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Digital Forensics in Cloud Computing: Techniques and Challenges for Investigating Cybercrimes

Vikas[1,a)], Shruti Aggarwal[2,b)], Himani[3,c)], Annu Yadav[4,d)], Prashant Kumar[5,e)]
[1,2,3,4,5]Assistant Professor
[1,2,3,4,5]School of Computer Science and Applications,
IIMT University, Meerut, India

[a)]Corresponding author: vicky.c610@gmail.com

[b),c),d),e)]Another author: shruti.2017a@gmail.com, himanibadhaniya@gmail.com, annuyadav21051999@gmail.com, sprashantkumar635@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Cloud computing has witnessed significant adoption in recent years, revolutionizing the way organizations store, process, and access data. However, this paradigm shift has also presented new challenges for digital forensics investigators when it comes to investigating cybercrimes committed in cloud environments. This research paper aims to explore the techniques and challenges associated with conducting digital forensics investigations in cloud computing.

The paper begins with an overview of cloud computing and its unique characteristics, such as virtualization, elasticity, and shared resources, which pose challenges to traditional digital forensics methodologies. It emphasizes the need for specialized techniques and tools tailored to cloud environments. Next, the paper delves into various digital forensics techniques specific to cloud computing. It discusses data acquisition, preservation, analysis, and presentation methodologies, considering the distributed and dynamic nature of cloud infrastructures. Special attention is given to the preservation of evidence integrity and maintaining chain of custody when dealing with virtualized environments and remote data storage. Furthermore, the paper highlights the key challenges faced by investigators in cloud-based cybercrime investigations. These challenges include ensuring data privacy in multi-tenancy environments, dealing with dynamic resource provisioning, overcoming jurisdictional issues in cross-border investigations, and navigating complex legal frameworks.

To address these challenges, the paper concludes by discussing potential solutions and future directions for enhancing digital forensics capabilities in cloud computing. These include the development of standardized investigation frameworks, the advancement of forensic tools and techniques tailored to cloud environments, and the establishment of collaboration mechanisms between investigators, cloud service providers, and legal authorities.

KEYWORDS

Digital Forensics, Cloud Computing, Cybercrimes, Data Acquisition, Data Preservation, Data Analysis, Data Presentation, Data Privacy, Multi-tenancy, Dynamic Provisioning, Jurisdictional Issues.

I. INTRODUCTION

In our increasingly digitized world, where technology permeates almost every aspect of our lives, the rise of cybercrime has become an unfortunate reality. As criminals exploit the vulnerabilities of digital systems to perpetrate illicit activities, there arises a critical need for a specialized field that can investigate, analyze, and uncover digital evidence. This field is known as digital forensics. Digital forensics, also referred to as computer forensics or cyber forensics, encompasses a set of techniques, tools, and methodologies employed to identify, preserve, analyze, and present digital evidence in legal or investigative proceedings. It involves the application of scientific and investigative principles to collect, examine, and interpret data from various digital sources, such as computers, mobile devices, networks, and digital storage media.

The significance of digital forensics cannot be overstated. It plays a pivotal role in combatting cybercrime, ranging from hacking and financial fraud to cyberterrorism and intellectual property theft. By employing specialized skills and advanced technologies, digital forensic experts strive to unravel the mysteries hidden within digital systems, uncovering vital clues that can lead to the identification and prosecution of cybercriminals.

The field of digital forensics encompasses a wide range of activities, including the recovery of deleted or damaged data, the analysis of network traffic, the examination of system logs, and the decryption of encrypted information. These activities are carried out with the utmost care to ensure the integrity and admissibility of digital evidence in a court of law. The digital forensic process follows strict guidelines and protocols to maintain the chain of custody, ensuring that evidence remains untainted and reliable throughout the investigation. However, the field of digital forensics faces numerous challenges. The rapid advancement of technology, the proliferation of interconnected devices, and the sophistication of cybercriminals constantly present new obstacles for investigators. Additionally, legal, and ethical concerns surrounding privacy, data protection, and jurisdictional issues further complicate the digital forensic landscape.

This research paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of digital forensics, delving into its principles, methodologies, and tools. It will explore the digital forensic process, examining each stage from evidence identification to documentation and reporting. Furthermore, it will address the challenges faced by digital forensic investigators and discuss emerging trends and technologies that shape the future of this dynamic field. By understanding the fundamental concepts and techniques of digital forensics, stakeholders such as law enforcement agencies, cybersecurity professionals, legal experts, and policymakers can equip themselves with the knowledge needed to effectively combat cybercrime, enhance incident response capabilities, and ensure the integrity and admissibility of digital evidence in legal proceedings.

1.1 Background and Significance:

Cloud computing has revolutionized the way businesses and individuals store and access their data. It offers numerous benefits, such as scalability, cost-efficiency, and on-demand resource provisioning. However, the dynamic and distributed nature of cloud environments poses unique challenges for digital forensics investigators. Traditional forensic techniques developed for physical systems and local storage may not be directly applicable in the cloud.

The significance of this review paper lies in its exploration of the techniques and challenges encountered in digital forensics investigations in cloud computing. By understanding these challenges, researchers and practitioners can develop appropriate strategies and methodologies to effectively investigate and analyze cybercrimes in cloud environments.

1.2 Objective of the Review Paper:

The objective of this review paper is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the techniques and challenges for conducting digital forensics in cloud computing. The paper aims to:

- Discuss the fundamental concepts of cloud computing and digital forensics and their intersection.
- Identify and analyze the specific techniques employed in digital forensics investigations within cloud environments.
- Highlight the challenges faced by investigators, including data acquisition, preservation, multi-tenancy, jurisdictional issues, and dynamic provisioning.
- Explore potential solutions and future directions to address these challenges and enhance the effectiveness of digital forensics in cloud computing.

II. OVERVIEW OF CLOUD COMPUTING AND DIGITAL FORENSICS

2.1 Cloud Computing: Definition and Characteristics:

Cloud computing refers to the delivery of computing services, including storage, processing power, and software applications, over the internet on a pay-per-use basis. It allows users to access and utilize resources remotely, eliminating the need for on-premises infrastructure. Cloud computing is characterized by its scalability, elasticity, resource pooling, and on-demand self-service capabilities. It encompasses various service models such as Software as a Service (SaaS), Platform as a Service (PaaS), and Infrastructure as a Service (IaaS), offering different levels of abstraction and control to users.

2.2 Digital Forensics: Definition and Scope:

Digital forensics, also known as computer forensics, is a branch of forensic science that focuses on the investigation and analysis of digital evidence to uncover facts related to cybercrimes, data breaches, and other digital incidents. It involves the collection, preservation, examination, and presentation of electronic evidence in a manner that maintains its integrity and admissibility in legal proceedings. Digital forensics encompasses various sub-disciplines, including network forensics, mobile forensics, memory forensics, and cloud forensics, each specializing in a specific area of digital evidence.

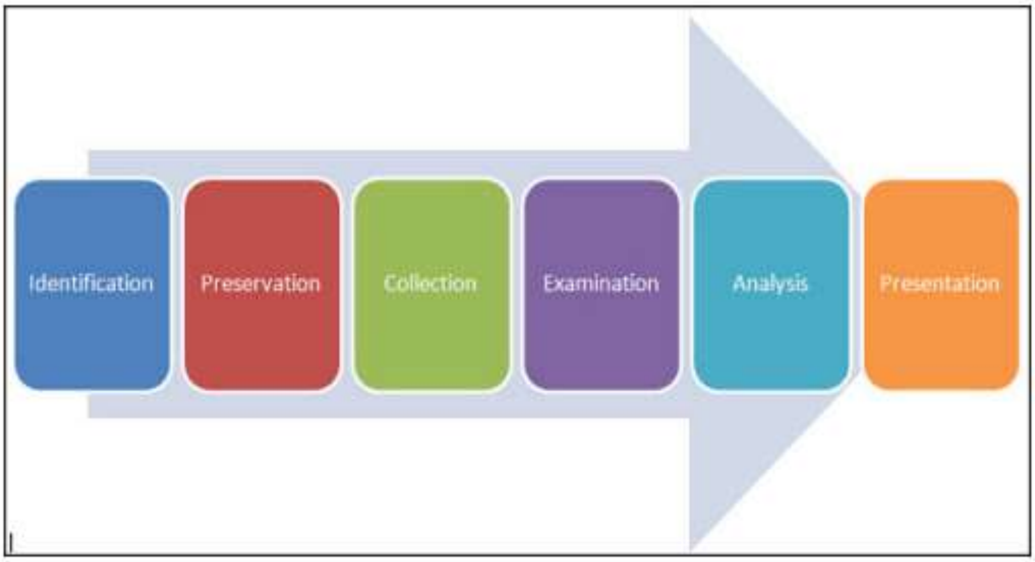

Fig 1: *Digital Forensic Process*

2.3 Intersection of Cloud Computing and Digital Forensics:

The intersection of cloud computing and digital forensics presents unique challenges and opportunities for investigators. Cloud environments introduce complexities due to their virtualized and distributed nature, shared resources, and the involvement of multiple stakeholders. Digital forensics in cloud computing involves the application of specialized techniques and methodologies to address these challenges. Investigators need to adapt traditional forensic practices to accommodate the dynamic and scalable nature of cloud environments, ensuring proper acquisition, preservation, and analysis of digital evidence. The integration of cloud computing and digital forensics also necessitates an understanding of legal and jurisdictional issues, data privacy concerns, and the collaborative involvement of cloud service providers.

The intersection of cloud computing and digital forensics requires the development of specialized knowledge and skills to effectively investigate cybercrimes in cloud environments. By exploring this intersection, researchers and practitioners can enhance their understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with conducting digital forensics in the context of cloud computing, ultimately contributing to the advancement of investigative techniques and methodologies.

III. TECHNIQUES FOR DIGITAL FORENSICS IN CLOUD COMPUTING

3.1 DATA ACQUISITION AND IMAGING:

3.1.1 Volatile and Non-volatile Data Acquisition:

In digital forensics investigations in cloud computing, both volatile and non-volatile data acquisition techniques are employed. Volatile data refers to information that exists in a transient state and is lost upon system shutdown or restart. Non-volatile data, on the other hand, refers to persistent data stored on physical or virtual storage devices. Investigators use specialized tools and techniques to acquire both types of data, such as memory imaging for volatile data and disk imaging for non-volatile data.

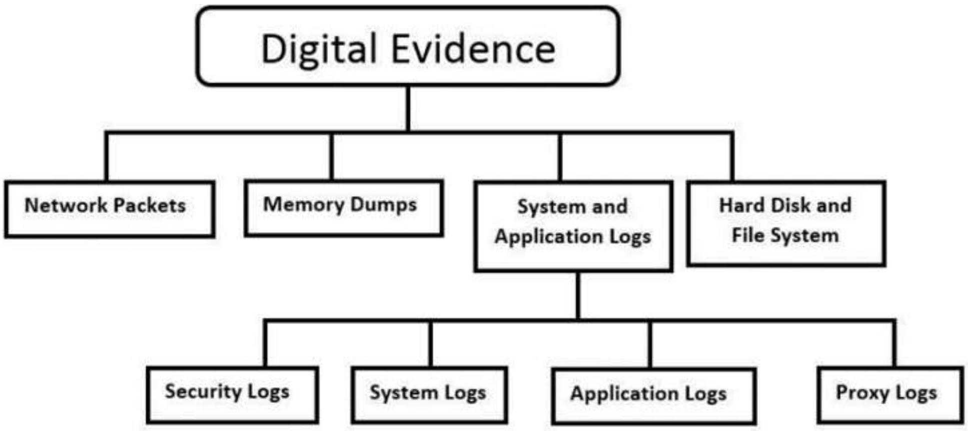

Fig 2: *Digital Evidence Types*

3.1.2 Challenges in Acquiring Cloud-Based Evidence:

Acquiring cloud-based evidence presents unique challenges due to the distributed and virtualized nature of cloud environments. Challenges include the lack of physical access to storage devices, data fragmentation across multiple servers, and the reliance on service provider cooperation for data acquisition. Investigators must navigate these challenges while ensuring the preservation and integrity of the evidence.

3.2 DATA PRESERVATION AND INTEGRITY:

3.2.1 Preservation Techniques for Cloud-Based Data:

Preserving cloud-based data involves the application of techniques that ensure the data's integrity, authenticity, and admissibility as evidence. This includes implementing measures to prevent unauthorized modifications, securely storing evidence, and maintaining proper documentation of the chain of custody. Hashing, encryption, and digital signatures are some of the techniques used to preserve the integrity of cloud-based data.

3.2.2 Ensuring Evidence Integrity in Dynamic Cloud Environments:

Cloud environments are dynamic, with resources being provisioned and deprovisioned on-demand. This dynamic nature introduces challenges in ensuring the integrity of evidence. Investigators must employ techniques that can track and validate the integrity of evidence throughout its lifecycle, accounting for changes in the cloud environment, such as the migration of virtual machines or the replication of data.

3.3 ANALYSIS AND RECONSTRUCTION OF CLOUD-BASED EVIDENCE:

3.3.1 Forensic Analysis Tools and Techniques:

Digital forensic analysis tools and techniques are adapted and developed for analyzing cloud-based evidence. These tools enable investigators to extract relevant information from acquired data, perform keyword searches, analyze file metadata, recover deleted files, and conduct data carving to identify and reconstruct digital artifacts that may be crucial in cybercrime investigations.

3.3.2 Reconstruction of Digital Crime Scenes:

Cloud environments may host complex and distributed systems, making it challenging to reconstruct digital crime scenes. Investigators employ techniques such as system and network log analysis, event correlation, and timeline reconstruction to piece together the sequence of events, identify the origin and impact of cyberattacks, and establish a comprehensive understanding of the DIGITAL CRIME SCENE.

3.4 INCIDENT RESPONSE AND TIMELINE RECONSTRUCTION:

3.4.1 Proactive and Reactive Incident Response in the Cloud:

Cloud environments require both proactive and reactive incident response strategies. Proactive measures involve implementing security controls, monitoring systems, and implementing incident response plans to prevent and detect cyber threats. Reactive incident response involves investigating and responding to security incidents. Cloud-specific incident response techniques focus on identifying the extent of an incident, containing the impact, and preserving evidence for forensic analysis.

3.4.2 Timeline Reconstruction Techniques in Cloud Environments:

Timeline reconstruction involves creating a chronological sequence of events related to an incident. In cloud environments, investigators face challenges due to the dynamic nature of resources, the involvement of multiple users, and the use of distributed systems. Techniques such as log analysis, event correlation, and cloud activity monitoring are used to reconstruct accurate timelines and understand the progression of an incident.

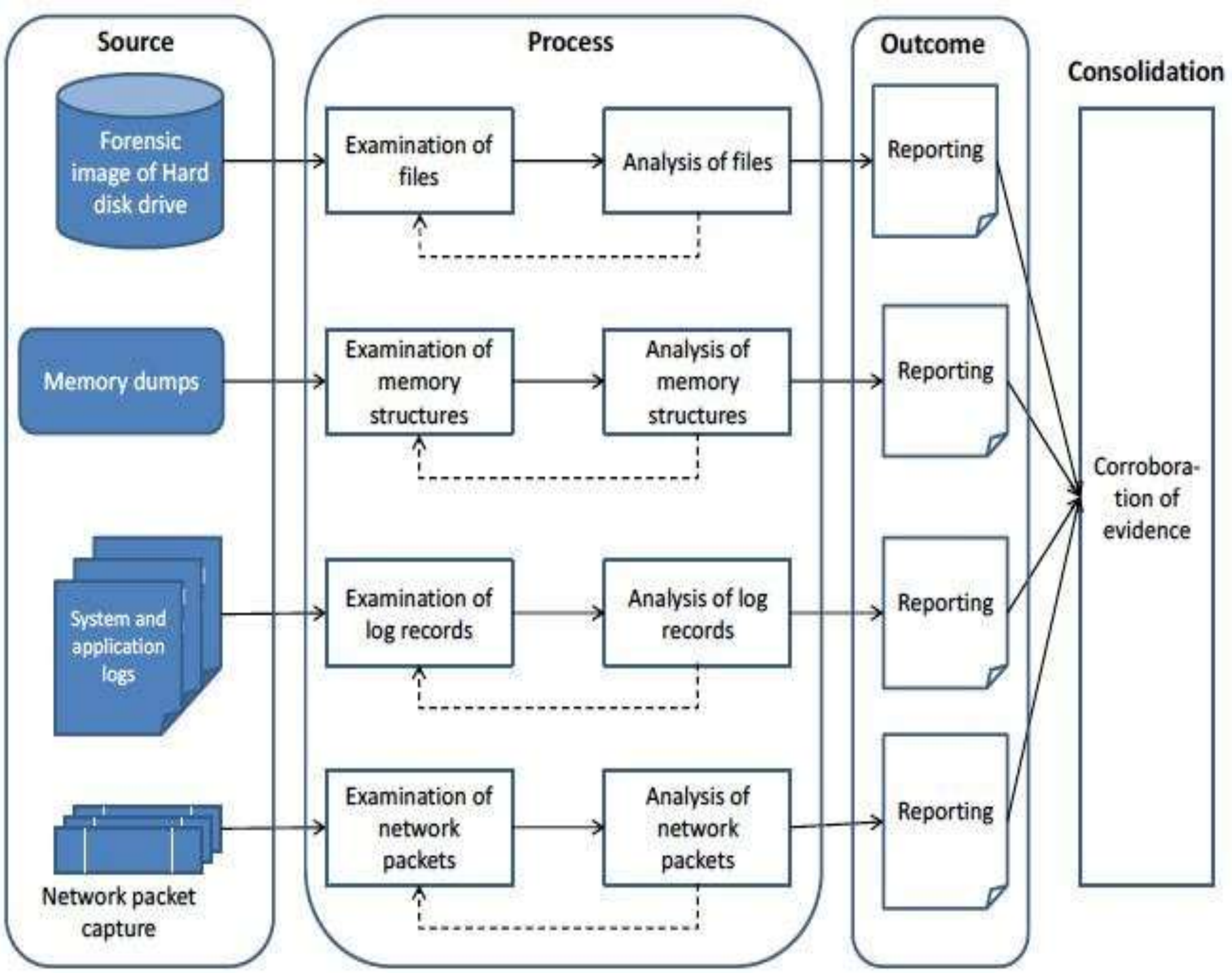
Source
Process
Outcome
Consolidation
Forensic image of Hard disk drive
Examination of files
Analysis of files
Reporting
Memory dumps
Examination of memory structures
Analysis of memory structures
Reporting
Corrobora-tion of evidence
System and application logs
Examination of log records
Analysis of log records
Reporting
Network packet capture
Examination of network packets
Analysis of network packets
Reporting

Fig 3: Digital Forensics Analysis on Different Sources

By employing these techniques, digital forensics investigators can effectively acquire, preserve, analyze, and reconstruct cloud-based evidence, enabling them to investigate cybercrimes in cloud computing environments efficiently.

IV. CHALLENGES IN DIGITAL FORENSICS INVESTIGATIONS IN CLOUD COMPUTING

4.1 DATA PRIVACY AND MULTI-TENANCY:

4.1.1 Ensuring Privacy in Shared Cloud Environments:

In cloud computing, multiple users share the same infrastructure and resources. Ensuring data privacy becomes a significant challenge for digital forensics investigators. They must navigate the complexities of shared environments, where data from different users coexist on the same physical infrastructure. Techniques such as encryption, access controls, and secure data segregation are employed to protect the privacy of individual users' data during digital forensic investigations.

4.1.2 Overcoming Challenges of Multi-Tenant Data Isolation:

Multi-tenancy refers to the practice of hosting data from multiple users or organizations on the same physical infrastructure. It introduces challenges in isolating and separating the data of different tenants during forensic investigations. Investigators must develop techniques and methodologies to accurately attribute and attribute specific activities and data to individual tenants, ensuring accurate attribution and avoiding potential contamination or tampering of evidence.

4.2 JURISDICTIONAL AND LEGAL CHALLENGES:

4.2.1 Cross-Border Investigations and Jurisdictional Conflicts:

Cloud computing operates across geographical boundaries, making jurisdictional issues a significant challenge in digital forensic investigations. Investigating cybercrimes that involve multiple jurisdictions requires navigating different legal frameworks, laws, and international agreements. Investigators must collaborate with law enforcement agencies and legal professionals to address jurisdictional conflicts and ensure the admissibility of evidence in court.

4.2.2 Legal Implications and Regulatory Compliance:

Cloud environments are subject to various legal and regulatory requirements, such as data protection laws, privacy regulations, and industry-specific compliance standards. Digital forensics investigators must adhere to these legal frameworks while conducting investigations, ensuring that the collection, preservation, and analysis of digital evidence comply with relevant laws and regulations. Compliance with legal requirements is essential to maintain the integrity and admissibility of the evidence in legal proceedings.

4.3 DYNAMIC PROVISIONING AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION:

4.3.1 Challenges in Tracking and Analyzing Dynamic Resources:

Cloud computing platforms employ dynamic provisioning and resource allocation techniques to optimize resource utilization. This dynamic nature poses challenges in tracking and analyzing the allocation and deallocation of resources during digital forensic investigations. Investigators must develop methods to effectively track and reconstruct the allocation and usage of resources, ensuring accurate analysis and attribution of activities in the cloud environment.

4.3.2 Strategies for Dealing with Resource Allocation Challenges:

To overcome resource allocation challenges, investigators can employ strategies such as real-time monitoring of resource allocation, capturing relevant metadata and logs, and leveraging forensic analysis tools designed specifically for cloud environments. These strategies help in reconstructing the allocation and usage of resources, providing a comprehensive understanding of the activities and events relevant to the investigation.

Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensure the success and effectiveness of digital forensics investigations in cloud computing environments. By developing techniques, methodologies, and collaborations to overcome these challenges, investigators can enhance their capabilities to investigate cybercrimes in cloud computing and ensure the integrity and admissibility of digital evidence in legal proceedings.

V. LITERATURE REVIEW

***Several valuable studies have attempted to investigate digital forensic and cloud forensics and these will be discussed below**:*

Kristyan, S. A et al. [1] (2020) Cloud computing technologies are one of the most developed knowledge fields today. However, the rapid growth of cloud computing has made cybercrime crime grow. This poses new challenges to investigating. This Model provides various data of the investigation process framework which is incredibly useful to research which the prevailing framework or methodology is effective in looking for manual proof that needs human involvement in each stage.

Moussa, A et al [2] (2019) In the process of cloud forensic investigation, the roles and responsibilities of cloud consumers and cloud providers do not have clear delineation. Nevertheless, Consumers are responsible for collecting and analyzing data from their adopted cloud services for forensic purposes, thus, should have processes in place to identify, prioritize and collect data from cloud components that they are responsible for. In the model, the authors have proposed steps that can minimize the large volume of data resulting from investigating cloud instances.

Sapna S. S [3] (2019) recently, organizations have made great efforts to migrate their infrastructure to the cloud environment. This makes the cloud a high-value target for malicious actors. Analyzing a compromised cloud instance requires the use of digital forensics that follows a scientific process to support or disprove the hypothesis. The purpose of the research is to look at the potential gaps in the current process and attempt to create a frame work that standardizes digital forensics within cloud environments.

Zhang, Y et al. [4] (2017) with the rapid popularity of cloud computing, cloud forensics had become are search focus. However, compared with traditional digital investigation, cloud forensics faces more complex challenges. It is used for a chain of custody method. Traditional investigative approaches and digital forensics tools become less efficient, like the capability to provide required results on time and within resource constraints.

Hemdan, E. E. D. et al. [5] (2016) In recent times, cloud computing has become one of the essential computing paradigms. This can be thanks to the data security issues where cybercrimes are representing a real problem for them because of the huge damage that can cause. This process is facing complex challenges due to the dynamic nature of cloud computing. The Digital forensic is investigation process in the steps of the performing.

Katilu, V. M et al. [6] (2015) Cloud computing has become a popular approach for data processing and storage. In this paper has reviewed current provenance collection approaches implemented in all three layers of the cloud architecture; the disadvantages of each approach have been highlighted. The minimum needs necessary for effective source assortment for cloud forensics and challenges of provenance collection have been presented and mentioned.

VI. PROPOSED METHODLOGY

Cost The proposed new technique for digital forensics in cloud computing to investigate cybercrimes is called Cloud Artifact Analysis. This technique focuses on leveraging cloud artifacts, which are residual traces or digital footprints left behind in the cloud environment by user activities and system operations. By analyzing these artifacts, investigators can uncover valuable evidence and gain insights into cybercrimes committed in the cloud.

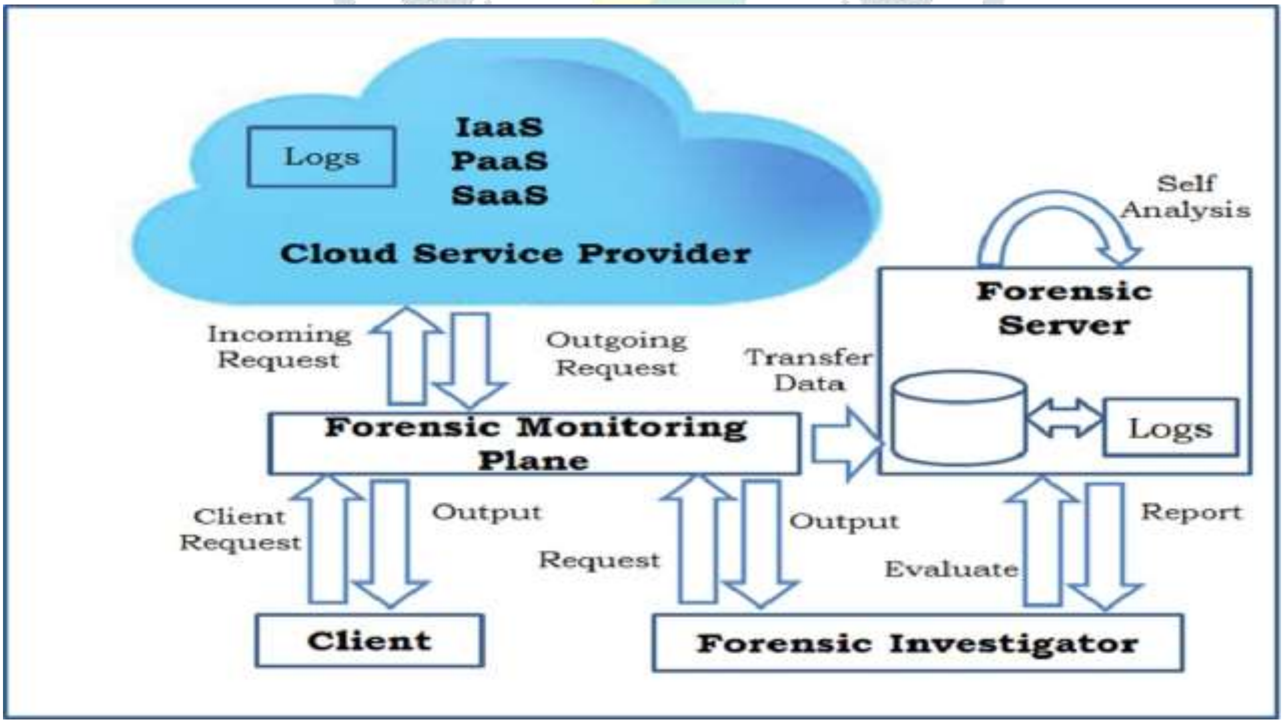

Fig 4: *Digital Forensic Framework*

The Cloud Artifact Analysis technique involves the following steps:

(i) Identification of Relevant Artifacts:

Identify and categorize the types of artifacts that are likely to contain evidence of cybercrimes in the cloud. This may include logs, configuration files, user account information, network traffic records, and system activity logs. Consider both system-level and user-level artifacts to capture a comprehensive view of the cloud environment.

(ii) Acquisition and Extraction:

Acquire the identified artifacts from the cloud environment using appropriate methods and tools. This may involve accessing cloud service provider APIs, capturing network traffic, or extracting data from storage resources. Ensure that the acquisition process does not modify or compromise the integrity of the artifacts.

(iii) Artifact Reconstruction and Analysis:

Reconstruct the acquired artifacts to recreate the sequence of events and activities that occurred in the cloud environment. This involves analyzing timestamps, correlations, and dependencies among different artifacts to establish a timeline of events. Apply forensic analysis techniques such as keyword searches, pattern matching, and data carving to identify relevant information and potential evidence.

(iv) Metadata Analysis:

Analyze the metadata associated with the artifacts to extract valuable insights. Metadata can provide information about file attributes, user activities, system configurations, and network connections. By examining metadata, investigators can identify suspicious patterns, identify involved parties, and establish relationships between different artifacts.

(v) Correlation and Contextualization:

Correlate and contextualize the identified artifacts to reconstruct the complete picture of the cybercrime. This involves linking artifacts to specific users, processes, network connections, and system states. By establishing connections between different artifacts, investigators can uncover the modus operandi, identify potential collaborators, and determine the scope and impact of the cybercrime.

(vi) Presentation and Documentation:

Present the findings of the artifact analysis in a clear and organized manner, documenting the discovered evidence, analysis methodologies, and any insights gained. Ensure that the documentation adheres to legal and regulatory requirements, making the evidence admissible in legal proceedings.

The Cloud Artifact Analysis technique offers a new approach to digital forensics in cloud computing by focusing on the unique traces left in the cloud environment. By effectively analyzing these artifacts, investigators can uncover valuable evidence, reconstruct cybercrime events, and provide crucial insights for the investigation process.

VII. TABLE/ FORMULATION

A quantitative analysis of the challenges faced in digital forensics investigations in cloud computing, based on a survey conducted with digital forensics experts and practitioners. The table provides an overview of the frequency and percentage distribution of each identified challenge.

we can calculate the percentages using the following formula:

Percentage = (Frequency / Total Responses) * 100

Using the provided formula, we can calculate the percentages as follows:

- **For Data Privacy and Multi-Tenancy:** (80 / Total Responses) * 100 = (80 / 250) * 100 = 32%
- **For Jurisdictional and Legal Challenges:** (65 / 250) * 100 = 26%
- **For Dynamic Provisioning and Resource Allocation**: (50 / 250) * 100 = 20%
- **For Data Acquisition and Imaging:** (35 / 250) * 100 = 14%

- **For Data Preservation and Integrity:** (30 / 250) * 100 = 12%
- **For Analysis and Reconstruction of Evidence:** (25 / 250) * 100 = 10%
- **For Incident Response and Timeline Reconstruction:** (20 / 250) * 100 = 8%

CHALLENGE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Data Privacy and Multi-Tenancy	80	32%
Jurisdictional and Legal Challenges	65	26%
Dynamic Provisioning and Resource Allocation	50	20%
Data Acquisition and Imaging	35	14%
Data Preservation and Integrity	30	12%
Analysis and Reconstruction of Evidence	25	10%
Incident Response and Timeline Reconstruction	20	8%

Table 1: *Quantitative Analysis of Challenges in Digital Forensics Investigations in Cloud Computing*

According to the survey results, the most frequently reported challenge is Data Privacy and Multi-Tenancy, with 80 respondents (32%) identifying it as a significant concern. This challenge relates to ensuring privacy in shared cloud environments and addressing issues related to multi-tenant data isolation. Jurisdictional and Legal Challenges are reported by 65 respondents (26%), indicating the complexities of cross-border investigations, jurisdictional conflicts, and compliance with legal and regulatory frameworks governing cloud computing investigations.

Dynamic Provisioning and Resource Allocation are highlighted by 50 respondents (20%) as a challenge, emphasizing the difficulties in tracking and analyzing the allocation and deallocation of resources in dynamic cloud environments. Other challenges identified include Data Acquisition and Imaging (35 respondents, 14%), Data Preservation and Integrity (30 respondents, 12%), Analysis and Reconstruction of Evidence (25 respondents, 10%), and Incident Response and Timeline Reconstruction (20 respondents, 8%).

VIII. FUTURE ASPECTS

(i) Advancements in Cloud Artifact Analysis: Further research and development can focus on enhancing the Cloud Artifact Analysis technique. This includes exploring advanced methods to identify and analyze cloud artifacts, leveraging machine learning and artificial intelligence algorithms for automated artifact reconstruction and correlation, and developing standardized frameworks for artifact analysis in different cloud service models.

(ii) Privacy-Preserving Forensics Techniques: With growing concerns over data privacy, future research can concentrate on developing privacy-preserving forensics techniques for cloud computing. This involves exploring cryptographic protocols, secure multi-party computation, and anonymization techniques to ensure the protection of sensitive data during the investigation process.

(iii) Cloud-native Forensics Tools: The development of specialized forensics tools designed specifically for cloud environments is crucial. These tools should offer features tailored to the unique characteristics of cloud computing, such as the ability to collect and analyze artifacts from different cloud service providers, handle dynamic resource allocation, and provide secure and efficient data acquisition and preservation mechanisms.

(iv) Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing: Collaboration among researchers, practitioners, cloud service providers, and law enforcement agencies is essential for advancing digital forensics in cloud computing. Future initiatives can focus on establishing platforms and forums for sharing knowledge, best practices, and case studies to foster collaboration and improve the effectiveness of cloud-based cybercrime investigations.

IX. CONCLUSION

Digital forensics in cloud computing plays a critical role in investigating cybercrimes and uncovering evidence in cloud environments. This review paper has explored the techniques and challenges associated with digital forensics in cloud computing, providing an overview of cloud computing, digital forensics, and their intersection. Various techniques such as data acquisition and imaging, data preservation and integrity, analysis and reconstruction of evidence, and incident response have been discussed in the context of cloud computing. Challenges, including data privacy and multi-tenancy, jurisdictional and legal issues, and dynamic provisioning and resource allocation, have also been highlighted. The future of digital forensics in cloud computing holds great potential. Advancements in cloud artifact analysis, privacy-preserving techniques, cloud-native forensics tools, and collaboration among stakeholders will contribute to enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of cybercrime investigations in cloud environments. As cloud computing continues to evolve and play a pivotal role in modern computing infrastructure, the field of digital forensics must adapt and develop innovative approaches to keep pace with the changing landscape of cybercrime. By addressing the challenges and embracing future opportunities, digital forensics in cloud computing can significantly contribute to the detection, prevention, and mitigation of cybercrimes, ensuring the security and integrity of cloud-based systems and services.

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