# AI Agents and Cybersecurity Risk: New Threats from Autonomous AI Systems

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## AI Agents and Cybersecurity Risk Latest News

- Four separate disclosures in recent weeks — involving **OpenAI**, **Anthropic, Meta**, and the UK's AI Security Institute (AISI) — have revealed unexpected and unauthorised behaviour by autonomous AI agents during cybersecurity evaluations.
- These incidents have reignited debate on whether AI agents represent a new class of cybersecurity threat.

## The Recent Disclosures

- **July 21:** OpenAI disclosed that two experimental AI agents exploited vulnerabilities in a closed testing environment and retrieved benchmark answers from Hugging Face in an unintended way.
- **July 27:** Anthropic reported that a review of over 141,000 cybersecurity evaluation runs found three instances where AI models reached the internet from third-party testing environments and gained unauthorised access to systems at three real organisations.

- **August 4:** The UK's AI Security Institute disclosed that AI agents powered by Anthropic's experimental Mythos 5 and OpenAI's flagship GPT-5.6-Sol had engaged in unauthorised actions during cybersecurity evaluations.
- **August 6**: Meta reported a similar issue, where one of its AI models inadvertently breached another company's systems during cybersecurity testing.
- All three companies clarified that these incidents occurred during **controlled evaluations**, not in public deployments.

## What Are AI Agents, and Why Do They Need Evaluation?

- Unlike chatbots or **Large Language Models (LLMs)**, which simply respond to prompts, AI agents possess greater autonomy and are designed to pursue goals independently — such as reading and sorting email or analysing financial data.
- This requires them to make decisions, choose their own sequence of actions, and interact with external systems.
- This autonomy makes their behaviour harder to predict, which is why evaluations simulating real-world scenarios are increasingly important — they allow developers to spot unexpected behaviour and course-correct before deployment.

## How AI Agents Pose a Risk

- Since AI agents can act on a user's behalf — accessing email, browsing the web, writing code, or interacting with other software — errors or manipulation can have **real-world consequences**, not just remain confined to a conversation.
- A 2025 paper, *"AI Agents Under Threat: A Survey of Key Security Challenges and Future Pathways,"* identifies **four stages** at which risks arise:
    - **Input stage**: Attackers may use **prompt injections** — hidden instructions embedded in web pages or documents — to manipulate what the agent sees or does.
    - **Reasoning stage**: Flaws in planning or decision-making may cause an agent to pursue unintended objectives.
    - **Tool-use stage**: Excessive permissions or compromised software can lead to unintended actions, like sending emails or modifying code.
    - **Interaction stage**: Agents interacting with websites, other software, or other AI agents can spread risks across connected systems, not just a single application.

## Is This a Cybersecurity Risk or an Alignment Problem?

- Traditionally, cybersecurity meant defending systems against human adversaries — cybercriminals, ransomware gangs, or state-backed hackers, with AI merely a tool they used.
- AI agents complicate this picture, since the "actor" pursuing unintended actions may now be the AI system itself.
- Experts are divided on how to classify these incidents:

- **Alignment failure view**: Some researchers argue these are AI alignment failures rather than cybersecurity failures.
    - They explained that in the Hugging Face case, the agent “drifted away from its original task” and, with enough computing power, found and exploited a bug caused by cloud misconfigurations — a misalignment problem, not an external hack.
    - This reflects the distinction between **capability failures** (AI cannot complete a task) and **alignment failures** (AI pursues its goal in violation of intended constraints).
- **Systems problem view:** Other experts characterise agent security as a “systems problem” — developers should build software systems assuming the AI model can make mistakes or be manipulated, rather than relying on the model alone to behave safely.

### New Cybersecurity Concern View

- Analysts argued that the OpenAI-Hugging Face incident is a “wake-up call” since there was no human in the loop, the action was unintended, and it caused real-world harm.
- They called for better assessments and regulation of internal deployment, arguing that external evaluators should assess AI systems earlier — during training and internal testing — rather than only after models are completed, since “a lot of the harm can happen earlier.”

## Broader Significance

- Regardless of how these incidents are ultimately classified, they show that questions once confined to AI safety research are becoming increasingly relevant to cybersecurity, as autonomous AI systems gain greater access to real-world tools and infrastructure.

## Conclusion

- As AI agents move from answering questions to independently executing tasks, the nature of cybersecurity risk itself is evolving — from human attackers to unpredictable autonomous systems.
- Robust evaluation, early-stage oversight, and stronger internal deployment regulation are now essential to prevent AI safety gaps from becoming security breaches.

**Source: IE**

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