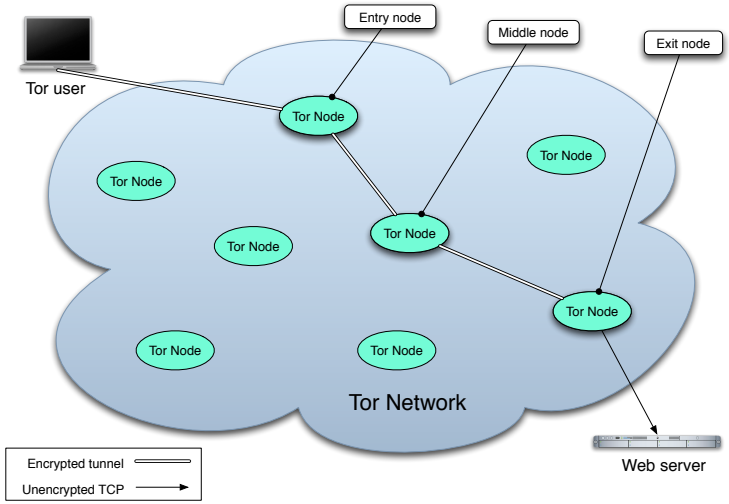
Anonymity and Censorship Resistance

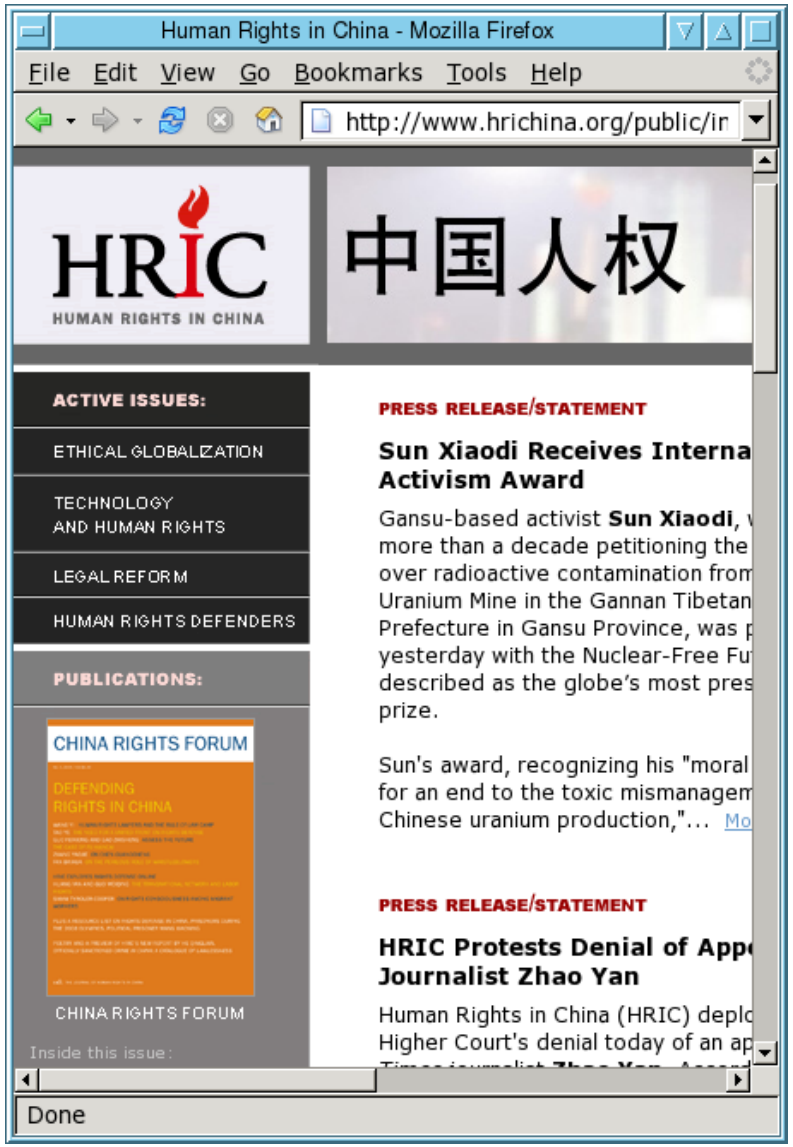


Steven J. Murdoch

http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/users/sjm217/

What is being blocked, and why

- Out of the 40 countries studied by the OpenNet Initiative in 2006, 26 censored the Internet in some way
- The types of material censored varied depending on country, e.g.:
  - Human Rights (blocked in China)
  - Religion (blocked in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, Bahrain)
  - Pornography (blocked in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, Bahrain, Singapore, Burma, . . .)
- Other issues censored include: military and militant websites; sex education, alcohol/drugs, music; gay and lesbian websites; news



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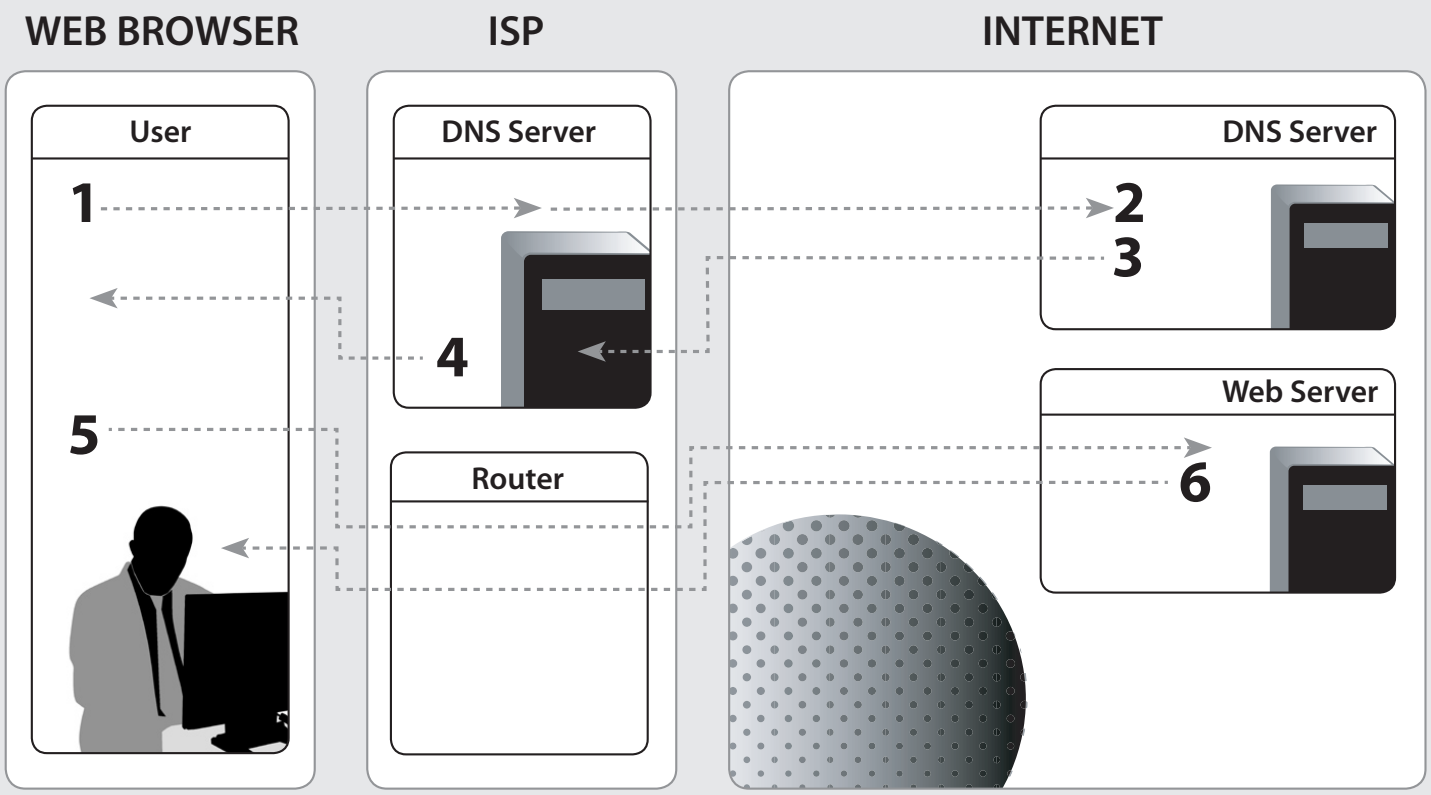
Blocking with technology

- When a country's government controls international connectivity, they can block requests for banned websites
- There are a number of different approaches (DNS blocking, IP address blocking, etc.)
- Software may be produced in-country, but often is an adapted commercial product
- These companies not only make the software, but provide a continuously updated list of websites to be blocked

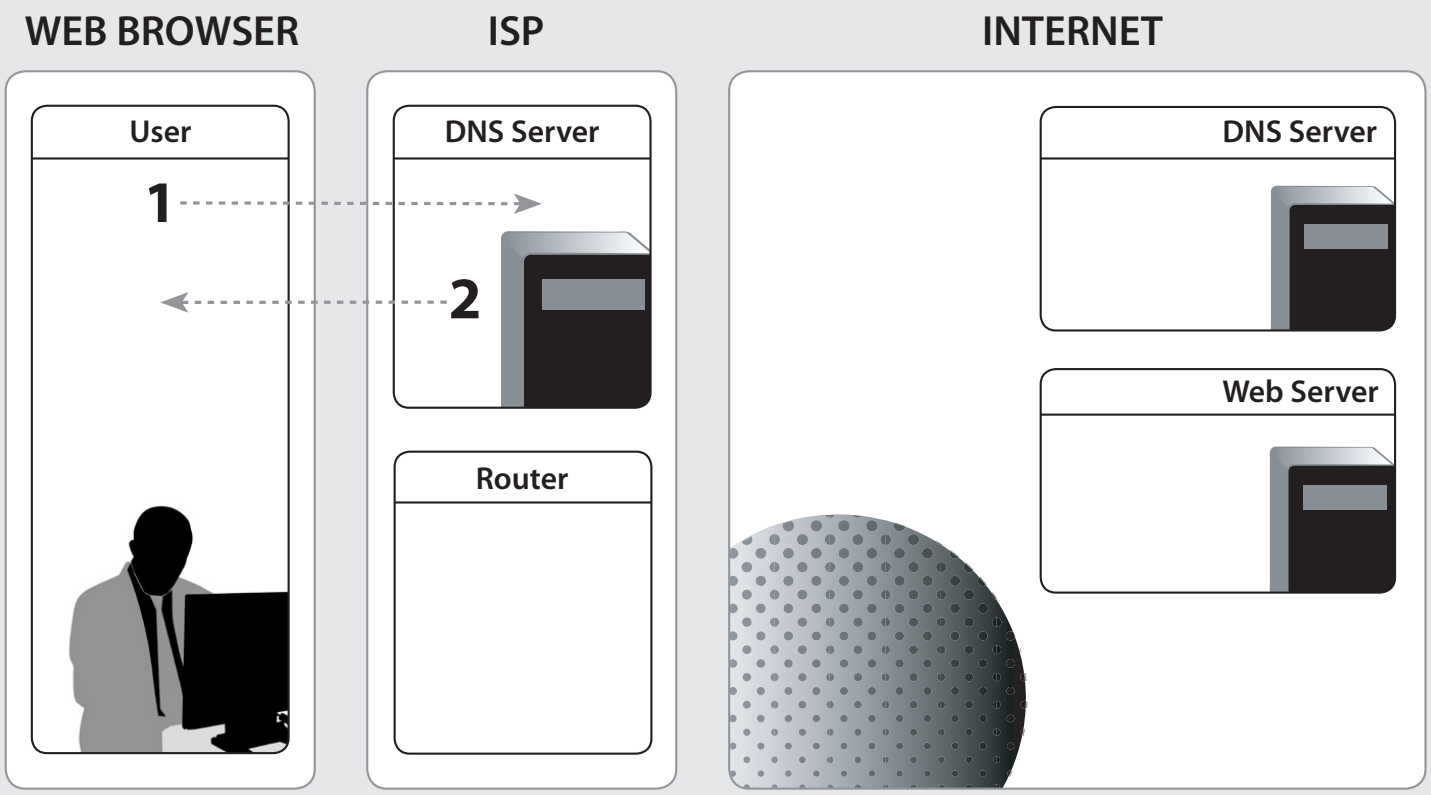
Normal web browsing



1. User requests www.example.org/page.html
2. DNS lookup for www.example.org
3. Lookup response: www.example.org is 192.0.2.166
4. www.example.org is 192.0.2.166
5. Get web page: www.example.org/page.html at 192.0.2.166
6. Here is www.example.org/page.html

Diagram: Jane Gowan

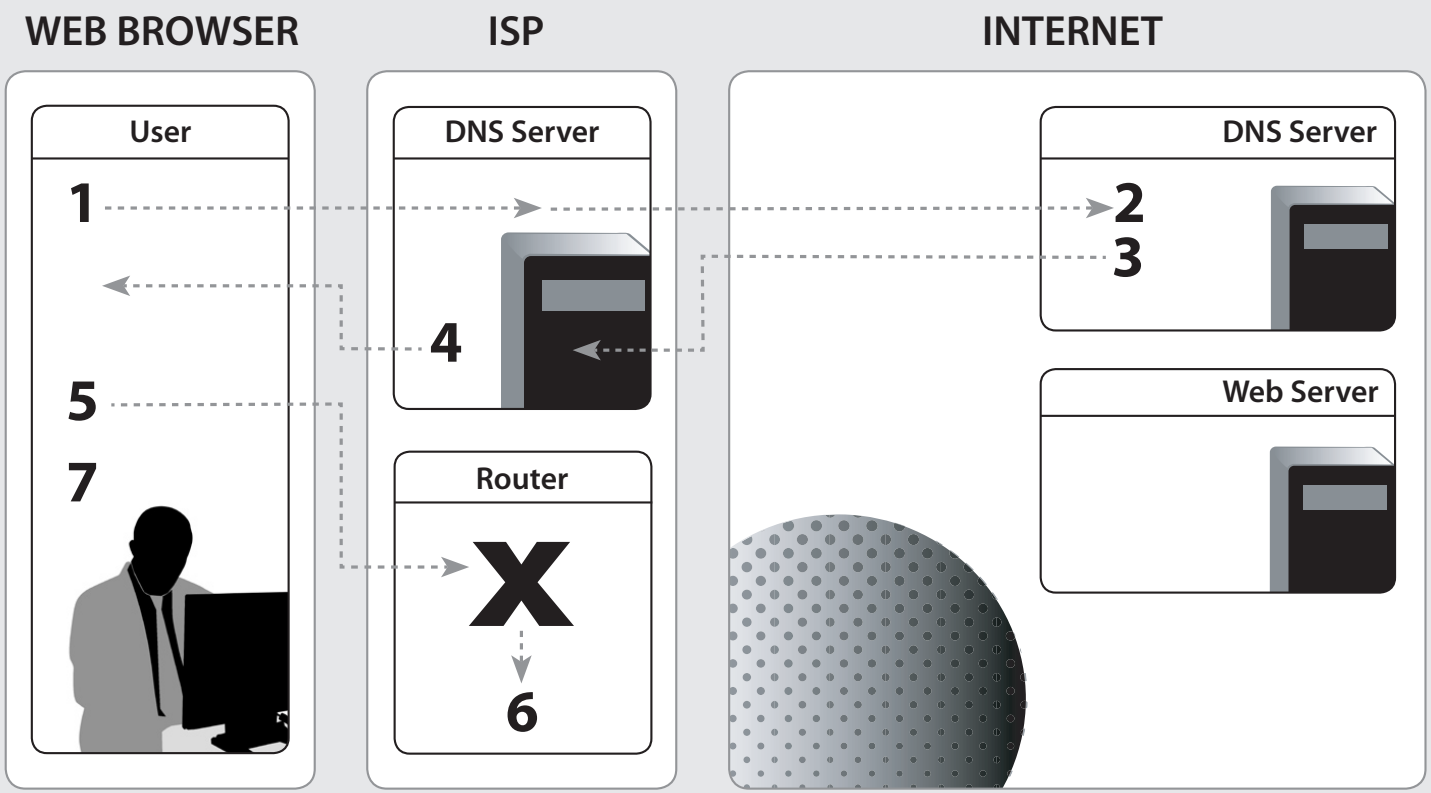
DNS tampering



1. User requests www.example.org/page.html
2. DNS response: www.example.org does not exist

Diagram: Jane Gowan

IP blocking



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5. Get web page: www.example.org/page.html at 192.0.2.166
6. Router drops all packets to 192.0.2.166
7. Browser concludes that www.example.org is inaccessible

Diagram: Jane Gowan

Even if a site is accessible, it may be removed from search engine results

Searching for “Tiananmen Square” on Google.com and Google.cn

Limitations of blocking

- Censorship systems block legitimate content and fail to block banned content
- It is fairly easy for readers and publishers to circumvent the technical measures
- Building and maintaining censorship systems is expensive
- Blocking one type of content encourages other types to be blocked
- Often the process of censorship is not transparent

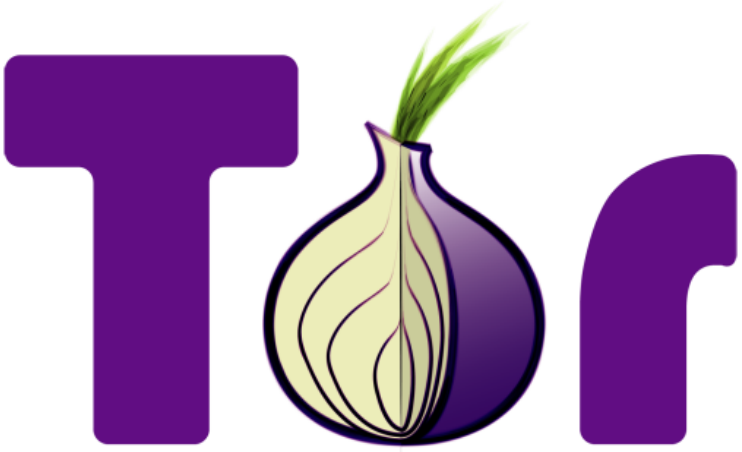
Photograph: David Gaya

Blocking through laws, fear, and intimidation

- ISPs may be forced to block sites themselves, or implement self-regulation
- People can be intimidated into not testing rules through fear of detection and retribution
- These may be through laws, social pressure or extra-legal punishment
- All these approaches may be used at the same time, and complement each other

Censorship resistance systems

- Software to resist censorship should
  - Hide where user is visiting (to prevent blocking)
  - Hide who the user is (to protect them from intimidation)
- These properties should be maintained even if the censorship resistance system is partially compromised

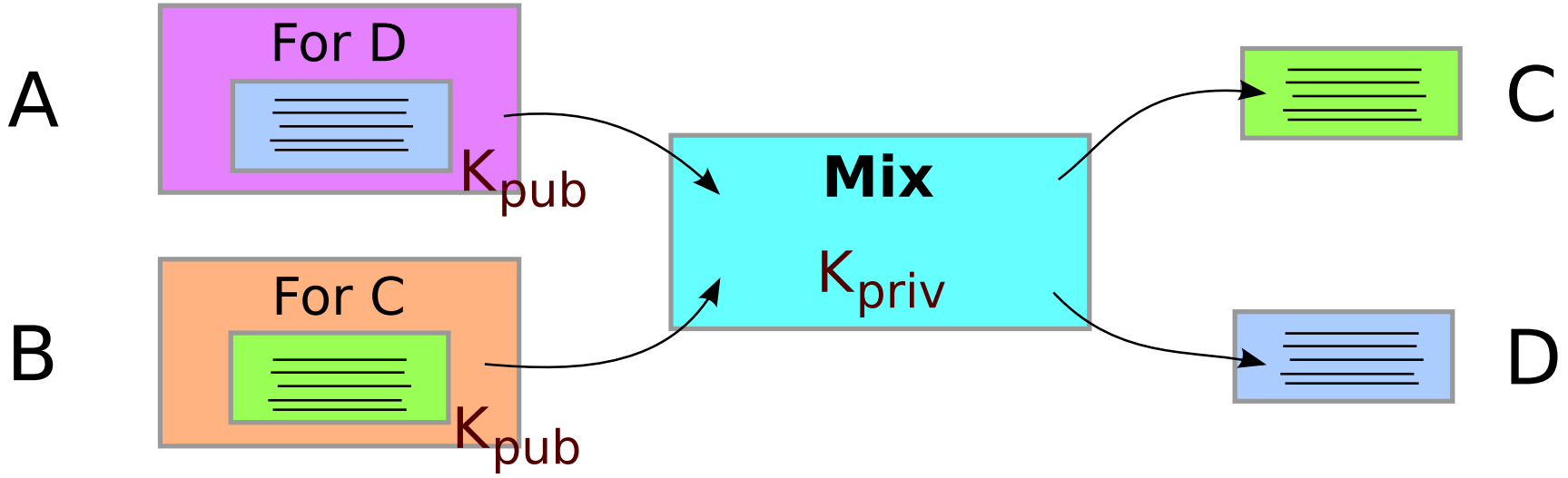


There are many other reasons why people might want privacy

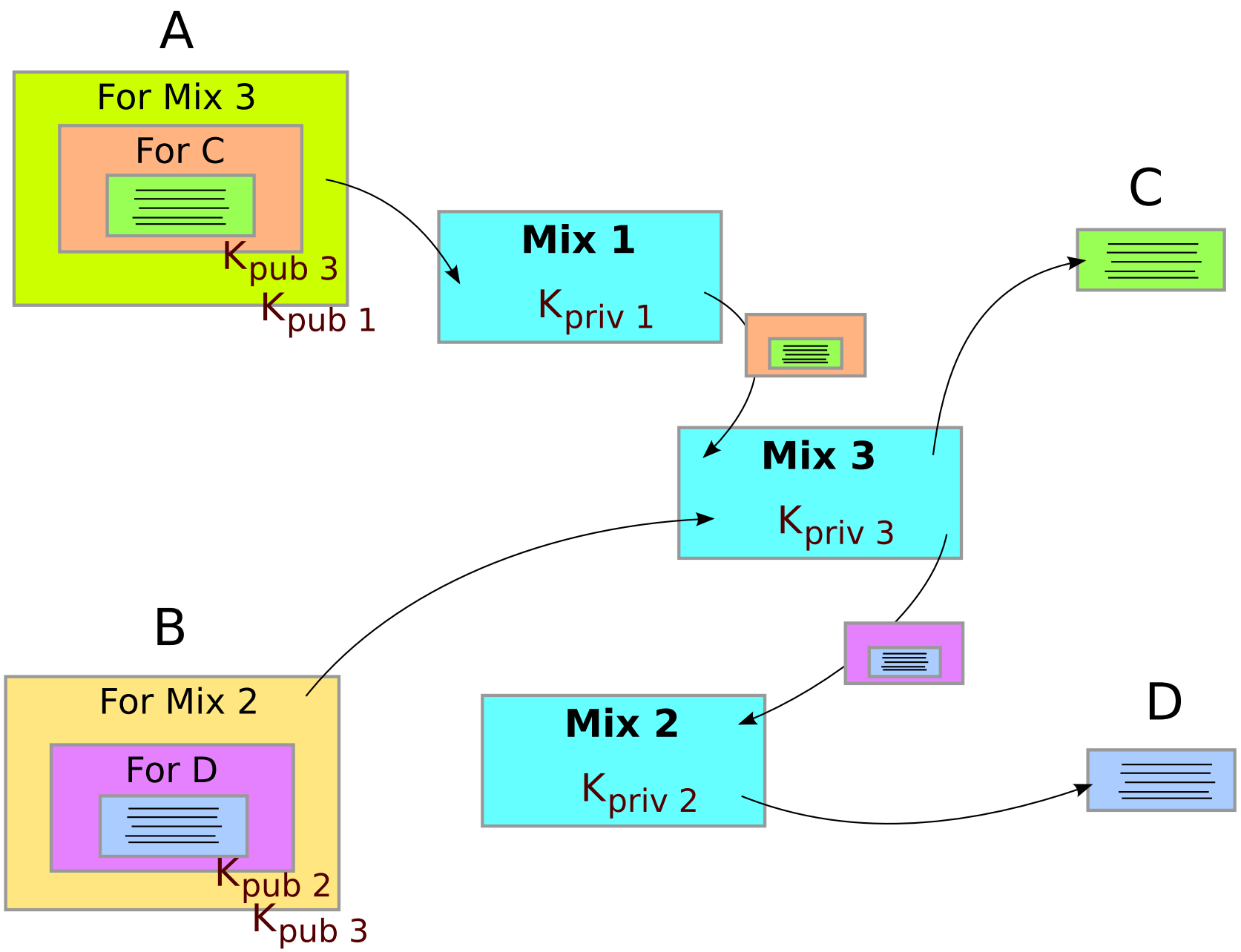
- Ordinary people
  - To avoid personal information being sold to marketers
  - Protect themselves when researching sensitive topics
- Militaries and law enforcement
  - To carry out intelligence gathering
  - Protect undercover field agents
  - Offer anonymous tip lines
- Journalists
  - To protect sources, such as whistle blowers
- Human rights workers
  - To publicise abuses and protect themselves from surveillance
  - Blogging about controversial subjects
- Businesses
  - To observe their competition and build anonymous collaborations

Anonymous communication

- People have to hide in a crowd of other people ("anonymity loves company")
- The goal of the system is to make all users look as similar as possible, to give a bigger crowd
- Hide who is communicating with whom
- Layered encryption and random delays hide correlation between input traffic and output traffic



Remailers


A
For Mix 3
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$K_{pub\ 3}$
$K_{pub\ 1}$
Mix 1
$K_{priv\ 1}$
C
Mix 3
$K_{priv\ 3}$
B
For Mix 2
For D
$K_{pub\ 2}$
$K_{pub\ 3}$
Mix 2
$K_{priv\ 2}$
D

Tor is a low-latency anonymity system

- Based on technology developed in the Onion Routing project
- Commonly used for web browsing (works for any TCP traffic)
- Originally built as a pure anonymity system (hides who is talking to whom)
- Now designed to resist censorship too (hides whether someone is using the system at all)
- Centralised directory authorities publish a list of all servers
- (First version developed as Part II project by Matej Pfajfar)

Tor hides communication patterns by relaying data through volunteer servers

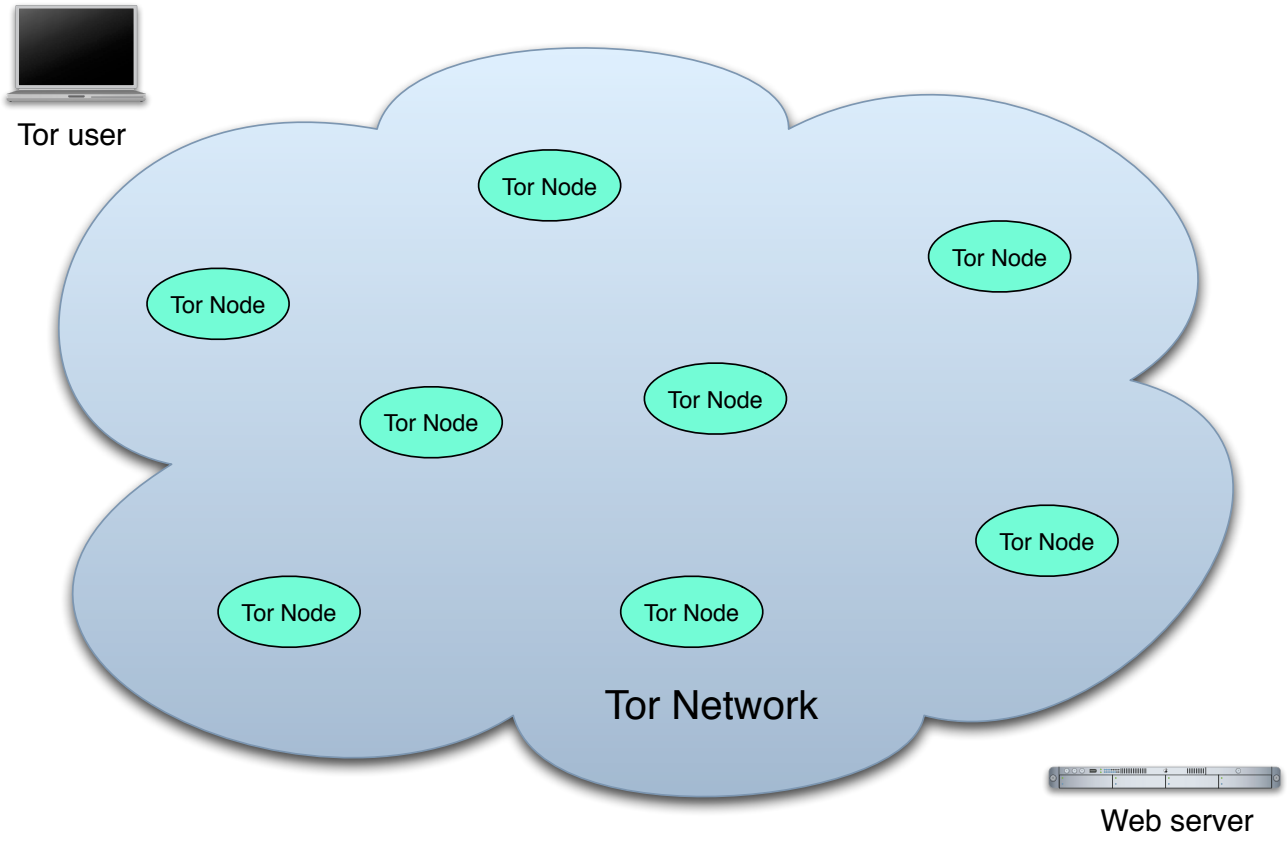

Diagram: Robert Watson

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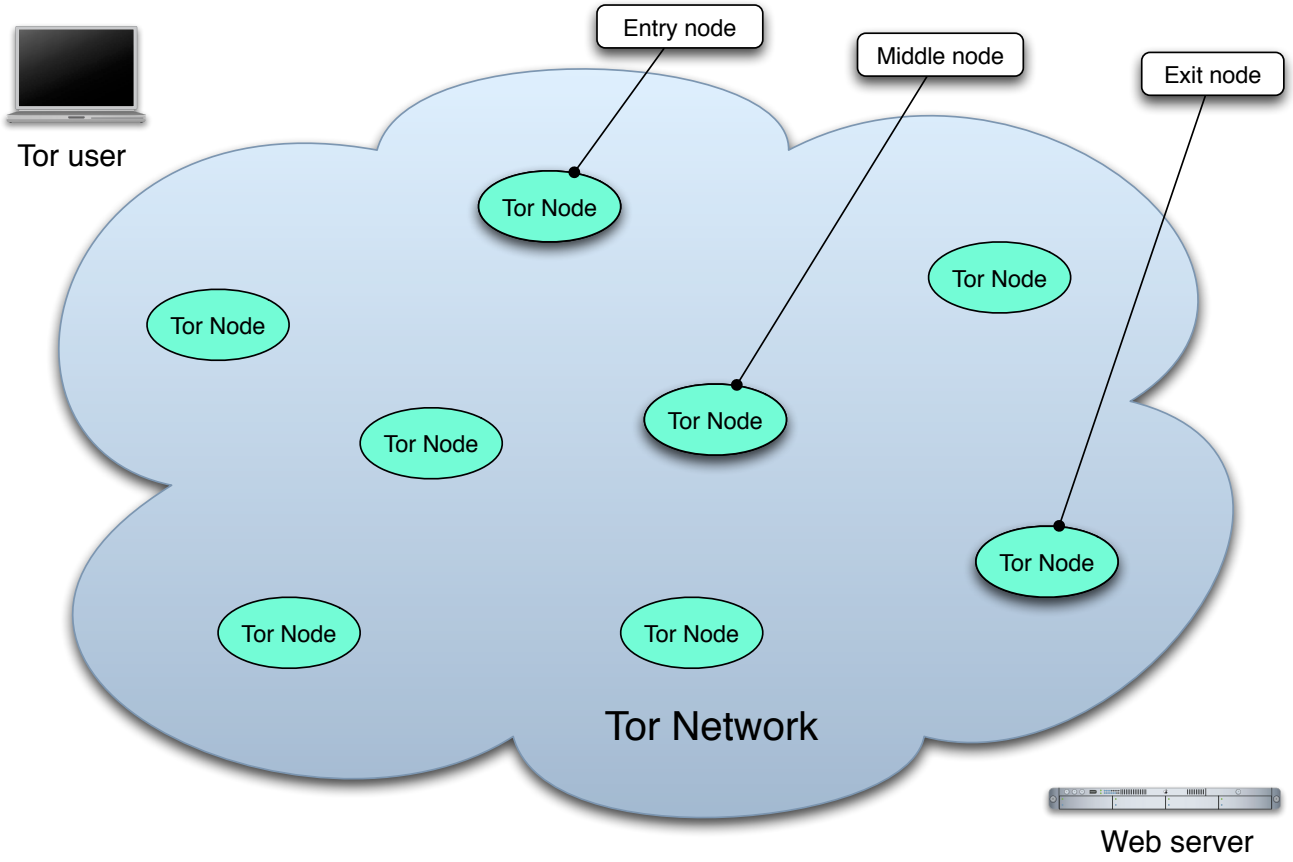

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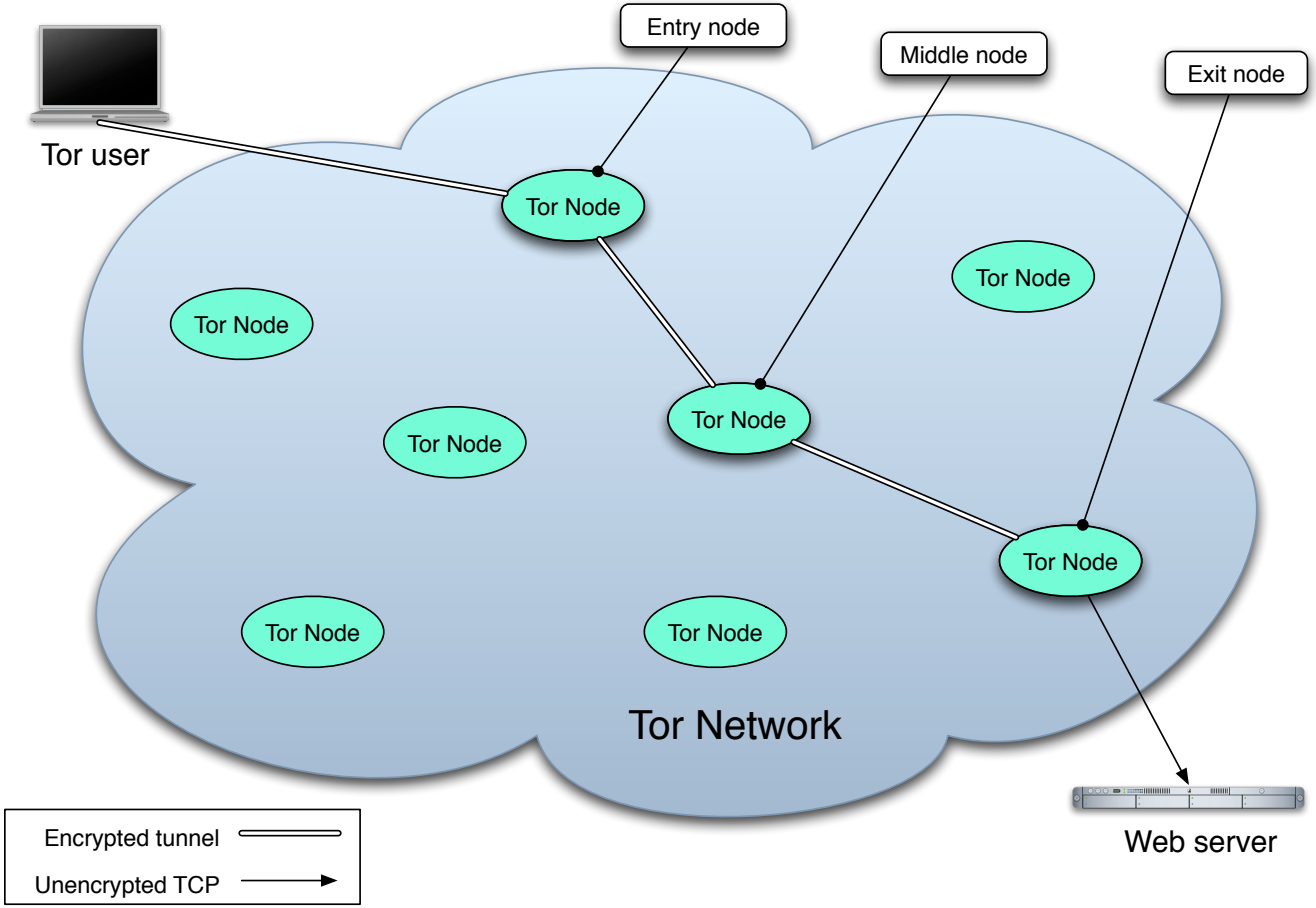

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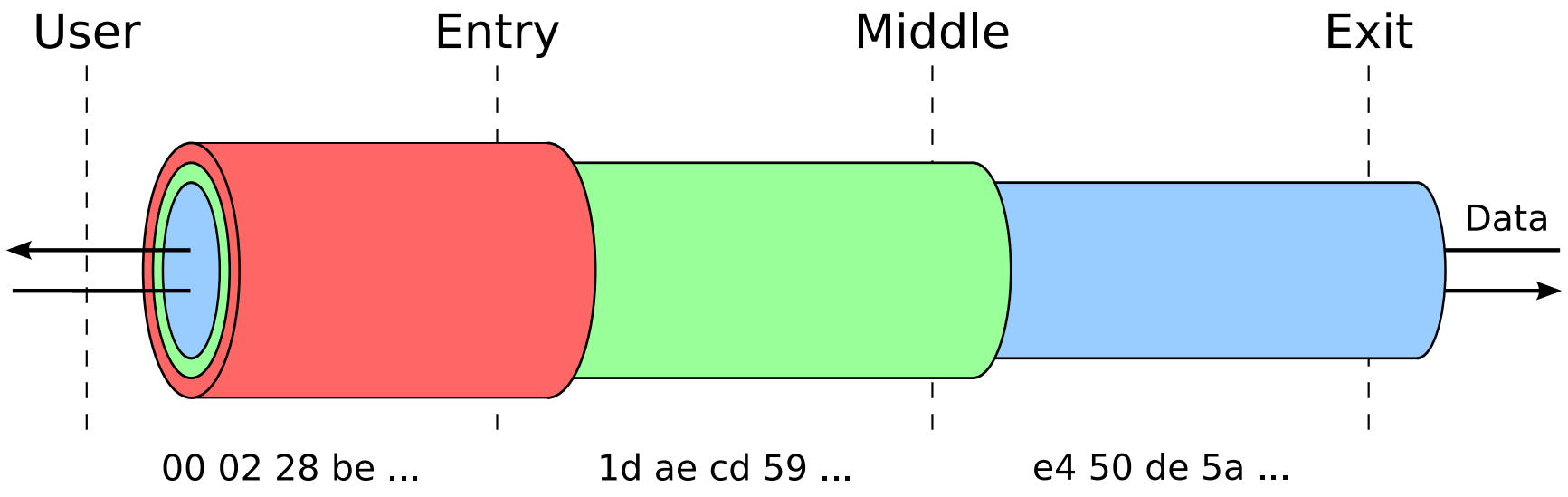
Tor uses two types of encryption



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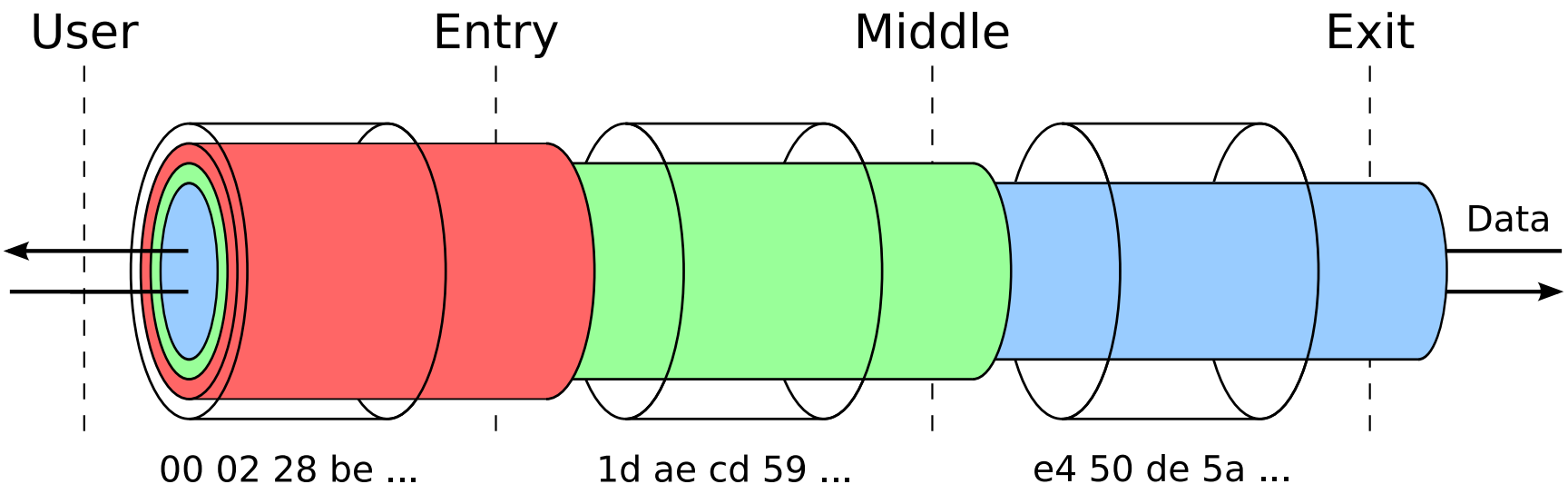

Circuit encryption unlinks data entering and leaving a server
Link encryption (TLS) disguises individual circuits

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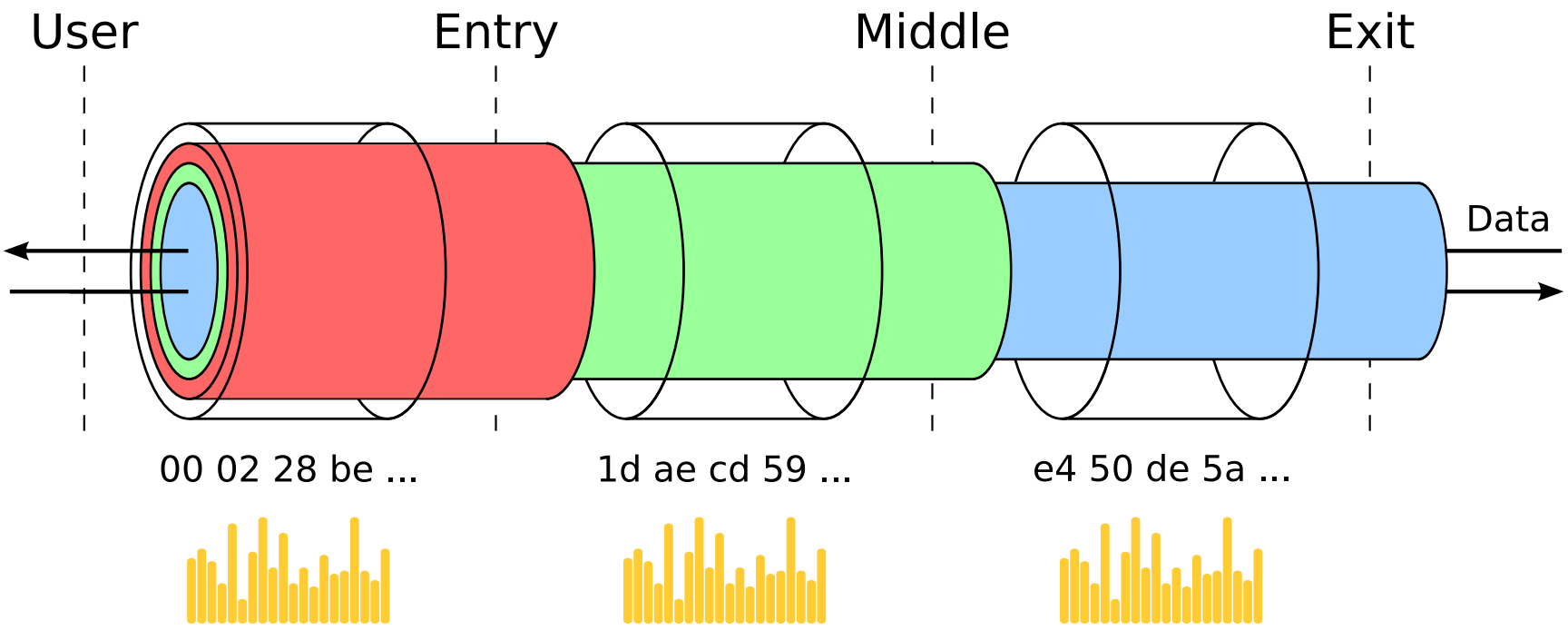
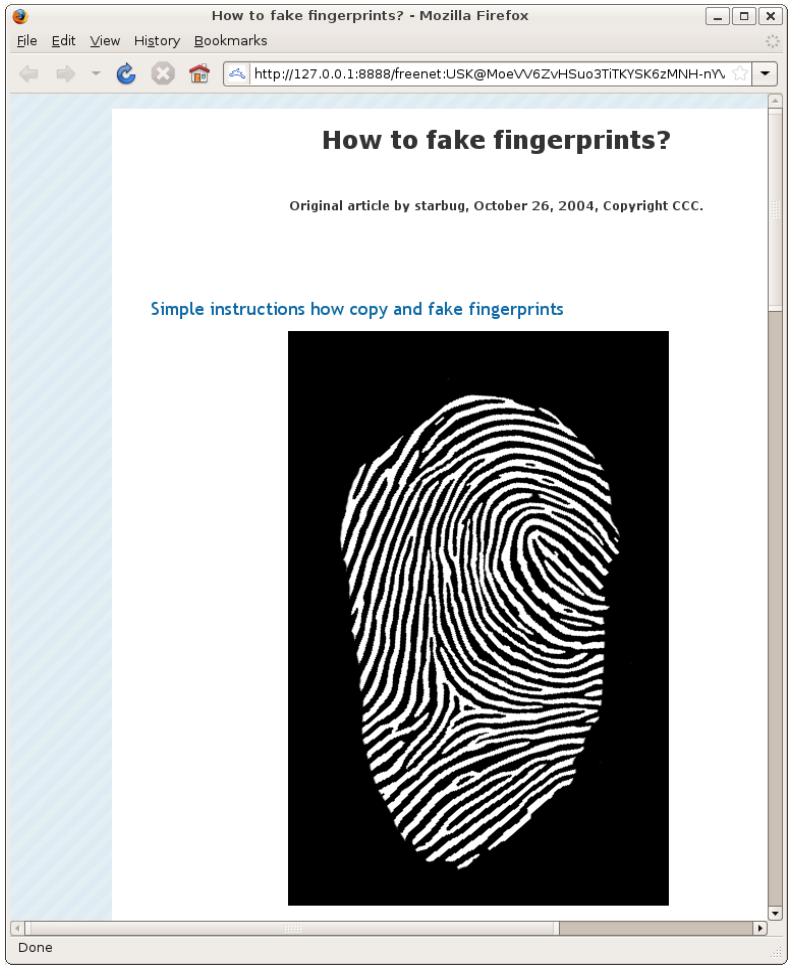


Circuit encryption unlinks data entering and leaving a server
Link encryption (TLS) disguises individual circuits
But data rate is unchanged so traffic analysis can correlate flows

Freenet is an anonymous content distribution network

- While Tor allows access to the Internet, Freenet creates a private network
- Users can create websites, share files and send/receive emails between other members of the network
- Content is hosted by sharing it amongst users of the network
- Users cannot select what content they host, and it is stored in an encrypted form



Psiphon a is censorship resistance system with different tradeoffs to Tor

- There is no centralized control, so it is hard to block but also hard for user to find a server
- Users do not have to download software, but this limits the strength of protection
- If the user cannot modify browser settings or install software, Psiphon is still usable
- Users within a censored country can ask someone they trust outside of the country to install the Psiphon server

Further information

"Tools and Technology of Internet Filtering", a chapter in "Access Denied".
`http://opennet.net/accessdenied`

"Security Engineering", 2nd Edition (Chapter 23).
`http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/~rja14/book.html`

The anonymity bibliography
`http://www.freehaven.net/anonbib/`

The Tor Project website
`https://www.torproject.org/`

A copy of these slides will be available
`http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/~sjm217/`