

# Some Results on RC4

**Abstract.** In this paper, we have given a theoretical analysis of the key scheduling algorithm (KSA) of RC4, where the nonlinear operation is swapping among the permutation bytes. We have come up with explicit formulae for the probabilities with which the pseudo random index  $j$  and hence the permutation bytes are biased to the secret key at any stage before the first  $l + 1$  rounds of the KSA, where  $l =$  keylength. Theoretical proofs of these formulae had been left open since Roos' work (1995)[27]. But in 2008 Gautam Paul and Subhamoy Maitra[35] gave the first theoretical proof of the Roos' bias. In their work the analysis was based on the assumption that the pseudo random index  $j$  is uniformly distributed over  $\mathbb{Z}_N$  at each round of KSA. In reality, this is actually not the case. The only thing that is truly random in the whole of RC4 are the key bytes. In this paper, we have done the analysis based on the assumption that only the key bytes are distributed uniformly over  $\mathbb{Z}_N$ . The formulae that we got gives a better approximation of the experimental probabilities than result in [35].

**Keywords:** Bias, Cryptanalysis, Keystream, Key leakage, Permutation, RC4, Stream cipher.

## 1 Introduction

RC4 is a synchronous stream cipher. RC4 was designed by Ron Rivest of RSA Security in 1987. While it is officially termed "Rivest Cipher 4", the RC acronym is alternatively understood to stand for "Ron's Code", thus RC4 = Ron's code #4 or Rivest's code # 4 RC4 was initially a trade secret, but in September 1994 a description of it was anonymously posted to the Cypherpunks mailing list which invoked the external analysis of RC4. The name "RC4" is trademarked, however. RC4 is often referred to as "ARCFOUR" or "ARC4" (meaning Alleged RC4, because RSA has never officially released the algorithm), to avoid possible trademark problems. RC4 is one of the most widely-used software stream cipher and is used in popular protocols such as Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) and Transport Layer Security (TLS) (to protect Internet traffic), Wired Equivalent Privacy (WEP) and Wi-Fi Protected Access (WPA) (to secure wireless networks). It is also used in Microsoft Windows, Lotus Notes, Apple AOCE, Oracle Secure SQL etc. Though a variety of other stream ciphers have been proposed after RC4, it is still the most popular stream cipher algorithm due to its simplicity, ease of implementation, speed and efficiency. The algorithm can be stated in less than ten lines, yet after two decades of analysis its strengths and weaknesses are of great interest to the community.

The RC4 algorithm uses a state array or a S-Box  $S = (S[0], \dots, S[N - 1])$  of length  $N$ . Typically,  $N = 256$ .  $S$  is initialized as the identity permutation, i.e.,  $S[y] = y$  for  $0 \leq y \leq N - 1$ . A secret key  $k$  of size  $l$  bytes (typically,  $5 \leq l \leq 16$ ) is used to scramble this permutation.

The RC4 cipher has two components, namely, the Key Scheduling Algorithm (KSA) and the Pseudo-Random Generation Algorithm (PRGA). The KSA takes as input the secret key  $k$  and the state array  $S$  and turns into a random permutation  $S$  of  $0, 1, \dots, N - 1$ . The random permutation obtained after the completion of KSA forms the input to the PRGA which then uses this permutation to generate pseudo-random keystream bytes. The keystream output

byte  $z$  is bitwise XOR-ed with the message byte to generate the ciphertext byte which is then send through the channel. On the other end the receiver has in his disposal a similar synchronised RC4 running wiht the same key  $k$ . The receiver upon receiving the cipher text  $z$  again bitwise XOR's with the keystream byte generated at his/her end to get back the message byte.

The index  $i$  in both the algorithm above is normally termed as the deterministic index of RC4 whereas the index  $j$  is termed as the pseudo-random index of RC4.

KSA()	PRGA()
<i>Initialization:</i>	<i>Initialization:</i>
for $i$ from 0 to $N-1$	$i := 0$
$S[i] := i$	$j := 0$
endfor	<i>Keystream Generation Loop:</i>
$j := 0$	while GeneratingOutput:
<i>Scrambling:</i>	$i := (i + 1) \bmod N$
for $i$ from 0 to $N-1$	$j := (j + S[i]) \bmod N$
$j := (j + S[i] + \text{key}[i \bmod l]) \bmod N$	swap(&S[i],&S[j])
swap(&S[i],&S[j])	output $S[(S[i] + S[j]) \bmod N]$
endfor	endwhile

## 2 A Different Probabilistic Approach For The Analysis Of The Key Scheduling Algorithm

### 2.1 Notations

Let,  $S_{y+1}$  be the permutation and  $j_{y+1}$  be the value of the pseudo-random index after the  $(y + 1)^{th}$  round of the RC4 KSA, i.e, the round when the deterministic index  $i$  takes the value  $y$ , where  $y \in \{0, 1, \dots, N - 1\}$ . Thus,  $S_N$  denotes the final state after the completion of RC4 KSA. We denote the initial state by  $S_0$  and the initial value 0 of  $j$  by  $j_0$ . Further let,  $\mathbb{Z}_N$  denote the set  $\{0, 1, \dots, N - 1\}$ .

### 2.2 Our Work

In the literatures that we have went through all the probability analysis that is done on the KSA of RC4 is done based on the assumption that the pseudo-random index  $j$  can take all possible  $N$  values at each round of the KSA independently, according to the uniform distribution. But in reality this is not the case for RC4. This assumption has inherent drawbacks as it considers events and hence their probabilities, in cases where those events actually never occur. Thus increasing the search space as one tries to implement such kind of theoretical biases.

In this section we discuss some of the previously known result but without the assumption of the pseudo-random index  $j$  being uniformly distributed. Instead we calculate the probabilities based on the fact that the key bytes are uniformly distributed over

$\mathbb{Z}_N = \{0, 1, \dots, N-1\}$  (where we identify the congruence class  $\underline{i}$  with  $i$ ). Since the only thing that is truly random in the whole of RC4 are the key bytes. Which in effect means that one can manipulate upto the  $l^{th}$  round of KSA, by choosing different key bytes. After which everything is deterministic. Thus the idea behind this discussion is to come out with some results which are solely dependent on the key bytes and thus giving a better probabilistic analysis of RC4.

**Theorem 1.** *During KSA,*

1.  $S_y[y] = y$  can only happen if till the  $(y+1)^{th}$  round the index  $j$  does not hit  $y$  and
2. if  $S_y[y] \neq y$  then  $S_y[y] < y$ .

*Proof.* 1. The other possibility is that the index  $j$  hits  $y$  first, say in the  $(\alpha+1)^{th}$  round  $\alpha < y$  and after that it is swapped again in an intermediate round, i.e., between  $(\alpha+1)^{th}$  round and  $(y+1)^{th}$  round. This can happen more than once.

Let,  $S_\alpha[\alpha] = \beta$ , then after  $(\alpha+1)^{th}$  round

$$S_{\alpha+1}[\alpha] = y, S_{\alpha+1}[y] = \beta.$$

Now, after the  $(\alpha+1)^{th}$  round the index  $i$  takes values greater than  $\alpha$ . So, to have after any  $(\gamma+1)^{th}$  ( $\alpha < \gamma < y$ ) round  $S_{\gamma+1}[y] = y$ ,  $j$  should hit  $\alpha$  in the  $(\gamma+1)^{th}$ . In that case after  $(\gamma+1)^{th}$  round

$$S_{\gamma+1}[\alpha] = S_\gamma[\gamma]$$

$$S_{\gamma+1}[\gamma] = y.$$

Now this can happen more than once where after each such step  $S_{\gamma+1}[\gamma] = y$ . So the only way  $S_y[y]$  may be equal to  $y$  is when  $\gamma = y-1$  but in that case  $S_y[y-1] = y$ . Thus, leading to the conclusion that  $S_y[y] \neq y$ . Hence the theorem.

2. Suppose if possible  $S_y[y] = A > y$ . Now before  $(y+1)^{th}$  round the value of the deterministic index  $i$  was  $< y$  which implies that there must have been an index  $\alpha < y$  such that  $S_\alpha[\alpha] = A > y > \alpha$  implying that there exists a  $\beta < \alpha < y$  such that  $S_\beta[\beta] = A > y > \alpha > \beta$ . Now this argument can be continued infinitely many times. Thus, implying that the index  $i$  is unbounded below which is a contradiction to the fact that minimum value of  $i$  is 0. Hence, the theorem.  $\square$

**Theorem 2.**  $P(S_y[y] = y) = \left(\frac{N-1}{N}\right)^y$  ( $y \leq l$ ).

*Proof.*

$$P(S_y[y] = y) = P(j_1 \neq y, \dots, j_y \neq y) \text{ [By Theorem 1]}$$

$$P(j_1 \neq y) = P(K[0] \neq y) = \left(\frac{N-1}{N}\right).$$

Now,

$$j_x = \sum_{m=1}^{x-1} S_m[m] + \sum_{m=0}^{x-1} K[m \bmod l] = \sum_{m=1}^{x-1} S_m[m] + \sum_{m=0}^{x-2} K[m \bmod l] + K[(x-1) \bmod l].$$

Let,  $\sum_{m=1}^{x-1} S_m[m] + \sum_{m=0}^{x-2} K[m \bmod l] = \alpha_x$ .

Then “ $j_x \neq y \mid j_1 \neq y, \dots, j_{x-1} \neq y$ ”  $\Rightarrow K[(x-1) \bmod l] \not\equiv (y - \alpha_x) \pmod N$ . Thus,

$$P(j_x \neq y \mid j_1 \neq y, \dots, j_{x-1} \neq y) = P(K[(x-1) \bmod l] \not\equiv (y - \alpha_x) \pmod N) = \left(\frac{N-1}{N}\right).$$

Therefore,

$$\begin{aligned} P(S_y[y] = y) &= P(j_1 \neq y, \dots, j_y \neq y) \\ &= P(j_1 \neq y) \cdot P(j_2 \neq y \mid j_1 \neq y) \cdots P(j_y \mid j_1 \neq y, \dots, j_{y-1} \neq y) \\ &= P(K[0] \neq y) \cdot P(K[1] \not\equiv (y - \alpha_2) \pmod N) \cdots \\ &\quad P(K[y-1] \not\equiv (y - \alpha_y) \pmod N) \\ &= \left(\frac{N-1}{N}\right) \cdot \left(\frac{N-1}{N}\right) \cdots \left(\frac{N-1}{N}\right) = \left(\frac{N-1}{N}\right)^y. \quad \square \end{aligned}$$

**Theorem 3.**  $P(S_0[0] = 0; S_1[1] = 1; \dots; S_y[y] = y) = \left(\frac{(N-1)!}{N^y(N-y-1)!}\right) (y \leq l)$ .

*Proof.*

$P(S_0[0] = 0) = 1$  [Since the initial permutation is the identity permutation in KSA]

Now,

$$\begin{aligned} &P(S_0[0] = 0; S_1[1] = 1; \dots; S_y[y] = y) \\ &= P(; j_1 \neq 1; j_1 \neq 1, j_2 \neq 2; \dots; j_1 \neq 1, \dots, j_y \neq y) \text{ [by Theorem 1]} \\ &= P(j_1 \neq 1, \dots, j_1 \neq y; j_2 \neq 2, \dots, j_2 \neq y; \dots; j_y \neq y) \end{aligned}$$

Now,

$$P(j_1 \neq 1, \dots, j_1 \neq y) = P(k[0] \neq 1, \dots, y) = \left(\frac{N-y}{N}\right).$$

Therefore,

$$\begin{aligned} &P(j_x \neq x, \dots, j_x \neq y \mid j_1 \neq 1, \dots, j_1 \neq y; j_2 \neq 2, \dots, j_2 \neq y; \dots; \\ &\quad j_{x-1} \neq x-1 \cdots j_{x-1} \neq y) \\ &= P(K[x] \not\equiv x - \alpha_{x+1}, \dots, y - \alpha_{x+1}) = \left(\frac{N - (y - (x-1))}{N}\right) \end{aligned}$$

where  $\alpha_x$  has the same meaning as in Theorem 2 and  $x \leq y$ . Then from the chain rule we get the required probability =  $\left(\frac{(N-1)!}{N^y(N-y-1)!}\right)$   $\square$

**Corollary 1.** *The event “ $j_{y+1} = \frac{y(y+1)}{2} + \sum_{m=0}^y K[m \bmod l]$ ” can occur if and only if the event “ $S_0[0] = 0; S_1[1] = 1; \dots; S_y[y] = y$ ” occurs, where  $y$  is such that  $\frac{y(y+1)}{2} \leq N$  and  $\frac{(y+1)(y+2)}{2} > N$ .*

*Proof.* Let,  $A_y$  be the event “ $S_0[0] = 0; S_1[1] = 1; \dots; S_y[y] = y$ ” and  $E_y$  the event that “ $j_{y+1} = \frac{y(y+1)}{2} + \sum_{m=0}^y K[m \bmod l]$ ”. Let,  $j'_{y+1} = \sum_{m=1}^y S_m[m] + \sum_{m=0}^y K[m \bmod l]$  where atleast one  $S_m[m] \neq m$ . Now, the other possibility by which  $E_y$  can occur is if,

$$\begin{aligned} j_{y+1} &\equiv j'_{y+1} \pmod{N} \\ \Rightarrow \sum_{m=1}^y S_m[m] &\equiv \frac{y(y+1)}{2} \pmod{N} \end{aligned}$$

Now, from the second part of Theorem 1 we get  $S_m[m] \leq m$ , which implies that in  $j'_y$

$$\sum_{m=1}^y S_m[m] = \sum_{m=1}^{y_m} (i_m)^{n_m}$$

where  $\sum_{m=1}^{y_m} n_m = y$  and  $i_m \in \{1, \dots, y\} \forall m$ . Therefore,

$$\sum_{m=1}^{y_m} (i_m)^{n_m} + \delta N = \frac{y(y+1)}{2}.$$

where  $\delta \in \mathbb{N} \cup \{0\}$ . Clearly, if  $\frac{y(y+1)}{2} \leq N$  then  $\delta = 0$  in which case  $\sum_{m=1}^{y_m} (i_m)^{n_m} \neq \frac{y(y+1)}{2}$ , since for atleast one  $m$ ,  $S_m[m] < m$ .  $\square$

According to the corollary 1 for  $N = 256$  and  $l$  upto 22 (since  $\frac{22 \cdot 23}{2} = 253 < 256$  and  $\frac{23 \cdot 24}{2} = 276 > 256$ ) the event “ $j_{y+1} = \frac{y(y+1)}{2} + \sum_{m=0}^y K[m \bmod l]$ ” can occur if and only if “ $S_0[0] = 0; S_1[1] = 1; \dots; S_y[y] = y$ ”, where  $y \leq l$ . Which implies that in lemma 1 of [35, section 2.1],  $P(E_y | \bar{A}_y) = 0$  instead of  $1/N$ ,  $\forall y \leq l \leq 22$ . Also the probability of  $A_y$  in lemma 1 of [35, section 2.1] was calculated assuming that  $j$  takes values from  $\mathbb{Z}_N$  uniformly at random which is not the case in KSA. Hence, the probability of the same event calculated as in Theorem 3 gives a more exact picture of what actually occurs during RC4 KSA.

*Experimental Results :* We here substantiate our above claims through experimental results, which actually shows that our claim is indeed true. The following experimental results were obtained by running RC4 KSA on one million randomly selected keys of length 16 bytes.

d	Experimental	Theorem 3	Mentioned Paper	Diff. col 2, col 3	Diff. col 2, col 4
5	0.942002	0.9426899	0.943204346	0.0006899	0.001202346
6	0.918577	0.920595605	0.921403419	0.002018605	0.002826419
7	0.893766	0.895423069	0.896607697	0.001657069	0.002841697
8	0.865494	0.867441098	0.869089214	0.001947098	0.003595214
9	0.834725	0.836945122	0.839143578	0.002220122	0.004418578
10	0.802510	0.804251953	0.807084699	0.001741953	0.004574699
11	0.768166	0.769694252	0.773239341	0.001528252	0.005073341
12	0.732340	0.733614834	0.737941633	0.001274834	0.005601633
13	0.694950	0.696360956	0.701527645	0.001410956	0.006577645
14	0.657209	0.658278716	0.664330183	0.001069716	0.007121183
15	0.618262	0.619707697	0.626673878	0.001445697	0.008411878
16	0.578868	0.580975966	0.588870698	0.002107966	0.010002698

Thus we can see that that the experimental results also seems to suggest that Theorem 3 actually gives a more accurate probability of the event.

$$\text{Also, } \frac{(N-l) \times \dots \times (N-1)}{N^l} > \frac{1}{2}$$

$$\Rightarrow \log(N-l) + \dots + \log(N-1) - l \log(N) > -1$$

$$\Rightarrow l \left( \log(N-1) - \log(N) \right) > \log(N-l) + \dots + \log(N-1) - l \log(N) > -1$$

$$\Rightarrow l \left( \log(N) - \log(N-1) \right) < 1$$

$$\Rightarrow l < \frac{1}{\left( \log(N) - \log(N-1) \right)}$$

Now, for  $N = 256$  and  $l \leq 177$ , i.e, for all key of length  $< 177$  the event “ $S_0[0] = 0; S_1[1] = 1; \dots; S_l[l] = l$ ” occurs with probability  $> \frac{1}{2}$ .

Thus we have the following corollary.

**Corollary 2.** For  $N = 256$  and  $l \leq 177$ , i.e, for all key of length  $\leq 177$  the event “ $S_0[0] = 0; S_1[1] = 1; \dots; S_y[y] = y$ ” ( $y \leq l$ ) occurs with probability  $> \frac{1}{2}$ .  $\square$

Here we also like to bring to the notice that after the  $l^{th}$  round the probability of events like “ $S_y[y] = y$  where  $y > l$ ” is actually much more than what we find in the literature. For example, consider the event “ $S_{l+1}[l+1] = l+1$ ”. now for this event to occur it is sufficient that “ $K[0] \neq l+1, k[0] \neq l+1 - j_l - S_l[l]; j_2 \neq l+1; \dots; j_l \neq l+1$ ” event occurs thus giving

$$\begin{aligned}
P(S_{l+1}[l+1] = l+1) &= \left(\frac{N-1}{N}\right)^l; \text{ if } j_l = S_l[l] = 0 \text{ or } j_l + S_l[l] = N \\
&= \left(\frac{N-2}{N}\right) \left(\frac{N-1}{N}\right)^{l-1}; \text{ otherwise}
\end{aligned}$$

which is much more than the  $\left(\frac{N-1}{N}\right)^{l+1}$  which is what we get if we consider  $j$  to be uniformly distributed over  $\mathbb{Z}_N$ .

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