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Precision Synchronization of Computer Network Clocks

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Abstract

This report builds on previous work involving the Network Time Protocol, which is used to synchronize computer clocks in the Internet. It describes a series of incremental improvements in system hardware and software which result in significantly better accuracy and stability, especially in primary time servers directly synchronized to radio or satellite time services. These include novel interfacing techniques and operating system features. The goal in this effort is to improve the synchronization accuracy for fast computers and networks from the tens of milliseconds regime of the present technology to the submillisecond regime of the future.

In order to assess how well these improvements work, a series of experiments is described in which the error contributions of various modern Unix system hardware and software components are calibrated. These experiments define the accuracy and stability expectations of the computer clock and establish its design parameters with respect to time and frequency error tolerances. The report concludes that submillisecond accuracies are indeed practical, but that further improvements will be possible only through the use of temperature-compensated clock oscillators.

Keywords: disciplined oscillator, computer clock, network time synchronization.

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Table of Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Network Time Protocol	1
2.1.	Calculating Offsets, Delays and Error Bounds	3
2.2.	The Unix Local Clock Model	5
2.3.	The NTP Local Clock Model	7
3.	Hardware and Software Interfaces for Precision Timekeeping	9
3.1.	Connection via Serial Port	10
3.1.1.	The CLK Facility	12
3.1.2.	The PPSCLK Facility	13
3.1.3.	The PPS Facility	14
3.2.	The IRIG Facility	15
4.	Unix Kernel Modifications for Precision Timekeeping	17
4.1.	Design Principles	18
4.2.	Precision Time Resolution	19
4.3.	Daemon and Application Interfaces	20
4.4.	Leap Seconds	21
5.	Timekeeping Errors in Time and Frequency	23
5.1.	Clock Reading Errors	24
5.2.	Clock Frequency Stability	27
5.2.1.	Allan Variance of Typical Workstations	28
5.2.2.	PLL Time Constant and Update Interval	30
6.	Timekeeping in the Global Internet	31
6.1.	Timekeeping in LANs and WANs	32
6.2.	NTP System Performance	35
7.	Summary and Conclusions	37
8.	Acknowledgements	38
9.	References	38
	Appendix A. Audio IRIG Receiver Programming Information	41
A.1.	Application Program Interface	41
A.2.	Programming Example	43
A.3.	Implementation and Configuration Notes	43
	Appendix B. Precision Time Kernel Programming Information	45
B.1.	The ntp_gettime() System Call	45
B.2.	The ntp_adjtime() System Call	46
B.3.	Command/Status Codes	49
B.4.	Kernel Variables	49
B.5.	Architecture Constants	51
	Appendix C. Phase-Lock Loop Simulator	53
	Appendix D. DCnet Timekeeping Facilities	59
D.1.	Computer and Network Facilities	59
D.2.	DCnet Master Clock	60
D.3.	Data Collection Facilities	61
D.4.	Proof of Performance	64

List of Figures

Figure 1. Subnet Synchronization Topologies	2
Figure 2. Network Time Protocol	2
Figure 3. Measuring Delay and Offset	3
Figure 4. Clock Adjustment Process	6
Figure 5. Update Nomenclature	8
Figure 6. Timing Offsets with Serial ASCII Timecode	10
Figure 7. Timing Offsets with PPS Signal	11
Figure 8. Probability of Error with Ultrix Kernel	20
Figure 9. Kernel Latency for SPARCstation IPC - 1	24
Figure 10. Kernel Latency for DECstation 5000/240	25
Figure 11. Kernel Latency for DEC 3000/400 AXP	25
Figure 12. Kernel Latency for SPARCstation IPC - 2	26
Figure 13. Probability of Error for SPARCstation IPC	27
Figure 14. Typical Clock Oscillator Wander	28
Figure 15. Allan Variance of Typical Local Oscillator	29
Figure 16. Transient Response of NTP PLL - Phase	30
Figure 17. Transient Response of NTP PLL - Frequency	31
Figure 18. Timing Offsets of a Primary Server	32
Figure 19. Timing Offsets Between Primary Servers	32
Figure 20. Timing Offsets of a LAN Secondary Server	33
Figure 21. Timing Offsets of a NSFnet Secondary Server	34
Figure 22. Timing Offsets of a NIST Primary Server	34
Figure 23. Timing Offsets for an Australian Primary Server	35
Figure 24. DCnet Timekeeping Facilities	59
Figure 25. Probability Distribution of GPS Receiver Errors	65
Figure 26. Time Offsets of WWVB Receiver	65
Figure 27. Time Offsets of LORAN-C Receiver	66

List of Tables

Table 1. Table of Leap-Second Insertions	22
Table 2. Characteristics of Typical NTP Peers	36