Google announces Measurement Lab: new initiative to expose traffic shaping and throttling by ISPs
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A number of ISPs have lately started to clamp down on peer-to-peer networks and are actively restricting heavy usage of 'unlimited' connections. For users, however, there is very little transparency in this process and it can be very hard to figure out if an ISP is actually actively throttling a connection or preventing certain applications from working properly. In reaction to this, Google, together with the New America Foundation's Open Technology Institute and the PlanetLab Consortium announced the Measurement Lab, an open platform for researchers and a set of tools for users that can be used to examine the state of your broadband connection.

In the course of 2009, Google will provide researchers with 36 servers in 12 locations in the U.S. and Europe that will allow them access to a widely-distributed number of servers and data for examining broadband connections and the way ISPs are manipulating them. At the same time, Google is also hosting a set of tools that allow users to examine their own broadband connections.

Check Your Own Connection

For now, Google has made three tools available to users that are running on the company's servers in Mountain View. A basic networks diagnostic tool lets you test your connection speed, while the aptly named Glasnost checks if your BitTorrent transfers are being blocked or throttled. A network path and application diagnosis tool allows you to run some basic, low-level diagnostics on your broadband connections.

Google will also soon host DiffProbe and NANO, two tools that are especially geared towards examining whether an ISP is selectively degrading performance for a subset of users or a certain application. DiffProbe can also examine whether an ISP is giving priority to certain kinds of traffic.

The data gathered by Measurement Lab initiative will be made public.

Google and Net Neutrality

These tools, of course, are not new (Google is just hosting them for the researchers), but it is interesting that Google is putting its weight behind these efforts through the Measurement Lab. In the announcement, Google doesn't directly take sides on the net neutrality issue, but instead, the announcement refers to the importance of keeping Internet users "well-informed about what they're getting when they sign up for broadband." It is also interesting to note that the announcement on the Google Blog was coauthored by Vint Cerf, the "father of the Internet" and Google's Chief Internet Evangelist, which puts even more weight behind the importance of this initiative for Google and the message the company wants to send by supporting this project.

For the first time in three years, net neutrality will once again be discussed by the U.S. House of Representatives today, so it seems safe to assume that this announcement was timed to coincide with this.