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# Freezing the Web: A Study of ReDoS Vulnerabilities in JavaScript-based Web Servers

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## Abstract

Regular expression denial of service (ReDoS) is a class of algorithmic complexity attacks where matching a regular expression against an attacker-provided input takes unexpectedly long. The single-threaded execution model of JavaScript makes JavaScript-based web servers particularly susceptible to ReDoS attacks. Despite this risk and the increasing popularity of the server-side Node.js platform, there is currently little reported knowledge about the severity of the ReDoS problem in practice. This paper presents a large-scale study of ReDoS vulnerabilities in real-world web sites. Underlying our study is a novel methodology for analyzing the exploitability of deployed servers. The basic idea is to search for previously unknown vulnerabilities in popular libraries, hypothesize how these libraries may be used by servers, and to then craft targeted exploits. In the course of the study, we identify 25 previously unknown vulnerabilities in popular modules and test 2,846 of the most popular websites against them. We find that 339 of these web sites suffer from at least one ReDoS vulnerability. Since a single request can block a vulnerable site for several seconds, and sometimes even much longer, ReDoS poses a serious threat to the availability of these sites. Our results are a call-to-arms for developing techniques to detect and mitigate ReDoS vulnerabilities in JavaScript.

## 1 Introduction

Regular expressions are widely used in all kinds of software. Since regular expressions are easy to get wrong [42], which may help attackers to bypass checks [18, 5], developers are trained to think about the correctness of regular expressions. In contrast, another security-related aspect of regular expressions is often neglected: the performance, specifically, how long it takes to match a string against a regular expression. Unfortunately, given a specifically crafted input, matching against a suboptimally designed regular expression

can easily take several minutes or even hours. For example, matching the apparently harmless regular expression  $(a^+)^b/$  against a sequence of 30 “a” characters on the Node.js JavaScript platform takes about 15 seconds on a standard computer.<sup>1</sup> Matching a sequence of 35 “a” characters already takes over 8 minutes, i.e., the matching time explodes exponentially.

If a server implementation suffers from this kind of performance problem, then an attacker can exploit it to overwhelm the server with hard-to-match inputs. This attack is known as *regular expression denial of service*, or short *ReDoS*. Such attacks are a form of algorithmic complexity attack [10] that exploits the worst-case complexity behavior of algorithms that match a string against a regular expression. Since for some regular expressions, the worst-case complexity is much higher than the average-case complexity, an attacker can cause denial of service with a few, relatively small inputs.

Even though ReDoS has been known for several years, recent developments in the web server landscape bring new and increased attention to the problem. The reason is that JavaScript is becoming increasingly popular not only for the client-side but also for the server-side of web applications. However, the single-threaded nature of JavaScript, where every request is handled by the same thread, makes server applications much more susceptible to ReDoS attacks. In practice, to avoid making the server unresponsive by blocking this thread, developers try to split any long-running computation into smaller events, which are then handled asynchronously. The problem is that in current JavaScript engines, matching a string against a regular expression cannot be easily split into multiple chunks of computation. As a result, a single request can effectively block the main thread, making the web server unresponsive to any other incoming requests and preventing it from finishing any other already established requests.

<sup>1</sup>We use JavaScript syntax for regular expressions, i.e., a pattern is either enclosed by slashes or given to the `RegExp()` constructor.

Despite the importance of ReDoS in web servers, there is currently little reported knowledge about the prevalence of ReDoS vulnerabilities in real-world websites. In this paper, we present the first comprehensive study of ReDoS across a large number of websites. We seek to answer the following questions:

- How widespread are ReDoS vulnerabilities in the server-side part of real-world JavaScript-based websites?
- What is the effect of vulnerabilities on the response time of web servers?
- What kinds of vulnerabilities are the most prevalent?
- Are more popular websites less vulnerable to ReDoS?
- Are existing defense mechanisms in use and if so, how effective are they in preventing ReDoS attacks?

Answering these questions involves solving two methodological challenges. First, how to identify ReDoS vulnerabilities in the server-side of websites when their source code is not available. We address this challenge based on a set of 25 previously unknown vulnerabilities in popular libraries and by speculating how these libraries may be used in servers. Second, how to analyze which websites are exploitable without actually performing a denial of service attack against live websites. We address this challenge by triggering requests with increasing input size, using both manually crafted exploit inputs and randomly generated, harmless inputs, and by statistically comparing the response times.

Using this methodology, we identify 339 websites that suffer from at least one ReDoS vulnerability. Based on experiments with locally installed versions of the vulnerable server-side libraries, attacking these websites with crafted inputs can cause a web server to remain unresponsive for several seconds or even minutes. These problems are due to a very small number of vulnerabilities, with a single vulnerability that causes 241 sites to be exploitable. While this is encouraging from a mitigation point of view, it also implies that an attacker aware of a single, previously unknown vulnerability can cause serious harm to several websites.

Ojamaa and D  una [27] were the first to identify ReDoS as a threat for the Node.js platform. Davis et al. [11] confirm that such problems exist in popular modules and report that 5% of the security vulnerabilities identified in Node.js libraries are ReDoS. No prior work has studied the impact of ReDoS on real-world web sites. Existing work on detecting ReDoS vulnerabilities mostly targets languages other than JavaScript. For example, W  stholz et al. [43] propose a static analysis of ReDoS vulnerabilities in Java. The only available tool for JavaScript that we are aware of is a small utility called `safe-regex`<sup>2</sup>, which checks for simple AST-level patterns known to cause Re-

<sup>2</sup><https://www.npmjs.com/package/safe-regex>

DoS. However, this approach is notoriously prone to both false positives and false negatives, since it reasons neither about the context in which these patterns appear nor about the actual performance of regular expression matching. Our work shows the urgent need for effective tools and techniques that detect and prevent ReDoS vulnerabilities in JavaScript.

In summary, this paper contributes the following:

- A novel methodology for analyzing the exploitability of deployed servers. The key ideas are (i) to hypothesize how server implementations may use libraries that have previously unknown vulnerabilities and (ii) to assess whether an attack is feasible without actually attacking the servers.
- The first comprehensive study of ReDoS vulnerabilities in JavaScript-based web servers. Out of 2,846 studied websites, we find 12% to be vulnerable.
- Empirical evidence that ReDoS is a real and widespread threat. Our work calls for novel tools and techniques that detect and prevent ReDoS vulnerabilities.
- A benchmark of previously unreported ReDoS vulnerabilities and ready-to-use exploits, which we make available for future research on finding, fixing, and mitigating ReDoS vulnerabilities:

<https://github.com/sola-da/ReDoS-vulnerabilities>

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Regular Expression Matching

Regular expressions are used to check whether a given sequence of characters *matches* a specified pattern. Most implementations in modern programming languages address this problem by converting the regular expression into an automaton [38] and through a backtracking-based search for a sequence of transitions from the initial to an accepting state that consumes the given string. For example, consider the regular expression `/^(a+b)?$/` and its equivalent automaton in Figure 1. Given the string “aab”, the automaton starts from state *s* and has two available transitions, to states 1 and 3. It first takes the transition to state 1, which leads to the accepting state *a*. Since the input string was not consumed and there are no available transitions, the algorithm backtracks to *s* and explores the transition to state 3 etc. After multiple explorations the algorithm identifies the sequence of transitions `s → 3 → 4 → 5 → 4 → 5 → 6 → 7 → a`, which reaches the accepting state and consumes all characters of the input string.

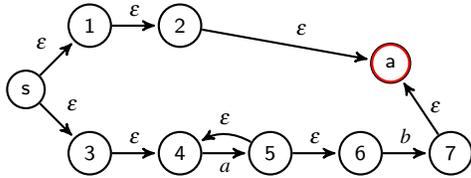


Figure 1: Automaton for the regular expression  $/\^(a+b)?\$/$ .  $s$  is the starting state and  $a$  is the accepting state.

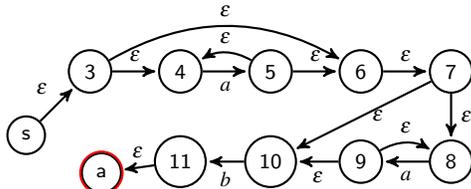


Figure 2: Automaton for the regular expression  $/\^a*a*b\$/$ .  $s$  is the starting state and  $a$  is the accepting state.

## 2.2 Regular Expression Denial of Service (ReDoS)

The backtracking-based search may cause the algorithm to backtrack a possibly large number of times. ReDoS attacks exploit these pathological cases. For example, consider the regular expression  $/\^a*a*b\$/$ , its automaton in Figure 2, and the input string “aaa”. Each character “a” can be matched using two transitions,  $4 \rightarrow 5$  and  $8 \rightarrow 9$ . At each step, the algorithm needs to decide which of these two transitions to take. Eventually, since there is no character “b” in the input string, the algorithm will always fail when reaching state 11. However, before concluding that the input string does not match the pattern, the algorithm tries all possible ways of matching the “a” characters. The example is a regular expression of super-linear complexity [43], since the number of transitions during matching is quadratic in the input size. Other regular expression even have exponential complexity, e.g., because of nested repetitions, such as in  $/\^(a*)*b\$/$ . In our study, we identify ReDoS vulnerabilities of both these types and show that both are of importance for server-side JavaScript.

## 2.3 Server-side JavaScript

JavaScript is becoming more and more popular, including the server-side Node.js platform, which advocates a single-threaded, event-based execution model that uses asynchronous I/O calls. In Node.js, the main thread of execution runs an event loop, called the *main loop* that handles events triggered by network requests, I/O operations, timers, etc. A slow computation, e.g., matching a string against a regular expression, slows down all other incoming requests. Compared to multi-threaded web

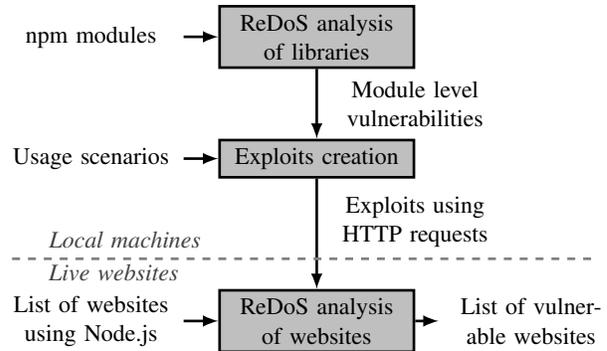


Figure 3: Overview of the methodology.

servers, such as Apache, the single-threaded execution model compounds the problem in JavaScript. For example, consider a regular expression that takes more than an hour to match, which we show to exist in widely used JavaScript software. To completely block an Apache web server, we need to send hundreds of such requests, each blocking one thread. Depending on the number of available parallel processing units, the operating system, and the thread pool size, new requests can still be handled even with hundred of busy threads running. In contrast, in Node.js one such request is enough to completely block the server for an hour. To make matters worse, even less severe ReDoS payloads can significantly degrade the availability of a Node.js server, as we show in Section 4.3.

## 3 Methodology

This section presents our methodology for studying ReDoS vulnerabilities in real websites. The overall goals of the methodology are to understand (i) how widespread such vulnerabilities are, (ii) whether an attacker could exploit them to affect the availability of live websites, and (iii) to what extent existing defense mechanisms address the problem. To answer these questions, our methodology must address two major challenges. The first challenge is a technical problem: Since the server-side source code of most websites is not available, how to know what vulnerabilities a website suffers from? The second challenge is an ethical concern: How to study the potential impact of attacks on live websites without actually causing noticeable harm to these websites?

Figure 3 shows a high-level overview of the methodology. We address the two challenges through experiments performed on machines under our control and on live websites. A main insight to address the first challenge is to use previously unknown vulnerabilities in popular JavaScript libraries and to speculate how servers may use these libraries. More precisely, we analyze third-party libraries, called node package manager modules

(npm packages or npm modules for short), to find vulnerabilities that may be exploitable via HTTP requests. We then hypothesize how the server implementation may use these packages and create exploits for these scenarios.

To address the second challenge, we present a technique that tests whether a site is vulnerable but that avoids blocking the site for a noticeable amount of time. The basic idea is to start with very small payloads that do not require more computation time than normal web requests, and to then slowly increase the payload – just long enough to claim with confidence that the site *could* be exploited if an attacker used larger payloads. To decide on the size of payloads sent to live websites, we run experiments on locally installed web servers that use the vulnerable packages.

An alternative to experimenting with live websites would be to locally install open-source web applications. We discarded this idea because it would limit the scale of our study to the few web sites that disclose their server-side code, because it would remain unclear whether the results generalize to real-world sites, and because we could not study which counter-measures are deployed in practice.

### 3.1 Identifying Websites with Server-side JavaScript

We consider the most popular one million websites aggregated by Alexa<sup>3</sup> as candidate sites for our study. Many of these websites do not use JavaScript on the server-side and analyzing all the websites against our exploits is prohibitive. Instead, we select sites that run the currently most popular framework for JavaScript-based web servers, Express<sup>4</sup>. To this end, we make a request to each of the one million websites and check whether the header `X-Powered-By` is “Express”. The framework sets this value by default on a fresh installation. In total, 2,846 sites set this header which account for a market share of around 0.3%, consistent with estimates by others.<sup>5</sup> Because headers may be filtered to prevent attackers from targeted attacks and because frameworks other than Express exist, our selection of sites is likely yield an underapproximation of the impact of ReDoS. Figure 4 shows the number of Express-based websites in batches of 100,000 sites, ordered by popularity. We observe that Express tends to be used by the more popular websites, confirming the importance of studying the security of JavaScript-based servers.

<sup>3</sup><http://www.alexa.com/>

<sup>4</sup><https://expressjs.com/>

<sup>5</sup><https://w3techs.com/technologies/details/ws-nodejs/all/all>

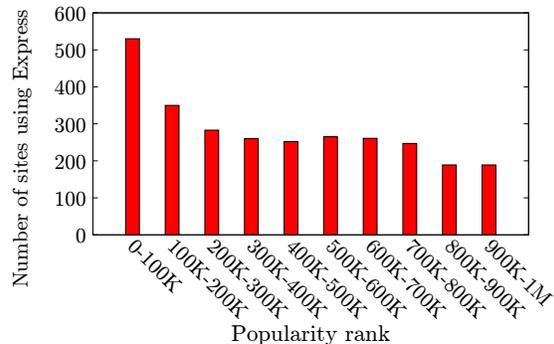


Figure 4: Number of server-side JavaScript websites within a given popularity range.

### 3.2 Finding ReDoS Vulnerabilities in Libraries

Our methodology relies on knowing previously unknown, or at least not yet fixed, ReDoS vulnerabilities in popular npm modules. Similar to previous work [43], we consider a regular expression to be vulnerable if we can construct inputs of linearly increasing size that cause the matching time of the expression to increase super-linearly. To identify previously unknown vulnerabilities, we use a combination of automated and manual analysis, similar to what a potential attacker might do. This technique is not the contribution of this paper, but rather a way to enable our study. In principle, any other way of identifying ReDoS vulnerabilities could be used instead, including existing analyses [43], which however, are currently not available for JavaScript.

At first, we download the 10,000 most popular modules and extract their regular expressions by traversing the abstract syntax trees of the JavaScript code. This yields a total of 324,791 regular expressions, with a mean of 63.67, a median of 5.00 and a maximum of 19,791 per module. After removing regular expressions that contain no repetitions, and hence are immune to algorithmic complexity attacks, we obtain a total of 138,123 expressions, with mean 37.93 and median 4.00 per module.

Next, we semi-automatically search for regular expression patterns that are known to be vulnerable. For example, we search for expressions containing repetitions of a negated group followed by a character. The second regular expression in Figure 6 is an example because it contains the subexpression `[^=] +=`. A regular expression that is not anchored with a start anchor and contains this pattern is likely to be vulnerable. The reason is that the repetition group is generic enough to contain most of the possible prefixes and the `=` character guarantees that there exists a failing suffix. For example, the regular expression `/ab[^=] +=/` can be exploited using a long string "abababab...".

Given a set of possibly exploitable regular expression,

we manually inspect the context in which the regular expressions are used. The goal is to find matching operations on data that may be delivered through an HTTP request to a web server. To this end, we focus on (i) modules included in the Express framework, (ii) middleware modules that extend this framework, and (iii) modules that manipulate HTTP request components, such as the body or a specific header. For regular expressions in these modules, we keep only those with a possible data flow from the package interface or from an HTTP header to the regular expression. Overall, it took one of the authors only a couple of days to find 25 such vulnerabilities in widely used npm modules, showing that a skilled individual can attack real-world websites with moderate effort. A more powerful attacker could easily detect a larger number of vulnerabilities and perform a larger-scale attack.

### 3.3 Creating Exploits

Based on the ReDoS vulnerabilities in npm modules, we create exploits targeted at web servers that use these modules. The main idea is to hypothesize how a server-side web application might use a module. To this end, we set up a fresh Express installation and implement an example web application that uses the module. For example, for a package that parses the user agent, we build an application that parses the user agent of every HTTP request for the main page, which might be used to track visitors. Next, we try to create an HTTP request where user-controlled data reaches the vulnerable regular expression, and craft input values that trigger an unusually long matching time. For crafting the input, we try to confuse the regular expression engine by forcing it to backtrack because the input can be matched in multiple ways [21, 43]. While creating exploits, we assume that the maximum header size is 81,750 characters, which is the default in Express.js. If we succeed in crafting an input that takes more than five seconds, we consider the vulnerability as exploitable and consider it for the remainder of the study.

To further assess the impact of the exploits, we measure how much longer it takes to process a crafted input compared to a random string of the same length. We use two ways of measuring the time. First, we measure the *matching time* of the regular expression, i.e., the time needed to check whether a string matches the regular expression. Second, we measure the time of an entire HTTP request, called *response time*. The response time may include various other components, such as HTTP parsing and serialization, DNS resolving, routing time for the package, and dealing with HTTP retransmissions or package fragmentation. To measure the response time of a site, we request its main page. For complex sites,

this measure underapproximates the time a human user needs to wait for the page to load, because complex sites require separate requests for images, etc.

### 3.4 ReDoS Analysis of Websites

The next step is to measure how many websites are vulnerable to a ReDoS attack based on one of the exploits. The main challenge is to draw meaningful conclusions about the harm that an attacker *could* cause, without actually attacking live websites. During our initial experiments we sent one request with a crafted header that appeared to make the analyzed website unresponsive for almost a minute. The goal of our methodology is to avoid this type of mistake.

We address this challenge by triggering requests with increasing input sizes, using both crafted and random inputs, while measuring the response times. Based on locally performed experiments, we choose input sizes that are unlikely to block the server for more than a small, configurable amount of time (we use two seconds in our experiments). If the response time with crafted inputs grows faster than with random inputs, then we classify the website as exploitable.

Measuring the response time in a reliable way is non-trivial due to DNS resolving, network caching, delays, retransmissions, and other influencing factors. Another issue is how to determine whether the response time is larger than another in a statistically reliable way. We address these issues by adapting a technique originally used for comparing the performance of software running on a virtual machine [16, 29]. The basic idea is to repeatedly measure the response time and to conclude that crafted inputs cause a higher response time than random inputs only if we observe a statistically significant difference.

More specifically, to measure the response time for a given input, we first repeat the request  $n_w$  times to “warm up” the connection, e.g., to fill network caches, and then repeat the request another  $n_m$  times while recording the response times. Given  $k$  pairs of increasingly large random and crafted inputs ( $i_{random}, i_{crafted}$ ), where the two inputs in a pair have the same size, we obtain  $k$  pairs ( $T_{random}$  and  $T_{crafted}$ ) of sets of time measurements (with  $|T_{random}| = |T_{crafted}| = n_m$ ). For each input size, we compare the confidence intervals of the values in  $T_{random}$  and  $T_{crafted}$  and conclude that the response times differ if and only if the intervals do not overlap. If the response times differ for all  $k$  input sizes, we quantify the difference for an input size as the difference between  $\bar{T}_{random}$  and  $\bar{T}_{crafted}$ , where  $\bar{T}$  is the average of the times in  $T$ . For  $k$  input sizes, this comparison gives a sequence of differences  $d_1, \dots, d_k$ . Finally, we consider a website to be *exploitable* if  $d_1 < d_2 < \dots < d_k$ . Intuitively, this means that the response times for random and crafted inputs have a

statistically significant difference, and that this difference increases when the input size increases.

To execute these measurements, we need to pick values for  $n_w$ ,  $n_m$ ,  $k$ , and the  $k$  input sizes. We use  $n_w=three$ ,  $n_m=five$ , and  $k = 5$  because these values are large enough to draw statistically relevant conclusions for most websites yet small enough to not disturb the analyzed server. For picking the  $k$  input sizes, the challenge is to ensure that measure a difference when there is one without repeatedly causing the server to block for a longer period of time. We address this challenge by experimenting on a locally installed version of the vulnerable package and by choosing input sizes that take approximately 100ms, 200ms, 500ms, 1s and 2s to respond to.

Our setup allows us to assess whether a website could be exploited without actually attacking it. Since we take measurements in a sequential manner and since the overall number of requests per site is small, we allow legitimate users to be served between our requests. Moreover, the servers of popular websites implement some kind of redundancy, such as multiple Node.js instances in a cluster, i.e., our measurements are likely to block only one such instance at a time. In contrast, an attacker would likely send both more requests and requests with larger inputs, which can cause severe harm to vulnerable sites, as we show in Section 4.3.

### 3.5 Analysis of Mitigation Techniques

Some sites reject requests with large headers and instead return a “400 Bad Request” error. This mitigation can limit the damage of ReDoS attacks. To measure whether a site uses this mitigation technique, we create benign requests of different sizes and measure how often a site rejects a request.

## 4 Results

This section presents the results of applying the methodology described in Section 3 to live, real websites. We perform our measurements using three different machines depending on the experiments: a ThinkPad 440s laptop with four Intel i7 CPUs and 12GB memory (Section 4.1), a third party commercial web server with 512MB memory (Section 4.3 and 4.4) and a server with 48 Intel Xeon CPUs and 64GB memory (from Section 4.6 on).

### 4.1 Vulnerabilities and Exploits

Figure 5 shows the modules for which we found at least one vulnerable regular expression that can be exploited through the module’s interface. At the time of performing our experiments, each vulnerability was working on

| Module              | Version | Number of dependencies | Downloads in July 2017 |
|---------------------|---------|------------------------|------------------------|
| debug               | 2.6.8   | 16,055                 | 54,885,335             |
| lodash              | 4.17.4  | 49,305                 | 44,147,504             |
| mime                | 1.3.6   | 2,798                  | 22,314,018             |
| ajv                 | 5.2.2   | 758                    | 17,542,357             |
| tough-cookie        | 2.3.2   | 302                    | 15,981,922             |
| fresh               | 0.5.0   | 197                    | 14,151,270             |
| moment              | 2.18.1  | 14,421                 | 10,102,601             |
| forwarded           | 0.1.0   | 31                     | 9,883,630              |
| underscore.string   | 3.3.4   | 2,486                  | 7,277,966              |
| ua-parser-js        | 0.7.14  | 225                    | 5,332,979              |
| parsejson           | 0.0.3   | 19                     | 4,897,928              |
| useragent           | 2.2.1   | 191                    | 3,515,292              |
| no-case             | 2.3.1   | 18                     | 3,321,043              |
| marked              | 0.3.6   | 2,624                  | 3,012,792              |
| content-type-parser | 1.0.1   | 8                      | 2,337,147              |
| platform            | 1.3.4   | 128                    | 757,174                |
| timespan            | 2.3.0   | 34                     | 523,290                |
| string              | 3.3.3   | 911                    | 421,700                |
| content             | 3.0.5   | 9                      | 316,083                |
| slug                | 0.9.1   | 499                    | 151,004                |
| htmlparser          | 1.7.7   | 178                    | 138,563                |
| charset             | 1.0.0   | 36                     | 112,001                |
| mobile-detect       | 1.3.6   | 101                    | 107,672                |
| ismobilejs          | 0.4.1   | 50                     | 44,246                 |
| dns-sync            | 0.1.3   | 7                      | 10,599                 |

Figure 5: Modules with at least one previously unknown vulnerability.

the latest release of the package. The packages vary in the number of dependencies and downloads, but we can safely conclude that ReDoS vulnerabilities are present even in very popular packages.

Given the amount of possible damage entailed by the vulnerabilities, we have invested significant efforts to disclose them in a responsible way. For each vulnerability, we have contacted the developers either directly or through the Node Security Platform<sup>6</sup>, and gave them several months to fix the problem before making it public. 14 of the 25 have been fixed by now and are listed as advisories on the Node Security Platform. For the others, the developers are either still in the process of fixing or decided to leave the task of fixing to the community. The complete list of vulnerabilities, along with details on their current status is available for the reviewers.<sup>7</sup>

As explained in Section 3.3, we try to create exploits for the vulnerabilities by hypothesizing how web server implementations may use the vulnerable modules. Figure 6 shows the modules and usage scenarios for which we could create an exploit. For all the scenarios we assume the payload is sent using a specific HTTP header. We believe that HTTP bodies, UDP packages or WebSocket messages can also be used for the same purpose. The last column of Figure 6 shows the JavaScript implementation of the usage scenario. We run this implementation on our local server to experiment with the exploit.

<sup>6</sup><https://nodesecurity.io/advisories>

<sup>7</sup>Following this link may de-anonymize the authors: [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1rnR8zsXeA1eccrpxeZK0\\_LtQ1c8j\\_u60IR7nnVQgbE/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1rnR8zsXeA1eccrpxeZK0_LtQ1c8j_u60IR7nnVQgbE/edit?usp=sharing)



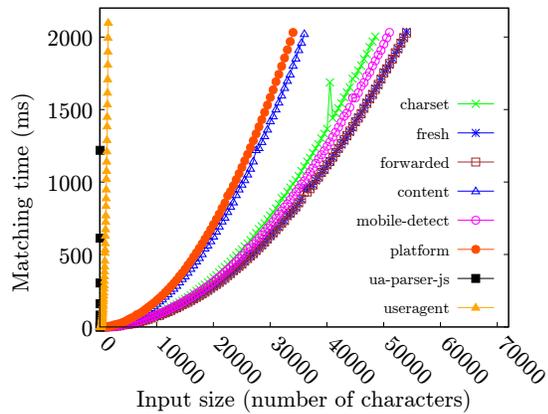


Figure 7: Matching time for different input sizes.

## 4.2 Matching Time

We use the exploits to measure the influence of the size of the input to the matching time of the vulnerable expression (Figure 7). For most of the exploits, the input dependency seem to be quadratic, reaching one second matching time within 20,000 to 40,000 characters. For two exploits, the input dependency is presumably exponential, reaching one second matching time with less than 1,000 characters. We consider any of these eight exploits to be harmful because they may impact a website’s availability (Section 4.3 and because even a non-exponential ReDoS vulnerability may aid an attacker in mounting a DoS attack (Section 5.1).

To further illustrate the effectiveness of inputs crafted for a specific regular expression, we measure the matching time for each vulnerable module with randomly created inputs. It turns out that random string inputs of the same size as our crafted exploits cause much lower matching times. The maximum matching time across the eight attacks is 20 milliseconds for inputs with 100,000 characters. We conclude that crafting inputs for vulnerable regular expressions is significantly more effective, from an attacker’s perspective, than launching a brute-force DoS attack with randomly created inputs.

## 4.3 Availability

We now show that the matching time of a regular expression has a direct impact on the availability of a web server. To show the threat to availability posed by ReDoS exploits, we create a simple Express application with two features: it replies with a “hello world” message when called at the “/echo” path, and it calls the `forwarded` module with the request headers when called at the “/re-dos” path. We choose this module because it appears in Figure 7 to be the *least* harmful in our set of exploits, i.e., we are underestimating the negative impact on availability. We then upload this simple application on a machine

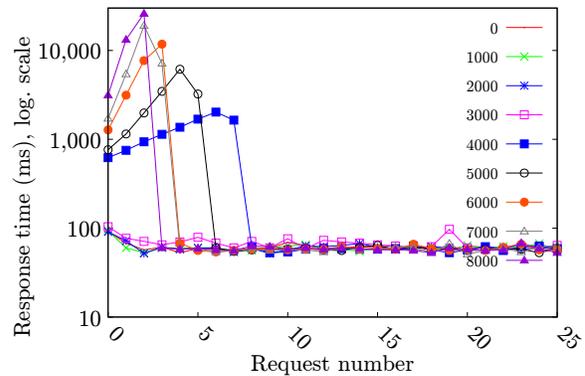


Figure 8: Impact of differently sized payloads on a server’s response time. Note the logarithmic y-scale. Payloads are plotted in increments of 1,000 characters.

running Node.js, provided by a commercial cloud platform<sup>8</sup>.

We set up two other machines to concurrently send request. One machine, called the victim, measures the time it takes to trigger 100 requests of the “hello world” message. This victim machine triggers the next request once the previous request has been responded to. At the same time, the other machine, called the attacker, delivers 1,000 ReDoS payloads, by triggering all 1,000 requests at once. The victim machine starts its requests immediately after the victim machine has triggered its requests.

We vary the payload size from 0 characters to 8,000 characters in increments of 1,000 characters. A zero-sized payload is a request with an empty header instead of one that exploits the ReDoS vulnerability. We consider the zero-sized payload to check whether a Node.js server can be blocked using a brute-force strategy. We chose the upper limit for the payload size because, by default, the web server provider limits the size of the header fields to 8,500 characters. Other hosting providers allow significantly larger headers, as we report later in this section.

Figure 8 shows the response times measured at the victim machine for the first 25 “/echo” requests. Payloads smaller than 4,000 characters have no significant effect on the response time of the server. In contrast, payloads larger than this value delay as many as eight requests with a maximum delay of 20 seconds. By increasing the size of payloads, an attacker can control both the number of requests we delay and their duration. For the largest payloads we use, we even experienced dropping of requests.

This result is particularly remarkable because an individual payload of size 4,000 does not require an immense amount of time to respond to. We separately measured the CPU time required to respond to one such request

<sup>8</sup><http://heroku.com>

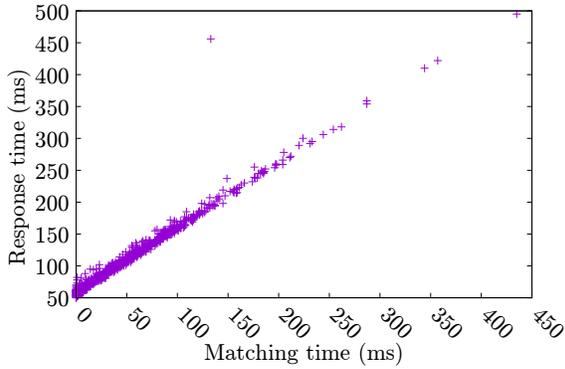


Figure 9: Correlation between server computation time and request response time.

and find it to take only 5.73 milliseconds, on average. However, several requests together can delay the victim’s request by up to 20 seconds. This finding shows that the ReDoS payloads have a cumulative effect and even a small delay in the main loop can cause significant harm for availability.

We remind the reader that the above experiment uses the smallest payload in our data set, `forwarded`. Therefore, if we show that even this exploit poses a threat to availability, we can conclude that the rest of the exploits also do. For more severe ReDoS vulnerabilities, e.g. in `ua-parser-js`, there is even no need to evaluate the impact on availability. As described in the Section 2, one single such payload is enough to completely block the server for as long as the matching takes. Considering that with 50–60 characters we predict a CPU computation time in the order of years, such vulnerabilities are a very serious threat to availability.

#### 4.4 Response Time vs. Matching Time

Our methodology relies on the assumption that small changes in the server computation time have an effect on clients. To validate this assumption we again use the `forwarded` package and the commercial web server setup from the previous section. We use 1,000 payloads smaller than 8,000 characters. The largest one of these payloads produces a matching time smaller than 100 milliseconds on our local machine. We measure the time spent by the server in the `forwarded` package and the time it takes for a request to be served at the client level. We then plot the relation between these two time measurements in Figure 9. The correlation between both measurements is 0.99, i.e., very strong. The strong correlation shows that the delays introduced by the network layer are relatively constant over time and that the server computation time is the dominant component in the response time measured at the client-side. Of course, the observed value depends on the chosen web server

| Module                     | P1:<br>100ms | P2:<br>200ms | P3:<br>500ms | P4:<br>1s | P5:<br>2s |
|----------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|
| <code>fresh</code>         | 12,000       | 17,000       | 27,000       | 37,500    | 53,500    |
| <code>forwarded</code>     | 12,000       | 17,000       | 26,500       | 38,000    | 53,500    |
| <code>useragent</code>     | 500          | 650          | 925          | 1,150     | 1,450     |
| <code>ua-parser-js</code>  | 38           | 39           | 40           | 41        | 42        |
| <code>mobile-detect</code> | 10,500       | 15,500       | 25,000       | 36,500    | 50,500    |
| <code>platform</code>      | 7,500        | 11,000       | 17,500       | 25,000    | 34,500    |
| <code>charset</code>       | 10,500       | 15,500       | 24,000       | 34,000    | 48,000    |
| <code>content</code>       | 8,000        | 11,000       | 18,000       | 25,500    | 35,500    |

Figure 10: Number of characters in each payload needed to achieve a specific delay in a vulnerable module.

provider and the current server load, but we can safely conclude that measuring time at the client level is a good enough estimation of the server-side computation time.

#### 4.5 Dimensioning Exploits

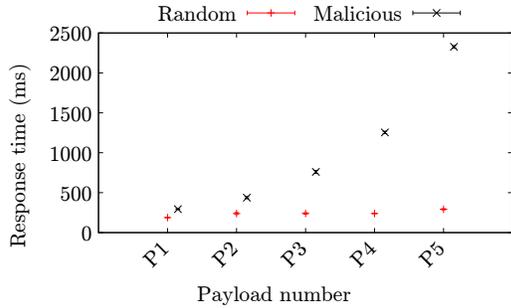
Choosing an appropriate size for the payload is a crucial part in our methodology and distinguishes our study from a real DoS attack on websites. The goal of this step is to find a payload size that is large enough to check whether a website is vulnerable to a specific attack, but small enough to only block the website for a negligible amount of time. To this end, we locally run each exploit five times with a payload of increasing size and stop the process when the matching time exceeds two seconds. We consider five target matching times, 100ms, 200ms, 500ms, 1s, and 2s, and choose the payload size that produces the closest matching time to the target time.

Figure 10 shows the values for each target time and vulnerable module. For example, for the `platform` vulnerability, we obtain a matching time of 200ms with a payload of 11,000 characters. The `useragent` and `ua-parser-js` packages, whose matching times grow at a much faster rate, requiring less than 1,500 characters to cause a delay of 2s.

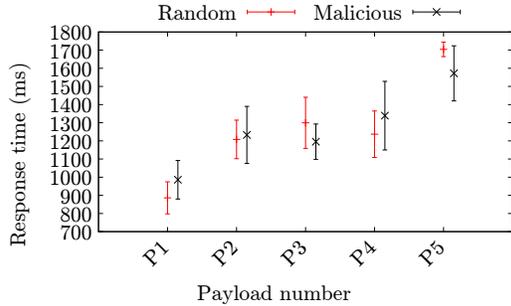
#### 4.6 Vulnerable Sites

The goal of the next step is to assess to what extent real websites suffer from ReDoS vulnerabilities. Based on the five payload sizes for each exploit, we create attack payloads and random payloads for each exploit and payload size. We send these payloads to the 2,846 real websites that are running an Express webserver (Section 3.1). We warm up the connection three times and then measure five response times for both random and malicious inputs. Using the methodology described in Section 3.4, we then decide based on the measured response times whether a site is vulnerable. If for some reason, we could not send three or more out of the five payloads to a specific website, we consider that website to be non-vulnerable.

Overall, we observe that 339 sites suffer from at



(a) Response time for an vulnerable site.



(b) Response time for a non-vulnerable site.

Figure 11: Effect of increasing payload sizes on the response time of two websites.

least one of the eight vulnerabilities. 66 sites actually suffer from two vulnerabilities and six sites even from three. This result shows that ReDoS attacks are a widespread problem that affects a large number of real-world websites. Given that our methodology is designed to underestimate the number of affected sites, e.g., because we consider only eight exploits, the actual number of ReDoS-vulnerable sites is likely to be even higher. Moreover, we expect the growing popularity of JavaScript on the server side to further increase the problem in the future.

To illustrate our methodology for deciding whether a site is vulnerable, consider two example websites. In Figure 11, we plot for each of the five payload sizes the response time for malicious and random inputs. The figure shows the mean and the confidence intervals for a vulnerable site in Figure 11a and for a non-vulnerable site in Figure 11b. The response time grows significantly faster for the malicious payloads in the vulnerable site, reaching slightly more than two seconds for the fifth payload. In contrast, for the non-vulnerable site, the response time for both malicious and random payloads seems to grow linearly. Since the confidence interval for the response times in Figure 11b overlap, we classify this website as non-vulnerable. By inspecting other websites classified as vulnerable by our methodology, we observe patterns similar to Figure 11a. Therefore, we conclude that our criteria for deciding if a website is vulnerable are valid.

| Exploit       | Affected sites |
|---------------|----------------|
| fresh         | 241            |
| forwarded     | 99             |
| ua-parser-js  | 41             |
| useragent     | 16             |
| mobile-detect | 9              |
| platform      | 8              |
| charset       | 3              |
| content       | 0              |

Figure 12: Number of websites affected by specific vulnerabilities.

## 4.7 Prevalence of Specific Vulnerabilities

Figure 12 shows the number of websites affected by each vulnerability. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the vulnerabilities in `fresh` and `forwarded` have most impact, since these two modules are part of the Express framework. One of them needs to be activated using a configuration option, while the other module is enabled by default. One may ask why not all Express analyzed websites suffer from this problem. The reason is the way we dimension our payloads: Many Express instances limit the header size, and hence we cannot send large enough payloads to confirm that the sites are vulnerable. The other six vulnerabilities affect websites with a frequency that is roughly proportional to the popularity of the respective modules. For example, the vulnerability in the popular `useragent` affects more websites than the vulnerability in the less used `charset` module. To our initial surprise, we cannot confirm any site vulnerable due to the `content` module. After more careful consideration, we realized that there are two more popular alternatives for parsing the `Content-Header` and the `content` package seems to be more popular among users of the `hapi.js` framework, which is a competitor of Express.

From an attacker’s perspective, the distribution of vulnerabilities is great news, because exploits are portable across websites and knowing a vulnerabilities is sufficient to attack various websites. Likewise, the distribution is also good news for the community, showing that one can lower the risk of ReDoS in multiple websites by fixing a relatively small set of popular packages.

## 4.8 Influence of Popularity

Are ReDoS vulnerabilities a problem of less popular sites? In Figure 13, we show how the vulnerable sites are distributed across the Alexa top one million sites. For each point  $p$  on the horizontal axis, the vertical axis shows the number of exploitable sites with popularity rank  $\leq p$ . For example, there are 61 vulnerable sites in the top 100,000 websites, with one site in top 1,000 and nine in top 10,000. As can be observed from the distribution, the vulnerabilities are roughly equally distributed among the top one million sites. There is even

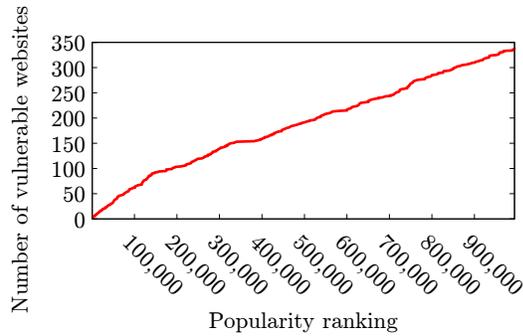


Figure 13: Cumulative distribution function showing the popularity of vulnerable sites. Each point on the graph shows how many sites among the top  $x$  sites suffer from at least one vulnerability.

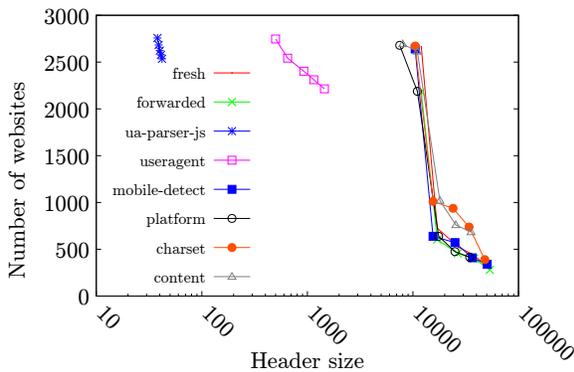


Figure 14: Number of websites that accept a payload of a specific size. Note the logarithmic x-scale.

a slight tendency toward more vulnerabilities among the more popular websites. This tendency can be explained by the trend we have seen in Figure 4, that server-side JavaScript tends to be more popular among popular websites. Overall, we can conclude that ReDoS vulnerabilities are a general problem that affects sites independent of their popularity ranking.

## 4.9 Use of Mitigation Techniques

As mentioned before, some websites refuse to process a request whose header size exceeds a certain size. In Figure 14 we plot for each exploit how many websites accept a payload of a given size. As can be observed, most websites accept headers that are smaller than 10,000 characters, but only few websites accept headers that are, for instance, 40,000 characters long. As we have shown in Section 4.3, 10,000 characters are enough to do harm even with the least serious vulnerability. Therefore, the current limits that the websites apply on the header size are insufficient and they do not provide adequate protection against DoS.

Another interesting trend to observe in Figure 14 is that even for the most harmful exploit, `useragent`, for which we require payloads between 38 and 42 characters

only, the number of websites that accept larger payloads decreases over time. This is surprising since for other exploits like `mobile-detect` there seem to be more websites to accept 10,000 characters long headers. We believe this observation to be due to the fact that some websites refuse to process many requests from the same user in a short period of time. For instance, our largest payload is sent after approximately 50 other requests of smaller size and the site refuses to serve it. This is a well known network-level protection against DoS, but there seem to be only around 200 websites to implement it. However, limiting the number of requests is no silver bullet against denial of service attacks, especially when the attacker has the resources to deploy a distributed denial of service attack.

## 4.10 Threats to Validity

One threat to validity for our study is that we rely on time measurements performed over the network to estimate the likelihood of a ReDoS vulnerability. One may argue that these measurements should not be trusted and that pure chance made us observe some larger slowdowns for malicious payloads. We address this threat in multiple ways: we show that for commercial web hosting servers there is a high correlation between response time and server CPU time, we repeat measurements multiple times, and we draw conclusions only from statistically significant differences.

Another potential concern is that the exploits we created are too generic and happen to cause slowdown in another regular expression than the one we created them for. We believe that this situation would only impact our ability to tell which module is used on the server-side and not the impact of a ReDoS attack. Moreover, five of our exploits rely on a specific sequence of characters in the payload to be effective. These sequences of highly contextual characters need to be present in the beginning or at the end of the exploit. Removing any of them would make the exploit unusable. Therefore, we believe that at least for these vulnerabilities it is very likely that our exploits indeed trigger the intended regular expression.

## 5 Discussion

In this section, we discuss the potential of a large-scale DoS attack on Node.js websites and some defenses we recommend to minimize the impact of such an event. Finally, we describe an unexpected implication of our study: that algorithmic complexity attacks can be used for software fingerprinting.

## 5.1 Impact of a Large-scale Attack

Compared to a regular DoS attack, a ReDoS vulnerability enables an attacker to launch an attack with fewer resources. As shown in Section 4.3, even the least harmful vulnerabilities we identify can be a lethal weapon when used as part of a large-scale DoS attack, because the attacker can send payloads that hang the loop for hundreds of milliseconds, several seconds, or even more, depending on the vulnerability. We remind the reader that with just eight standard attack vectors we could affect hundreds of websites.

It is worth emphasizing once again that this issue would not be as serious in a traditional thread-based web server, such as Apache. This is because the matching would be done in a thread serving the individual client. In contrast, in an event-based system, the matching is done in the main loop and spending a few seconds matching a regular expression is equivalent to completely blocking the server for this amount of time.

A large-scale ReDoS attack against Node.js-based sites is a bleak scenario for which, as we have shown, many websites are not prepared. To limit this risk, we have been working with the maintainers of vulnerable modules to fix vulnerabilities. In addition, we urgently call for the adoption of multiple layers of defense, as outlined in the following.

## 5.2 Defenses

First of all, to limit the effect of a payload delivered through an HTTP header, the size of the header should be limited. For more than 15% sites, we could successfully deliver headers longer than 25,000 characters. We are not aware of any benign use cases for such large HTTP headers. Therefore, a best practice in Node.js applications should be to limit the size of request headers. This kind of defense would mitigate the effects of some potential attacks, but is limited to vulnerabilities related to HTTP headers. In contrast, vulnerabilities related to other inputs received from the network, e.g., the body of an HTTP request, would remain exploitable.

Another defense mechanism could be to use a more sophisticated regular expression engine that guarantees linear matching time. The problem is that these engines do not support advanced regular expression features, such as look-ahead or back-references. Davis et al. [11] advocate for a hybrid solution that only calls the backtracking engine when such advanced features are used, and to use a linear time algorithm in all other cases. This is an elegant solution that is already adopted by languages like Rust<sup>9</sup>. However, it would not completely solve the problem, since some regular expressions with

<sup>9</sup><https://github.com/rust-lang/regex>

advanced features may still contain ReDoS vulnerabilities. For instance, during our vulnerability study, we found the following regular expression:

```
/(?=.*\bAndroid\b)(?=.*\bMobile\b)/i
```

This expression from the `ismobilejs` module contains both lookahead and has super-linear complexity in a backtracking engine.

We also recommend that Node.js augments its regular expression APIs with an additional, optional timeout parameter. Node.js will stop any matching of regular expressions that takes longer than the specified timeout. This solution is far from perfect, but it is relatively easy to implement and adopt, has been successfully deployed in other programming languages [25], and may also be feasible for Node.js [14].

Additionally, we advocate that our work should be used as a roadmap for penetration testing sessions performed on Node.js websites. First, the tester audits the list of package dependencies, identifies any known ReDoS vulnerability in these packages or analyzes all the contained regular expressions. Second, the tester creates payloads for all the vulnerable regular expressions identified in the first step. Third, the tester tries to deliver these payloads using standard HTTP requests.

Finally, better tools and techniques should be created to help developers reason about ReDoS vulnerabilities in server-side JavaScript. Both static and dynamic analysis tools can aid in understanding the complexity of regular expressions and their performance. A good starting point could be porting existing solutions that were created for other languages, e.g. [43].

## 5.3 Fingerprinting Web Servers

Part of our methodology could be used to fingerprint web servers to predict some of the third-party modules used by a website. This ability can be useful for an attacker in at least two ways. First, the attacker may try to temper with the development process of that module by introducing backdoors that can then be exploited in the live website. Given that npm modules often depend on several others, the vulnerability can even be hidden in a dependent module. Second, the attacker may exploit a more serious vulnerability present in the same module. To show how this scenario may happen, consider the `dns-sync` vulnerability, identified in Section 4.1. The vulnerable function suffers both from a ReDoS attack and a command injection attack [37]. An attacker may use the ReDoS attack as a hard-to-detect way to scan which sites use the vulnerable module and then attack these sites with a command injection.

## 6 Related Work

**Server-side JavaScript** Ojamaa and D  una [27] discuss the security of Node.js and identify algorithmic complexity attacks as one of the main threats. Davis et al. [11] show that ReDoS vulnerabilities are present in popular modules. We take these observations further and show that ReDoS affects real websites. Other studies on Node.js explore command injection vulnerabilities [37] and configuration errors [32]. Several techniques handle more general, Node.js-related issues: static analysis that handles Node.js-specific events [26], fuzzing to uncover concurrency-related bugs [12], auto-sanitization to protect against injections [37], and work on understanding event interactions between server-side and client-side code [1]. To the best of our knowledge, our work is the first to analyze Node.js security problems in real-world websites and to demonstrate how an attacker may exploit vulnerabilities in npm modules to attack websites.

**Analysis of ReDoS Vulnerabilities** Prior work analyzes the worst case matching time of regular expressions [6, 41, 21, 2]. Most of this work assumes backtracking-style matching and analyzes regular expressions in isolation, ignoring whether attacker-controlled inputs reach it. Recent work by W  stholz et al. [43] considers this aspect. They combine static analysis and exploit generation to find 41 vulnerabilities in Java software. Our work differs in three ways: (i) we analyze JavaScript ReDoS, which is more serious than Java ReDoS, (ii) we detect vulnerabilities in real-world websites whose source code is not available for analysis, and (iii) we uncover ReDoS vulnerabilities containing advanced features, e.g. lookahead, that are not supported by any of the previous work. A study performed concurrently with ours considers ReDoS vulnerabilities in the npm ecosystem and confirms that ReDoS is a serious threat for JavaScript code [13].

**Regular Expressions** Regular expressions are often used for sanitizers and XSS filters. Bates et al. [5] show that XSS filters are often slow, incorrect, and sometimes even introduce new vulnerabilities. Hooimeijer et al. [18] show that supposedly equivalent implementations of sanitizers differ. A study by Chapman et al. [9] shows that developers have difficulties in composing and reading regular expressions. We are the first to analyze the impact of this problem on real-world websites. To avoid mistakes in regular expressions, developers may synthesize instead of writing them [3, 4].

**Algorithmic Complexity Attacks** Differences between average and worst case performance are the basis of algorithmic complexity attacks. Crosby and Wallach [10] analyze vulnerabilities due to the performance of hash tables and binary trees, while Dietrich et al. [15] study serialization-related attacks. Wise [7], SlowFuzz [28], and PerfSyn [39] generate inputs to trigger

unexpectedly high complexity.

**Resource Exhaustion Attacks** SAFER [8] statically detects CPU and stack exhaustion vulnerabilities involving recursive calls and loops. Huang et al. [19] study blocking operations in the Android system that can force the OS to reboot when called multiple times. Shan et al. [35] consider attacks on n-tier web applications and model them using a queuing network model.

**Testing Regular Expressions** The problem of generating inputs for regular expressions is also investigated from a software testing perspective [40], [24], [22], [34]. In contrast to our work, these techniques aim at maximizing coverage or finding bugs in the implementation.

**Performance of JavaScript** ReDoS vulnerabilities are a kind of performance problem. Such problems are worth fixing independent of their exploitability in a denial of service attack, e.g., to prevent websites from being perceived as slow and unresponsive. Existing work has studied JavaScript performance issues [33] and proposed profiling techniques to identify them [30, 17, 20]. Studying the exploitability of other performance issues beyond ReDoS is a promising direction for future work.

**Studies of the Web** Lauinger et al. [23] study the use of client-side JavaScript libraries that are outdated and have known vulnerabilities. In contrast to their setup, we focus on ReDoS issues, on server-side code, and on code that is vulnerable despite being up-to-date. Another study looks into attack vectors and defenses related to the `postMessage` API in HTML5 [36], showing that attackers may use it to circumvent the same-origin policy. A study by Richards et al. [31] analyzes the use of JavaScript's `eval` function, which is prone to code injections. All the above studies are orthogonal to our work. To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to focus on server-side JavaScript and on ReDoS vulnerabilities.

## 7 Conclusions

This paper studies ReDoS vulnerabilities in JavaScript-based web servers and shows that they are an important problem that affects various popular websites. We exploit eight vulnerabilities that affect at least 339 popular websites. We show that an attacker could block these vulnerable sites for several seconds and sometimes even much longer. More generally, our results are a call-to-arms to address the current lack of tools for analyzing ReDoS vulnerabilities in JavaScript.

### Acknowledgments

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