

# NetBump: User-extensible Active Queue Management with Bumps on the Wire

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## Abstract

Engineering large-scale data center applications built from thousands of commodity nodes requires both an underlying network that supports a wide variety of traffic demands, and low latency at microsecond timescales. Many ideas for adding innovative functionality to networks, especially active queue management strategies, require either modifying packets or performing alternative queuing to packets in-flight on the data plane. However, configuring packet queuing, marking, and dropping is challenging, since buffering in commercial switches and routers is not programmable.

In this work, we present *NetBump*, a platform for experimenting with, evaluating, and deploying a wide variety of active queue management strategies to network data planes with minimal intrusiveness and at low latency. NetBump leaves existing switches and endhosts unmodified by acting as a “bump on the wire,” examining, marking, and forwarding packets at line rate in tens of microseconds to implement a variety of virtual active queuing disciplines and congestion control mechanisms. We describe the design of NetBump, and use it to implement several network functions and congestion control protocols including DCTCP and 802.1Qau quantized congestion notification.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

C.2.2 [Network Protocols]: Protocol Architecture; C.2.3 [Network Operations]: Network Management

## General Terms

Design, Experimentation, Management, Performance

## Keywords

Datapath programming, vAQM, congestion control

## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the ultimate goals in data center networking is predictable, congestion-responsive, low-latency communication. This is a chal-

lenging problem and one that requires tight cooperation between endhost protocol stacks, network interface cards, and the switching infrastructure. While there have been a range of interesting ideas in this space, their evaluation and deployment have been hamstrung by the need to develop new hardware to support functionality such as Active Queue Management (AQM) [13,21], QoS [45], traffic shaping [17], and congestion control [1,2,18]. While simulation can show the merits of an idea and support publication, convincing hardware manufacturers to actually support new features requires evidence that a particular technique will actually deliver promised benefits for a range of application and communication scenarios.

We consider a model where new AQM disciplines can be deployed and evaluated directly in production data center networks without modifying existing switches or endhosts. Instead of adding programmability to existing switches themselves, we instead deploy “bumps on the wire,” called *NetBumps*, to augment the existing switching infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> Each NetBump exports a virtual queue primitive that emulates a range of AQM mechanisms at line rate that would normally have to be implemented in the switches themselves.

NetBump provides an efficient and easy way to deploy and manage active queue management separate from switches and endhosts. NetBumps enable AQM functions to be incrementally deployed and evaluated by their placement at key points in the network. This makes implementing new functions straightforward. In our experience, new queuing disciplines, congestion control strategies, protocol-specific packet headers (e.g. for XCP [18]), and new packets (for a new congestion control protocol we implement) can be easily built and deployed at line rate into existing networks. Developers can experiment with protocol specifics by simply modifying software within the bump.

The NetBump requirements are: rapid prototyping and evaluation, ease of deployment, support for line rate data processing, low latency (i.e. tens of  $\mu s$ ), packet marking and transformation for a range of AQM and congestion control policies, and support for distributed deployment to support data center multipath topologies. We greatly reduce the latency imposed by NetBump because our functionality is limited to modifications of packets in flight, with no actual queuing or buffering done within NetBump. We expect these bumps on the wire to be part of the production network that will form a proving ground to inform eventual hardware development (see Fig. 1 for an example deployment scenario).

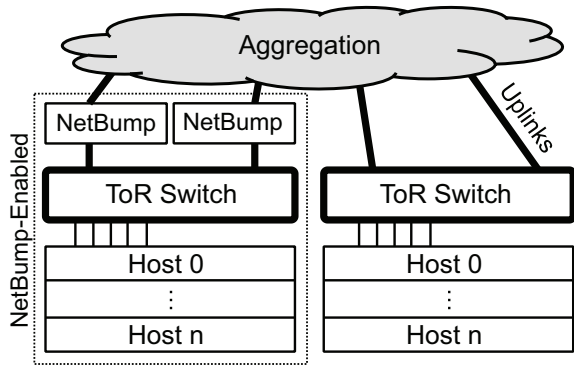
We based our NetBump implementation on a user-level, zero-copy, kernel-bypass network API, and found that it performed well;

<sup>1</sup>The “bump on the wire” term here is unrelated to previous work about IPsec deployment boxes [19].

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**Figure 1:** Deployment scenario in the data center. “NetBump-enabled racks” include NetBumps in-line with the Top-of-Rack (ToR) switch’s uplinks, and monitor output queues at the host-facing ports.

able to support custom active queue management of 64-byte packets at a rate of 14.17Mpps (i.e. 10Gbps line rate) with one CPU core at 20-30 $\mu$ s. In part this performance is the result of NetBump’s simpler packet handling model supporting pass-through functionality on the wire, as compared to general-purpose software routers.

The primary contributions of this paper are: 1) the design of a “bump on the wire” focusing on evaluating and deploying new buffer management packet processing functions, 2) a simple virtual Active Queue Management (vAQM) implementation to indirectly manage the buffers of neighboring, unmodified switches, 3) the evaluation of several new programs implemented on top of NetBump, including an implementation of IEEE 802.1Qau-QCN L2 congestion control, and 4) an extensible and *distributed* traffic update and management platform for remote physical switch queues.

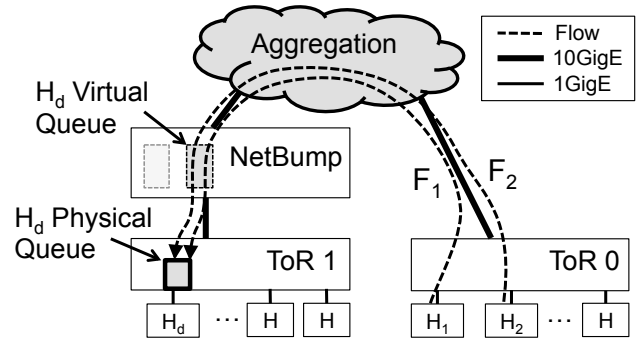
## 2. MOTIVATION

In this section we first present an example of NetBump functionality in action, and then motivate our requirements for a low-latency implementation.

### 2.1 NetBump Example

In Fig. 2, we show a simple network where two source hosts  $H_1$  and  $H_2$  each send data to a single destination host  $H_d$  (in flows  $F_1$  and  $F_2$ , respectively).  $H_1$  and  $H_2$  are connected to Switch0 at 1Gbps. Switch 0 has a 10Gbps uplink to a NetBump (through the aggregation layer), and on the other side of the NetBump is a second 10Gbps link to Switch1. Destination host  $H_d$  is attached to Switch1 at 1Gbps. Flows  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  each have a maximum bandwidth of 1Gbps, and since host  $H_d$  has only a single 1Gbps link, congestion will occur on  $H_d$ ’s input or output port in Switch1 if  $rate(F_1) + rate(F_2) > 1$ Gbps. Without NetBump, assuming Switch1 implements a drop-tail queuing discipline, packets from  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  will be interleaved in  $H_d$ ’s physical queue until it becomes full, at which point Switch1 will drop packets arriving to the full queue. This leads to known problems such as burstiness and lack of fairness.

Instead, as NetBump forwards packets from its input to its output port, it estimates the occupancy of a virtual queue associated with  $H_d$ ’s output port buffer. When a packet arrives,  $H_d$ ’s virtual queue occupancy is increased by the packet’s size. Because NetBump has



**Figure 2:** An example of NetBump at ToR switch, monitoring downstream physical queues.

the topology information and knows the speed of the link between Switch1 and  $H_d$  (§ 3.1), it computes the estimated *drain rate*, or the rate that data leaves  $H_d$ ’s queue. By integrating this drain rate over the time between subsequent packets, it calculates the amount of data that has left the queue since the last packet arrival.

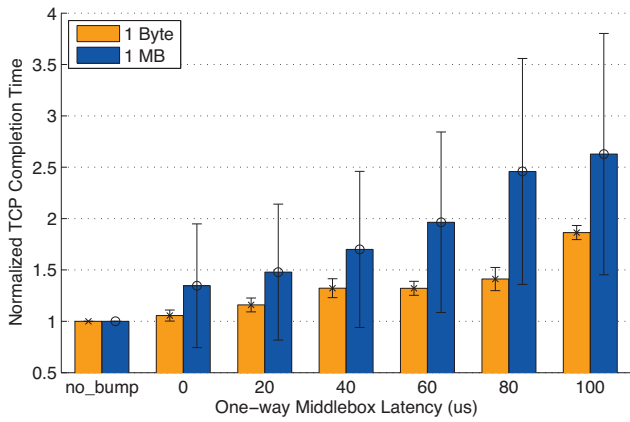
Within NetBump, applications previously requiring new hardware development can instead act on the virtual queue. For example, to implement Random Early Detection (RED), the NetBump in Fig. 2 maintains a virtual queue for each physical queue in Switch1. This virtual queue maintains two parameters, `MinThreshold` and `MaxThreshold`, as well as an estimate of the current downstream queue length. According to RED, packets are sent unmodified when the moving average of the queue length is below the `MinThreshold`, packets are marked (or dropped) probabilistically when the average is between the two thresholds, and unconditionally marked (or dropped) when it is above `MaxThreshold`.

Note that in this example, just as in all the network mechanisms presented in this paper, packets are never delayed or queued in the NetBump itself. Instead, NetBump marks, modifies, or drops packets at line rate as if the downstream switch directly supported the functionality in question. Note also that NetBump is not limited to a single queuing discipline or application—it is possible to compose multiple applications (e.g. QCN congestion control with Explicit Congestion Notification (ECN) marking [11]). Furthermore, AQM functionality can act only on particular flows transiting a particular end-to-end path if desired.

### 2.2 Design Requirements

The primary goal of NetBump is enabling rapid and easy evaluation of new queue management and congestion control mechanisms in deployed networks with minimal intrusiveness. We next describe the requirements NetBump must meet to successfully reach this goal.

**Deployment with unmodified switches and endhosts:** We seek to enable AQM development and experimentation to take place in the data center itself, rather than separate from the network. This means that NetBump works despite leaving switches and endhosts unmodified. Thus a requirement of NetBump is that it implements a virtual Active Queue Management (vAQM) discipline that tracks the status of neighboring switch buffers. This will differ from previous work that applies this technique within switches [13, 21], as our implementation will be remote to the switch.



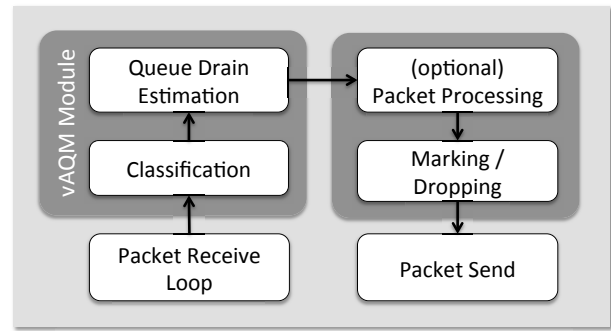
**Figure 3:** Effect of middlebox latency on completion time of short (1 Byte) and medium-sized (1MB) TCP flows. Baseline (direct-connect) transfer time was  $213\mu\text{s}$  (1B),  $9.0\text{ms}$  (1MB), others are through a NetBump with configurable added delay.

**Distributed deployment:** Modern networks increasingly rely on multipath topologies both for redundancy in the face of link and switch failure, and for improving throughput by utilizing several, parallel links. Left unaddressed, multipath poses a challenge for the NetBump model since a single bump may not be able to monitor all of the flows heading to a given destination. Therefore a requirement for NetBump is that it supports enough throughput to manage a sufficient number of links, and that it supports a distributed deployment model. In a distributed model, multiple bumps deployed throughout the network coordinate with each other to manage flows transiting them. In this way, a set of flows taking separate network paths can still be subjected to a logically centralized, though physically distributed, AQM policy.

**Ease of development:** Rather than serving as a final deployment strategy, we see NetBump as an experimental platform, albeit one that is deployed directly on the production network. Thus rapid prototyping and reconfiguration are a requirement of its design. Specifically, the platform should export a clear API with which users can quickly develop vAQM applications using C/C++.

**Minimizing latency:** Many data center and enterprise applications have strict latency deadlines, and any datapath processing elements must likewise have strict performance guarantees, especially given NetBump’s target deployment environment of data center networks, whose one-way latency diameters are measured in microseconds. Since the throughput of TCP is in part a function of the network round-trip time [32], any additional latency imposed by NetBump can affect application flows. Fig. 3 shows the completion times of two flows as a function of one-way middlebox latency—one flow transfers a single byte between a sender-receiver pair, the other transfers 1MB. Adding even tens of microseconds of one-way latency has a significant impact on flow completion times when the baseline network RTT is very small.

Since the network layer sits below all data center applications, and since a single application-layer request might cost several round-trips, NetBump’s forwarding latency must be very low to minimize the overhead for those applications.



**Figure 4:** The NetBump pipeline.

**Forwarding at line rate:** Although most data center hosts still operate at 1Gbps, 10Gbps has become standard at rack-level aggregation. Deploying a NetBump inline with top-of-rack uplinks and between 10Gbps switches will require an implementation that can support 10Gbps line rates. The challenge then becomes keeping up with packet arrival rates: 10Gbps corresponds to 14.88M 64-byte minimum-sized packets per second, including Ethernet overheads.

### 3. DESIGN

In this section we describe the design of the NetBump vAQM pipeline, including how it scales to support more links and a distributed deployment for multi-path data centers.

#### 3.1 The NetBump Pipeline

The core NetBump pipeline consists of four algorithms: 1) packet classification, 2) virtual queue (VQ) drain estimation, 3) packet marking/dropping, and optionally 4) extensible packet processing. This pipeline is exported to the user via the NetBump API (Table 1).

**Virtual Queue Table Data Structure:** Each NetBump maintains a set of virtual queues, which differ from physical queues in that they do not store or buffer packets. Instead, as packets pass through a virtual queue, it maintains state on what its occupancy *would* be if it were actually storing packets. Thus each virtual queue must keep track of 1) the number and sizes of packets transiting it, 2) the packet arrival times, and 3) the virtual rate at which they drain from the queue. Note that packets actually drain at line rate (i.e. 10Gbps), however a virtual queue could be configured with any virtual drain parameter (e.g. 1Gbps, 100Mbps).

The virtual queue table is a simple data structure kept by the NetBump that stores these three parameters for each virtual queue at that bump. For the AQM functionality we consider, we only need to know the virtual queue occupancy and drain rate, and so each virtual queue keeps 1) the size in bytes of the queue, 2) the time the last packet arrived to the queue, and 3) the virtual queue drain rate. These values are updated when a packet arrives to the virtual queue.

**1. Packet Classification:** As packets arrive to the NetBump, they must first be classified to determine into which virtual queue they will be enqueued. This classification API is extensible in NetBump, and can be overridden by a user as needed. A reasonable scheme would be to map packets to virtual queues corresponding to the downstream physical switch output buffer that the packet will reside in when it leaves the bump. In this case the virtual queue is emulating the downstream switch port directly.

Function	Description
<code>void init(vQueue *vq, int drainRate);</code>	Initializes a virtual queue and set the given drain rate.
<code>vQueue * classify(Packet *p) const;</code>	Classifies a packet to a virtual queue.
<code>void vAQM(Packet *p, vQueue *vq);</code>	Updates internal vAQM state during packet reception.
<code>int estimateQlen(vQueue *vq) const;</code>	Returns an estimate of a virtual queue's length.
<code>int process(Packet *p, vQueue *vq);</code>	Defines packet processing. Modify, duplicate, drop, etc.

**Table 1:** The NetBump API. The user may extend any of the provided functions as needed.

```

Procedure vAQM(Packet *pkt, vQueue *VQ):
1  if (VQ->lastUpdate > 0) {
2    elapsedTime = pkt->timestamp - VQ->lastUpdate
3    drainAmt = elapsedTime * VQ->rate
4    VQ->tokens -= drainAmt
5    VQ->tokens = max(0, VQ->tokens)
6  }
7  VQ->tokens += pkt->len
8  VQ->lastUpdate = pkt->timestamp

Procedure DCTCP(Packet *pkt, vQueue *VQ):
9  if (VQ->tokens > VQ->MaxThresh) {
10   mark(pkt)
11  }

```

**Figure 5:** The vAQM queue drain estimation and DCTCP. MaxThresh is the ECN marking threshold  $K$ .

To make this association, NetBump requires two pieces of information: the mapping of packet destinations to downstream output ports, and the speed of the link attached to that port. The mapping is needed to determine the destination virtual queue for a particular packet, and the link speed is necessary for estimating the virtual queue’s drain rate. There are many ways of determining these values: the bump could query neighboring switches (e.g. using SNMP) for their link speeds, or those values could be statically mapped when the bump is configured. For software-defined networks based on OpenFlow [14, 27], the central controller could be queried for host-to-port mappings and link speeds, as well as the network topology. In our evaluation, we statically configure the NetBump with the port-to-host mapping and link speeds.

**2. Queue Drain Estimation:** The purpose of the queue drain estimation algorithm is to calculate, at the time a packet is received into the bump, the occupancy of the virtual queue associated with the packet (Fig. 5). The virtual queue estimator is a leaky bucket that is filled as packets are assigned to it, and drained according to a fixed drain rate determined by the port speed [43].

Lines 1-6 implement the leaky bucket. First, the elapsed time since the last packet arrived to this virtual queue is calculated. This elapsed time is multiplied by a physical port’s rate to calculate how many bytes would have left the downstream queue since receiving the last packet. The physical port’s drain rate comes from the link speed of the downstream switch or endhost. This amount is then subtracted from the current estimate (or set to zero, if the result would be negative) of queue occupancy to get an updated occupancy. If this is the first packet to be sent to that port, then the

default queue occupancy estimate of 0 is used instead. Lastly, the “last packet arrival” field of the virtual queue is updated accordingly.

A key design decision in NetBump is whether to couple the size of the virtual queue inside the bump with the actual size of the physical buffer in the downstream switch. If we knew the size of the downstream queue, then we could set the maximum allowed occupancy of the virtual queue accordingly. This would be challenging in general, since switches do not typically export the maximum queue size programmatically. Furthermore, for shared buffer switches, this quantity might change based on the instantaneous traffic in the network. In fact, by assuming a small buffer size in the virtual queue within NetBump, we can constrain the flow of packets to reduce actual buffer occupancy throughout the network. Thus, assuming small buffers in our virtual queues has beneficial effects on the network, and simplifies NetBump’s design.

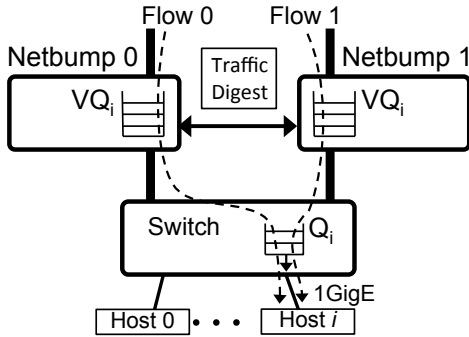
**3. Packet Marking/Dropping:** At line 9 in Fig. 5, NetBump has an estimate for the virtual queue occupancy. Here a variety of actions can be performed, based on the application implemented in the bump. The example code shows the Data Center TCP (DCTCP) application [2]. In this example, there is a “min” limit that results in packet marking, and a “max” limit that results in packet dropping. Packet marking takes the form of setting the ECN bits in the header, and dropping is performed simply in software.

**4. Extensible Processing Stage:** In addition to the vAQM estimation and packet marking/dropping functionality built into the basic NetBump pipeline, developers can optionally include arbitrary additional packet processing. NetBump developers can include extensions to process packet streams. This API is quite simple, in that the extension is called once per packet, which is represented by a pointer to the packet data and length field. Developers can read, modify, and adjust the packet arbitrarily before re-injecting the packet back into the NetBump pipeline (or dropping it entirely).

Packets destined to particular virtual queues can be forwarded to different extensions, each running in its own thread, and coordinating packet reception from the pipeline through a shared producer-consumer queue. By relying on multi-core processors, each extension can be isolated to run on its own core. This has the advantage that any latency induced by an extension only affects the traffic subject to that extension. Furthermore, correctness or performance bugs in an extension only affects the subset of traffic enqueued in the virtual queues serving that extension. This enables an incremental “opt-in” experimental platform for introducing new NetBump functionality into the production network.

An advantage of the NetBump architecture is that packets travel a single path from the input port to the output port. Thus, unlike multi-port software routers, here packets can remain entirely on a single core, and stay within a single cache hierarchy. The only point





**Figure 6:** Flow0 and Flow1 both destined to  $Host_i$ , with two NetBumps monitoring the same  $Q_i$  buffer.

of synchronization is the shared vAQM data structure, and we study the overhead of this synchronization and the resulting lock contention in § 6.2.5.

## 3.2 Scaling NetBump

Managing packet flows in multipath environments requires that NetBump scale with the number of links carrying a particular set of flows. This scaling operates within two distinct regions. First, supporting additional links by adding NICs and CPU cores to a single server, and second, through a distributed deployment model.

### 3.2.1 Multi-link NetBump

For environments in which packets headed to a single destination might travel over multiple paths, it is possible to scale NetBump by simply adding new NICs and CPU cores. For example, a top-of-rack switch with two 10Gbps uplinks would meet these requirements. Here, a single server is only limited in the number of links that it can support by the amount of PCI bandwidth and the number of CPU cores. Each pair of network interfaces supports a single link (10Gbps in, and 10Gbps out), and PCIe gen 2 supports up to three such bi-directional links. In this case, “Multi-link” NetBump is still conceptually simpler than a software-based router, since packets still follow a single-input, single-output path. Each supported link is handled independently inside the bump, and we can assign to it a dedicated CPU core. The only commonality between these links is the vAQM table, which is shared across the links.

### 3.2.2 Distributed NetBump

For multi-path environments, where NetBumps must be physically separated, or for those with more links than are supported by a single server, we consider a distributed NetBump implementation. Naturally, if multiple NetBumps contribute packets to a shared downstream buffer, they must exchange updates to maintain accurate VQ estimates. Note that the vAQM table maintains queue estimates for each of neighboring switch’s ports (or a monitored subset).

In this case, where we assume the topology (adjacency matrix and link speeds) to be known in advance, NetBumps update their immediate neighbor bumps about the traffic they have processed (Fig. 6). Hence, updates are not the queue estimate itself, but tuples of individual packet lengths and physical downstream switch and port IDs, so that forwarding tables need not be distributed. Each *source* NetBump sends an update to its monitoring neighbors at a given tunable frequency (e.g. per packet, or batched), and each *des-*

*tinuation* NetBump calculates a new queue estimate by merging its previous estimate with the traffic update from its neighbor, according to the algorithm in Fig. 5. In this design, updates are tiny; 4B per monitored flow packet (i.e. 2B for packet size and 2B for the port identifier). This translates to about 3MB/s of control traffic per 10Gbps monitored flow. Note also that updates can be transmitted on a dedicated link, or in-band with the monitored traffic. We chose the latter for our Distributed NetBump implementation.

The above technique introduces two possible sources of queue estimation error: 1) batching updates causes estimates to be slightly stale, and since packet sizes are not uniform, the individual packet components of a virtual queue and their respective order would not necessarily be the same, and 2) the propagation delay of the update. Despite this incremental calculation, the estimation naturally synchronizes whenever the buffer occupancy is near its empty/full boundaries.

## 4. DEPLOYED APPLICATIONS

In this section, we describe the design and implementation of two vAQM applications we developed with NetBump. In addition to Data Center TCP and Quantized Congestion Notification applications described here, the tech report version of this work also includes the implementation of Random Early Detection and rate-limiting applications [34].

### 4.1 Data Center TCP

We implemented Data Center TCP (DCTCP) [2] on NetBump. The purpose of DCTCP is to improve the behavior of TCP in data center environments, specifically by reducing queue buildup, buffer pressure, and incast. It requires changes to the endhosts as well as network switches. A DCTCP-enabled switch marks the ECN bits of packets when the size of the output buffer in the switch is greater than the marking threshold  $K$ . Unlike RED, this marking is based on instantaneous queue size, rather than a smoothed average. The receiver is responsible for signaling back to the sender the particular sequence of marked packets (see [2] for a complete description), and the sender maintains an estimate  $\alpha$  of the fraction of marked packets. Unlike a standard sender that cuts the congestion window in half when it receives an ECN-marked acknowledgment, a DCTCP sender reduces its rate according to:  $cwnd \leftarrow cwnd * (1 - \alpha/2)$ . We support DCTCP in the endhosts by using a modified Linux TCP stack supplied by Kabbani and Alizadeh [15].

Implementing DCTCP in NetBump was straightforward. Here, we mark based on the instantaneous queue size instead of computing a smoothed queue average of the downstream physical queue occupancy. Next, we set both `LowThresh` and `HighThresh` to the supplied  $K$  (chosen to be 20 MTU packets, based on the authors’ guidelines [2]). We experimented with other values of  $K$ , and found that it had little noticeable effect on aggregate throughput or rate convergence time.

### 4.2 Quantized Congestion Notification

We also implemented the IEEE 802.1Qau-QCN L2 Quantized Congestion Control (QCN) algorithm [1]. QCN-enabled switches monitor their output queue occupancies and when sensing congestion, they send feedback packets to upstream *Reaction Points*. The sender NIC is responsible for adjusting the rate according to a given formula. For every QCN-enabled link, there are two basic algorithms:

**Congestion Point (CP):** For every output queue, the switch calculates a *feedback measure* ( $F_b$ ) whenever a new frame is queued. This measure captures the *rate* at which the queue is building up ( $Q_\delta$ ), as well as the *difference* ( $Q_{off}$ ) between the current occupancy and a desired equilibrium threshold ( $Q_{eq}$ , assumed to be 20% of the physical buffer). If  $Q$  denotes the current queue occupancy,  $Q_{old}$  is the previous iteration, and  $w$  is the weight controlling rate build-up, then:

$$Q_{off} = Q - Q_{eq} \quad Q_\delta = Q - Q_{old}$$

$$F_b = -(Q_{off} + wQ_\delta)$$

Based on  $F_b$ , the switch probabilistically generates a congestion notification frame proportional to the severity of the congestion (the probability profile is similar to RED [12], i.e. it starts from 1% and plateaus at 10% when  $|F_b| \geq F_{bmax}$ ). This QCN frame is destined to the upstream reaction point from which the just-added frame was received. If  $F_b \geq 0$ , then there is no congestion and no notification is generated.

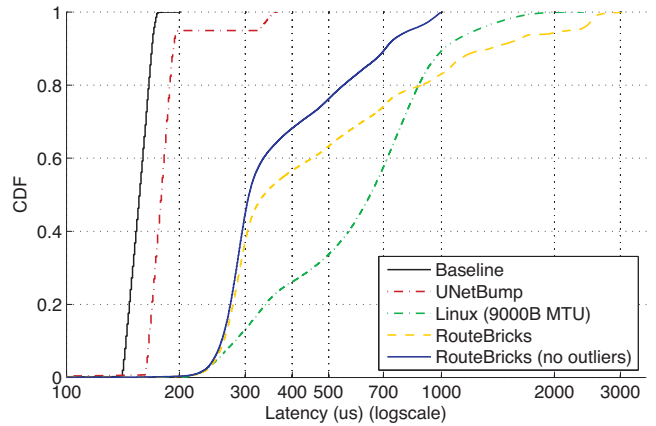
**Reaction Point (RP):** Since the network generates signals for rate decreases, QCN senders must probe for available bandwidth gradually until another notification is received. The reaction point algorithm has two phases: Fast-Recovery (FR) and Additive-Increase (AI). This is similar to, but independent from, BIC-TCP’s dynamic probing.

The RP algorithm keeps track of the sending Target Rate (TR) and Current Rate (CR). When a congestion control frame is received, the RP algorithm immediately enters the Fast Recovery phase; it sets the target rate to the current rate, and reduces the current rate by an amount proportional to the congestion feedback (by at most 1/2). Barring further congestion notifications, it tries to recover the lost bandwidth by setting the current rate to the average of the current and target rates, once every *cycle* (where a cycle is defined in the base byte-counter model as 100 frames). The RP exits the Fast Recovery phase after five cycles, and enters the Additive Increase phase, where the RP continually probes for more bandwidth by adding a constant increase to its target rate (1.5Mbps in our implementation), and again setting the current sending rate to the average of the CR and TR.

## 5. IMPLEMENTATION

NetBump can be implemented using a wide variety of underlying technologies, either in hardware or in software. We evaluated three such choices: 1) the stock Linux-based forwarding path, 2) the RouteBricks software router, and 3) a user-level application relying on kernel-bypass network APIs to read and write packets directly to the network. We call this last implementation *UNetBump*. We show in Fig. 7 the latency distributions of these systems when forwarding 1500B packets at 10Gbps (except Linux with 9000B). The baseline for comparison being a simple loopback.

All of our implementations are deployed on HP DL380G6 servers with two Intel E5520 four-core CPUs, each operating at 2.26GHz with 8MB of cache. These servers have 24 GB of DRAM separated into two 12GB banks, operating at a speed of 1066MHz. For the Linux and UNetBump implementations, we use an 8-lane Myricom 10G-PCIE2-8B2-2S+E dual-port 10Gbps NIC which has two SFP+ interfaces, plugged into a PCI-Express Gen 2 bus. For RouteBricks, we used an Intel E10G42AFDA dual-port 10Gbps NIC (using an 82598EB controller) with two SFP+ interfaces.



**Figure 7:** Forwarding latency at line rate of baseline, UNetBump, Linux, RouteBricks (batching factor of 16, and a Click burst factor of 16), with and without an outlier queue.

### 5.1 Linux

The Linux kernel natively supports a complete IP forwarding path, including a configurable set of queuing disciplines managed through the “traffic control (tc)” extensions [23]. Linux `tc` supports flow and packet shaping, scheduling, policing, and dropping. While `tc` supports a variety of queuing disciplines, it does not support managing the queues of remote switches. This support would have to be added to the kernel. In our evaluation we used Linux kernel version 2.6.32, and found that the latency overheads of the Linux forwarding path were very high, with a mean latency above  $500\mu s$ , and a 99th percentile above  $1500\mu s$ . Furthermore, our evaluation found that Linux could not forward non-Jumbo frames at speeds approaching 10Gbps (and certainly not with minimum-sized packets). This is because the kernel implementation incurs high per packet and per byte overhead [35]. Based on these microbenchmarks, we decided not to further consider Linux as an implementation alternative.

### 5.2 RouteBricks

RouteBricks [8] is a high-throughput software router implementation built using Click’s core, extensive element library, and specification language. It increases the scalability of Click in two ways—by improving the forwarding rate within a single server, and by federating a set of servers to support throughputs beyond the capabilities of a single server. To improve the scalability within a single server, RouteBricks relies on a re-architected NIC driver that supports multiple queues per physical interface. This enables multiple cores to read and write packets from the NIC without imposing lock contention, which greatly improves performance [7, 26, 47]. Currently, RouteBricks works only with the `ixgbe` device driver, which delivers packets out of the driver in fixed-size batches of 16 packets each. We built a single-node RouteBricks server using the HP server architecture described above, but with the Intel E10G42AFDA NIC (the only available the RouteBricks driver patch still supported). This server used the Intel `ixgbe` driver (version 1.3.56.5), with a batching factor of 16. The use of this batching driver improves throughput by amortizing the overhead of transferring those packets, at the cost of increased latency on an individual packet basis. Indeed RouteBricks was designed for

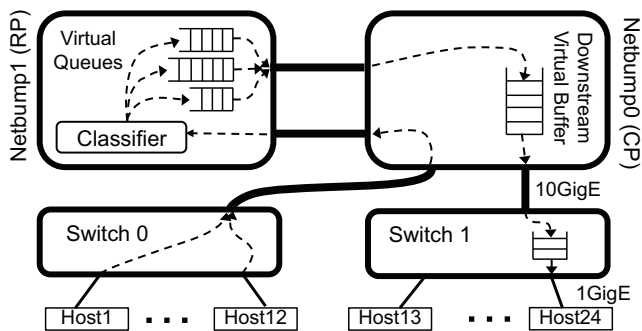


Figure 8: Two-rack 802.1Qau-QCN and DCTCP Testbed

high throughput, not low-latency. There is nothing in the Click or RouteBricks model that precludes low-latency forwarding, however for this work we chose not to use RouteBricks.

### 5.3 UNetBump

In user-level networking, instead of having the kernel deliver and demultiplex packets, the NIC instead delivers packets directly to the application. This is typically coupled with kernel-bypass support, which enables the NIC to directly copy packets into the application’s memory region.

User-level networking is a well-studied approach that has been implemented in a number of commercially-available products [42]. Myricom offers Ethernet NICs with user-level networking APIs that we use in our evaluation [28]. There have been at least two efforts to create an open and cross-vendor API to user-level, kernel-bypass network APIs [31, 36]. In this paper, we re-evaluate the use of user-level networking to support low-latency applications, especially those requiring low latency variation. Note that it is possible to layer the RouteBricks/Click runtime on top of the user-level, kernel-bypass APIs we use in UNetBump.

## 6. EVALUATION

Our evaluation seeks to answer the following: 1) How expressive is NetBump? 2) How easy is it to deploy applications? 3) How effective is vAQM estimation in practice? 4) What are the latency overheads and throughput limitations?

To answer these, we built and deployed a set of NetBump prototypes in our experimental testbed. We started by evaluating the baseline latency and latency variation of these prototypes, and based on these measurements, we proceeded with construction of UNetBump, a fully-functional prototype based on user-level networking APIs. We then evaluate a range of AQM functionalities with UNetBump.

### 6.1 Testbed Environment

Our experimental testbed consists of a set dual-processor Nehalem server described above, using either Myricom NICs, or in the case of RouteBricks, the Intel NIC. The Myricom NICs use the Sniffer10G driver version 1.1.0b3. We use copper direct-attach SFP+ connectors to interconnect the 10Gbps endhosts to our NetBumps. Experiments with 1Gbps endhosts rely on a pair of SMC 8748L2 switches that each have 1.5MB of shared buffering across all ports. Each SMC switch has a 10Gbps uplink that we connect to the appropriate NetBump.

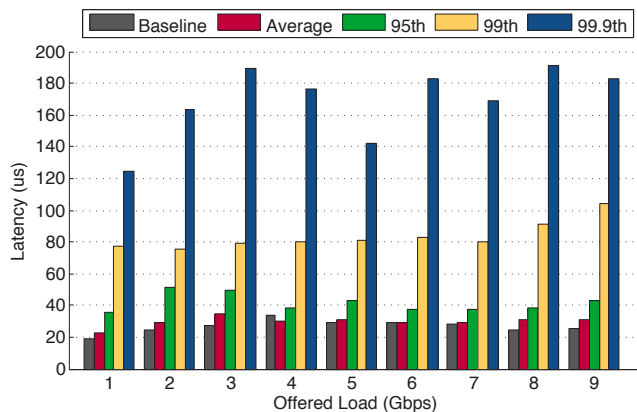


Figure 9: Latency percentiles imposed by UNetBump vs. offered load. Baseline is the loopback measurement overhead.

We evaluate NetBump in three different contexts. The first is in microbenchmark, to examine its throughput and latency characteristics. Here we deploy NetBump as a loopback (simply connecting the two ports to the same host) to eliminate the effects of clock skew and synchronization. The second simply puts a NetBump inline between two machines, and tests NetBump’s operation at full 10Gbps. Separating the source and destination to different machines enables throughput measurement with real traffic.

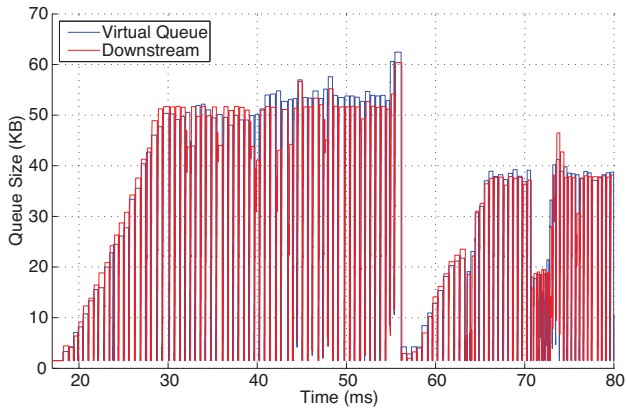
The third testbed, Fig. 8, evaluates NetBump in a realistic data center environment in which it might be deployed right above the top-of-rack switch. Here, we have two twelve-node racks of endhosts, each connected to a 1Gbps switch. A 10Gbps uplink connects the two 1Gbps switches and the NetBump is deployed inline with those uplinks. In this case, the NetBump actually has four 10Gbps interfaces—two to the uplinks of each of the two SMC 1Gbps switches, and two that connect to a second NetBump. We use this testbed to evaluate 802.1Qau-QCN, with one NetBump acting as the Congestion Point (CP) and the other as the Reaction Point (RP).

## 6.2 Microbenchmarks

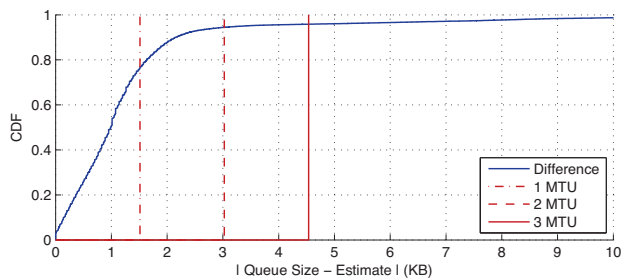
### 6.2.1 NetBump Latency

A key metric for evaluation is the latency overhead. To measure this, we use a loopback testbed and had a packet generator on the client host send packets onto the wire, through the NetBump, and back to itself. To calibrate, we also replace the NetBump with a simple loopback wire, which gives us the baseline latency overhead of the measurement host itself. We subtract this latency from the observed latency with the NetBump in place, giving us the latency of just the NetBump. We generated a constant stream of 1500-byte packets sent at configurable rates (Fig. 9).

For UNetBump, the latency is quite low for the majority of forwarded packets. There is a jump in latency at the tail due to NIC packet batching when they arrive above a certain rate. There is no way to disable this batching in software, even though we were only using a single CPU core which could have serviced a higher packet rate without requiring batching. The forwarding performance of UNetBump was sufficient to keep up with line rate using minimum-sized packets and a single CPU core.



(a) Virtual queue size vs. actual downstream queue. Running an **iperf** TCP session between two 10G hosts, rate-limited to 1Gbps with a 40KB buffer downstream to induce congestion.



(b) CDF of the queue size difference. The estimate is within two 1500B MTUs 95% of the time.

**Figure 10:** Downstream vAQM estimation accuracy.

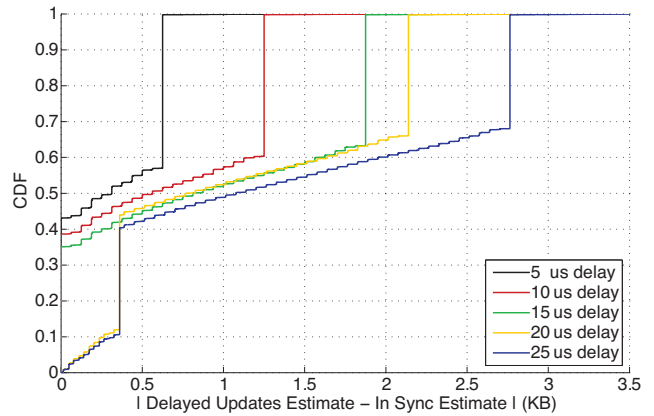
### 6.2.2 vAQM Estimation Accuracy

To evaluate the accuracy of the vAQM estimation, we ran **iperf** sessions between two hosts, connected in series by a NetBump and another pass-through machine (which records the timestamps of incoming frames). Since we cannot export physical buffer occupancy of commercial switches, we use the frame timestamps and lengths from the downstream pass-through machine to recreate the output buffer size over time, knowing the drain-rate. Fig. 10 shows the NetBump virtual queue size vs. the actual downstream queue. The estimate was within two MTUs 95% of the time.

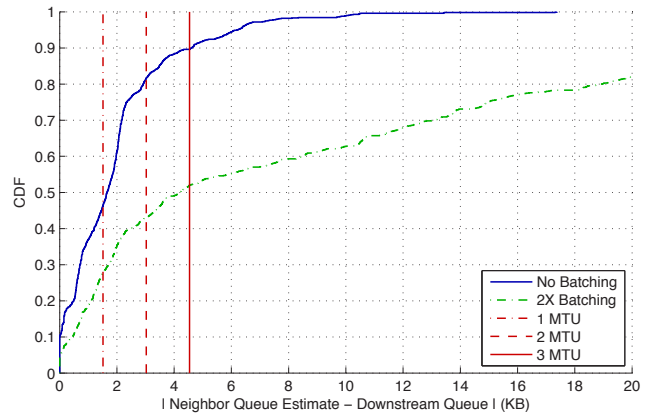
### 6.2.3 Distributed NetBump

We also measured the accuracy of queue estimation when multiple NetBumps exchange updates to estimate a common downstream queue. In the first experiment, measure the effect of update latency on queue estimate accuracy. We varied the timestamp interleaving of two TCP **iperf** flows that share a downstream queue in order to simulate receiving delayed updates from a neighboring NetBump. Fig. 11 shows the CDF of the difference between the delayed inter-bump estimation and the in-sync version; Even when update latency was  $25\mu s$ , the difference was always under 2MTU.

Next, we show the accuracy of NetBump's queue estimating of a downstream queue, based solely on updates from its neighbor. In our implementation, the updates are transmitted in-band with the monitored traffic. Fig. 12 gives the CDF of the difference between the actual queue size and the distributed NetBump estimate. We



**Figure 11:** CDF of the absolute difference between the queue estimate with delayed updates and the in-sync version. The combined throughput is rate-limited to 5Gbps, and the downstream buffer is 40KB.



**Figure 12:** CDF of the difference between actual queue size and the Distributed NetBump estimate using a 1Gbps rate-limited TCP flow and a 40KB buffer. The estimating NetBump does not observe the monitored traffic directly.

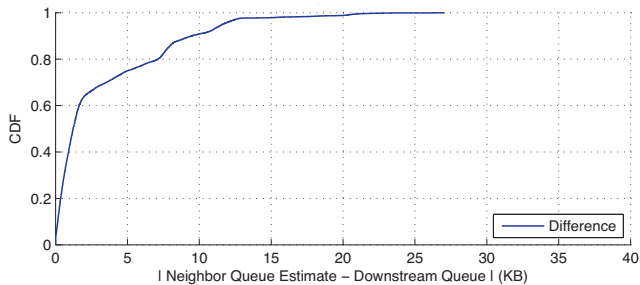
observe that the estimate is within 3MTUs 90% of the time. Note, however, the effect of update batching: estimates quickly drift when updates are delayed. Fig. 13 shows a typical relative difference CDF when background elephant flows are present (i.e. some flows are observed directly, and others indirectly through updates).

### 6.2.4 CPU Affinity Effect

One of the challenges of designing NetBump was not only maintaining a low average latency, but also reducing variance. Modern CPU architectures provide separate cores on the same die and physically separate memory across multiple Non-Uniform Memory Access (NUMA) banks. This means that access time to memory banks changes based on which core issues a given request. To reduce latency outliers, we allocated memory to each UNetBump thread from the same NUMA domain as the CPU core it was scheduled to.

Given the significant additional latency that may be introduced by the unmodified Linux kernel scheduler, we compare latency of NetBump with and without CPU-affinity and scheduler modifications. Our control experiment uses default scheduling. To improve





**Figure 13:** Typical distributed NetBump relative error with background elephant flows.

Latency ( $\mu s$ )	Avg	95th	99th	99.9th	Max
No Affinity	32	39	76	1,322	3,630
With Affinity	30	42	83	169	208

**Table 2:** UNetBump latency percentiles vs. CPU core affinity.

on this, we exclude all but one of the CPU cores from the default scheduler, and ensure that the UNetBump user-space programs execute on the reserved cores. We then examined the average, 95th, 99th, 99.9th, and maximum latencies through NetBump compared to the baseline (Table 2). CPU-affinity had a minor effect on latency on average, but was most pronounced on outlier packets. The maximum observed latency was 17 times smaller with CPU-affinity at the 99.9th percentile, showing the importance of explicit resource isolation in low-latency deployments.

### 6.2.5 Multicore Performance

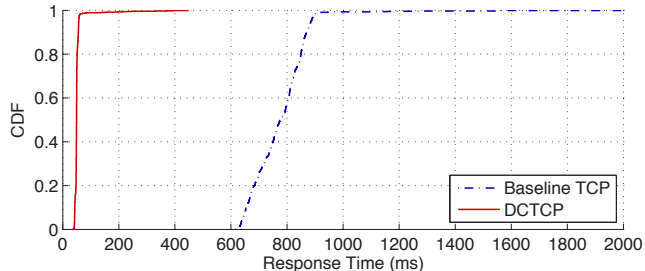
In UNetBump, basic vAQM estimation can be done at 10Gbps using only a single CPU core. However, to support higher link rates, additional cores might be necessary. The NIC itself will partition flows across CPU cores using a hardware hash function. In this scenario, a user-space thread would be responsible for handling each ring pair, and the only time these threads must synchronize would be when updating the vAQM state table. To evaluate the effect of this synchronization on the latency of NetBump in a multi-threaded implementation, we examined the effect of vAQM table lock overhead. As a baseline, a single-threaded forwarding pipeline (FP) has a latency of  $29.16\mu s$ . Running NetBump with two FPs (two ring pairs in the NIC and each FP running on its own core) increased that latency by 17.9% to  $35.5\mu s$ . Further running NetBump with four FPs on four cores increased the latency by an additional 1.95% to  $36.8\mu s$ . Thus we find that the synchronization overhead is minimal to gain back a four-fold increase in computation per packet, or alternatively, a four-fold increase in supported line rate. A key observation is that NetBump avoids some of the required synchronization overheads found in software routers [7, 9, 26] with multiple ports, since in NetBump each input port only forwards to a single output port, preventing packets from spanning cores or causing contention on shared output ports.

## 6.3 Deployed Applications

One metric highlighting the ease of writing new applications with NetBump is shown in Table 3. Most of our applications took only 10s of lines of code, and QCN, which is much more complex, was

Application	Lines of Code
NetBump core	940
DCTCP	29
QCN	464

**Table 3:** Coding effort for NetBump and some of its applications.



**Figure 15:** Baseline TCP (CUBIC) and DCTCP response times for short RPC-type flows in the presence of background elephant flows.

written in less than 500 lines of code. The time commitment ranged from hours to a couple of days in the case of QCN. We now examine each application in detail.

### 6.3.1 Data Center TCP

The next experiment represents a recreation of the DCTCP convergence test presented by Alizadeh et al. [2] performed in our two-rack testbed (Fig. 8). Five source nodes each open a TCP connection to one of five destination nodes in 25 second intervals. In the baseline TCP case (Fig. 14(a)), due to buffer pressure and a drop-tail queuing discipline, the bandwidth is shared unfairly, resulting in a wide oscillation of throughput and unfair sending rate among the flows. Fig. 14(b) shows the throughput of DCTCP-enabled endpoints and a DCTCP vAQM strategy in the NetBump. Like in the original DCTCP work, here the fair sharing of network bandwidth results from the lower queue utilization afforded by senders backing off in response to NetBump-set ECN signals.

Another contribution of reduced queue buildup is better support for mixtures of latency-sensitive and long-lived flows. Fig. 15 shows the CDF of response time for 10,000 RPC-type requests in the presence of two large elephant flows, comparing stock TCP endpoints without NetBump DCTCP support. This figure recreates a key DCTCP result: signaling the long flows to reduce their rates results in smaller queues, lower RTT, and in the end, shorter response times.

### 6.3.2 Quantized Congestion Notification

Another example of how the NetBump programming model enabled rapid prototyping and evaluation of new protocols was deploying 802.1Qau-QCN. Our implementation of QCN is 464 lines of code, and took around 2-3 days to write and debug. Developing QCN within NetBump enabled us to easily tune parameters and evaluate their effect. This was especially important given QCN's novelty, and the lack of other tools or simulations we could have used to study it. Using the testbed topology of Fig. 8, we use NetBump0 as the CP, and NetBump1 as the RP. In our RP, we chose a virtual queue size of 100KB (and  $Q_{eq}$  at 20KB).

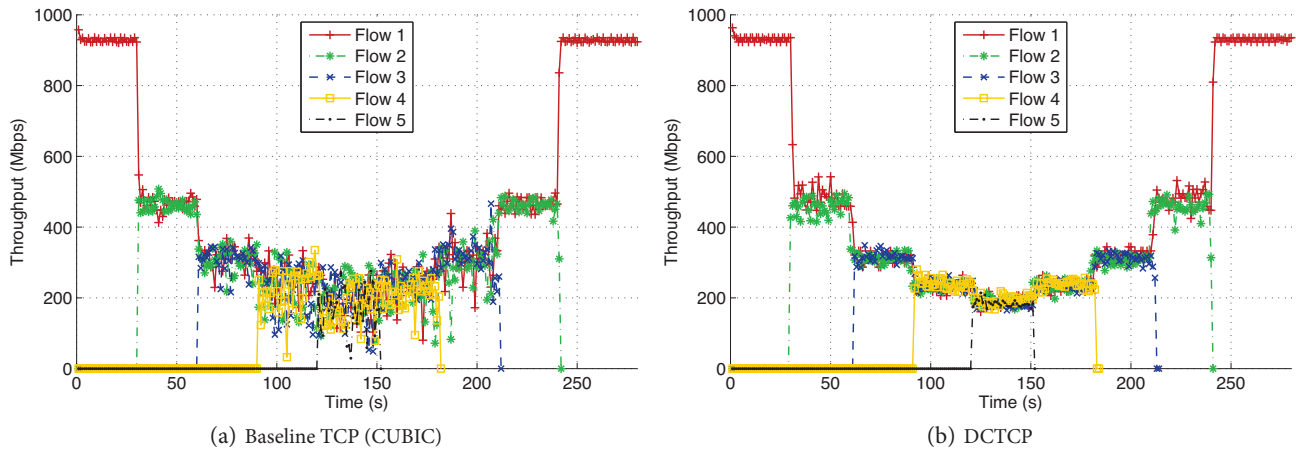


Figure 14: The effect on fairness and convergence of DCTCP on five flows sharing a bottleneck link.

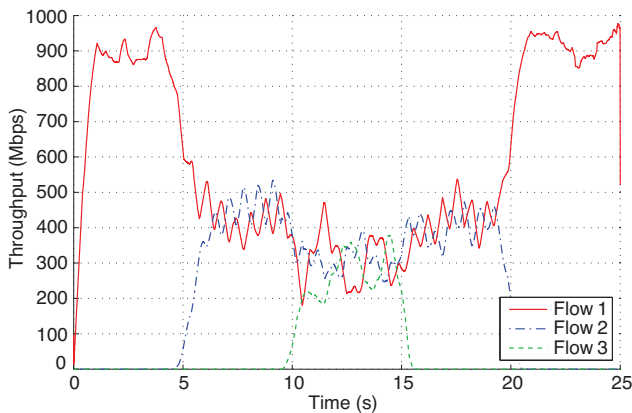


Figure 16: QCN with three 1Gbps UDP flows. With QCN enabled, the RP virtual queue occupancy never exceeded 40%, as opposed to persistent drops downstream without.

We found that the QCN feedback loop tends to be more stable when the frequency of messages is higher and their effect smaller. For this reason, we use  $F_{bmax} = 32$ , and plateau the probability profile at 20%. Due to the burstiness in packet arrival, we also decreased  $w$  to 1 to avoid unnecessary rate drops. Our implementation also considered the relative flow weights in the entire queue when choosing which flow to rate-limit, rather than using just the current packet. We use the byte counter-only model of RP in our implementation. For the Additive Increase phase, we use cycles of 100 packets, and an increase of 1.5Mbps (to show the convergence of the virtual port current rates), and 600 packet cycles for the Fast Recovery phase. We show in Fig. 16 the throughput of three 1Gbps UDP flows sharing the same bottleneck link. Without QCN, the downstream buffer would be persistently overwhelmed by the three UDP flows from 5-20s, but with QCN enabled, congestion is pushed upstream and the virtual queue occupancy never exceeded 40%, thereby preventing drops for potential mice flows.

## 7. RELATED WORK

**Virtual Queuing and AQM:** In virtual queuing (VQ), metadata about an incoming packet stream is maintained to simulate the behavior of a hypothetical physical queue. We differ from previous work in that we maintain VQs outside of the switch itself. VQ provides a basis for a variety of active queue management (AQM) techniques. AQM manipulates packets in buffers in the network to enact changes in the control loop of that traffic, typically to reduce packet drops, queue overflows, or buffer sizes. One proposal, Active Virtual Queue [21], reduces queue sizes in traffic with small flows, which typically pose challenges for the TCP control loop. Due to the inefficiency of RED’s dropping packets to signal congestion, the Early Congestion Notification (ECN) [22] field was developed to decouple packet drops from congestion indicators. Several proposals for improving on RED have been made [4], including Data Center TCP (DCTCP) [2]. Quantized congestion notification [1] was proposed as a congestion control mechanism for non-TCP traffic, and can respond faster than the round-trip time. Implementations of QCN have been developed on 1Gbps networks [30], as well as emulated within FPGAs at 10Gbps networks [30]. Our deployment is done at 10Gbps and distributed across multiple network hops. Approximate-Fairness QCN (AF-QCN) [16] is an extension that biases input links’ feedback by the ratio of their queue occupancy.

**Datapath Programming in Software:** Software-based packet switches and routers have a long history as a platform for rapidly developing new functionality. Click [20] is a modular software router consisting of a pipeline of simple packet-processing building blocks. Click’s library of modules can be extended by writing code in C++ designed to work in the Linux kernel or userspace. RouteBricks [8] focused on scaling out a Click runtime to support forwarding rates in tens of Gbps by distribution of packet processing across cores, and across a small cluster of servers. ServerSwitch [24], allows programming commodity Ethernet switching chips (with matching/modification of standard header fields), but delegates general packet processing to the CPU (e.g. for XCP). Besides avoiding crossing the kernel/user-space boundary, NetBump allows arbitrary packet modification at line rate. A key distinction is that these projects are all multi-port software switches focused on packet routing, while NetBump focuses on pass-through virtual

queuing within a pre-existing switching layer. SideCar [40], on the other hand, is a recent proposal to delegate a small fraction of traffic requiring special processing from the ToR switch to a companion server. While superficially similar, the redirection and traffic sampling are not applicable for NetBump’s vAQM use-case, where low-latency is a key design requirement. For these reasons, we consider these efforts to be orthogonal to this work.

Several efforts have looked at ways of mapping packet handling tasks necessary to support software routers to multi-core, multi-NIC queue commodity servers. Egi et al. [9], and Dobrescu et al. [7] investigate the effects of casting forwarding paths across multiple cores, and find that minimizing core transitions is necessary for high performance. NetBump takes a similar approach to the “split traffic” and “cloning” functionality described, in which an entire forwarding path resides on a single core and cache hierarchy. Manesh et al. [26] study the performance of multi-queue NICs as applied to packet forwarding workloads. They found that increasing the number of NIC queues led to reduced performance, and were not able to forward minimum-sized packets at line rate. We did not find such a limitation with our particular hardware NICs. However, Based on our experiences we fully support their recommendations for new NIC APIs for handling packet forwarding for applications.

Typically, the OS kernel translates streams of raw packets to and from a higher-level interface such as a socket. And While sockets are a useful networking primitive, the required kernel involvement can become a bottleneck, and several alternative user-level networking techniques have been developed [5, 10, 44, 46]. In user-level networking, user-programs are responsible for TCP sequence reassembly, retransmission, etc., and this is typically coupled with zero-copy buffering, where a packet is stored in shared memory with target applications. Kernel-bypass drivers also enable applications to directly access packets from NIC memory, avoiding kernel involvement on the datapath. Commercially-available NICs already support these mechanisms [6, 28, 33, 41, 42]. NetBump is implemented at user-level, and relies on zero-copy, kernel-bypass drivers.

**Datapath Programming in Hardware:** One drawback of software-based packet forwarding is that historically it has suffered from low performance, and alternative hardware architectures have been proposed. Perhaps the best-known and most widely-used hardware forwarding platform is the NetFPGA [29], a powerful development tool for FPGA devices; however, the complexity of FPGA programming remains a challenge. On top of NetFPGA, the CAFE project [25] enables users to more easily develop forwarding engines based on custom and non-standard packet header formats. RiceNIC [38] is similarly based on an FPGA, but provides additional per-packet computing through two embedded PowerPC processors.

Two recent projects sought to address the programming challenge: Switchblade [3] provides modular building blocks that can support a wide variety of datapaths, and Chimpp [37] converts datapaths specified in the Click language into Verilog code suitable for an FPGA. In addition, network processors (NPs) [39] have been used to prototype and deploy new network functionality. They have the disadvantage of a difficult-to-use programming model and limited production runs. Their primary advantage is their multiple functional units, providing significant parallelism to support faster data rates. Commodity CPUs have since greatly increased their number of cores, and can also provide significant per-packet processing at high line rates.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

A major barrier to developing and deploying new network functionality is the difficulty of programming the network datapath. In this work, we presented NetBump, a platform for developing, experimenting with, and deploying alternative packet buffering and queuing disciplines with minimal intrusiveness and at low latency. NetBump leaves existing switches and endhosts unmodified. It acts as a “bump on the wire,” examining, optionally modifying, and forwarding packets at line rate in tens of microseconds to implement a variety of virtual active queuing disciplines and congestion control protocols implemented in user-space. We built and deployed several applications with NetBump, including DCTCP and 802.1Qau-QCN. These applications were quickly developed in hours or days, and required only tens or hundreds of lines of code in total. The adoption of multi-core processors, along with kernel-bypass commodity NICs, provides a feasible platform to deploy data modifications written in user-space at line rate. Our experience has shown that NetBump is a useful and practical platform for prototyping and deploying new network functionality in real data center environments.

## 9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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