

There are several different options for end-to-end encrypted communication, each with different trade-offs. This article provides an overview and installation instructions for Tails, Qubes OS, and GrapheneOS.

Encrypted Messaging for Anarchists



Series: Defensive

AnarSec is a resource designed to help anarchists navigate the hostile terrain of technology – defensive guides for digital security and anonymity, as well as offensive guides for hacking. All guides are available in booklet format for printing and will be kept up to date.

Defensive

Tails

- Tails for Anarchists
- Tails Best Practices

Qubes OS

- Qubes OS for Anarchists

Phones

- Kill the Cop in Your Pocket
- GrapheneOS for Anarchists

General

- Linux Essentials
- Remove Identifying Metadata From Files
- Encrypted Messaging for Anarchists
- Make Your Electronics Tamper-Evident

Offensive

Coming soon

This version of the zine was last edited on 2024-04-19. Visit anarsec.guide to see whether it has been updated since.

The dagger symbol [†] on a word means that there is a glossary entry for it. Ai ferri corti.

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There are several different options for end-to-end encrypted[†] communication, each with different trade-offs. This article provides an overview and installation instructions for Tails, Qubes OS, and GrapheneOS. Before proceeding, let's go over a few concepts to help you distinguish between the different options.

- **End-to-end encryption** means (in theory) that only you and the person you are communicating with can read messages. However, not all encryption[†] is created equal. The quality of the encryption is determined by the *encryption protocol* used and how it's implemented at the software level.
- **Metadata protection** means that the message *metadata*[†] (the data about the data) is obscured. Even if the message itself is encrypted, metadata can reveal who is communicating with whom, when, how often, the sizes of any files that may have been transferred, and so on. Metadata exposure is a major concern¹.
- **Peer-to-peer** means that the messages do not pass through a centralized server.
- **Tor** is an anonymity network[†]. Some applications route your messages through Tor by default.

For a more in-depth look at these various considerations, we recommend The Guide to Peer-to-Peer, Encryption, and Tor: New Communication Infrastructure for Anarchists². This text criticizes Signal for not being peer-to-peer and not using Tor by default, and goes on to compare Signal, Cwtch, and Briar.

Since anonymous public-facing projects such as counter-info websites interact with unknown (i.e. untrusted) contacts, they need more from encrypted communication than people using applications for private communication. These additional needs include:

- That anyone can contact the project
- Resiliency to correlation attacks[†]

¹docs.cwtch.im/security/risk#threat-model

²notrace.how/resources/#pet-guide

prevents the operators of the sites you visit from learning your physical location.

Every website visited through the Tor network passes through 3 relays. Relays are servers hosted by different people and organizations around the world. No single relay ever knows both where the encrypted connection is coming from and where it is going. An excerpt from a leaked top-secret NSA assessment calls Tor “the King of high secure, low latency Internet anonymity” with “no contenders for the throne in waiting”. The Tor network can be accessed through the Tor Browser on any operating system. The Tails¹³⁰ operating system forces every program to use the Tor network when accessing the Internet.

For more information, see Tails for Anarchists¹³⁰ and Privacy Guides¹³¹. To understand the limitations of Tor, see the Whonix documentation¹³².

VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol)

Google Voice is a well-known and insecure VoIP service; this technology routes your calls over the Internet (as Signal does) instead of using standard cell tower transmission. Unlike Signal, VoIP allows you to receive calls from anyone, not just other Signal users. The advantage of using VoIP for calls over a data plan is that you can create different numbers for different activities (one for bills, one for signing up for a Signal account, etc.), and you never need to turn off Airplane mode. The advantage of using a data plan instead is that you can use it away from Wi-Fi, at the cost of geolocation (i.e. it will be possible for your service provider and possibly other parties to know where your device is at any given time).

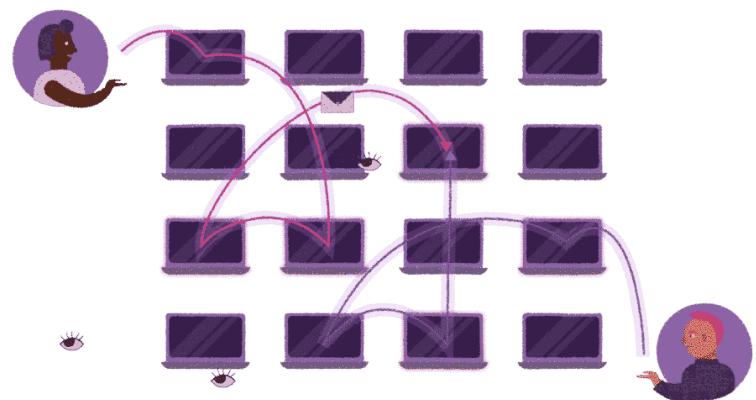
- Resiliency to exploits[†]
- For multiple project members to be able to access the same messages

The following recommendations for encrypted messaging are listed in order of highest to lowest metadata protection.

TL;DR

- Cwtch for text communication
- SimpleX Chat or Signal for voice/video calls
- PGP Email for anonymously-run public projects

Cwtch



- **Mediums:** Text
- **Metadata protection:** Yes (strong)
- **Encryption protocol:** Tor Onion Services (v3) + Tapir³
- **Peer-to-peer:** Yes
- **Tor:** Yes

Cwtch is our preference for text communication by a long shot. Cwtch is designed with metadata protection in mind; it's peer-to-

¹³⁰anarsec.guide/posts/tails/#tor

¹³¹privacyguides.org/en/advanced/tor-overview/

¹³²whonix.org/wiki/Warning

³docs.cwtch.im/security/components/tapir/authentication_protocol

peer, uses the Tor network, and stores all data locally on the device, encrypted.

Like all peer-to-peer communication, Cwtch requires *synchronous*[†] communication, meaning that both people must be online at the same time. However, its server feature also allows *asynchronous*[†] communication by providing offline delivery:

“Cwtch contact to contact chat is fully peer to peer, which means if one peer is offline, you cannot chat, and there is no mechanism for multiple people to chat. To support group chat (and offline delivery) we have created untrusted Cwtch servers which can host messages for a group. [...] the server has no way to know what messages for what groups it might be holding, or who is accessing it.”

Cwtch servers enable group communication through untrusted infrastructure — these servers are “untrusted” because the protocol is designed to be secure against a malicious Cwtch server⁴. Once the server exists, contacts can be invited to use it. For asynchronous direct messaging, create a group chat with only two people.

Any Cwtch user can turn the app on their phone or computer into a server to host a group chat, though this is best for temporary needs like an event or short-term coordination, as the device must remain powered on for it to work. Fortunately, Anarchy Planet⁵ runs a public server that is suitable for long-term groups.

Asynchronous conversations on Cwtch need to be started from a synchronous conversation — in other words, you need to be online at the same time as your contact to invite them to a group, and then you no longer need to be online at the same time. This “first contact” dynamic is not unique to Cwtch, but is present in all peer-

For more information, see *Making Your Electronics Tamper-Evident*¹²⁴, the *Threat Library*¹²⁵, the *KickSecure documentation*¹²⁶, and *Defend Dissent: Protecting Your Devices*¹²⁷.

Remote attacks

By remote attack, we mean that an adversary would access the data on your phone or laptop through an Internet or data connection. There are companies that develop and sell the ability to infect your device (usually focusing on smartphones) with malware¹¹¹ that would allow their customer (your adversary, be it a corporate or state agent) to remotely access some or all of your information. This is in contrast to a physical attack[†].

For a more detailed look, see *Defend Dissent: Protecting Your Devices*¹²⁸.

Synchronous communication

Unlike asynchronous communication[†], both parties must be online at the same time. This does not require servers for the communication and is often referred to as “peer to peer”.

Tor network

Tor¹²⁹ (short for The Onion Router) is an open and distributed network that helps defend against traffic analysis. Tor protects you by routing your communications through a network of relays run by volunteers around the world: it prevents someone monitoring your Internet connection from learning what sites you visit, and it

¹²⁴anarsec.guide/posts/tamper

¹²⁵notrace.how/threat-library/techniques/targeted-digital-surveillance/physical-access.html

¹²⁶kicksecure.com/wiki/Protection_Against_Physical_Attacks

¹²⁷open.oregonstate.education/defenddissent/chapter/protecting-your-devices/

¹²⁸open.oregonstate.education/defenddissent/chapter/protecting-your-devices/

¹²⁹torproject.org/

⁴docs.cwtch.im/security/components/cwtch/server

⁵anarchyplanet.org/chat.html#cwtch

middle¹¹¹) won't be able to decrypt those messages if the keys are compromised in the future. Modern encryption protocols such as TLS¹¹¹ 1.3 and the Signal Protocol provide FS. For more information, see Anonymous Planet¹²¹.

Metadata

Metadata is data that provides information about other data. For example, a JPG file contains the actual image (data) but it may also contain metadata such as the date the file was created, the type of camera, GPS coordinates, and so on. Metadata can be valuable to attackers (to find appropriate exploits for outdated software the target is using), government agencies (to collect information about people to create social graphs), and other parties (to target location-based advertising). Whenever you use a computer, you are likely leaving metadata behind.

For more information, see Remove Identifying Metadata From Files¹²² and Defend Dissent: Metadata¹²³.

Operating system (OS)

The system software that runs your device before any other software. Some common examples include Windows, macOS, Linux, Android, and iOS. Linux and some versions of Android are the only open-source options on this list.

Physical attacks

A physical attack is a situation where an adversary first gains physical access to your device through loss, theft, or confiscation. For example, your phone may be confiscated when you cross a border or are arrested. This is in contrast to a remote attack[†].

to-peer applications. In the future, Cwtch plans to improve this with hybrid groups⁶. Until hybrid groups are implemented, you will need to establish your asynchronous Cwtch conversations by using a second channel to set a time when you will both be online.

You can learn more about how to use Cwtch with the Cwtch Handbook⁷.

Note

Briar⁸ is another application that works in a similar way (with peer-to-peer and Tor), using the Bramble Transport Protocol⁹ (BTP). Briar's main distinguishing feature is that it continues to work even when the underlying network infrastructure is down¹⁰. It was audited in 2017¹¹. Unfortunately, Briar Desktop does not yet work with Tails or Qubes-Whonix because it cannot use the system Tor¹². Unlike Cwtch, to connect to a contact on Briar, you both have to add each other first. You can either exchange `briar://` links or scan a contact's QR code if they are nearby. Briar Mailbox¹³ allows asynchronous communication.

OnionShare¹⁴ has a chat feature that creates an ephemeral peer-to-peer chat room that is routed over the Tor network. The metadata protection works in the same way as Cwtch; it uses the Tor network as a shield and stores everything (ephemerally) locally on the device running OnionShare. OnionShare doesn't implement any chat encryption on its own – it relies on the Tor onion service's encryption. Cwtch and Briar both have more features (including the additional Tapir and BTP encryption protocols). The only advantage of OnionShare is that it is installed on Tails by default.

¹²¹anonymousplanet.org/guide.html#forward-secrecy

¹²²anarsec.guide/posts/metadata

¹²³open.oregonstate.education/defenddissent/chapter/metadata/

⁶docs.cwtch.im/blog/path-to-hybrid-groups/

⁷docs.cwtch.im/

⁸briarproject.org

For Anonymous Public-facing Projects

Need #1: That anyone can contact the project

Anyone can connect to a public Cwtch account when it's online. If the account is offline, it's not currently possible to establish first contact, though this will be supported in the future.

Need #2: Resiliency to correlation attacks

Real-time messaging applications are particularly susceptible to end-to-end correlation attacks because of the ability of an adversary, once they know their target's ID on the messaging platform, to trigger incoming network traffic on the target's side by sending them messages on the platform (when the target is online). "Appear Offline Mode" in Cwtch allows a user to selectively connect to trusted contacts and groups, while appearing offline to everyone else. An issue¹⁵ is open to further address this.

Content padding exists¹⁶ to frustrate correlation attacks via message size.

Need #3: Resiliency to exploits

A vulnerability in any application can be targeted with exploits — a severe vulnerability can allow an adversary to hack your system, such as by permitting Remote Code Execution¹⁷. Cwtch libraries are written in memory-safe languages (Go and Rust) and Cwtch

⁹code.briarproject.org/briar/briar/-/wikis/A-Quick-Overview-of-the-Protocol-Stack

¹⁰briarproject.org/how-it-works/

¹¹code.briarproject.org/briar/briar/-/wikis/FAQ#has-briar-been-independently-audited

¹²code.briarproject.org/briar/briar/-/issues/2095

¹³briarproject.org/download-briar-mailbox/

¹⁴docs.onionshare.org/2.6/en/features.html#chat-anonymously

¹⁵git.openprivacy.ca/cwtch.im/cwtch-ui/issues/712

¹⁶docs.cwtch.im/security/components/tapir/packet_format

¹⁷en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arbitrary_code_execution

cipher is not intended to be kept secret. The scrambled, unreadable, encrypted message is called the ciphertext and can be safely shared. Most ciphers require an additional piece of information, called a *cryptographic key*, to encrypt and decrypt (scramble and unscramble) messages.

For more information, see symmetric cryptography¹¹¹, asymmetric cryptography¹¹¹, or Defend Dissent: What is Encryption?¹¹⁸

End-to-end encryption (e2ee)

Data is encrypted[†] as it travels from one device to another — endpoint to endpoint — and cannot be decrypted by any intermediary. It can only be decrypted by the endpoints. This is different from "encryption at rest", such as Full Disk Encryption¹¹¹, where the data stored on your device is encrypted when the device is turned off. Both are important!

For more information, check out Encrypted Messaging for Anarchists¹¹⁹, and Defend Dissent: Protecting Your Communications¹²⁰.

Exploit

An exploit is designed to take advantage of a vulnerability¹¹¹. Even worse (or better, depending on whether you are the attacker or the target) are zero-day exploits¹¹¹.

Forward secrecy

Forward secrecy (FS, also known as "Perfect Forward Secrecy") combines a system of long-term keys and session keys to protect encrypted communications from future key compromise. An attacker who can record every encrypted message (man-in-the-

¹¹⁸open.oregonstate.education/defenddissent/chapter/what-is-encryption/

¹¹⁹anarsec.guide/posts/e2ee

¹²⁰open.oregonstate.education/defenddissent/chapter/protecting-your-communications/

Command Line Interface (CLI)

The “command line” is an all-text alternative to the graphical “point and click” tool that most of us are more familiar with; the Command Line Interface (CLI) allows us to do some things that a Graphical User Interface (GUI) does not. Often, either a GUI or a CLI would work, and which you use is a matter of preference. For example, in Tails[†], you can verify the checksum¹¹¹ of a file using either a GUI (the GtkHash program) or a CLI command (sha256sum).

For more information, see Linux Essentials¹¹². The Tech Learning Collective’s “Foundations: Linux Journey” course on the command line¹¹³ is our recommended introduction to using the CLI/terminal.

Correlation Attack

An end-to-end correlation attack is a theoretical way that a global adversary could break the anonymity of the Tor network[†]. For more information, see Protecting against determined, skilled attackers¹¹⁴ and Make Correlation Attacks More Difficult¹¹⁵. For research papers on the subject, see Thirteen Years of Tor Attacks¹¹⁶ and the design proposal on information leaks in Tor¹¹⁷.

Encryption

Encryption is the process of scrambling a message so that it can only be unscrambled (and read) by the intended parties. The method you use to scramble the original message, or *plaintext*, is called the *cipher* or *encryption protocol*. In almost all cases, the

¹¹¹anarsec.guide/glossary

¹¹²anarsec.guide/posts/linux/#the-command-line-interface

¹¹³techlearningcollective.com/foundations/linux-journey/the-shell

¹¹⁴anarsec.guide/posts/tails-best/#2-protecting-against-determined-skilled-attackers

¹¹⁵anarsec.guide/posts/tails/#make-correlation-attacks-more-difficult

¹¹⁶github.com/Attacks-on-Tor/Attacks-on-Tor#correlation-attacks

¹¹⁷spec.torproject.org/proposals/344-protocol-info-leaks.html

does fuzz testing¹⁸ to find bugs. See the Security Handbook¹⁹ to learn more. For public-facing project accounts, we recommend against enabling the “file sharing experiment” or the “image previews and profile pictures experiment” in the settings.

Need #4: For multiple project members to be able to access the same messages

If a project has multiple members, all of them should be able to access the same messages independently. Currently, this is not possible with Cwtch.

Installation

Cwtch Installation on GrapheneOS

Install Cwtch the same way you would install any app that doesn’t require Google Services²⁰ (we don’t recommend F-Droid).

Cwtch Installation on Tails

Cwtch support for Tails is very new and not thoroughly tested.

- Start Tails with an Administration Password.
- Download Cwtch for Linux²¹ with Tor Browser
- According to our Tails Best Practices²², personal data should be stored on a second LUKS USB and Persistent Storage should not be enabled. Extract the folder with the file manager (right click, select “Extract”), then move the `cwtch` folder to such a “personal data” LUKS USB.
- Run the install script
 - In the File Manager, enter the `cwtch` directory you just moved, so that you can see a file named “`install-tails.sh`”. Right click in the File Manager and select “Open in Terminal”
 - Run `./install-tails.sh` and enter the Administration Password when prompted.
- You can now launch Cwtch from the “Activities” overview.

¹⁸openprivacy.ca/discreet-log/07-fuzzbot/

¹⁹docs.cwtch.im/security/intro

²⁰anarsec.guide/posts/grapheneos/#how-to-install-software

- With Persistent Storage disabled, profile data must be restored from backup every session you need to install Cwtch. Export your profile when you are done using Cwtch, copy it to the “personal data” LUKS USB, and import it again the next time you install Cwtch.
 - Alternatively, you can backup `/home/amnesia/.cwtch` to the “personal data” LUKS USB, and copy it back to `/home/amnesia/` before you open Cwtch during your next session, in order to also persist configuration settings. “Show Hidden Files” will need to be enabled in the File Manager.
- When a new version of Cwtch is released, you will have to update manually. Download the new version, extract it, and replace the `cwtch` folder.

Cwtch Installation on Qubes-Whonix

Cwtch on Whonix does not guarantee Tor Stream Isolation²³ from other applications in the same qube, so we will install it in a dedicated qube. Cwtch is installed in an App qube, follow the installation instructions²⁴.

SimpleX Chat

Operating system[†]: **Qubes OS** has better security than Tails for many use cases, but has a steeper learning curve and no anti-forensic features. However, it is accessible enough for journalists and other non-technical users. Basic knowledge of using Linux is required — see Linux Essentials¹⁰⁶. Qubes OS can even run Windows programs such as Adobe InDesign, but much more securely than a standard Windows computer. See Qubes OS for Anarchists¹⁰⁷.

See When to Use Tails vs. Qubes OS¹⁰⁸. We do not offer “harm reduction” advice for Windows or macOS computers, as this is already widespread and gives a false sense of privacy and security.

Encrypted Messaging

See Encrypted Messaging for Anarchists¹⁰⁹

Storing Electronic Devices

See Make Your Electronics Tamper-Evident¹¹⁰.

Appendix: Glossary

Asynchronous Communication

Unlike synchronous communication[†], both parties do not need to be online at the same time. This relies on some sort of server to store messages until the message recipients come online. This is the type of messaging that most people are familiar with (email, Signal, etc.).

²¹cwtch.im/download/#linux

²²anarsec.guide/posts/tails-best/#using-a-write-protect-switch

²³anarsec.guide/posts/qubes/#whonix-and-tor

²⁴docs.cwtch.im/docs/platforms/whonix/

¹⁰⁶anarsec.guide/posts/linux

¹⁰⁷anarsec.guide/posts/qubes/

¹⁰⁸anarsec.guide/posts/qubes/#when-to-use-tails-vs-qubes-os

¹⁰⁹anarsec.guide/posts/e2ee/

¹¹⁰anarsec.guide/posts/tamper/

equipped with a microphone and/or a camera (cell phone, baby monitor, computer, car GPS, networked watch, etc.) close to a conversation in which “private or confidential words are spoken” and must remain so, even if it’s switched off, we become a potential state informer...”

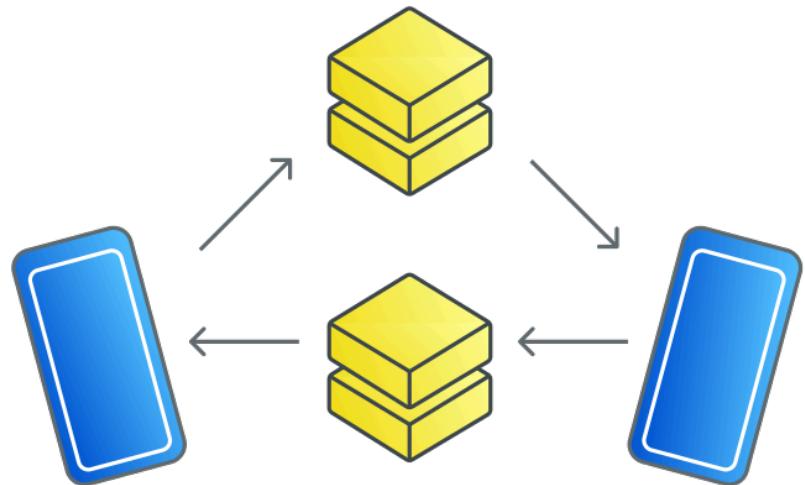
You may also be interested in the Threat Library’s “Digital Best Practices”¹⁰¹.

Your Phone

Operating system[†]: **GrapheneOS** is the only reasonably secure choice for cell phones. See GrapheneOS for Anarchists¹⁰². If you decide to have a phone, treat it like an “encrypted landline” and leave it at home when you are out of the house. See Kill the Cop in Your Pocket¹⁰³.

Your Computer

Operating system[†]: **Tails** is unparalleled for sensitive computer use (writing and sending communiques, moderating a sketchy website, researching for actions, reading articles that may be criminalized, etc.). Tails runs from a USB drive and is designed with the anti-forensic property of leaving no trace of your activity on your computer, as well as forcing all Internet connections through the Tor network[†]. See Tails for Anarchists¹⁰⁴ and Tails Best Practices¹⁰⁵.



- **Mediums:** Video call, voice call, text
- **Metadata protection:** Yes (Moderate)
- **Encryption protocol:** SimpleX Messaging Protocol²⁵, audited (2022²⁶), and SimpleX File Transfer Protocol²⁷
- **Peer-to-peer:** No
- **Tor:** Not default

SimpleX Chat allows voice and video calls, but this inherently provides less metadata protection²⁸. As a design choice to facilitate asynchronous communication, SimpleX Chat is not peer-to-peer — it uses decentralized servers that anyone can host²⁹ and does not rely on any centralized component. Servers do not store any user information (no user profiles or contacts, or messages once they are delivered), and primarily use in-memory persistence. To understand what a server can and cannot see, read the threat model³⁰.

²⁵ simplex.chat/docs/protocol/simplex-chat.html

²⁶ simplex.chat/blog/20221108-simplex-chat-v4.2-security-audit-new-website.html

²⁷ simplex.chat/blog/20230301-simplex-file-transfer-protocol.html

²⁸ mastodon.social/@sarahjamielewis/112311305534271974

²⁹ simplex.chat/docs/server.html

³⁰ github.com/simplex-chat/simplexmlobj/blob/stable/protocol/overview-tjr.md#simplex-messaging-protocol-server

¹⁰¹ notrace.how/threat-library/mitigations/digital-best-practices.html

¹⁰² anarsec.guide/posts/grapheneos/

¹⁰³ anarsec.guide/posts/nophones/

¹⁰⁴ anarsec.guide/posts/tails/

¹⁰⁵ anarsec.guide/posts/tails-best/

Since SimpleX requires that users place some trust in the SimpleX servers³¹, we recommend prioritizing Cwtch over SimpleX Chat for text communication with other anarchists, and using SimpleX Chat or Signal for voice and video calls.

Unlike Signal, SimpleX Chat doesn't require a phone number or smartphone.

If SimpleX is served with a warrant, their privacy policy³² is quite specific. Servers have the records of the message queues³³ and any undelivered encrypted messages³⁴ — no data is stored that links the queues or messages to particular users, and the data which is stored is not very useful without access to the user's device.

SimpleX Chat will work with Tor if used on an operating system that forces it to, such as Whonix or Tails. However, voice and video calls generally don't work very well over Tor regardless of which application you use.

You can learn more about how to use SimpleX Chat with their guide³⁵. Make sure to set a database passphrase³⁶.

For Anonymous Public-facing Projects

Need #1: That anyone can contact the project

Unlike the one-time invitation links that are normally used by SimpleX Chat and shared through a separate channel, you also have a long term address³⁷ that can be published online so that anyone can connect to you. We recommend against enabling “Auto-accept”.

³¹github.com/simplex-chat/simplexmq/blob/stable/protocol/overview-tjr.md#trust-in-servers

³²github.com/simplex-chat/simplex-chat/blob/stable/PRIVACY.md

³³github.com/simplex-chat/simplex-chat/blob/stable/PRIVACY.md#connections-with-other-users

³⁴github.com/simplex-chat/simplex-chat/blob/stable/PRIVACY.md#messages-and-files

³⁵simplex.chat/docs/guide/readme.html

³⁶simplex.chat/docs/guide/privacy-security.html#database-passphrase

³⁷simplex.chat/docs/guide/app-settings.html#your-profile-settings

- **Matrix/Element:** Matrix has a problem that is inherent in federated networks — terrible metadata leakage⁹⁰ and data ownership⁹¹. It has no forward secrecy, the Element client has a large attack surface, and there is a long list of other issues⁹². What's more, the developers are very friendly with various national police agencies⁹³.
- **XMPP Clients:** Regardless of the client, an XMPP server will always be able to see your contact list⁹⁴. Additionally, server-side parties (e.g., administrators, attackers, law enforcement) can inject arbitrary messages, modify address books, log passwords in cleartext⁹⁵ and act as a man-in-the-middle⁹⁶.

Appendix: Recommendations

As anarchists, we must defend ourselves against police and intelligence agencies that conduct targeted digital surveillance⁹⁷ for the purposes of incrimination⁹⁸ and network mapping⁹⁹. Our goal is to obscure the State's visibility into our lives and projects. Our recommendations are intended for all anarchists, and they are accompanied by guides to put the advice into practice.

We agree with the conclusion of an overview of targeted surveillance measures in France¹⁰⁰: “So let's be clear about our responsibilities: if we knowingly bring a networked device

⁸⁹words.filippo.io/dispatches/telegram-ecdh/

⁹⁰anarc.at/blog/2022-06-17-matrix-notes/#metadata-handling

⁹¹anarc.at/blog/2022-06-17-matrix-notes/#data-retention-defaults

⁹²telegra.ph/why-not-matrix-08-07

⁹³element.io/blog/bundesmessenger-is-a-milestone-in-germanys-ground-breaking-vision/

⁹⁴coy.im/documentation/security-threat-model/

⁹⁵web.archive.org/web/20211215132539/https://infosec-handbook.eu/articles/xmpp-aitm/

⁹⁶notes.valdikss.org.ru/jabber.ru-mitm/

⁹⁷notrace.how/threat-library/techniques/targeted-digital-surveillance.html

⁹⁸notrace.how/threat-library/tactics/incrimination.html

⁹⁹notrace.how/threat-library/techniques/network-mapping.html

¹⁰⁰actforfree.noblogs.org/post/2023/07/24/number-of-the-day-89502-preventive-surveillance-measures-france/

Need #3: Resiliency to exploits

A vulnerability in any application can be targeted with exploits — a severe vulnerability can allow an adversary to hack your system, such as by permitting Remote Code Execution⁸⁷. Email can be accessed through webmail (via Tor Browser) or through a client like Thunderbird — these have different attack surfaces. For example, a Cwtch developer found an exploit to turn Thunderbird into a decryption oracle⁸⁸ when it displays messages with HTML.

We recommend using Thunderbird (which is available in Tails and Qubes-Whonix by default) with the setting to display email as “Plain Text” rather than as HTML: **View → Message Body As → Plain Text**. Most webmail will not function with Tor Browser in “Safest” mode.

Need #4: For multiple project members to be able to access the same messages

If a project has multiple members, all of them should be able to access the same messages independently. This is straight forward with email, if all project members have the email password and the private PGP key.

Applications we do not recommend

We do *not* recommend:

- **Telegram:** Telegram has no end-to-end encryption for group chats, and it is opt-in for one-on-one chats. The encryption doesn’t use established protocols, and has had cryptographers describe it as “the most backdoor-looking bug I’ve ever seen”⁸⁹.

Need #2: Resiliency to correlation attacks

Real-time messaging applications are particularly susceptible to end-to-end correlation attacks because once an adversary knows their target’s ID on the messaging platform, they can trigger incoming network traffic on the target’s side by sending them messages on the platform (when the target is online). An issue³⁸ is open to address this. Message “mixing” is also planned³⁹.

Content padding exists⁴⁰ to frustrate correlation attacks via message size.

Need #3: Resiliency to exploits

A vulnerability in any application can be targeted with exploits — a severe vulnerability can allow an adversary to hack your system, such as by permitting Remote Code Execution⁴¹. For public-facing project accounts, we recommend that you set SimpleX Chat preferences to only allow text (prohibiting voice messages and attachments).

Need #4: For multiple project members to be able to access the same messages

If a project has multiple members, all of them should be able to access the same messages independently. Currently, this is not possible with SimpleX Chat.

Installation

SimpleX Chat Installation on GrapheneOS

Install SimpleX Chat the same way you would install any app that doesn’t require Google Services⁴² (we don’t recommend F-Droid).

³⁸github.com/simplex-chat/simplex-chat/issues/3197

³⁹github.com/simplex-chat/simplex-chat#privacy-and-security-technical-details-and-limitations

⁴⁰github.com/simplex-chat/simplex-chat#privacy-and-security-technical-details-and-limitations

⁴¹en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arbitrary_code_execution

⁴²anarsec.guide/posts/grapheneos/#how-to-install-software

If you're using a VPN (as we recommend⁴³) then the default relay for calls is redundant and can be turned off to improve call quality: **Settings → Audio & video calls**, disable **Always use relay**

SimpleX Chat Installation on Tails

- Tails does *not* need an Administration Password to run an AppImage package.
- Download the AppImage⁴⁴ with Tor Browser
- According to our Tails Best Practices⁴⁵, personal data should be stored on a second LUKS USB and Persistent Storage should not be enabled. Copy the .AppImage file to such a "personal data" LUKS USB.
- Make the AppImage executable
 - In the File Manager, right-click "Properties". Under "Permissions", enable "Executable as Program".
- You can now launch SimpleX Chat by double-clicking the AppImage file.
- In **Settings → Network & Servers**, enable "Use SOCKS proxy (port 9050)" (to configure SimpleX Chat to go through Tor⁴⁶). You can now create a SimpleX address.
- With Persistent Storage disabled, configuration and profile data must be restored from backup every session you use SimpleX Chat. Export your database (**Settings → Database passphrase & export**) when you are done using SimpleX Chat, copy it to the "personal data" LUKS USB, and import it again the next time you use SimpleX Chat.
 - Alternatively, you can backup `/home/amnesia/.local/share/simplex` to the "personal data" LUKS USB, and copy it back to `/home/amnesia/.local/share` before you open SimpleX during your next session. "Show Hidden Files" will need to be enabled in the File Manager.
- When a new version of SimpleX Chat is released, you will have to update manually. Download the new version and replace the .AppImage file.

⁴³anarsec.guide/posts/grapheneos/#how-to-install-software

⁴⁴simplex.chat/downloads/#desktop-app

Problem⁸¹ and Stop Using Encrypted Email⁸². Privacy Guides⁸³ agrees that "email is best used for receiving transactional emails [...], not for communicating with others." **We recommend that anarchists still using PGP email use Cwtch groups instead.**

There is an exception: for anonymous public-facing projects, we still recommend using PGP email because it is currently the best option that meets the additional needs required by a public account. Use a radical server⁸⁴ that doesn't require an invite code. You can learn more about how to use PGP email with the Riseup Guide to Encrypted Email⁸⁵.

Note

PGP is used for another purpose outside of communication: verifying the integrity and authenticity of files. For this use case, see our explanation⁸⁶.

For Anonymous Public-facing Projects

Need #1: That anyone can contact the project

Anyone can send a message to a public email account regardless of whether the recipient is online or offline.

Need #2: Resiliency to correlation attacks

Email is not a real-time messaging application — this means that it is not particularly susceptible to end-to-end correlation attacks via time.

No content padding exists to frustrate correlation attacks via message size in email protocols, but if you access the mail servers through Tor then the traffic is padded.

⁸¹latacora.micro.blog/2019/07/16/the-pgp-problem.html

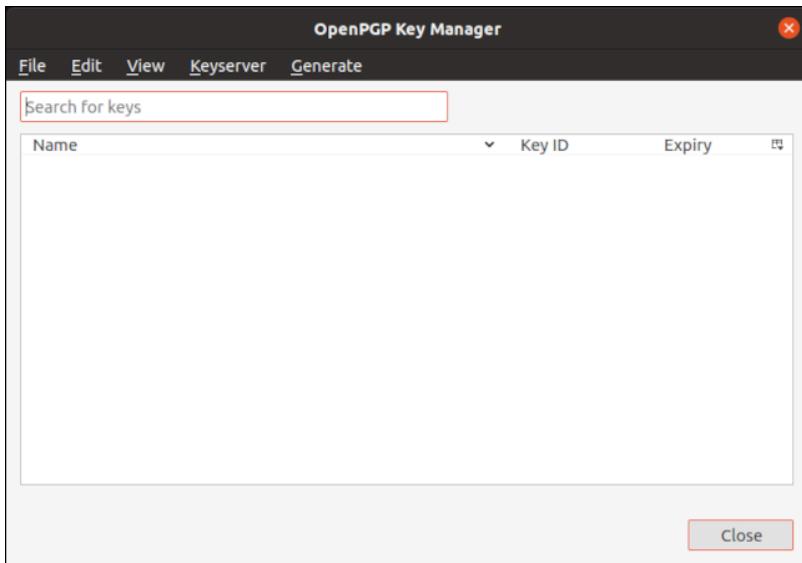
⁸²latacora.micro.blog/2020/02/19/stop-using-encrypted.html

⁸³privacyguides.org/en/basics/email-security/

⁸⁴riseup.net/en/security/resources/radical-servers

⁸⁵riseup.net/en/security/message-security/openpgp

⁸⁶anarsec.guide/posts/tails-best/#appendix-gpg-explanation



- **Medium:** Text
- **Metadata protection:** No
- **Encryption protocol:** RSA⁸⁰ or ed25519, no forward secrecy
- **Peer-to-peer:** No
- **Tor:** Not default

PGP (Pretty Good Privacy) is not so much a messaging platform as it is a way to encrypt messages on top of existing messaging platforms (in this case, email). PGP email does not have the encryption property of *forward secrecy*[†]. The goal of forward secrecy is to protect past sessions from future key or password compromises. It maintains the secrecy of past communications even if the current communication is compromised. This means that an adversary could decrypt all past PGP messages in one fell swoop. When you also consider the metadata exposure inherent in email, PGP simply doesn't meet the standards of modern cryptography. For a more technical critique, see The PGP

⁸⁰blog.trailofbits.com/2019/07/08/fuck-rsa/

SimpleX Chat Installation on Qubes-Whonix

SimpleX Chat on Whonix does not guarantee Tor Stream Isolation⁴⁷ from other applications in the same qube, so we will install it in a dedicated qube. SimpleX Chat is installed in an App qube, not a Template (because it is an AppImage).

- Download the AppImage⁴⁸ using Tor Browser in a disposable Whonix qube.
- Create an App qube⁴⁹ with the Template `whonix-workstation-17` and networking `sys-whonix`.
- Copy the file to your new App qube
- Make the AppImage executable
 - In the File Manager, right-click “Properties”. Under “Permissions”, enable “Allow this file to run as a program”.
- You can now launch SimpleX Chat by double-clicking the AppImage file.
- When a new version of SimpleX Chat is released, you will have to update manually. Download the new version and replace the .AppImage file.

Signal

⁴⁵anarsec.guide/posts/tails-best/#using-a-write-protect-switch

⁴⁶tails.net/doc/persistent_storage/additional_software/index.en.html#index5h2

⁴⁷anarsec.guide/posts/qubes/#whonix-and-tor

⁴⁸simplex.chat/downloads/#desktop-app

⁴⁹anarsec.guide/posts/qubes/#how-to-organize-your-qubes



- **Mediums:** Video call, voice call, text
- **Metadata protection:** Yes (Moderate)
- **Encryption protocol:** Signal Protocol, audited (2017⁵⁰)
- **Peer-to-peer:** No
- **Tor:** Not default

The Signal Protocol has a moderate amount of metadata protection; sealed sender⁵¹, private contact discovery⁵², and the private group system⁵³. Message recipient identifiers are only stored on Signal's servers for as long as it takes to deliver each message. As a result, if Signal is served with a warrant, they will only be able to provide⁵⁴ the time of account creation and the date of the account's last connection to the Signal servers. Still, Signal relies on the Google Services Framework (though it's possible to use Signal without it), and the sealed sender metadata protection applies only to contacts (by default).

Signal is not peer-to-peer; it uses centralized servers that we must trust. Signal will work with Tor if used on an operating system that forces it to, such as Whonix or Tails.

⁵⁰en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Signal_Protocol

⁵¹signal.org/blog/sealed-sender/

⁵²signal.org/blog/private-contact-discovery/

⁵³signal.org/blog/signal-private-group-system/

⁵⁴signal.org/bigbrother/

- Run the commands in the Signal installation guide⁷⁵ to install Signal Desktop in the Template.
 - Note that the layout of the Signal installation guide is a bit confusing for users unfamiliar with the command line; `wget` and `cat` are separate commands, but `echo` in #2 is a command so long that it takes two lines (which is why the second line is indented).
 - Template qubes require a proxy for `wget`. Before running the command, create a configuration file at `~/.wgetrc` in the Template, with the following contents:

```
use_proxy = on
http_proxy = 127.0.0.1:8082
https_proxy = 127.0.0.1:8082
```

- Create an App qube⁷⁶ with the Template `whonix-workstation-17-signal` and networking `sys-whonix`.
- In the **Settings → Applications** tab of the new App qube, you may need to click “Refresh applications” for Signal to show up. Move Signal to the Selected column and press “OK”.
- Updates will be handled by **Qubes Update** as you would expect.

Alternative method

You can install Signal Desktop in a Whonix Workstation App qube using Qube Apps⁷⁷ and not need to bother with Templates. Signal Desktop on Flathub is community maintained⁷⁸, not official, which is a security consideration⁷⁹.

PGP Email

⁷⁵signal.org/download/linux/

⁷⁶anarsec.guide/posts/qubes/#creating-qubes

⁷⁷micahflee.com/2021/11/introducing-qube-apps/

⁷⁸github.com/flathub/org.signal.Signal

⁷⁹kicksecure.com/wiki/Install_Software#Flathub_Package_Sources_Security

Follow the instructions for installing software that isn't available in the Play Store⁶⁹. You can migrate from an existing Signal account⁷⁰. Turn on database encryption.

Signal Installation on Tails

About.Privacy maintains a guide⁷¹ for installing Signal Desktop on Tails. There is a guide for registering an account from Tails without a smartphone (using Signal-cli), and another guide for if you already have a Signal account.

Some of the Signal Configuration and Hardening Guide⁷² also applies to Signal Desktop.

Signal Installation on Qubes-Whonix

Signal Desktop on Whonix is not guaranteed to have Tor Stream Isolation⁷³ from other applications in the same qube, so we will install it in a dedicated qube. Signal Desktop is installed in a Template, not an App qube (because it is available as a .deb from a third party repository).

Some of the Signal Configuration and Hardening Guide⁷⁴ also applies to Signal Desktop.

- Go to **Applications menu → Qubes Tools → Qube Manager**
- Clone whonix-workstation-17 and name it something like whonix-workstation-17-signal.
 - We do this to avoid adding attack surface to the base Whonix Workstation template. If you also install other messaging applications, they could share a cloned template with a name like whonix-workstation-17-e2ee
- Open a Terminal in the new Template: **Applications menu → Template: whonix-workstation-17-signal: Xfce Terminal**

⁶⁹anarsec.guide/posts/grapheneos/#software-that-isn-t-on-the-play-store

⁷⁰github.com/mollyim/mollyim-android#compatibility-with-signal

⁷¹0xacab.org/about/privacy/messengers-on-tails-os/-/wikis/HowTo

⁷²blog.privacyguides.org/2022/07/07/signal-configuration-and-hardening/

⁷³anarsec.guide/posts/qubes/#whonix-and-tor

⁷⁴blog.privacyguides.org/2022/07/07/signal-configuration-and-hardening/

Signing up for a Signal account is difficult to do anonymously. The account is tied to a phone number that the user must retain control of – due to changes in “registration lock”⁵⁵, it is no longer sufficient to register with a disposable phone number. An anonymous phone number can be obtained on a burner phone or online⁵⁶ and must be maintained as long as you’re using it, which takes some technical know-how and money, limiting the amount of people who will do this.

Another barrier to anonymous registration is that Signal Desktop will only work if Signal is first registered from a smartphone. For users familiar with the command line[†], it is possible to register an account from a computer using Signal-cli⁵⁷. The VoIP[†] account used for registration would have to be obtained anonymously.

These barriers to anonymous registration mean that Signal is rarely used anonymously. This has significant implications if the State gains physical[†] or remote[†] access to the device. One of the primary goals of State surveillance of anarchists is network mapping⁵⁸, and it’s common for them to gain physical access to devices through house raids⁵⁹ or arrests. For example, if police bypass your device’s authentication⁶⁰, they can identify Signal contacts (as well as the members of any groups you are in) simply by their phone numbers, if those contacts haven’t changed their settings to hide their phone number.

In a recent repressive operation in France against a riotous demonstration⁶¹, the police did exactly that. Police got physical access to suspects’ phones during arrests and house raids, remote access through spyware, and then identified Signal contacts and

⁵⁵blog.privacyguides.org/2022/11/10/signal-number-registration-update/

⁵⁶anonymousplanet.org/guide.html#getting-an-anonymous-phone-number

⁵⁷0xacab.org/about/privacy/messengers-on-tails-os/-/wikis/HowTo#signal

⁵⁸notrace.how/threat-library/techniques/network-mapping.html

⁵⁹notrace.how/threat-library/techniques/house-raid.html

⁶⁰notrace.how/threat-library/techniques/targeted-digital-surveillance/authentication-bypass.html

⁶¹notrace.how/resources/#lafarge

group members. These identities were added to the list of suspects who were subsequently investigated.

The risk of a compromised device aiding the police in network mapping is partly mitigated by the username feature⁶² — use it to prevent a Signal contact from being able to learn your phone number. In **Settings → Privacy → Phone Number**, set both

Who can see my number and **Who can find me by number to Nobody**. We recommend that you select a profile name and photo that won't be useful for establishing your identity. For voice and video calls, Signal reveals the IP address of both parties by default, which could also be used to identify Signal contacts. If you aren't using Signal from behind a VPN or Tor, then in **Settings → Privacy → Advanced**, enable **Always relay calls** to prevent this.

A private company that sells spyware to governments has a product called JASMINE that is marketed to deanonymize Signal users⁶³, based on the analysis of metadata.

In its targeted interception mode — which starts from a single target — JASMINE has claimed it is able to identify communicating parties in encrypted but peer-to-peer applications [...] the JASMINE documentation explicitly claims support for identifying the IP addresses of participants in encrypted apps such as WhatsApp and Signal during voice and video calls where peer-to-peer connections are also used for calling by default.

The JASMINE documentation also explains that by analysing encrypted traffic “events” for a whole country — in mass interception mode — JASMINE has the ability to correlate and identify the participants in encrypted group chats on messaging apps.

⁶²signal.org/blog/phone-number-privacy-usernames/

⁶³securitylab.amnesty.org/latest/2023/10/technical-deep-dive-into-intellexa-alliance-surveillance-products

A similar surveillance product would not work against Cwtch because it uses Tor by default. Without a Tor or VPN proxy, an adversary can see that you are connecting to Signal servers which is what enables this type of timing correlation attack. Although it is possible to configure Signal to use a VPN or Tor, it is opt-in so most people will not use it like this.

Signal was designed to bring encrypted communication to the masses, not for an anarchist threat model. Because it's very difficult to register for Signal anonymously, and because you must first install Signal on a phone to use it on a computer, **we recommend prioritizing Cwtch over Signal for text communication with other anarchists, and using SimpleX Chat or Signal for voice and video calls**. For the same reasons, Signal is not well-suited for anonymous public-facing projects.

Installation

Signal Installation on GrapheneOS

We recommend the Signal Configuration and Hardening Guide⁶⁴. As noted above, unless you are familiar with the Command Line Interface[†], Signal needs to be registered on a smartphone before it can be connected to a computer. Install Signal the same way you would install any app that doesn't require Google Services⁶⁵ (we don't recommend F-Droid). If you are using Signal from behind a VPN (as we recommend⁶⁶) then a relay for calls is redundant and should be turned off: **Settings → Privacy → Advanced**, disable **Always relay calls**

Molly-FOSS⁶⁷ is a fork of Signal with hardening and anti-forensic features available on Android — we recommend it over Signal, and trusting the Molly team is made easier by its reproducible builds⁶⁸.

⁶⁴blog.privacyguides.org/2022/07/07/signal-configuration-and-hardening/

⁶⁵anarsec.guide/posts/grapheneos/#how-to-install-software

⁶⁶anarsec.guide/posts/grapheneos/#how-to-install-software

⁶⁷blog.privacyguides.org/2022/07/07/signal-configuration-and-hardening/#molly-android

⁶⁸github.com/mollyim/mollyim-android/tree/main/reproducible-builds