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Northwestern's action against Napster

On December 29, 1999, Northwestern University Information Technology (NUIT) took action that blocks access between the University network to a particular company, Napster. Napster provides software to allow you to collect and play MP3's (a popular electronic music encoding format). This action was necessary because use of Napster was causing significant congestion on the University's link to the Internet. In addition, installation of the Napster software could unknowingly turn the University machine into a MP3 server.

In October, NUIT began to see accelerating use of the University's Internet link. Over the next two months, the volume of traffic grew to such an extent that the link became first fully utilized and then congested. Adding additional capacity to the link did not remedy the problem - the new capacity was quickly used up. At the same time, NUIT began investigating the activity on the University Internet link and discovered that a single Internet site, Napster, was constantly in the top five sites over any 24-hour period. Further research showed that the traffic to this one site represented between 20% and 30% of the total University traffic to the Internet.

Investigating the site, NUIT determined that the services offered by Napster are not central to the University's academic, research, and administrative missions. Furthermore, NUIT determined that the software used by Napster to deliver its services turned the local computer into a server to the Internet at large. As a result, third parties (that is, neither Napster nor the computer owner at NU) were granted access to the NU computer. While these investigations were proceeding, NUIT communicated with other universities who had reported similar findings regarding Napster. From those consultations, NUIT learned that Napster presented a widespread problem and that other universities had elected to block access to the site.

NUIT is concerned that the University Network, a shared resource, is being unfairly monopolized by this traffic. In addition, since we have already seen instances of unknowing distribution of copyrighted MP3's, NUIT does not wish to see members of our community exposed to potential liability. Effective immediately, and until further notice, all traffic to Napster will be blocked.

NUIT will continue to monitor NUNet capacity and take action as appropriate. If you have questions about this action, please send mail to it-feedback@northwestern.edu.