The INDIANA UNIVERSITY administration put a great deal of effort into helping students understand exactly what their student fees were supporting and into clarifying policies associated with the appropriate use of university resources. Much of the ‘netwoming’ was dispelled, to most students’ satisfaction. But IU, like other higher education institutions, felt uncomfortable blocking the flow of any kind of information on the network. The action seemed antithetical to free inquiry, somehow, even though the blocking was designed to keep information flowing. After two IU network engineers conducted some very good research into Napster and other peer-to-peer applications, and after Napster made some changes to the application to make it a better network consumer, the IU administration decided to unblock the Napster application but to limit the amount of total bandwidth that Napster could consume.

With this as background, it’s interesting to think about the entire Napster episode and consider how things are today. Colleges and universities are still reluctant to maintain filters or to restrict the flow of information, at least on content basis. But whereas the belief used to be that filters were necessary to control irresponsible student behavior with scarce resources, it has become clear—at IU, at least—that students will behave responsibly when given the opportunity to pursue some amount of recreational and other personal use of the network connection in their rooms and when the consequences of irresponsible use feed back tangibly.

Campuses have long provided lounges and other common spaces with televisions, game tables, and other recreational facilities. Recreational Internet access must be seen in the same context. Today’s students do not use computers and the Internet in the same way that their parents or grandparents did. Since college and university administrators are typically in the generation of the students’ parents and grandparents, they tend to make network-use decisions based on the prior experience of parents and students who have played in their college/university experiences. But for today’s students, the network plays a central role, and the computer is a composite tool, useful for both their academic work and their recreation. In responding to peer-to-peer applications, administrators have had to become sensitive to the different recreational cultures of current students.

Today the Residence Hall network at IU-Bloomington has a dedicated connection to the commercial Internet, a connection that is separate from the main campus commercial Internet connection. When that second connection was activated, it was not in place for peer-to-peer applications (though for legal reasons, the university blocked Napster itself until its effective demise). Nearly immediately, many students in the residence halls started complaining that their Internet connections were painfully slow. Analysis showed that the new bandwidth was already being consumed by Napster-like peer-to-peer applications such as KaZaA and Audio Galaxy. After collecting the usage statistics, and correlating them with the complaints, IU staff described the situation to Residence Hall Student Government and suggested that the applications shouldn’t be blocked but that there were ways to limit their consumption. The reaction from student government was unequivocal: “Students doing academic work should not have to compete with students consuming the network for recreational purposes.” The university reinstated limits, but at a generous level. Complaints continued to come in, albeit fewer of them, and the usage analysis was repeated. Given the results, Residence Hall Student Government requested that the limits be reinstated. There have been no further complaints.

So IU students may use peer-to-peer applications (though the university does aggressively fulfilling its obligations under copyright laws and investigates allegations of inappropriate use). Students doing academic work in the residence halls have excellent network access as well. No applications are currently being blocked. Technically, we’re back

My research, which attracted the attention of Intel Chairman Andy Grove (“Napster Is Crumbling; Grove’s Crystal Ball,” Wired, May 20, 2001), summarized in a white paper: Mark Meiss and Steven Grove’s Crystal Ball,” Wired, May 20, 2001), summarized in a white paper: Mark Meiss and Steven

Notes

1. This research, which attracted the attention of Intel Chairman Andy Grove (“Napster Is Crumbling; Grove’s Crystal Ball,” Wired, May 20, 2001), was published in a white paper: Mark Meiss and Steven Willow, “The Address Selection for Downtown Pile Services,” April 2002, (http://webmaths.indiana.edu/internet_white_paper.pdf). 2. Readers may recall that subsequently the head Metallica and its representatives filed a lawsuit against Internet2 and several other institutions because of various circumstances that might not be elaborated on here, but led the university to once again block this application. Thus, I believe, a different issue from one I’m brushing here.

About the Author

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