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THE CODE-BASED INTERPRETATION OF AUTHORIZATION:
AN INCOMPLETE PICTURE

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ABSTRACT

The definition of authorization under the Stored Communications Act raises questions about implied authorization in situations where someone fails to secure an email account properly. The few cases that have addressed this issue under the federal act or its state equivalents have not created a bright-line rule. Instead, the question of authorization has been highly fact-dependent. Two leading interpretive theories have emerged on the question of authorization: the code-based theory and the trespass theory. While the code-based interpretation of authorization seems pleasing because it appears to provide highly predictive outcomes, it fails in some circumstances. This failure is especially obvious when someone inadvertently and unintentionally gives someone else permanent access to an email account by, for instance, saving their username and password in the browser of a shared computer. Courts interpreting cases in this context implicitly reject the code-based interpretation of authorization, which would provide no remedy, in favor of the trespass theory. Ultimately, the code-based model does not provide enough flexibility to fit all situations in which the courts wish to provide a remedy. The best test, therefore, involves aspects of both theories.

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INTRODUCTION

At a time where anything and everything is done online, and when our computer, phone, or tablet can store all of our private email accounts and passwords, when do we implicitly grant someone else authorization to access that information? The question is not as clear-cut as some would like to think. There are two models of interpreting the ultimate question of what constitutes *authorization* under the federal Stored Communications Act (“SCA”): the code-based theory and the trespass theory. The code-based theory relies on whether the user bypasses code-based protections of the computer or system, whereas the trespass theory analogizes to trespass law to determine implied authorization. Depending on the facts of the case, the

without authorization a facility through which an electronic communication service is provided; or (2) intentionally exceeds an authorization to access that facility . . . shall be punished”⁷

The classic problem Congress designed the SCA to address is when an individual hacks into an email provider and reads another individual’s emails. As one departs from the archetypal example, however, the analysis becomes more complicated. This Article does not attempt to answer the ultimate question of when a person can and cannot implicitly have authorization. Instead, this Article attempts to demonstrate the highly fact-dependent nature of the inquiry.

B. Civil Cause of Action

The SCA provides for a civil cause of action, which allows persons who are “aggrieved” by the violation of the SCA to recover damages from the violator.⁸ Notably, the civil cause of action requires a lesser mens rea: from intentional to either “knowing or intentional.”⁹ The SCA also guarantees a minimum of a \$1,000 recovery, grants the court power to award the prevailing party costs and attorney’s fees, and allows for the possibility of punitive damages if the conduct was “willful or intentional.”¹⁰

C. State Statutes

Certain states have adopted comparable statutes to the SCA.¹¹ For example, New Jersey expanded its Wiretap Act to include language equivalent to that of the federal SCA.¹² While New Jersey’s version has a different grammatical structure than its federal counterpart, the

⁷ 18 U.S.C. § 2701(a) (2002).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.* § 2707(c).

¹¹ The following is a non-exhaustive list of states that have some variation of the SCA: Alaska, Delaware, Florida, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin. *See* 1 ROBERT D. BROWNSTONE & TYLER G. NEWBY, DATA SEC. & PRIVACY LAW § 9:47, at 1 n.1 (2014); N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2A:156A-27 (West 2013).

¹² N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2A:156A-27 (West 2013).

when someone determines the password using a password-cracking computer program, but also covers others situations, such as where a person hacks around a password barrier or other security device, or uses social engineering to trick someone into disclosing their password to the hacker.¹⁹ Though this approach covers a wide swath of activity, it is still narrow in that only limited types of conduct constitute code-based violations.

One reason for using this approach is clarity. Another is that it limits the number of situations that would constitute a violation of the SCA. Recognizing that statutes like the SCA impose criminal liability, some argue that the rule of lenity²⁰ should apply to require this narrow interpretation of authorization.²¹ Therefore, this method of understanding authorization limits liability to when someone *explicitly* tricks a computer system or uses deceit to induce a human into giving more information or privileges than the person otherwise would have.²²

B. The Trespass Theory is a More Fluid Model

Another, more fluid theory of interpreting authorization involves linking violations to the tort of trespass. This theory operates mainly by analogy between trespass law and computer systems.²³ In *Theofel*, the court found a violation of the SCA when a company sought to execute a clearly invalid subpoena on an email provider.²⁴ After recognizing that the SCA serves a comparable role to the tort of

Determining Employees' Authorization Under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, 107 MICH. L. REV. 819, 825 (2009).

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ The Rule of Lenity requires that ambiguous laws imposing criminal liability be interpreted in favor of the defendant when their ambiguity cannot be clarified through traditional means of statutory interpretation. *See Bell v. United States*, 349 U.S. 81, 83–84 (1955).

²¹ *See* Warren Thomas, Comment, *Lenity on Me: LVRC Holdings LLC v. Brekka Points the Way Toward Defining Authorization and Solving the Split over the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act*, 27 GA. ST. U. L. REV. 379 (2011) (arguing for lenity to be applied in interpreting authorization under the CFAA).

²² Field, *supra* note 18, at 825.

²³ *See, e.g., Theofel v. Farey-Jones*, 359 F.3d 1066, 1072–73 (9th Cir. 2003). *Theofel* is the leading and arguably first case to apply the trespass model.

²⁴ *See id.* at 1074.

fact.²⁸

In *Marcus v. Rodgers*, a school employee used a computer after another employee who had not logged off of her email.²⁹ The subsequent user discovered the email inbox open on the screen and then opened two emails where the email subject indicated that he was discussed.³⁰ While he did not have to do anything to see the inbox contents, he did have to click on each of the two individual emails to see their text.³¹ He eventually printed and disseminated the content of the emails.³² Criminal charges were brought against Rodgers but ultimately dismissed.³³ Thereafter Marcus, the owner of the email account, sued under New Jersey's equivalent of the SCA.³⁴ The trial court denied a motion for summary judgment and let the issue go to a jury.³⁵ The jury found that Rodgers did not violate the act.³⁶

On appeal, the court found that Marcus could not establish that the defendant acted without authorization because she left her email account open and accessible.³⁷ The court noted that the defendant did not circumvent a username or password but merely accessed what was open and available to him.³⁸ This analysis implies a code-based approach to interpreting authorization.

However, the court did not close the door on further analysis beyond the simple code-based inquiry. While the code-based approach appeared to resolve the first question of whether the defendant had authorization, the court looked further to whether the defendant “knowingly *exceeded* his authorization.”³⁹ As to this second step, the court focused on the mens rea requirement: “plaintiffs had to establish that [Rogers] *knowingly* exceeded his

²⁸ *Marcus*, 2012 WL 2428046, at *5.

²⁹ *Id.* at *1.

³⁰ *Id.* at *1–2.

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.* at *1–3.

³³ *Id.* at *3.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.* at *1.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *See id.* at *5.

³⁹ *Id.* (emphasis added).

skepticism as to the defendants' story.⁵²

The juxtaposition of these two cases serves to highlight how highly fact-dependent the outcomes of these cases are. While it is important to note that these cases deal with different statutes in different jurisdictions,⁵³ both indicate the unwillingness of courts to leave the question to the simple code-based approach. Ultimately, and despite the simple answer under the code-based approach, both courts left the question to the jury.

*B. The Context of a Computer Shared Between Spouses
Demonstrates the Predictive Appeal of the Code-Based
Interpretation*

Feuding spouses provide another context in which questions of implied authorization arise. In these cases, the code-based model seems applicable and largely outcome-determinative.

In *White v. White*,⁵⁴ the wife hired a private agency to investigate her husband for information that she could use to obtain a divorce.⁵⁵ The agency looked at a computer that was for family use and found that the husband had backed up all his emails on the hard drive.⁵⁶ Not knowing that the emails would be available without username or password, he did not attempt to secure the emails.⁵⁷ The wife's investigator copied the emails from the hard drive.⁵⁸ In the resultant custody proceeding, the husband moved to suppress the emails, arguing that the private investigator accessed them in violation of New Jersey's version of the SCA.⁵⁹

In denying the motion, the court briefly addressed the concept of authorization. It stated, “‘without authorization’ means using a computer from which one has been prohibited, or using another’s

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ *Marcus* applies the New Jersey equivalent to the SCA, while *Doe* applies the federal SCA.

⁵⁴ 344 N.J. Super. Ct. 211 (2001).

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 215–16.

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 216.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 217.

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 214–15.

scenario, courts may reject the code-based interpretation of authorization in favor of the more fluid trespass theory.

In *Lazette v. Kulmatycki*,⁶⁶ Verizon issued Lazette, an employee, a BlackBerry for business and personal use.⁶⁷ Verizon allowed the employee to check her personal Gmail account on the BlackBerry.⁶⁸ At the end of her employment, she returned the BlackBerry with all her personal emails deleted but without disabling or removing the Gmail account access.⁶⁹ Subsequently, her supervisor used the BlackBerry and continually monitored her personal email account from it.⁷⁰

Lazette sued, alleging a violation of the SCA.⁷¹ The defense filed a 12(b)(6) motion to dismiss and argued that her failure to secure the system deprived her of a claim under the SCA.⁷² The court declined to dismiss, stating that “negligence [in failing to remove the account] is, however, not the same as approval, much less authorization.”⁷³ The court followed the trespass model, analogizing the situation to someone who “fails to leave the door locked when going out” as opposed to “one who leaves it open knowing someone [will] be stopping by.”⁷⁴

In another case, *Pure Power Boot Camp v. Warrior Fitness Boot Camp*,⁷⁵ plaintiffs brought action against defendants for theft of business model, violation of trademarks and copyrights, and breaching fiduciary duties.⁷⁶ Defendants moved to exclude from evidence certain emails obtained in violation of the SCA.⁷⁷ Mr. Fell, owner of the defendant corporation, left his username and password for his personal email account stored on his work computer, such that it auto-filled when an employee of plaintiff corporation accessed the

⁶⁶ 949 F. Supp. 2d 748 (N.D. Ohio 2013).

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 751.

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.*

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Id.* at 751.

⁷² *Id.* at 756.

⁷³ *Id.* at 757.

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ 587 F. Supp. 2d 548 (S.D.N.Y. 2008).

⁷⁶ *Id.* at 551.

⁷⁷ *Id.*

email account.⁷⁸

The plaintiff⁷⁹ argued that authorization was implied because Fell left his username and password stored on the work computer.⁸⁰ The court applied the trespass model, likening plaintiff's conduct to leaving "a key to his house on the front desk [of the plaintiff's corporation]" and maintained that in such a situation, "one could not reasonably argue that he was giving consent to whomever found the key, to use it to enter his house and rummage through his belongings."⁸¹ The court held that there was no implied authorization for plaintiff's employees to access his personal email directly from his Hotmail account and other accounts by using a password stored on plaintiff's computers.⁸²

One final case does not involve inadvertence but express permission. In *Cardinal Health 414, Inc. v. Adams*,⁸³ two employees, Adams and Young, exchanged their usernames and passwords so they could access each other's email and other work materials when one was replacing the other as manager. After a couple of years, Adams left the company.⁸⁴ Though Adam's own username and password ceased to work once he left, he continued to access information on the employer's server using Young's account information.⁸⁵ He ultimately obtained information that was proprietary in nature.⁸⁶

The company eventually sued under, inter alia, the SCA. Both sides moved for summary judgment. Despite the fact that Young freely gave Adams his username and password, the court granted judgment for the plaintiff, finding an SCA violation as a matter of law.⁸⁷ The court first noted that "[c]ommon sense should have been sufficient to indicate to Adam that [his] behavior was wrong."⁸⁸ Then the court applied the trespass model:

⁷⁸ *Id.* at 552.

⁷⁹ The plaintiff was the non-movant for the motion.

⁸⁰ *Pure Power Boot Camp*, 587 F. Supp. 2d at 559, 561.

⁸¹ *Id.* at 561.

⁸² *Id.* at 562.

⁸³ 582 F. Supp. 2d 967, 970 (M.D. Tenn. 2008).

⁸⁴ *Id.*

⁸⁵ *Id.* at 970–71.

⁸⁶ *Id.* at 972.

⁸⁷ *Id.* at 977.

⁸⁸ *Id.*

Drawing the analogy to trespassing, it is as if, two years earlier, Young asked Adams to water the plants in his office while he was on vacation and, for this purpose only, Young gave Adams an extra key to his office. Then, two years later, after Adams left the company, Adams used the key to come back in the office, snoop around, and take some of Young's work-related materials. Such conduct would clearly be trespassing.⁸⁹

The first two of these cases suggest that, when a person inadvertently leaves another individual permanent access to his or her password, he or she does not grant the other individual authorization to access the email account. The final case suggests that inadvertence may not even be required. In all three situations the courts comfortably used an analogy, likening the situation to trespass law, thereby applying the trespass theory of authorization. Additionally, in all three cases the courts implicitly rejected the code-based analysis by finding breach of the act for simply using the password someone had access to. These cases demonstrate that the code-based approach is insufficient. It does not provide a remedy in every situation where society would expect one. The trespass theory is more fluid and can fit these unusual cases. If *Lazette*, *Pure Power Boot Camp*, and *Cardinal Health* are any indication, courts tend to abandon the code-based interpretation of authorization in situations where the code-based interpretation would not provide (from the court's perspective) an adequate remedy.

IV. THE APPROPRIATE APPROACH TO AUTHORIZATION LOOKS TO BOTH THE CODE-BASED AND TRESPASS THEORIES

It is important to note that the code-based and trespass approaches to authorization are not mutually exclusive. The predictive benefit of the code-based model can, at least in part, be utilized while still allowing a more fluid trespass model to emerge and protect individuals when needed. In fact, the best approach to determining authorization would involve both approaches working in tandem. As

⁸⁹ *Id.*

facts. So too, in the computer trespass context, practitioners should be aware that slightly distinguishable facts can create vastly different outcomes. The best model would involve using aspects of both approaches together. Thus, a court can get some of the predictive ability of the code-based approach while still having the freedom to find violations under analogies to trespass law when the facts and societal norms demand it.