

# To NACK or not to NACK?

## Negative Acknowledgments in Information-Centric Networking

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**Abstract**—Information-Centric Networking (ICN) is an inter-networking paradigm that offers an alternative to the current IP-based Internet architecture. ICN’s most distinguishing feature is its emphasis on information (content) instead of communication endpoints. One important open issue in ICN is whether negative acknowledgments (NACKs) at the network layer are useful for notifying downstream nodes about forwarding failures, or requests for incorrect or non-existent information. In benign settings, NACKs are beneficial for ICN architectures, such as CCNx and NDN, since they flush state in routers and notify consumers. In terms of security, NACKs seem useful as they can help mitigating so-called Interest Flooding attacks. However, as we show in this paper, network-layer NACKs also have some unpleasant security implications. We consider several types of NACKs and discuss their security design requirements and implications. We also demonstrate that providing secure NACKs triggers the threat of producer-bound flooding attacks. Although we discuss some potential countermeasures to these attacks, the main conclusion of this paper is that network-layer NACKs are best avoided, at least for security reasons.

**Keywords**—*information-centric networking, named-data networking, content-centric networking, negative acknowledgement, NACK, security considerations.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The original Internet design aimed to provide end-to-end connectivity, allowing users (numbering in tens of thousands) remote access to shared computing resources. The number of Internet users has since grown tremendously, reaching over three billion. They use a wide variety of applications: from email to dynamic web, to content distribution. This great shift in Internet usage highlighted design limitations of the IP-based design and motivated research to explore new architectures.

Named-Data Networking (NDN) is one such new architecture [1]. It is one of the five Future Internet Architecture projects funded by the U.S. National Science Foundations (NSF) [2]. NDN is an instance of Information-Centric Networking (ICN) [3] that branched out of the Content-Centric Networking project (CCNx) at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) [4, 5]. Despite recent differences in features, NDN and CCNx share the same basic ICN vision. Instead of establishing communication between a source and a destination (via packets, as in IP), in order to exchange data, NDN and CCNx directly address *content* using unique human-readable names. A consumer requests desired *content* by issuing an *interest* carrying the *content* name. Then, the network is in charge of finding and returning requested *content*. Moreover, content follows (in reverse) the exact path of the preceding interest(s) back to the consumer. In addition, routers keep state

information for all received interests in their Pending Interest Tables (PITs), along with the corresponding interfaces on which they are received. When a router receives content, it uses information in a matching PIT entry to forward the content to the correct downstream router, towards the consumer.

To facilitate efficient content distribution, NDN and CCNx introduce in-network content caching. An entity (a router or a host) can satisfy an incoming interest if a copy of requested content is found in the local cache. Whenever an interest can be neither satisfied locally nor forwarded, NDN and CCNx adopt different behaviors depending on the release version.

Since NDN’s initial release, producers simply drop interests they cannot satisfy, while router behavior in case of forwarding failures is unclear. Even though [6] proposed network-layer NACKs for notifying downstream routers about forwarding failures, there is currently no support for this feature in NDN. However, recent discussions [7] indicate that network-layer NACKs might be adopted by NDN.

For its part, CCNx implemented network-layer NACKs until version 0.8.2. However, in the latest release, CCNx team announced that NACKs are considered a higher-layer functionality and are no longer implemented at the network layer [8]. We believe that all these oscillations (over time, and in different but related projects) represent a strong motivation for the analysis provided in this paper.

The use of NACKs, as an alternative to simply dropping unsatisfiable interests, has some advantages. First, consumers can rely on NACKs to quickly identify non-existing content, instead of waiting for issued interests to time out. Second, NACKs allow consumers to differentiate between cases of non-existing content and packet (interest) loss. In the latter case, consumers have to wait until an issued interest expires before attempting retransmission. Third, the use of NACKs can help mitigate the effects of Interest Flooding (IF) attacks [9]. In such attacks, adversaries flood routers with non-sensical (unsatisfiable) interests in order to exhaust their PITs. Once the PIT of a router gets full, it drops new incoming interests, resulting in a denial-of-service for legitimate interests. Since, like content, a NACK traverses, in reverse, the path a corresponding interest, it causes routers to remove corresponding PIT entries and thus release valuable resources. Finally, NACKs can be a useful tool in notifying downstream routers that received interests cannot be forwarded further. Routers can thus quickly react and pursue alternative paths.

Despite aforementioned benefits, we show that network-layer NACKs in CCNx and NDN have important and interest-

ing security implications. In doing so, we differentiate between Forwarding-NACKs and Content-NACKs. To the best of our knowledge, this paper represents the first attempt to address security considerations for NACKs in the ICN context. The intended contributions of this paper are:

- We assess benefits and identify scenarios justifying the use of network-layer NACKs.
- We discuss security requirements for implementing NACKs.
- We show that naïve security for NACKs can facilitate DoS attacks against producers.
- We describe experiments that demonstrate effects of NACK-based DoS attacks.

As mentioned earlier, NDN and CCNx are research projects with the same goal of popularizing the ICN paradigm. Both NDN and CCNx are candidates for the next-generation Internet architecture. Even in the case they will never see wide adoption, their designs are likely to influence the Internet of the future. Therefore, we believe that this paper is both timely and important, since it studies, from a security perspective, one of the key ICN features.

This paper is organized as follows. In Section II we present an overview of NDN and CCNx architectures. In Section III, we identify two types of NACK messages usable in ICN, cNACKs and fNACKs, and we discuss their design requirements from a security perspective in Sections IV and V, respectively. Section VI discusses some potential methods for preventing producer flooding attacks imposed by introducing secure NACKs. We present the related work in Section VII, and we conclude in Section VIII.

## II. OVERVIEW

This section overviews NDN and CCNx. It can be skipped with no loss of continuity, given some familiarity with basic ICN concepts and terminology.

### A. NDN

Unlike IP, which emphasizes end-points of communication and their names/addresses, NDN [1, 4] focuses on content and makes it named, addressable and routable at the network layer. A content name is composed of one or more variable-length components opaque to the network. Component boundaries are explicitly delimited by “/” in the usual path-like representation. For example, the name of a WSJ’s news homepage content for May 1, 2015 might be: `/ndn/wsj/news/05-01-2015/index.htm`. Large content can be split into intuitively named segment, e.g., chapter 13 of Netflix’s movie “Argo” could be named: `/ndn/netflix/movies/argo.mp4/ch13/`.

NDN communication follows the general *pull* model, whereby content is delivered to consumers only upon (prior) explicit request, i.e., each content delivery is triggered by a request for that content. There are two types of NDN packets: interest and content. A consumer requests content by issuing an *interest* packet. An entity that can “satisfy” a given interest, i.e., has the requested content in its Content Store, returns it immediately. If content *C* with name *n* is received by a router with no pending interest for

that name, it is dropped as being unsolicited. Name matching in NDN is prefix-based. For example, an interest for `/ndn/youtube/alice/video-749.avi` can be satisfied by content named `/ndn/youtube/alice/video-749.avi/37`.<sup>1</sup> Note that the term *content object* refers to a segment of a content, while *content* denotes the entire content before segmentation takes place.

NDN content objects include several fields. In this paper, we are only interested in the following four:

- **Name:** A sequence of name components followed by an implicit digest (hash) component of the content re-computed at every hop. This effectively provides each content with a unique name and guarantees a match when provided in an interest.
- **Signature:** A public key signature, generated by the content producer, covering the entire object, including all explicit components of the name. The signature field also includes a reference (by name) to the public key needed to verify it.
- **Freshness:** A producer-recommended time for the content objects to be cached.
- **Type:** It specifies the content type, e.g., DATA or KEY.

An NDN interest message includes the name of requested content. In most cases, the last component of a name (hash) is not present in interests, since NDN does not provide a means for consumers to learn content hashes beforehand.

There are three types of NDN entities/roles:<sup>2</sup>

- *Consumer* – an entity that issues interest packets for content packets.
- *Producer* – an entity that produces and publishes (as well as signs) content.
- *Router* – an entity that routes interest packets and forwards corresponding content packets.

Each NDN entity (not just routers) maintains these three data structures [10]:

- *Content Store (CS)* – cache used for content caching and retrieval. From here on, we use the terms *CS* and *cache* interchangeably. Recall that timeout of cached content is specified in the freshness field.
- *Forwarding Interest Base (FIB)* – table of name prefixes and corresponding outgoing interfaces. FIB is used to route interests.
- *Pending Interest Table (PIT)* – table of outstanding (“pending”) interests and corresponding sets of interfaces from which interests arrive.

When a router receives an interest for a name *n*, and there are no pending interests for the same name in its PIT, it forwards the interest to the next hop(s), according to its FIB. For each forwarded interest, a router stores some amount of state information, including the name in the interest and the interface on which it arrived. However, if an interest for *n* arrives while there is already an entry for the same content name in the PIT, the router collapses the present interest,

<sup>1</sup>However, the reverse does not hold, by design.

<sup>2</sup>A physical entity (a host, in today’s parlance) can be both consumer and producer of content.

storing only the interface on which it was received. When content is returned, the router forwards it out on all incoming-interest interfaces, and flushes the corresponding PIT entry. Since no additional information is needed to deliver content, interests do not carry any *source address*.

A router’s cache size is determined by local resource availability. Each router unilaterally determines what content to cache and for how long. Upon receiving an interest, a router first checks its cache to see if it can satisfy this interest locally. Therefore, NDN lacks also any notion of *destination address* – content can be served by any NDN entity. Producer-originated content signatures allow consumers to authenticate received content, regardless of the entity that serves this content.

### B. CCNx

Both NDN and CCNx projects used to share the same codebase originally implemented by PARC. In August 2013, the two projects separated. Both codebases still sharing the basic design features outlined above. However, in December 2013, PARC released the roadmap for the new codebase, CCNx 1.0 [11], increasing the differences between NDN and CCNx.

Until version 0.8.2, CCNx used to provide NACK support by design. A NACK message is a content object containing no data, but the name of the requested content, and a type with value *NACK*. Following CCNx (and NDN) specifications, all content objects must be signed [12]. Therefore, all CCNx NACKs are signed by their producers. As mentioned above, recent CCNx 1.0 specifications removed NACK generation at the network layer. This is because they were (re)considered as a higher-layer functionality.

For the rest of this paper, we use the terms NACKs, NACK messages and NACK objects interchangeably to refer to content objects with type *NACK*.

## III. NACKS IN GENERAL

In communication protocols, there are usually two ways to confirm whether a packet (message or segment) has been received: acknowledgments (ACKs) or negative acknowledgments (NACKs). In ACK-based protocols, a receiver informs the sender about all successfully received packets. In NACK-based protocols, a receiver informs the sender whenever it believes that a received packet is unrecognized, non-sensical or corrupted [13].

In the next sections, we consider network-layer NACKs from a security perspective. In particular, we discuss two types of NACK messages that might make sense in ICNs: Content-NACKs (cNACKs) and Forwarding-NACKs (fNACKs). For each type, we present its benefits for network entities (consumers, producers and routers) and specify security requirements. Then, we show that – even with these requirements met – introducing cNACKs has negative security implications for producers and routers, while fNACKs are generally beneficial.

## IV. CONTENT-NACKS

A cNACK is a packet generated by a producer at the network layer: it indicates that a content – with the name reflected in a received interest – does not exist, i.e., has not

been produced or published. A cNACK is realized as a special kind of a content object, of type *CNACK*. One intuitive analogy (though at a higher layer) is the well-known “HTTP 404 not found” message [14].

### A. Benefits

cNACKs offer several benefits. On the consumer side, they help applications to: (1) distinguish between packet loss and *content not found*, and (2) reduce waiting time for consumers, i.e., inform consumers faster than interest timeouts. For routers and producers, cNACKs can reduce the effects of Interest Flooding (IF) attacks. Recall that a router creates a PIT entry for each distinct interest that it forwards.<sup>3</sup> A PIT entry is not purged until content arrives (from upstream), gets cached and forwarded downstream. However, if an interest requests some non-existing content and the producer simply drops such interest, corresponding PIT entries at all intervening routers (and at the consumer) remain until they expire. A producer-generated cNACK allows routers to purge PIT entries earlier and thus free their resources early. Even though this strategy does not fully mitigate the impact of IF attacks, it significantly reduces their effects.

In both NDN and CCNx, a router that receives a new interest (i.e., there is no PIT or cache hit) might determine – based on its local FIB – that multiple outgoing interfaces are possible for forwarding. If so, a router either: (1) forwards the interest on multiple interfaces, or (2) forwards the interest on one interface; in case of a time-out, it tries the next possible interface, and so on.<sup>4</sup> In the latter case (2), a router might incur considerable delay by sequentially trying (and timing out on) every viable interface. However, recall that cNACKs are generated by the producer to indicate non-existing content. Therefore, if a router receives a genuine cNACK, trying other possible interfaces would be useless. This early detection of non-existent content is another advantage of cNACKs. Finally, since a cNACK is a type of content and is thus cached, subsequent interests for the same name are satisfied accordingly.

### B. Security Issues

Despite aforementioned benefits, cNACKs’ security implications should be carefully examined. We believe that support for insecure cNACKs opens the door for simple content-focused DoS attacks. Assume that an adversary Adv controls a network link and can inject cNACKs for interests traversing that link. In this case, Adv can prevent consumers from obtaining legitimate extant content. Even if there are multiple paths to the producer, Adv only needs to inject cNACKs on just one path to succeed in the attack. For example, this attack can be trivially exploited to enforce censorship over content considered subversive or simply undesirable.

More generally, an unsecured cNACK – being a special type of content – can be abused to essentially *poison* router caches. As described in [9], a content poisoning attack can occur in either reactive or proactive mode. The former corresponds to the adversarial scenario above. The latter involves

<sup>3</sup>Clearly, this excludes collapsed interests.

<sup>4</sup>Other forwarding strategies are possible. However, we are not considering them here.

Adv that, anticipating demand for certain content, issues one or more bogus interests (perhaps from strategically placed zombie consumers), ahead of genuine interests being issued. Adv then replies with fake content (from a set of compromised routers or compromised producers, at or near genuine producers) thus pre-poisoning the caches of all routers that forwarded bogus interests.

One variation of proactive content poisoning attack is even simpler. Again, predicting the name of content that has not yet been produced, Adv issues an interest for such content and receives a legitimate cNACK from the genuine producer. Routers on the path cache this cNACK. Even if the actual content is published soon thereafter, subsequent interests for that content will be satisfied with a cached cNACK, thus resulting in a DoS.

The above clearly motivates securing cNACKs, which intuitively translates into two requirements: (1) authenticating cNACK origin and integrity, i.e., detect fakes, and (2) checking cNACK freshness, i.e., to detect replays. We discuss these in the next section.

### C. Securing cNACKs

Addressing authentication of cNACK origin and integrity is easy: in fact, one of the basic tenets of both NDN and CCNx is that all content must be signed by its producer. (Indeed, creating a special type of content that is exempt from being signed would violate this very tenet.) A router can elect to verify content signatures before caching or forwarding content. However, this process is not mandatory for several reasons discussed in [15], hence triggering the aforementioned cNACK poisoning attack.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, the Interest Key Binding (IKB) rule has been introduced in [15]. Enforcing the IKB rule requires consumers and producers to collaborate in order to provide routers with the trust context needed to verify only one signature per content. In particular, consumers include the digest of the producer's public key in every interest. For their part, a producer includes its public key in all content it serves. A router that receives a content: (1) ensures that the digest of the public key in that content header matches the one provided in the matching interest, and (2) verifies the content signature with the public key included in the content header.<sup>6</sup> The IKB rule would thus prevent cNACKs from being modified or generated by entities other than legitimate producers.

A complementary means of preventing content poisoning is via Self-Certifying Names (SCNs) [15]. With SCNs, a consumer specifies, in the interest packet, the hash of the expected content. Using SCNs, routers only need to verify that the hash of a received content matches the value specified in the interest. A key advantage of this approach is that a content that is matched in this manner does not need to be signed. SCNs are particularly appropriate for static nested content, e.g., catalogs.

However, cNACKs cause a problem for routers when consumers use SCNs. Suppose that a benign consumer requests a content using SCN in an interest. Even though a consumer

might have pre-obtained the hash of currently requested content from a legitimate source (e.g., a catalog that it previously obtained using IKB), the content in question could be no longer available from its producer, for various reasons. In that case, the producer would satisfy the interest with a cNACK. However, the hash of the latter would certainly not match the content hash reflected in the SCN from the interest. Therefore, such a cNACK would be dropped by routers as an invalid content. Fortunately, this problem can be solved by a minor modification to network-layer trust rules proposed in [15]: interests bearing SCNs should also (as a backup) adhere to IKB, i.e., reflect the producer's public key, in order to handle (via signed cNACKs) expired or simply no-longer-available content.

Although the motivation for producer-signed cNACKs is not surprising, why this process should take place at run-time might not be obvious. First and foremost, producers cannot create and pre-sign cNACKs for all possible non-existing content. The reason is because content names can have arbitrary suffixes, resulting in an infinite number of possible names. In other words, a producer responsible for a name prefix `/ndn/x/y/z`, should be ready to respond to (in particular, by generating a signed NACK) an interest requesting any content name starting with that prefix.

To prevent replay attacks, signed cNACKs must include a challenge by the consumer, and/or a timestamp set by producers. However, both means have certain drawbacks:

- If each interest contains a unique consumer-selected challenge, then caching a signed cNACK that also includes this challenge is useless for other consumers who issue interests for the same content at, or near, the same time. Caching such a cNACK is beneficial only in the case of packet error or loss and retransmission. Moreover, PIT interest collapsing becomes a problem, since each interest to-be-collapsed would have a different challenge. Thus, we conclude that consumer challenges are problematic in the cNACK context.
- If, instead of challenges, each cNACK contains a producer-set timestamp, a time window needs to be defined to allow for transmission and caching delays. The selection of this window poses a problem. If too large, cNACK objects can be replayed for a longer time; else, if the window is too small, the probability of successful replay attacks decreases, while the probability of cNACKs wrongly considered invalid increases. One viable alternative is to use producer-specified expirations for signed and time-stamped cNACKs. This would address cNACK replay attacks. Nonetheless, we note that timestamps require a global synchronization protocols, e.g., a secure version of NTP [17].

Based on the above discussion we summarize the requirements for securing cNACKs:

- 1) Signature: a cNACK must be signed by its producer, just like any other content.
- 2) Timestamps: a cNACK should be generated, not per interest, but per time interval.
- 3) Expiration: a cNACK for plausible content (e.g., not yet published) should include expiration time.

<sup>5</sup>This is an attack similar to the content poisoning attack described in [16].

<sup>6</sup>This assumes that fast public key cryptographic operations will be supported in hardware in future routers.

#### D. Secure cNACKs: a Blessing or a Curse?

Unfortunately, secure cNACKs that satisfy our three requirements (which are themselves motivated in part by DoS prevention) facilitate producer-focused DoS attacks. Such an attack occurs when Adv sends a large number of closely-spaced interests requesting non-existing (and possibly non-sensical) content. A producer that receives a barrage of these interests generates a cNACK for each one, which requires generating a signature. The resultant computational load on the producer could be overwhelming. Furthermore, large numbers of useless cNACKs would pollute router caches.

Note that generating one cNACK for all interests arriving within a certain time interval is not effective against this DoS attack. This is because a smart Adv – instead of issuing interests for the same (non-existent) name – would issue many interests, each for a distinct name composed of a common prefix (registered to the victim producer) and a random suffix, e.g., `/ndn/cnn/news/world/$&F(?%)`. One simple countermeasure is to allow producers to issue cNACKs for prefixes. For example, a cNACK for `/ndn/cnn/news/world/`, once cached in routers, would throttle all interests with that prefix, including non-sensical ones. However, the very same cNACK would result in DoS for legitimate interests, e.g., referring to `/ndn/cnn/news/world/china`.

The discussion above leads us to a logical conclusion that secure cNACKs should be implemented carefully. Specifically, a producer must first decide whether an incoming interest is plausible or non-sensical. An interest is *plausible* if the producer believes that the referenced content name might have existed in the past or might exist in the future. In contrast, an interest is *non-sensical* if it refers to implausible (or unlikely to ever exist) content name. We have no guaranteed way of distinguishing between these two types of interests. This task is perhaps best left up to individual applications. As far as producer’s strategy, we believe that a producer should have the option of replying with a secure cNACK in response to a plausible interest. Otherwise, a producer should not reply at all to a non-sensical interest. This prompts the addition of another requirement for securing cNACKs:

- 4) Plausibility: a cNACK should be generated only for a plausible interest.

#### E. Experimenting with Secure cNACKs

To assess the efficacy of producer-focused DoS attacks, we performed several experiments, using ndnSIM [18, 19], to demonstrate additional overhead imposed by generating a network-layer cNACK per interest. Although, as discussed above, secure cNACKs should be generated only for plausibly named content, a smart Adv can still generate many names that a producer application can consider to be plausible. This can be caused by poorly implemented applications, or by the difficulty of distinguishing plausible from non-sensical names.

In our experiments, we consider the simple network topology illustrated in Figure 1. Also, we let benign and malicious consumers issue a large number of interests to a single producer at different rates: benign consumers send 10 interests per second for existing content; while malicious consumers send 100 non-sensical interests per second. We implemented two consumer modes:

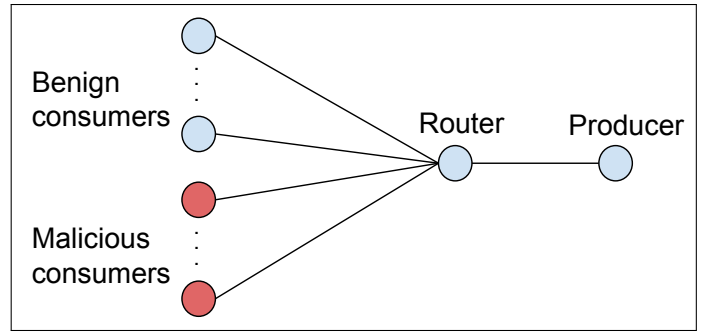


Fig. 1. Simulation Topology.

- 1) Basic: consumers request sequential content under a specific name space, e.g., `/ndn/a/1`, `/ndn/a/2`, etc.
- 2) Advanced: content requested by consumers adheres to a Zipf distribution. This reflects practical applications where some content is more popular than other.

Figure 2 shows the delay increment in serving existing content, for both basic and advanced benign consumers. In the base case all consumers are benign. The results show the additional time required by the producer to serve existing content, as compared to the base case, for different malicious consumers population (MCP) rates (10%, 20%, and 30%). As expected, increasing the number of malicious consumers, increases the producer overhead when serving existing content. Moreover, this overhead increases when using advanced consumers. This behavior is motivated as follows: collapsing of interests requesting existing content reduces the number of these interests on the link between the router and the producer. In fact, reducing interests on this link allows the router to forward more non-sensical interests to the producer. Therefore, the latter is forced to generate and sign more cNACKs.

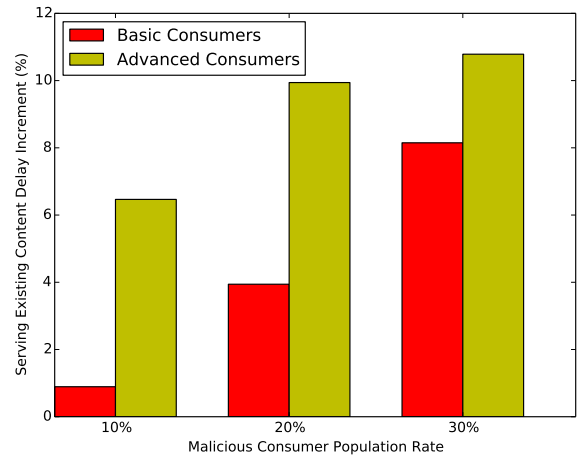


Fig. 2. Serving existing content delay increment compared to the base case for varying malicious consumer population rates.

We also studied experimentally the delay in serving existing content, when the number of consumers increases. In particular, we started the simulation with 200 benign consumers, and we considered two scenarios: (1) adding one benign consumer per second; (2) adding a malicious consumer per second.

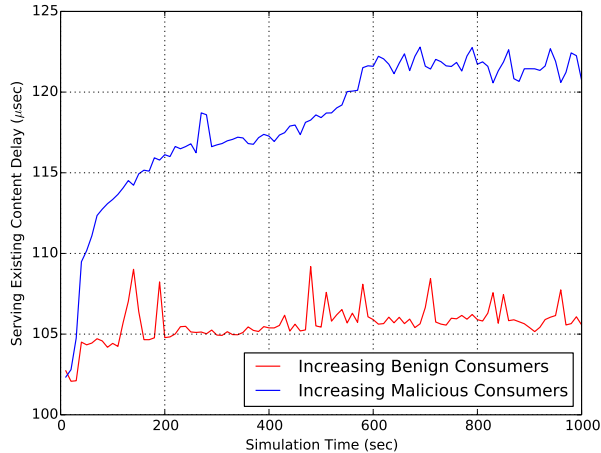


Fig. 3. Serving existing content delay for gradually increasing number of consumers.

In both cases, we stop adding nodes after 500 seconds, and measure the delay in serving content until the 1000-th second of simulation. The result of this experiment is illustrated in Figure 3. We note that increasing number of benign consumers does not significantly affect the producer performance, while increasing the number of malicious consumers does (e.g., after 500 seconds, the delay is some 10% more than the case with only benign nodes).

## V. FORWARDING-NACKS

A fNACK is a packet generated by a router at the network layer. Its purpose is to inform downstream routers that an interest cannot be forwarded due to congestion or unknown next hop [6]. Since edge routers are usually configured with a default route to an upstream router, fNACKs generated due to unknown next hop are most likely to occur at the network core. A good analogy to fNACKs is ICMP destination unreachable message [20].

Recall that, in both NDN and CCNx, a router’s FIB might specify multiple interfaces on which an interest with a particular name (prefix) can be forwarded. In such cases, a router has two forwarding choices:

- 1) Parallel: Forward the interest on all specified interfaces at the same time and set either the same or various time-outs for each interface. The PIT entry is flushed if all interfaces time out.
- 2) Sequential: Forward the interest on one interface and wait; in the event of a time-out, try another interface, and so on. Once the last possible outgoing interface times out, the PIT entry is flushed.

We distinguish the cases of a router *generating* and *forwarding* fNACKs. There are two reasons for a router to generate an fNACK: (1) FIB lookup failure, i.e., an entry indicating the next-hop of the received interest does not exist, or (2) all FIB-specified outgoing interfaces are congested. A router that generates an fNACK, sends it out on each interest incoming interface listed in the appropriate PIT entry. It then flushes the PIT entry.

A router must forward fNACKs on all downstream interfaces (on which interests were received) if it receives an fNACK on *every* upstream interface specified in the FIB, regardless of whether parallel or in sequential forwarding is used. Conversely, if an fNACK is not received on at least one upstream interface (i.e., at least one time-out occurs) a router *must not* forward fNACKs downstream. This is because a time-out does not imply producer unreachability. A producer might have actually received the interest and decided to drop or ignore it. Figure 4 shows two state diagrams (one for parallel and the other – for sequential case) for generating and forwarding fNACKs.

### A. Securing fNACKs

Similar to cNACKs, insecure fNACKs trigger content-focused DoS attacks. Adv controlling a link can inject fake fNACKs in response to interests on that link. This would prevent consumers from obtaining requested content.

Securing fNACKs seems similar to doing the same for cNACKs, i.e., ideally we would need origin authentication and replay prevention. However, we cannot use the methods from Section IV. If we require each fNACK to be signed, Adv can easily generate many spurious interests that cannot be forwarded by a particular router. That victim router would then be forced to sign one fNACK for each spurious interest. Since signing is often appreciably more expensive than verification (e.g., in RSA), computational overhead for the victim router would easily translate into a full-blown DoS attack.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, fNACK signing would trigger the need for a routing PKI since verifying fNACK signatures cannot be done mechanically: public key certificates must be fetched, verified and revocation-checked. This represents another challenge for supporting signed fNACKs.

However, if we assume that trust relationships can be established between neighboring routers, fNACK authentication can be easily achieved. In this case, fNACKs can be sent downstream over a sequence of pair-wise secure channels between neighboring routers. We can safely assume that such long-term channels are maintained between every pair of adjacent NDN or CCNx routers. One trivial way of securing fNACKs hop-by-hop is by using a keyed hash, HMAC [21]. Replay prevention can be achieved via timestamps, especially considering that adjacent routers are likely to maintain closely synchronized clocks.

### B. Experimenting with Secure fNACKs

We ran several experiments using ndnSIM 2.0 to demonstrate the negligible impact of secure fNACKs. We used the same topology as in Figure 1. Benign consumers request 10 contents per second, while malicious consumers send 100 interests per second; these interests cannot be forwarded by the router. Our evaluation metric is processing time for the router to forward an interest towards the producer. All consumers (benign and malicious) implement the basic mode.

<sup>7</sup>Note that some digital signature techniques flip this balance, e.g., in DSA, verification is more expensive than signing. However, the DoS attack would then be even worse, since multiple routers would verify fNACK signatures.



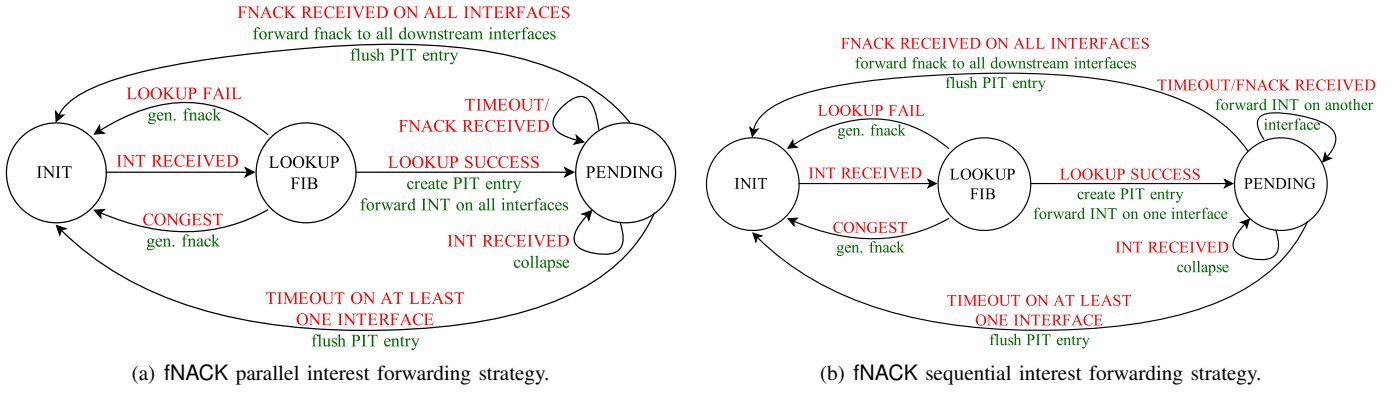


Fig. 4. fNACK generation and forwarding state diagrams (red/upper case: events, green/lower case: actions.)

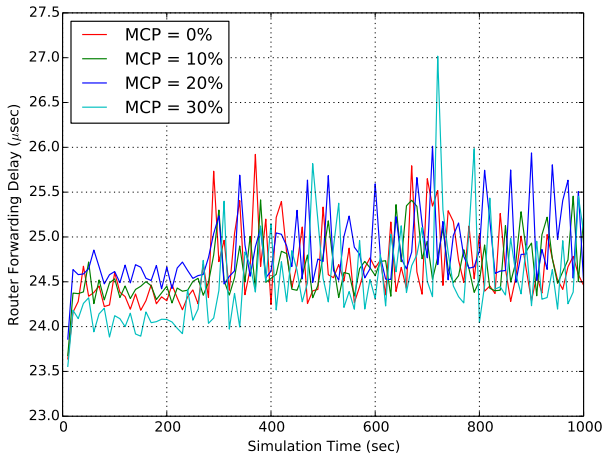


Fig. 5. Router forwarding performance for different MCP rates.

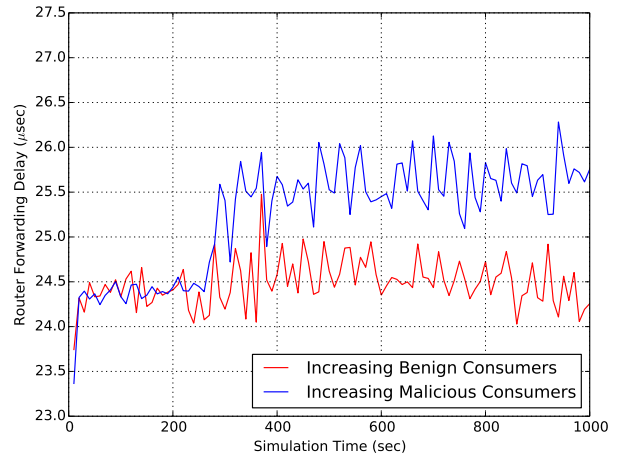


Fig. 6. Router forwarding delay for gradually increasing number of consumers.

We implemented two scenarios. In the first, we compared router forwarding performance for different rates of MCP (0%, 10%, 20% and 30%). The total number of consumers in this scenario is 200. Figure 5 shows that even with 30% MCP rate, router forwarding performance is not affected. In the second scenario, the number of consumers increases gradually. Initially, there are 200 benign consumers. We then either: (1) increase the number of benign consumers (one every second) until reaching 700, or (2) introduce 500 malicious consumers (one every second). Figure 6 illustrates the results: for up to 300 malicious consumers, router performance is similar to the case where the network contains only benign consumers. Even if the number of malicious consumers exceeds 300, router performance decreases only by an average of 4%.

## VI. MITIGATING PRODUCER-FOCUSED DoS ATTACKS

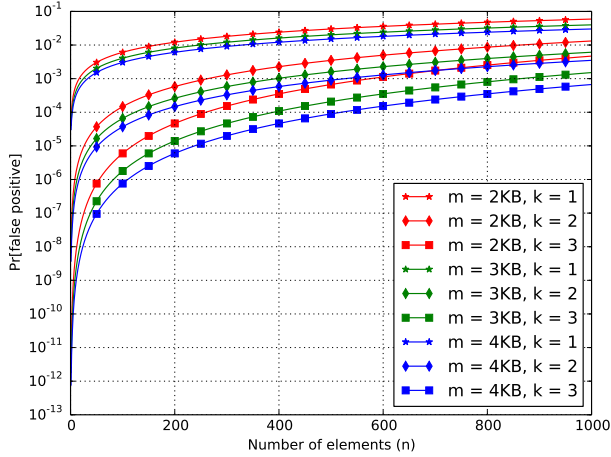
As discussed earlier, securing cNACKs comes at a price of possible DoS attacks on content producers. We now discuss some ways to mitigate the impact of such attacks.

One approach is to separate content-serving and cNACK-generation activities. Producers can set up special-purpose gateways that distinguish between interests requesting existing and non-existing content. The former are forwarded to the

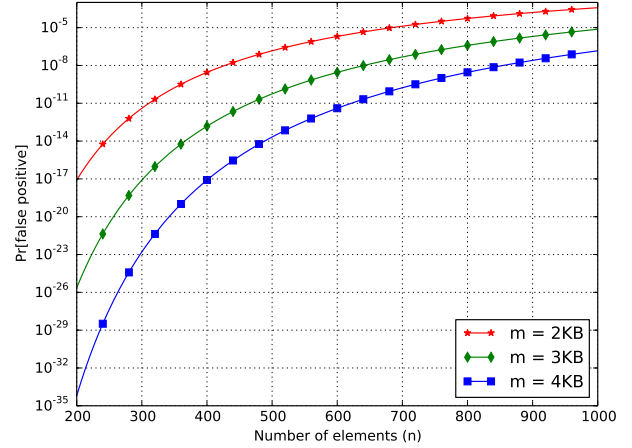
actual content repository that serves requested content, while the latter are forwarded to a special server that generates and signs cNACKs. However, this only works for static content because producers need to keep gateways updated with all published content, which cannot be achieved for (dynamic) content generated upon request.

By redirecting the attack towards the cNACK generation server, producers can still continuously serve content. However, the network still needs to deal with the attack traffic, which might consume a lot of bandwidth. Moreover, routers would have to create PIT entries for all interests since they cannot differentiate between interests requesting existing and non-existing content. If routers were capable of such differentiation, DoS attacks would be preventable closer to their sources.

One way of achieving this, is by allowing a producer to relay the list of all its published content names to routers. A producer can use these names to construct a Bloom filter [22] and disseminate it to routers processing interests for this producer. The dissemination of such filters depends on producer's policies. For instance, a producer can fall back on Bloom filters when its load of generating and signing cNACKs reaches a certain threshold.



(a) Variable filter size, number of elements in the set  $\mathbb{S}$ , and number of hash functions used.



(b) Variable filter size and number of elements in the set  $\mathbb{S}$ , and optimized number of hash functions used.

Fig. 7. Bloom filter false positive probability.

Bloom filters are created by producers periodically, or whenever new content objects are published. These filters can be implemented as content objects with a specific type, e.g., BLM-FLTR. Therefore, they will be cached by routers and used to satisfy pending interests, thus clearing corresponding PIT entries. The only difference is that Bloom filters, if cached, will not be used to satisfy future interests. Moreover, the caching duration of these filters depends on the `Freshness` value included in their headers. Producers need to carefully set this value to be compatible with the frequency at which new content is being published. For instance,

$$\text{Freshness} = \frac{1}{\text{avg}(f)|_{\tau}}, \quad (1)$$

where the denominator represents the average value of content publishing frequency over a specific period of time  $\tau$ .

Furthermore, the size of a Bloom filter depends on the number of elements (content names) loaded into it. Recall that large content objects can be divided into smaller segments, each having a unique name. We claim that the size of each Bloom filter should be upper bounded by the maximum size of a content segment. This avoids the case where a Bloom filter is split into multiple segments, thus requiring multiple interests to request the whole filter. Since producers disseminate Bloom filters as a reply to a single interest, they should fit in a single content segment.

On the other hand, Bloom filter's false positive probability (illustrated in Figure 7) depends on its size  $m$  (in bits), the number of elements  $n$  in the set  $\mathbb{S}$ , which are loaded into the filter<sup>8</sup>, and the number of used hash functions  $k$ . This false positive probability increases as  $n$  and  $k$  increase, and decreases as  $m$  increases. Assuming that the hash functions used  $(h_1, \dots, h_k)$  map each element of  $\mathbb{S}$  into a random value uniformly distributed over the range  $[1, \dots, m]$ , the false

positive probability can be expressed as in Equation 2 [23].

$$\begin{aligned} \Pr[\text{false positive}] &= \left(1 - \left(1 - \frac{1}{m}\right)^{kn}\right)^k \\ &\approx \left(1 - e^{-\frac{kn}{m}}\right)^k \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

Figure 7(a) illustrates the Bloom filter's false positive probability when varying  $m$ ,  $n$ , and  $k$ . However, for a given  $m$  and  $n$ , the number of hash functions  $k$  can be optimized. In this case, the false positive probability can be calculated using Equation 3 [23].

$$\Pr[\text{false positive}] = (0.6185)^{\frac{m}{n}} \quad (3)$$

In practice, producers can optimize the number of hash function in order to achieve lower false positive probability. However, an upper bound of  $k$  can be set to limit the hashing overhead required by routers. Figure 7(b) demonstrates the Bloom filter's false positive probability when varying  $m$  and  $n$ , and optimizing  $k$ .

Based on the plots in Figure 7, loading all published content names into a single Bloom filter (which size is upper bounded by the maximum size of a single content fragment), might not lead to a desired false positive probability. In this case, producers can create a separate Bloom filter for each namespace (or sub-namespace) they publish. Therefore, achieving the desired false positive probability might entail an upper bound on the number of content published under each namespace. It might also require redesigning the namespace hierarchy of producers implementing the aforementioned countermeasure. However, we will not discuss this optimization problem any further since we believe it is out of the scope of this paper. Moreover, the number of interests requesting non-existing content that forwarded to producers due to the probabilistic nature of Bloom filters, can be dramatically minimized with proper configuration of filters parameters.

<sup>8</sup>In this case,  $\mathbb{S}$  is the set of published content names.



Although Bloom filters are content objects that follow the same path, in reverse, of their corresponding interests, it is worth mentioning that they should not be delivered to consumers. The reason is because malicious consumers gain attack advantages when possessing these filters. For instance, Adv can pre-compute a list of content names that pass verification and use it to launch a distributed DoS attack against the target producer.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, such attacks can be circumvented if edge ISPs do not forward Bloom filters towards their customers, or filters are re-created periodically with different parameters.

## VII. RELATED WORK

In the current Internet, negative acknowledgments are proposed as a form of error notifications in error control methods. For instance, at transport layers, Automatic-Repeat-Request (ARQ) implements error control method in Go-Back-N and Selective Repeat [24]. In Go-Back-N, receivers detecting a packet loss send a NACK packet to the sender indicating the missing packet. In this case, the latter will restart the transmission from the lost packet. On the other hand, in Selective Repeat, receivers still use a NACK to notify a packet loss and the sender only resend that specific packet. Compared to Go-Back-N, Selective Repeat reduces the number of retransmissions.

In broadcast (one-to-many) communications, NACKs are preferred over ACKs to reduce network congestion and packets collision [25]. The reason is because using selective NACKs allows reducing the number of packets sent by receivers, hence reducing the probability of packet collision. However, NACK based mechanisms are prone to NACK implosion. In case of packet loss, the sender receives many NACKs from all receivers. Stran et al. [26] propose a time-based mechanism to reduce NACK implosion. Every receiver detecting a packet loss initiates a random timer. The receiver having the shortest random interval unicasts a NACK to the sender, which immediately multicasts the NACK to the other receivers. All other receivers having the same missing packet thereupon suppress their own NACKs. In [27], Yamamoto et al. demonstrate that the delay incurred by a NACK-suppression mechanism does not affect the performance of NACK multicast control flow.

In 802.11 networks, selective NACKs can be used for the RTS/CTS handshake mechanism in order to reduce network congestion and packets collision. The result is a considerable throughput improvement and delay reduction [28, 29]. In [30], NACKs at data-link layer are combined with NACKs at transport layer in order to improve video streaming performance over 3G cellular networks. In case of frame loss, a mobile device sends a selective data-link NACK to the base station. If the list frame has not been recovered after several successive NACKs, a transport-layer NACK is sent requesting resending the entire packet.

At transport layer, NACKs are used to provide reliable communications [31–34]. [31, 32] provide NACK-Oriented Reliable Multicast (NORM) Transport Protocol. NORM forms a reliable transport protocol between one or more senders to a group of receivers over an IP multicast network. In NORM, receivers use a selective NACK to notify senders

about packets loss. A similar approach is used in [33], where NACKs are used as a packet loss detection mechanism in satellite communication. In this case, a NACK is generated by sending a signal. Senders detect NACK by monitoring the total electrical power in the frequency band used for uplink from the receiver. This kind of NACK enables several receivers to share a low-speed uplink circuit simultaneously preventing NACKs collision. In [34], Obraczka surveys multicast transport protocols summarizing NACK-based protocols, ACK-based protocols and some other hybrid approaches.

## VIII. CONCLUSIONS

NDN and CCNx are two prominent ICN instances designed to address limitations of the current IP-based Internet. Network-layer NACKs are an important feature, adoption of which has been debated for both CCNx and NDN. As we showed in this paper, NACKs can be beneficial in mitigating the impact of Interest Flooding attacks. Despite their benefits, we also showed that NACKs have certain challenging security implications. We identified two types of NACKs (fNACKs and cNACKs) and explored their security requirements. We then discussed how secure cNACKs can trigger producer-focused flooding attacks and discussed some potential methods for mitigating these attacks.

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<sup>9</sup>We do not consider the case where malicious routers deliver Bloom filters to malicious consumers using side channels.

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