smallTALK

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No more Instant Messaging at Methodist College?

By John W. Arnold III
Opinion Editor

Since school began on August 20, the Methodist College server has been running at maximum capacity. Students, faculty, and staff have experienced first-hand the inconvenience of slow speeds when trying to reach a website of any kind.

In past months, it has taken as long as 15 minutes to simply download the opening site of a web page, this does not include the hours it could take to explore a web site and get information on a topic. However, the speed of the schools server, and the way you use it is all about to change.

> "THIS ACTION TO PUT LIMITS ON PROGRAMS LIKE AOL INSTANT MESSENGER DOES NOT INFRINGE ON STUDENTS' RIGHTS."

There is not a simple explanation for the sluggish speed, and unreliability of the school's internet server.

Tom Marthers, from the Methodist College Institute of Computer Science explains the problem. "There are two T1 lines for the school server. What is happening is that the amount of bandwidth students download is causing a back up to the T1 lines and slowing everything down," Marthers said.

If you are confused, that's ok. Mr. Marthers explained, in so many words that bandwidth is consumed by programs like AOL Instant Messenger and music sharing programs like kaZaA. Now, imagine the server as a river that runs smoothly back and fourth through a pipe. On one end of the pipe is the crystal clear ocean waters of the internet. On the opposite side is the murky lake of Methodist College.

At first, the MC server was clear, and things could move back and fourth through the pipe at lighting speeds. As students began to consume hordes of bandwidth (through instant messaging, etc) there becomes a dam on the MC side of the pipe that holds up everything.

Therefore, very little information is able to get into or out of the college server; when information does manage to get through it, it is at a snails pace.

In order to solve the problem of bandwidth, Marthers says the Institute of Computer Science has purchased a machine called a "Packeteer pocket shaper." What the Packeteer packet shaper does is enables the sever to isolate bandwidth being used and put a limit on it by tracking each individual users bandwidth consumption that is linked to the schools network.

Sam Clark, also from the Institute of Computer Science was quick to point out, "We are not blocking sites, but we have reached a point where the Internet is impossible to use and we have to set limits. The amount of bandwidth being used by each person has caused serious problems; the financial aid department is a great example. People who need to apply for loans over the internet are not able to because they are not able to get through. I would rather have some people be mad because they cannot get music than a lot of people mad because that cannot get what they desperately need."

This action to put "limits" on programs like AOL Instant Messenger does not infringe on students rights.

An unnamed source working for the office of institutional computing said, "First of all, if you read your terms of service you will find that certain programs are not to be used. This includes instant messaging programs and music sharing programs. It is obvious that lots of students broke this term due to the amount of bandwidth being detected. Also, this does not touch student's computers; it stops at the network card. The only way you could detect if someone is using something illegal is if they are acutely using it and it's on the network." The Packeteer packet shaper will not go onto the students' systems and find out anything about their systems. If you are using something on the network, the Packeteer packet shaper will detect on the network and shut it down."

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Though technically the system may be legal, students still feel as if their privacy is being invaded. "We had this system at my old college, it was horrible. Forget trying to use instant messages to save on long distant phone calls or keeping in contact with friends from home. I also think that the school is violating my constitutional rights to privacy. They are being really unfair in their decision here, they could have at least asked the students what they thought first before instituting this new system," transfer student, Brad Colt said.

The packeteer packet shaper will have no effect on downloading information such as jpeg's (pictures and text) from e-mail's. The system set in place will enable the server to run at a faster capacity than it has previously because students will only have access to the Internet rather than previously utilized software. Also, it will not be completely impossible to use instant messaging, but the amount of bandwidth that a user can consume will be drastically decreased.

It is rumored, but not confirmed, that the amount of money spent on the Packeteer packet shaper was well into the thousands. Sources from the office of computer science would not comment on the subject but did say the machine was paid for with funds from the Office of Computer Science.