

8.3 PACKET SWITCHING

In data communications, we need to send messages from one end system to another. If the message is going to pass through a **packet-switched network**, it needs to be divided into packets of fixed or variable size. The size of the packet is determined by the network and the governing protocol.

In packet switching, there is no resource allocation for a packet. This means that there is no reserved bandwidth on the links, and there is no scheduled processing time for each packet. Resources are allocated on demand. The allocation is done on a first-come, first-served basis. When a switch receives a packet, no matter what the source or destination is, the packet must wait if there are other packets being processed. As with

other systems in our daily life, this lack of reservation may create delay. For example, if we do not have a reservation at a restaurant, we might have to wait.

**In a packet-switched network, there is no resource reservation;
resources are allocated on demand.**

We can have two types of packet-switched networks: datagram networks and virtual-circuit networks.

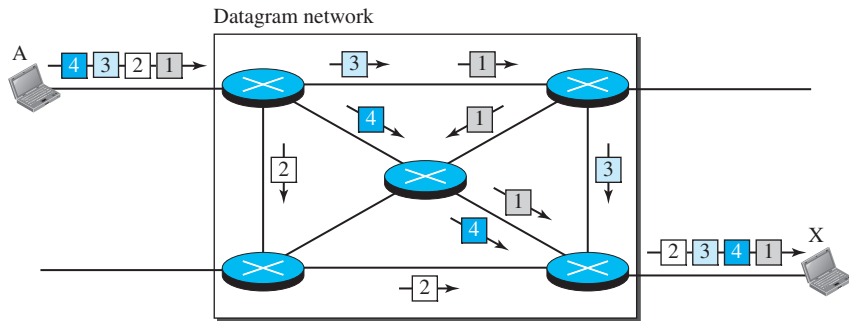
8.3.1 Datagram Networks

In a **datagram network**, each packet is treated independently of all others. Even if a packet is part of a multipacket transmission, the network treats it as though it existed alone. Packets in this approach are referred to as *datagrams*.

Datagram switching is normally done at the network layer. We briefly discuss datagram networks here as a comparison with circuit-switched and virtual-circuit-switched networks. In Chapter 18 of this text, we go into greater detail.

Figure 8.7 shows how the datagram approach is used to deliver four packets from station A to station X. The switches in a datagram network are traditionally referred to as routers. That is why we use a different symbol for the switches in the figure.

Figure 8.7 A datagram network with four switches (routers)



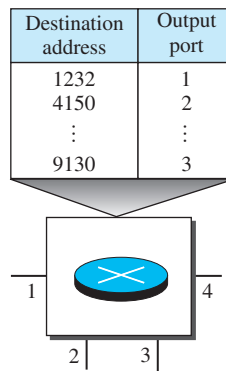
In this example, all four packets (or datagrams) belong to the same message, but may travel different paths to reach their destination. This is so because the links may be involved in carrying packets from other sources and do not have the necessary bandwidth available to carry all the packets from A to X. This approach can cause the datagrams of a transmission to arrive at their destination out of order with different delays between the packets. Packets may also be lost or dropped because of a lack of resources. In most protocols, it is the responsibility of an upper-layer protocol to reorder the datagrams or ask for lost datagrams before passing them on to the application.

The datagram networks are sometimes referred to as *connectionless networks*. The term *connectionless* here means that the switch (packet switch) does not keep information about the connection state. There are no setup or teardown phases. Each packet is treated the same by a switch regardless of its source or destination.

Routing Table

If there are no setup or teardown phases, how are the packets routed to their destinations in a datagram network? In this type of network, each switch (or packet switch) has a routing table which is based on the destination address. The routing tables are dynamic and are updated periodically. The destination addresses and the corresponding forwarding output ports are recorded in the tables. This is different from the table of a circuit-switched network (discussed later) in which each entry is created when the setup phase is completed and deleted when the teardown phase is over. Figure 8.8 shows the routing table for a switch.

Figure 8.8 Routing table in a datagram network



A switch in a datagram network uses a routing table that is based on the destination address.

Destination Address

Every packet in a datagram network carries a header that contains, among other information, the destination address of the packet. When the switch receives the packet, this destination address is examined; the routing table is consulted to find the corresponding port through which the packet should be forwarded. This address, unlike the address in a virtual-circuit network, remains the same during the entire journey of the packet.

The destination address in the header of a packet in a datagram network remains the same during the entire journey of the packet.

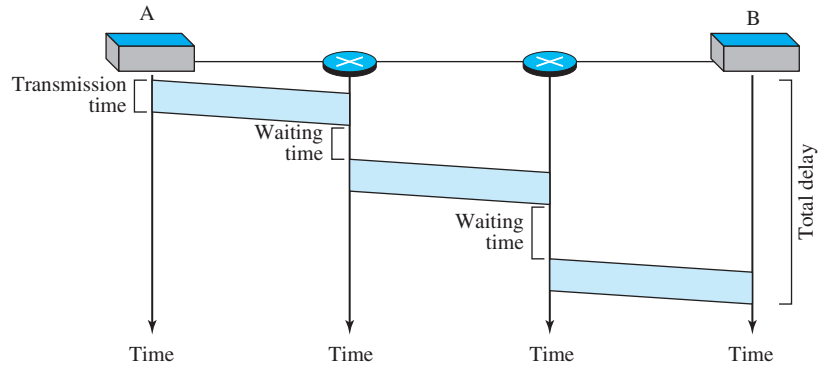
Efficiency

The efficiency of a datagram network is better than that of a circuit-switched network; resources are allocated only when there are packets to be transferred. If a source sends a packet and there is a delay of a few minutes before another packet can be sent, the resources can be reallocated during these minutes for other packets from other sources.

Delay

There may be greater delay in a datagram network than in a virtual-circuit network. Although there are no setup and teardown phases, each packet may experience a wait at a switch before it is forwarded. In addition, since not all packets in a message necessarily travel through the same switches, the delay is not uniform for the packets of a message. Figure 8.9 gives an example of delay in a datagram network for one packet.

Figure 8.9 Delay in a datagram network



The packet travels through two switches. There are three transmission times ($3T$), three propagation delays (slopes 3τ of the lines), and two waiting times ($w_1 + w_2$). We ignore the processing time in each switch. The total delay is

$$\text{Total delay} = 3T + 3\tau + w_1 + w_2$$