) has been a cornerstone of cybersecurity for decades, with its primary function being to detect unauthorized modifications to files and system configurations. Over the years, various approaches have been developed to enhance the effectiveness of FIM systems. This section reviews the key advancements in traditional FIM techniques and explores how emerging technologies, particularly machine learning, are now being integrated to address limitations of conventional systems.

- 1) **Traditional File Integrity Monitoring:** Early file integrity monitoring systems, such as **Tripwire**, introduced in the 1990s by Kim and Spafford, employed cryptographic hash functions (like MD5 and SHA) to detect changes in files by comparing them against known baselines [2]. These methods were revolutionary at the time, offering a simple yet powerful way to track unauthorized file modifications. However, as these systems evolved, several challenges became apparent. While hashes are effective at detecting changes, they do not provide information about the nature or context of the modification. Consequently, traditional systems cannot differentiate between benign updates and potentially malicious alterations, leading to a high number of false positives.
- 2) **Enhancements in FIM: Virtualization and Cloud Integration:** As IT infrastructures shifted towards cloud computing and virtualized environments, traditional FIM tools struggled to keep up with the increased complexity. Research has shown that virtualization introduces new layers of complexity in file integrity monitoring, requiring methods that can monitor not just individual files but also virtual machines and containers. Techniques such as **virtual machine introspection (VMI)** emerged to allow for deeper monitoring of virtual environments, which provided a more transparent way to inspect file systems and detect rootkits or other hidden malware. Despite these advances, the ability to effectively monitor files in cloud environments remained a challenge.
- 3) **Machine Learning in Cybersecurity:** The growing complexity of cybersecurity threats and the limitations of static detection methods led researchers to explore artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) as potential solutions.

Machine learning has shown considerable promise in areas such as anomaly detection, intrusion detection systems (IDS), and malware classification. Tools like **RandomForestClassifier** and **Support Vector Machines (SVM)** have been widely used for identifying patterns of malicious behavior in network traffic, user activity, and even file modifications. In particular, ML-based systems can learn from historical data to identify subtle patterns and correlations that human analysts or rule-based systems might miss. For file integrity monitoring, this means not just detecting changes, but also assessing the likelihood that those changes are malicious. For example, using file attributes such as size, type, frequency of changes, and even file access history, machine learning algorithms can determine whether a file modification is suspicious and requires further investigation [20, 21].

- 4) **Hybrid Approaches: Integrating Traditional FIM with Machine Learning:** Recent studies have proposed hybrid models that combine traditional FIM techniques with machine learning to improve detection accuracy and reduce false positives. For example, **Jin et al.** introduced a guest-transparent file integrity monitoring system that incorporated monitoring mechanisms in virtual environments alongside traditional hash-based verification. This allowed for deeper inspection of file changes but still lacked predictive capabilities to assess the risk of modifications.
- 5) **Gaps in Current Research and the Need for Further Development:** While hybrid FIM models have demonstrated significant improvements over traditional systems, several gaps remain in current research. For instance, the training and deployment of machine learning models in real-time monitoring scenarios present challenges related to computational overhead and data accuracy. Moreover, the lack of standardized datasets for training ML models specific to FIM systems means that many solutions are limited in scope, unable to generalize across different types of environments or attack vectors.

Additionally, there is a growing need to address how these hybrid systems can be integrated into broader cybersecurity frameworks, such as Security Information and Event Management (SIEM) platforms, to provide a more comprehensive defense strategy. The fusion of machine learning with traditional FIM techniques has the potential to transform file integrity monitoring from a reactive to a proactive defense mechanism, but further research is needed to refine these systems for real-world deployment.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. System Design and Architecture

The proposed system is built on the foundation of traditional file integrity monitoring mechanisms, while introducing a machine learning-based module to enhance risk assessment capabilities. This hybrid approach ensures both the detection of file modifications and an intelligent evaluation of their potential security risks.

1) Traditional FIM Module

The Traditional FIM Module is based on well-established file integrity monitoring tools like Tripwire and AIDE. These tools use cryptographic hash functions (such as SHA-256) to monitor changes in critical files. The core functionality includes:

- **Hash Calculation:** A cryptographic hash function generates a hash value (or checksum) for each monitored file.
- **Baseline Comparison:** The calculated hash is compared against a pre-established baseline hash stored in a secure database.
- **Change Detection:** If the hash values do not match, the system triggers an alert indicating a file modification.

2) AI-Driven Risk Assessment Module

To provide additional context and threat analysis, an **AI-Driven Risk Assessment Module** was introduced. This module analyzes the detected file changes and evaluates the likelihood that they represent malicious activity. The key components of this module include:

- **Feature Extraction:** Relevant file attributes (e.g., file type, size, modification frequency, and access patterns) are extracted.
- **Risk Scoring:** A machine learning model (RandomForestClassifier) evaluates these features and assigns a risk score to each detected modification, indicating the probability of malicious intent.

B. Data Collection and Preprocessing

The effectiveness of any machine learning model depends on the quality and diversity of the data used for training. For this system, the dataset included a combination of real-world file modification logs and synthetic data generated to simulate both benign and malicious activities.

1) Data Sources

- Real-World File Logs: Data was sourced from open-source file integrity monitoring systems like Tripwire, which provided logs of legitimate file changes.
- Cybersecurity Incident Databases: Known malware and attack patterns from repositories like VirusTotal and MITRE ATT&CK were used to create malicious modification scenarios.
- Simulated Data: Synthetic data was generated to simulate file modification patterns in various operational environments, including cloud, local, and virtual systems.

2) Data Preprocessing

Before feeding the data into the machine learning model, several preprocessing steps were required:

- Normalization: Continuous variables such as file size were normalized to ensure consistent scaling.
- Handling Missing Data: Missing values were either imputed using statistical methods or dropped from the dataset.
- Labeling: Each file modification was labeled as either benign or malicious based on expert analysis and reference logs.

C. Integration Process

1) Integration into FIM Workflow:

The traditional FIM system was responsible for initial file integrity checks, while the machine learning model was invoked only after a change was detected. This approach minimized the computational load, as only flagged files underwent risk assessment.

2) Real-Time Implementation

To maintain real-time monitoring, the machine learning inference process was optimized for speed. Using pre-trained models with lightweight inference engines allowed the system to assess file modifications with minimal delay, ensuring that security responses were immediate.

3) User Reporting

The results of the integrity check and risk assessment were consolidated into a comprehensive report, which provided:

- The file(s) that were modified.
- A risk score generated by the AI model.
- Suggested actions based on the risk assessment.

Table 3: Sample Output Report

File Name	Detected Change	Risk Score	Suggested Action
system.dll	Modified	0.85	Investigate and quarantine
config.ini	Modified	0.10	No action required
user.exe	Modified	0.75	Review access logs

By combining the strengths of traditional FIM techniques with machine learning, the proposed hybrid system enhances the overall capability to detect and respond to file-based threats. The integration process ensures low-latency, real-time monitoring, making the system both scalable and effective across different environments.

IV. RESULTS

A. Model Performance Metrics

The machine learning model, specifically the Random Forest Classifier, was trained and evaluated on a diverse dataset containing both benign and malicious file modifications. Key performance metrics such as accuracy, precision, recall, and F1-score were calculated to assess the model's effectiveness in detecting potentially harmful file changes. The model successfully identified 170 malicious modifications (TP) and 180 benign modifications (TN). 30 actual malicious changes were missed (FN), and 20 benign changes were incorrectly flagged as malicious (FP). This balance between true positives and false negatives is critical in a security application, where missing an actual threat (FN) is more dangerous than a false alarm (FP).

B. Comparative Analysis with Traditional Methods

The hybrid model's performance was compared against traditional file integrity monitoring systems like Tripwire and AIDE, which rely solely on cryptographic hashes to detect file changes. The analysis evaluated detection accuracy, operational efficiency, and false positive rates.

1) Comparison of Detection Accuracy

Table 6: Detection Accuracy Comparison

Method	Detection Accuracy
Traditional FIM (Tripwire, AIDE)	75%
Hybrid FIM with ML	92%

- The traditional FIM methods achieved an accuracy of 75%, as they could only detect changes but could not assess their context or risk level.
- The hybrid model significantly improved detection accuracy to 92% by integrating machine learning, which allowed for a contextual risk assessment of each detected change. As shown in Figure 5, the hybrid system significantly reduced response time due to its prioritization of high-risk changes for further evaluation.

C. Case Studies

1) Case Study 1: Detecting a Malware Infection

- Scenario: A server within a cloud environment experienced unexpected file changes in critical system directories. Traditional FIM detected these changes but could not differentiate between a benign update and a potential malware infection.
- Traditional FIM Response: Flagged 50 files as suspicious, requiring manual investigation of each.
- Hybrid FIM Response: The AI-driven module identified only 5 files as high-risk, all of which were confirmed to be infected by malware.

2) Case Study 2: Handling Routine Software Updates

- Scenario: An enterprise system underwent routine software updates, leading to multiple file changes across the network. Traditional FIM systems flagged these changes as suspicious, overwhelming the security team with alerts.
- Traditional FIM Response: Generated 100 alerts, most of which were false positives related to the legitimate update.
- Hybrid FIM Response: The AI model correctly identified the updates as benign, reducing the number of alerts to 10, which corresponded to non-update-related changes.

The hybrid FIM system, combining traditional methods with machine learning, demonstrated significant improvements in:

- Detection accuracy, rising from 75% to 92%.
- Reduction in false positives, lowering the rate from 25% to 10%.
- Operational efficiency, with a decrease in response time from 12 seconds to 5 seconds.
- Practical applicability, as shown by case studies where the system efficiently handled both routine updates and actual security threats.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Advantages of AI Integration

- Contextual Threat Analysis: Traditional file integrity systems primarily use hash comparisons to detect file changes. While this method is reliable for identifying changes, it lacks the ability to assess the context or the potential threat posed by a modification. The AI model, in contrast, evaluates various file attributes (e.g., frequency of changes, metadata) and offers a risk assessment, which provides valuable context that enhances decision-making.
- Reduction in Alert Fatigue: Conventional FIM systems generate alerts for every file change, regardless of its severity, leading to alert fatigue among security teams. By filtering out low-risk changes, the AI-enhanced system reduces the number of alerts requiring manual intervention. The reduction in false positives means fewer irrelevant alarms, improving the efficiency of security operations.

- 3) **Adaptability and Scalability:** Traditional systems often struggle to scale in dynamic environments, such as cloud and virtualized infrastructures, where frequent file changes are common. AI algorithms learn from historical data, adapt to new patterns, and offer better scalability by automatically adjusting to the system's changing environment.

Proactive Threat Identification: The AI model allows for proactive monitoring by identifying suspicious patterns or anomalies before they escalate into more serious security incidents. This contrasts with traditional methods that only detect changes after they occur, offering no predictive or preventive capabilities.

B. Limitations

- 1) **Dependence on Training Data:** The effectiveness of the machine learning model relies heavily on the quality and variety of the training data. If the model is trained on outdated or incomplete data, its ability to recognize emerging threats may be compromised. Continuous retraining with updated data is essential to maintain the model's accuracy and adaptability.
- 2) **Increased Resource Requirements:** Machine learning models, particularly those analyzing large datasets, can be resource-intensive in terms of processing power and memory usage. In environments where resources are limited, this may impact the system's overall performance. The additional computational overhead introduced by AI may also lead to delays in large-scale deployments.
- 3) **Complexity in Implementation:** Integrating AI into a traditional FIM system adds a layer of complexity in terms of setup and configuration. Organizations may face challenges in deploying the model, collecting and preprocessing the necessary data, and fine-tuning the system for optimal performance. Additionally, personnel may require additional training to manage and maintain the AI-enhanced FIM system.

C. Implications for Cybersecurity

1) Shift Toward Intelligent Cybersecurity Solutions

Traditional cybersecurity tools are largely reactive, relying on predefined rules or signatures to detect malicious activity. By incorporating machine learning, the hybrid FIM system moves toward an intelligent, adaptive solution capable of predicting and preventing potential threats. This trend reflects a broader shift in the cybersecurity industry toward AI-driven tools that can autonomously identify and mitigate risks.

2) Applicability to Cloud and Virtualized Environments

The scalability and adaptability of the hybrid FIM model make it particularly well-suited for cloud-based and virtualized environments, where traditional FIM systems often struggle. The ability to learn and adapt to frequent changes inherent in these environments allows the hybrid system to provide continuous, real-time monitoring without overwhelming security teams with irrelevant alerts.

3) Future of AI in Cybersecurity

The success of AI-enhanced file integrity monitoring opens the door to broader applications of machine learning in other areas of cybersecurity, such as network traffic analysis, endpoint protection, and user behavior analytics. As AI models become more sophisticated, they will likely play an increasingly central role in defending against advanced cyber threats, helping organizations stay one step ahead of attackers.

VI. CONCLUSION

The integration of AI into traditional file integrity monitoring represents a promising advancement in the field of cybersecurity. By enhancing the ability to detect, assess, and respond to file changes, the hybrid model offers a more intelligent, scalable, and efficient solution for modern security challenges.

While traditional FIM systems have long been a cornerstone of cybersecurity, the rapid evolution of the threat landscape demands more adaptive and proactive solutions. The use of machine learning brings the potential for smarter, more nuanced security tools that can keep pace with the increasing complexity of cyber threats.

The results of this study underscore the importance of continued innovation in cybersecurity tools and highlight the potential of AI-driven systems in addressing the limitations of traditional approaches. As organizations increasingly adopt cloud-based and virtualized environments, the demand for intelligent, scalable FIM solutions will only grow. The hybrid model developed in this research lays the foundation for future advancements in file integrity monitoring and cybersecurity at large, pushing the field toward more adaptive, context-aware systems that can anticipate and mitigate threats with greater accuracy and efficiency.

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