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**UDP Checksum Complement in the Network Time Protocol (NTP)
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Abstract

The Network Time Protocol (NTP) allows clients to synchronize to a time server using timestamped protocol messages. To facilitate accurate timestamping, some implementations use hardware-based timestamping engines that integrate the accurate transmission time into every outgoing NTP packet during transmission. Since these packets are transported over UDP, the UDP checksum field is then updated to reflect this modification. This document proposes an extension field that includes a 2-octet Checksum Complement, allowing timestamping engines to reflect the checksum modification in the last 2 octets of the packet rather than in the UDP checksum field. The behavior defined in this document is interoperable with existing NTP implementations.

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1. Introduction

The Network Time Protocol [[NTPv4](#)] allows clients to synchronize their clocks to a time server by exchanging NTP packets. The increasing demand for highly accurate clock synchronization motivates implementations that provide accurate timestamping.

1.1. Intermediate Entities

In this document we use the term 'intermediate entity', referring to an entity that resides on the path between the sender and the receiver of an NTP packet, that modifies this NTP packet en-route. Two examples of intermediate entities are presented below.

In order to facilitate accurate timestamping, an implementation can use a hardware based timestamping engine, as shown in Figure 1. In such cases, NTP packets are sent and received by a software layer, whereas a timestamping engine modifies every outgoing NTP packet by incorporating its accurate transmission time into the <Transmit Timestamp> field in the packet.

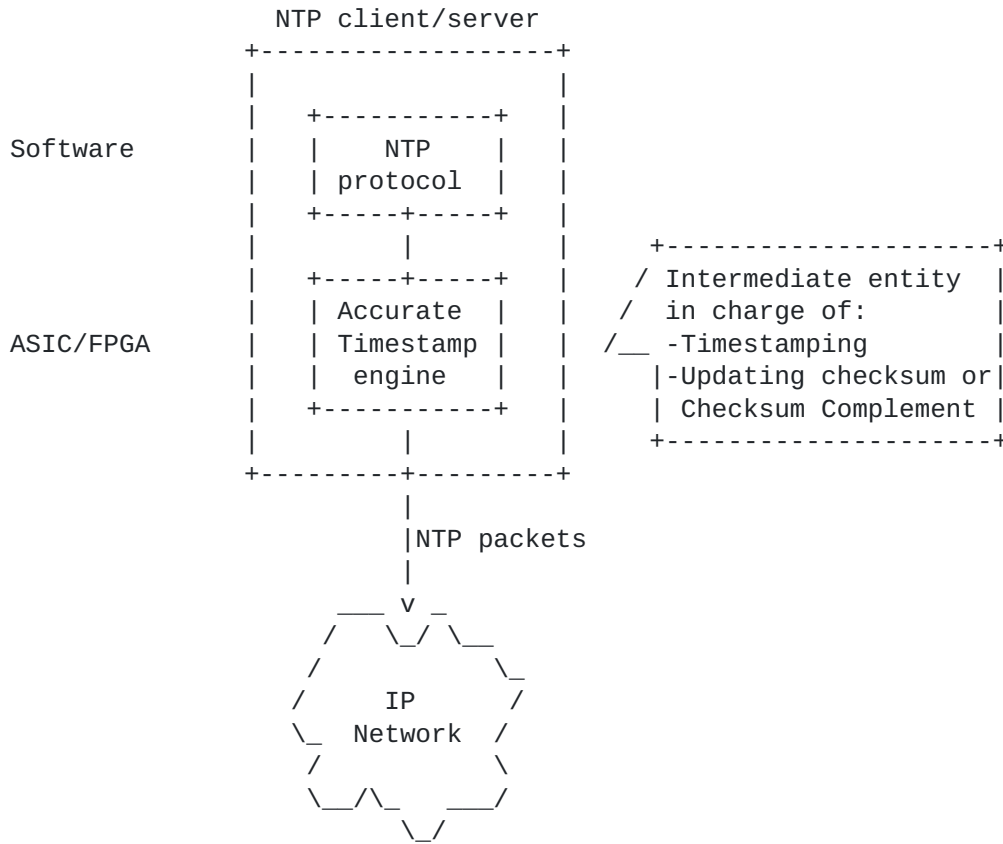


Figure 1 Accurate Timestamping in NTP

The accuracy of clock synchronization over packet networks is highly sensitive to delay jitters in the underlying network, which dramatically affects the clock accuracy. To address this challenge, the Precision Time Protocol (PTP) [IEEE1588] defines Transparent Clocks (TCs), intermediate switches and routers that improve the end-to-end accuracy by updating a "Correction Field" in the PTP packet by adding the latency caused by the current TC. In NTP no equivalent entity is currently defined, but future versions of NTP may define an intermediate node that modifies en-route NTP packets using a "Correction Field".

1.2. Updating the UDP Checksum

When the UDP payload is modified by an intermediate entity, the UDP Checksum field needs to be updated to maintain its correctness. When using UDP over IPv4 ([\[UDP\]](#)), an intermediate entity that cannot update the value of the UDP checksum has no choice except to assign a value of zero to the checksum field, causing the receiver to ignore the checksum field and potentially accept corrupted packets. UDP over IPv6, as defined in [\[IPv6\]](#), does not allow a zero checksum, except in specific cases [\[ZeroChecksum\]](#). As discussed in [\[ZeroChecksum\]](#), the use of a zero checksum is generally not recommended, and should be avoided to the extent possible.

Since an intermediate entity only modifies a specific field in the packet, i.e. the timestamp field, the UDP checksum update can be performed incrementally, using the concepts presented in [\[Checksum\]](#).

A similar problem is addressed in Annex E of [\[IEEE1588\]](#). When the Precision Time Protocol (PTP) is transported over IPv6, two octets are appended to the end of the PTP payload for UDP checksum updates. The value of these two octets can be updated by an intermediate entity, causing the value of the UDP checksum field to remain correct.

This document defines a similar concept for [\[NTPv4\]](#), allowing intermediate entities to update NTP packets and maintain the correctness of the UDP checksum by modifying the last 2 octets of the packet. This is performed by adding an NTP extension field at the end of the packet, in which the last two bytes are used as a checksum complement.

The term Checksum Complement is used throughout this document and refers to the 2 octets at the end of the UDP payload, used for updating the UDP checksum by intermediate entities.

The usage of the Checksum Complement can in some cases simplify the implementation, since if the packet data is processed in a serial order, it is simpler to first update the timestamp field, and then update the Checksum Complement rather than to update the timestamp and then update the UDP checksum, residing at the UDP header.

The Checksum Complement mechanism is also defined for the One-Way Active Measurement Protocol (OWAMP) and the Two-Way Active Measurement Protocol (TWAMP) in [\[IPPMComp\]](#).

2. Conventions used in this document

2.1. Terminology

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in [[KEYWORDS](#)].

2.2. Abbreviations

MAC Message Authentication Code

NTP Network Time Protocol

PTP Precision Time Protocol

UDP User Datagram Protocol

3. Using UDP Checksum Complements in NTP

3.1. Overview

The UDP Checksum Complement is a two-octet field that is appended at the end of the UDP payload using an NTP extension field. Figure 2 illustrates the packet format of an NTP packet with a Checksum Complement extension.

3.2.2. Intermediate Updates of NTP with Checksum Complement

An intermediate node that receives and alters an NTP packet containing a Checksum Complement extension MAY use the Checksum Complement to maintain a correct UDP checksum value.

3.2.3. Reception of NTP with Checksum Complement

This document does not impose new requirements on the receiving end of an NTP packet.

The UDP layer at the receiving end verifies the UDP Checksum of received NTP packets, and the NTP layer SHOULD ignore the Checksum Complement extension field.

3.3. Interoperability with Existing Implementations

The behavior defined in this document does not impose new requirements on the reception of NTP packets. Thus, transmitters and intermediate nodes that support the Checksum Complement can transparently interoperate with existing implementations. Note that, as defined in [[NTP-Ext](#)], a host that receives an NTP message with an unknown extension field SHOULD ignore the extension field and MAY drop the packet if policy requires it.

3.4. The Checksum Complement and Authentication

A Checksum Complement MUST NOT be used when authentication is enabled. The Checksum Complement is useful in unauthenticated mode, allowing the intermediate entity to perform serial processing of the packet without storing-and-forwarding it.

On the other hand, when message authentication is used, an intermediate entity that alters NTP packets must also re-compute the Message Authentication Code (MAC) accordingly. In this case it is not

possible to update the Checksum Complement; updating the Checksum Complement would result in having to recalculate the MAC, and there would be a cyclic dependency between the MAC and the Checksum Complement. Hence, when updating the MAC it is necessary to update the UDP Checksum field, making the Checksum Complement field unnecessary in the presence of authentication.

4. Security Considerations

This document describes how a Checksum Complement extension can be used for maintaining the correctness of the UDP checksum. The security considerations of time protocols in general are discussed in

[[SecTime](#)], and the security considerations of NTP are discussed in [[NTPv4](#)].

The purpose of this extension is to ease the implementation of accurate timestamping engines, as described in Figure 1. The extension is intended to be used internally in an NTP client or server, and not intended to be used by intermediate switches and routers that reside between the client and the server. As opposed to PTP [[IEEE1588](#)], NTP does not require intermediate switches or routers

to modify the content of NTP messages, and thus any such modification should be considered as a malicious MITM attack.

It is important to emphasize that the scheme described in this document does not increase the protocol's vulnerability to MITM attacks; a MITM who maliciously modifies a packet and its Checksum Complement is logically equivalent to a MITM attacker who modifies a packet and its UDP Checksum field.

The concept described in this document is intended to be used only in

unauthenticated mode. As described in [Section 3.4](#), in authenticated

mode using the Checksum Complement does not simplify the implementation compared to using the conventional Checksum, and therefore the Checksum Complement is not used.

5. IANA Considerations

IANA is requested to allocate an NTP extension Field Type value for the Checksum Complement extension.

6. Acknowledgments

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- [SecTime] Mizrahi, T., "Security Requirements of Time Protocols in Packet Switched Networks", [RFC 7384](#), October 2014.
- [ZeroChecksum] Fairhurst, G., Westerlund, M., "Applicability Statement for the Use of IPv6 UDP Datagrams with Zero Checksums", [RFC 6936](#), April 2013.

Appendix A. Checksum Complement Usage Example

Consider an NTP packet sent by an NTP client to an NTP server.

The client's software layer (see Figure 1) generates an NTP packet with an Origin Timestamp T, and a UDP checksum value U. The value of U is the checksum of the UDP header, UDP payload, and pseudo-header. Thus, U is equal to:

$$U = \text{Const} + \text{checksum}(T) \quad (1)$$

Where 'Const' is the checksum of all the fields that are covered by the checksum except the Origin Timestamp T.

Recall that the client's software emits the NTP packet with a Checksum Complement extension field, which resides at the end of the PTP packet. It is assumed that the client initially assigns zero to the value of the Checksum Complement.

The client's timestamping engine updates the Origin Timestamp field to the accurate time, changing its value from T to T'. The engine also updates the Checksum Complement field from zero to a new value C, such that:

$$\text{checksum}(C) = \text{checksum}(T) - \text{checksum}(T') \quad (2)$$

When the NTP packet is transmitted by the client's timestamping engine, the value of the checksum remains U as before:

$$\begin{aligned} U &= \text{Const} + \text{checksum}(T) = \text{Const} + \text{checksum}(T) + \text{checksum}(T') - \\ &\text{checksum}(T') = \text{Const} + \text{checksum}(T') + \text{checksum}(C) \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

Thus, after the timestamping engine has updated the timestamp, U remains the correct checksum of the packet.

When the NTP packet reaches the NTP server, the server performs a conventional UDP checksum computation, and the computed value is U. Since the Checksum Complement is part of the extension field, its value (C) is transparently included in the computation, as per Equation (3), without requiring special treatment by the server.

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