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P. Chimento
JHU Applied Physics Lab
J. Ishac
NASA Glenn Research Center
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Defining Network Capacity
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Abstract

Measuring capacity is a task that sounds simple, but in reality can be quite complex. In addition, the lack of a unified nomenclature on this subject makes it increasingly difficult to properly build, test, and use techniques and tools built around these constructs. This document provides definitions for the terms 'Capacity' and 'Available Capacity' related to IP traffic traveling between a source and destination in an IP network. By doing so, we hope to build a common

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language that can be used when discussing and analyzing a diverse set of current and future estimation techniques.

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1. Introduction

Measuring the capacity of a link or network path is a task that sounds simple, but in reality can be quite complex. Any physical medium requires that information be encoded and, depending on the medium, there are various schemes to convert information into a sequence of signals that are transmitted physically from one location to another.

While on some media, the maximum frequency of these signals can be thought of as "capacity", on other media, the signal transmission frequency and the information capacity of the medium (channel) may be quite different. For example, a satellite channel may have a carrier frequency of a few gigahertz, but an information-carrying capacity of only a few hundred kilobits per second. Often similar or identical terms are used to refer to these different applications adding to the ambiguity and confusion, and the lack of a unified nomenclature makes it difficult to properly build, test, and use various techniques and tools.

We are interested in information-carrying capacity, but even this is not straightforward. Each of the layers, depending on the medium, adds overhead to the task of carrying information. The wired Ethernet uses Manchester coding or 4/5 coding which cuts down considerably on the "theoretical" capacity. Similarly RF (radio frequency) communications will often add redundancy to the coding scheme to implement forward error correction because the physical medium (air) is lossy. This can further decrease the information efficiency.

In addition to coding schemes, usually the physical layer and the link layer add framing bits for multiplexing and control purposes. For example, on SONET there is physical layer framing and typically also some layer 2 framing such as HDLC, PPP or even ATM.

Aside from questions of coding efficiency, there are issues of how

access to the channel is controlled which may affect the capacity also. For example, a multiple-access medium with collision detection, avoidance and recovery mechanisms has a varying capacity from the point of view of the users. This varying capacity depends upon the total number of users contending for the medium, how busy the users are, and bounds resulting from the mechanisms themselves. RF channels are also varying capacity, depending on range, environmental conditions, mobility and shadowing, etc.

The important points to derive from this discussion are these: First, capacity is only meaningful when defined relative to a given protocol layer in the network. It is meaningless to speak of "link" capacity

without qualifying exactly what is meant. Second, capacity is not necessarily fixed, and consequently, a single measure of capacity at whatever layer may in fact provide a skewed picture (either optimistic or pessimistic) of what is actually available.

[2.](#) Definitions

In this section, we specify definitions for capacity. We begin by first defining a baseline capacity that is simply tied to the physical properties of the link.

Nominal Physical Link Capacity:

Or $NomCap(L)$ is the theoretical maximum amount of data that the link can support. For example, an OC-3 link would be capable of roughly 155 Mbps and does not vary with time. We stress that this is a measurement at the physical layer and not the network IP layer, which we will define separately.

There are many factors that can reduce the information carrying capacity of the link, some of which have already been discussed earlier in the introduction. However, the goal of this document is not to become an exhaustive list of of such factors. Rather, we outline some of the major examples in the following section, thus providing food for thought to those implementing the algorithms or tools that attempt to accurately quantify these values.

The remaining definitions are all given in terms of "IP layer bits"

in order to distinguish these definitions from the nominal physical capacity of the link. Also, given a time T and a time interval I , we define a path P of length n as a series of links (L_1, L_2, \dots, L_n) connecting a sequence of nodes $(N_1, N_2, \dots, N_{n+1})$. A source S and destination D reside at N_1 and N_{n+1} respectively. Furthermore, we define a link L as a special case where the path size is one.

IP layer bits:

Eight (8) times the number of octets in all IP packets received, from the first octet of the IP header to the last octet of the IP packet payload, inclusive.

The definitions are also defined as an average, not as an instantaneous value. Thus, the time parameters, T and I , must accompany any report or estimate of the following values in order for them to remain meaningful.

IP Layer Link Capacity:

We define the IP Layer link capacity, $C(L,T,I)$, to be the maximum number of IP layer bits that can be transmitted from S and correctly received by D over the link L during the interval T to $T+I$, divided by I .

Using this, we can then extend this notion to an entire path, such that the IP layer path capacity simply becomes that of the link with the smallest capacity along that path.

IP Layer Path Capacity:

$$C(P,T,I) = \min \{1..n\} \{C(L_n,T,I)\}$$

The previous definitions specify a link's capacity, namely the IP information bits that can be transmitted across a link or path should the resource be free of any contention. Determining how much capacity is available for use on a congested link is potentially much more useful. However, in order to define the available capacity we must first specify how much is being used.

IP Layer Link Usage:

The average usage of a link L , $Used(L,T,I)$, is the actual number of IP layer bits correctly transmitted from any source over link L from time T to time $T+I$, divided by I .

An important distinction between usage and capacity is that $Used(L,T,I)$ is not the maximum amount, but rather, the actual amount of IP bits that are sent. The information transmitted across the link can be generated by any source, including those who may not be directly attached to either side of the link. In addition, each information flow from these sources may share any number (from one to n) of links in the overall path between S and D . Next, we express usage as a fraction of the overall IP layer link capacity.

Average IP Layer Link Utilization:

$$Util(L,T,I) = (Used(L,T,I) / C(L,T,I))$$

Thus, the utilization now represents the fraction of the capacity that is being used and is a value between zero, meaning nothing is used, and one, meaning the link is fully saturated. Multiplying the utilization by 100 yields the percent utilization of the link. By using the above, we can now define the capacity available over the link as well as the path between S and D . Note that this is essentially the definition in [\[PDM\]](#).

IP Layer Available Link Capacity

$$AvailCap(L,T,I) = C(L,T,I) * (1 - Util(L,T,I))$$

IP Layer Available Path Capacity

$$AvailCap(P,T,I) = \min \{1..n\} \{AvailCap(Ln,T,I)\}$$

Since measurements of available capacity are more volatile than that of capacity, it is important that both the time and interval be specified as their values have a great deal of influence on the results. In addition, a range of measurements may be beneficial in offsetting the volatility when attempting to characterize available capacity.

[3.](#) Discussion

The base definitions specify that the IP layer packets must be received correctly. This is deliberate, because of the possible presence of lossy multiple-access media. On optical media, at a nominal bit error rate of 10^{-15} , a stream transmitted at 10 Gbps will experience an error about every 1 2/3 weeks on the average. On wireless media, the error rate is considerably larger than that,

reducing the effective capacity accordingly. Note that the reception of a partial packet cannot be checked for correctness, and consequently the definitions count as capacity only bits received as part of whole IP packets.

The base definitions also make no mention of hardware duplication of packets. While hardware duplication has no impact on the nominal capacity, it can impact the IP link layer capacity. For example, consider a link which can normally carry a capacity of $2X$ on average. However, the link has developed a syndrome where it duplicates every incoming packet. The link would still technically carry a capacity of $2X$, however the link has a effective capacity of X or lower, depending on framing overhead to send the duplicates, etc. Thus, a value for $C(L,T,I)$ and $AvailCap(L,T,I)$ will reflect the duplication with the lower value.

IP encapsulation does not impact the definitions as all IP header and payload bits should be counted regardless of content. However, different sized IP packets can lead to a variation in the amount of overhead needed at the lower layers to transmit the data, thus altering the overall IP link layer capacity.

Should the link happen to employ a compression scheme such as ROHC [RFC3095] or V.44 [V44], some of the original bits are not transmitted across the link. However, the inflated (not compressed) number of IP-layer bits should be counted.

3.1 Common Literature Terminology

Certain terms are often used to characterize specific aspects of the presented definitions. The link with the smallest capacity is commonly referred to as the "narrow link" of a path. Also, the value of n that satisfies $AvailCap(P,T,I)$, is often referred to as the "tight link" within a path. So, while L_n may have a very large capacity, the overall congestion level on the link makes it the likely bottleneck of a connection. Conversely, a link that has the smallest capacity may not be a bottleneck should it be lightly congested in relation to the rest of the path.

Also, common literature often overloads the term "bandwidth" to refer

to what we have described as capacity in this document. For example,

when inquiring about the bandwidth of a 802.11b link, a network engineer will likely answer with 11 Mbps. However, an electrical engineer may answer with 25 MHz, and an end user may tell you that his observed bandwidth is 8 Mbps. In contrast, the term capacity is not quite as overloaded and is an appropriate term that better reflects what is actually being measured.

3.2 Type P Packets

Note that these definitions do not make mention of "Type P" packets, while other IPPM definitions do. We could add the packet type as an extra parameter. This would have the effect of defining a large number of quantities, relative to the QoS policies that a given network or concatenation of networks may have in effect in the path. It would produce metrics such as "estimated EF IP Link/Path Capacity".

Such metrics may indeed be useful. For example, this would yield something like the sum of the capacities of all the QoS classes defined along the path as the link or path capacity. The breakdown then gives the user an analysis of how the link or path capacity (or at least the "tight link" capacity) is allocated among classes.

These QoS-based capacities become difficult to measure on a path if there are different capacities defined per QoS class on different links in the path. Possibly the best way to approach this would be to measure each link in a path individually, and then combine the information from individual links. However, such an approach is extremely difficult in practice.

[4.](#) IANA Considerations

This document makes no request of IANA.

Note to RFC Editor: this section may be removed on publication as an RFC.

[5.](#) Security Considerations

This document specifies definitions regarding IP traffic traveling between a source and destination in an IP network. These definitions do not raise any security issues and do not have a direct impact on the networking protocol suite.

[6.](#) Acknowledgements

[7.](#) References

[7.1](#) Normative References

[7.2](#) Informative References

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Authors' Addresses

Phil Chimento
JHU Applied Physics Lab
11100 Johns Hopkins Road
Laurel, Maryland 20723-6099
USA

Phone: +1-240-228-1743
Fax: +1-240-228-0789
Email: Philip.Chimento@jhuapl.edu

Chimento & Ishac

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Joseph Ishac
NASA Glenn Research Center
21000 Brookpark Road
Cleveland, Ohio 44135
USA

Phone: +1-216-433-6587
Fax: +1-216-433-8705
Email: jishac@grc.nasa.gov

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