

Heuristic Algorithms for Server Allocation in Distributed VoIP Conferencing

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Abstract

To allocate Audio Conference Servers (CS) [1] for virtual conferencing over IP, we leverage Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) for signaling. We address here the problem of facilitating seamless conference amongst participants using CSs. This demands a proper allocation of CSs to clients to maximize the number of participants served and at a reduced cost. Seeking a more realistic approach, we avoid oversimplifying assumptions; hence the problem becomes relatively harder. We present three heuristic algorithms for these NP-hard problems and bring about the effectiveness of their performance.

Keywords: VoIP Conference, Conference Servers, SIP, Facility Location Problem, Heuristic Algorithms

1 Introduction

Traditional data differ from voice and video in aspects of delay-constraints and packet loss tolerance. Hence as time-sensitive voice and video applications are deployed on Internet Protocol (IP), the inadequacy of the Internet is exposed progressively. Virtual conference (teleconference) facility is at the cutting edge Internet Telephony. Audio and video conferencing on Internet have advantages and are popular. Clearly, most collaborative works demand audio conferencing more frequently than video interactions [2]. It makes sense to deal with audio conferencing first.

The bandwidth required for teleconference over the Internet increases rapidly with the number of participants. Audio “quality” in a conference includes facil-

itating interactivity, *i.e.*, allowing impromptu speech, and spatialism [3, 4]. The critical implementation issues are: 1.Packet delay; 2.Echo; 3.Customized mixing of audio from selected clients [3]; 4Automatic selection of clients to participate in the conference; 5.Playout of mixed audio for every client; 6.Handling clients not capable of mixing audio streams (such clients are known as “dumb clients”); 7.Deciding the number of simultaneously active clients in the conference without compromising voice quality.

As participants increase, intermediate servers must serve to control, maintain and support a conference. Many of the issues listed above are closely related to server location *vis-à-vis* clients and assignment of clients to servers.

The problem we tackle is set in the backdrop of Virtual Conferencing Environment (VCE). The architecture for VCE is shown in Fig. 1. We focus on large audio VCE with several hundreds of users across the Internet. Key issues here are: (1) the front-end consisting of the application running on the computers of end users; and (2) the back-end that provides other applications that facilitate conferencing and conference service.

The domains and entities in a VCE are not fixed a priori. We identify clients and CSs of domains. Once a client is assigned to a domain the control messages for conference setup and maintenance are between SIPS and in turn CSs. We focus on finding a configuration of domains around possible locations of CSs seeking ‘near optimality’. Optimality is governed by delay, connection cost, etc. (vide Section 2.1).

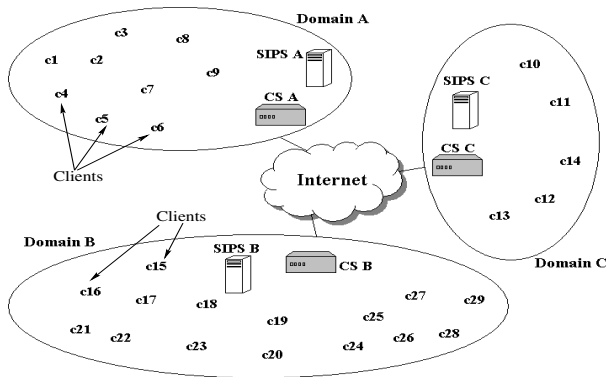


Figure 1: **VCE architecture showing domains, clients and servers**

1.1 Constraints

Necessary constraints for a conference are: (1) CSs locations are fixed; (2) CSs are software entities are enabled only when necessary; (3) Clients are assigned to a CS as and when conference service is requested; (4) A client is assigned to only one CS; and (5) Only one CS is opened at a location and if there is a need for another CS there, it is deemed to be another location with similar parameters with respect to the network.

Cost formulation and the problem definition comprise Section 2. Section 3 has three heuristic algorithms. Results are discussed in Section 4. We conclude in Section 5.

2 The Allocation Problem

Frequently asked questions and those addressed here are: (a) If a client is in a remote domain, say, a dial up link, how can that client be served? (b) Should a CS be always opened in a SIPS domain or can a client be assigned to a CS in another domain? (c) With several clients in a small network neighborhood, is it cost-effective to assign a new CS to that group?

Though a distributed conference system based on CS is scalable [4, 1, 5] it requires allocating CSs to clients. We consider choosing of CSs and CS group formation. Scalability depends on the number of CS domains. With more CS domains, communication cost between CSs goes as $O(\nu^2)$, with ν domains. The costs of client connecting to a CS and of CS opening

and maintaining are pertinent.

A conference is controlled by distributed SIPS [6], or by a centralized controller [4]. The servers can allocate CSs to clients at the start of a conference if the list of participants is known apriori. Else SIPS has to reallocate CSs. The options are: (1) Only the new client is allocated to that CS which reduces the cost; (2) The new client is allocated to a nearest CS and periodically, all clients are allocated afresh to CSs available. We propose the second approach to avoid frequent reallocations. In VoIP, the User Datagram Protocol (UDP) packets carrying voice are sent to the CS whose address is available with the client at allocation time. Addresses can be changed as UDP is not connection oriented.

This problem of allocation of clients to CSs, a Facility Location problem, is NP-hard [7], to which heuristics offer attractive solutions.

2.1 Cost

Two components of cost, viz., of connection between a client and a server, and of opening a CS, are pertinent here. They may be estimated by direct measurement on networks. This paper is focused on demonstrating the efficacy of our heuristic algorithms, we refrain from cost estimation here.

2.2 Problem Formulation

Let F_S be the set of m CSs and D_C , the set of n clients; locations of CSs and clients are known. Let the cost of connecting a client j to CS i be c_{ij} , d_j the demand from Client j , f_i the cost of opening CS i and l_i the upper bound on the units of computation by CS i .

$y_i = 1$, if CS i is opened, else 0. $x_{ij} = 1$ or 0, according as Client j is assigned to CS i or not. The minimization problem ($P_{\min}$) is formulated as an integer program as

$$\min : \sum_{i=1}^m f_i y_i + \sum_{i=1}^m \sum_{j=1}^n c_{ij} x_{ij} \quad (1)$$

subject to

$$\sum_{j=1}^n d_j x_{ij} \leq l_i, \quad (2)$$

$$\begin{aligned}
x_{ij} &\leq y_i, & (3) \\
\sum_{i=1}^m x_{ij} &= 1, & (4) \\
x_{ij} \in \{0, 1\} \quad \text{and} \quad y_i &\in \{0, 1\} & (5)
\end{aligned}$$

Constraint 2 limits the number of clients connected to a CS depending on its limit. Constraint 3 ensures that if there is an assignment of a client to a CS then that CS must have been running. Constraint 4 ensures each Client j is assigned to a CS i , $i \in F_S$ and $j \in D_C$. Constraints 5 are part of integer programming. Another constraint that a client is allocated to only one CS is captured in the above constraints and hence not mentioned explicitly.

3 Solution by heuristics

Two operations are involved here: (a) assigning clients to CSs with less cost; and (b) opening least number of CSs so that there is saving in supporting the conference service. When demands are splittable, *i.e.*, they can be met by more than one server, solutions by transshipment algorithms are suggested. In case of splittable demands, solution by approximation algorithms exist [8, 9, 10, 11].

In this problem of allocating CSs, there are instances in which a solution may not exist. A case in point is when the total capacity of CSs is less than the total demand by clients. In these cases heuristic algorithms definitely fail. Heuristic algorithms try to find a near optimal solution, if there exists one.

3.1 Algorithms: Phase-I

The algorithm suggested here is divided into two phases. The first one is the assignment phase. Here the clients are assigned to CSs in set $F_S^G \subseteq F_S$. CSs only in F_S^G are considered; the algorithm considers CSs outside this set as nonexistent. In the second phase, the number of CSs is minimised by closing some of them and clients previously assigned to the recently closed CSs are reallocated to other CSs. Algorithms of the first phase are given below.

Algorithm 3.1 Assignment Phase: Assignment of clients to given set of CSs (F_S^G)
Sort c_{ij} in list $L(k)$ in increasing

order $k = \{1, 2, \dots, mn\}$. Consider assignment of clients to a CS as $A_C[\cdot]$, a row vector that holds the CS identity i for each Client j .
 $A_C[j]$ is zero vector to start with.

$k = 1$. REPEAT

{

Step 1: Assign the Client j to CS i if

- For CS i , $l_i \geq d_j$, and
- Client j is not already assigned;

Step 2: $l_i = l_i - d_j$, if Client j is assigned to CS i . Update $A_C[j] = i$ and $x_{ij} = 1$.

Step 3: Stop if all clients are assigned; Return $\sum_{i,j} c_{ij}x_{ij}$ and $A_C[j]$. Break;

Step 4: Return 'Infeasible' if any client is not assigned when $k = mn$.

Step 5: $k = k + 1$

}

The complexity of this algorithm is $O(m^2n^2)$. The advantage of this algorithm is that it is very easy to implement. The next algorithm is an intelligent assignment solution.

Algorithm 3.2 Assignment Phase: Assignment of clients to given set of CSs (F_S^G)
 $A_C[j]$ is zero vector to start with.

Step 1: Find $b(j) = \min_i \{c_{ij}\}$ for each j .
That is, finding the CS $i \in F_S^G$ that results in minimum cost of assignment to Client j .

Step 2: Update $A_C[j] = i$ by assigning Client j to CS i found above and set $x_{ij} = 1$.

Step 3: Find $F_S^{(OL)} \subseteq F_S^G$, that are overloaded taking into account $A_C[j]$ and l_i . If no CS is overloaded, goto Step 7.

Step 4: Find difference matrix $[a_{ij}]$ where $a_{ij} = c_{ij} - b(j)$, $i \in F_S^G$.
Mark 'X' in $[a_{ij}]$ if Client j is allocated to CS i in Step 2.

Step 5: For each CS $r \in F_S^{(OL)}$, for clients $s \in D_C^{(r)}$, i.e., clients assigned to the CS r , find new CS-client pair (p, q) corresponding to $\text{argmin}_{(i,s)} \{a_{is}\}$, $s \in D_C^{(r)}$, $i \in F_S^G$ and $i \notin F_S^{(OL)}$ and CS p is able to serve this new client without overloading itself (a_{ij} 's marked with 'X' are not to be considered)

Step 6: If a new CS is not found in Step 5, Return 'Infeasible'. Else, assign Client q to CS p , i.e., $A_C(q) = p$ and $x_{pq} = 1$. Subtract the load d_q from CS r . Update $A_C[j]$ and $F_S^{(OL)}$ taking into account this change. Mark a_{rq} , the previous position of Client q , with 'X'. Repeat Step 5 till $F_S^{(OL)} = \{\}$.

Step 7: Return $A_C[j]$ and cost of assignment $\sum_{i,j} c_{ij}x_{ij}$.

Unlike Algorithm 3.1, Algorithm 3.2 does an intelligent CS selection. It can be found that the worst case complexity of this algorithm is $O(mn^2)$.

Algorithm 3.3 Assignment Phase: Assignment of clients to CSs in (F_S^G)

Algorithm 3.3 is a minor variant of Algorithm 3.2. It is blind to overloading of CS in Step 5. Eventually an overloaded CS transfers its client to another CS such that transfer incurs minimal extra cost. Since a client can move to all the m servers in worst case this algorithm has worst case complexity of $O(m^2n^2)$.

Remark: The relative merits of the algorithms here is problem-dependent. The strategy is to invoke all the algorithms and carry forward the best at each iteration. We can also find the solution with each first phase algorithm – without mixing them together in the iterations – individually. The solution can be compared later to select the best one. We have selected the former.

3.2 Algorithm: Phase-II

Here we try to close CSs one by one using the cost function

$$T_i = \frac{f_i}{l_i} - \sum_i \sum_j I_C(j)c_{ij} \quad (6)$$

The first term in the RHS of Eq. (6) pertains to the cost of operating for unit capacity of the server. Later we close the Server- L corresponding to highest T_L .

The best of Phase-I and Phase-II algorithms is used in the comprehensive Algorithm 3.4 below.

Algorithm 3.4 Allocation Phase: A heuristic solution to the problem (P_{min})

Let $F_S^{(O)}(i)$ be a vector that represents whether a CS is open. It is found using client assignment vector $A_C[j]$.

$$F_S^{(O)}(i) = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if CS } i \text{ is serving any client} \\ 0 & \text{Otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Total cost SOLN of any assignment is found using

$$SOLN = \sum_i F_S^{(O)}(i)f_i + \sum_{\forall i,j} I_C(j)c_{ij} \quad (7)$$

$$\text{where } I_C(j) = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if Client } j \text{ is served by CS } i \\ 0 & \text{Otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Note: The second sum is nothing but $\sum_{i,j} x_{ij}c_{ij}$

Step 1: Initialise $A_C[j]$ and $F_S^{(O)}(i) \forall i, j$ to zero, $F_S^G = F_S$ and a set $Z = \{\}$.

Step 2: Find $A_C[j]$, $F_S^{(O)}(i)$ corresponding to a minimum SOLN, after using the three Algorithms 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 of first phase.

Step 3: Find T_i , $i \in F_S$, as defined below and arrange in descending order.

$$T_i = \frac{f_i}{l_i} - \sum_i \sum_j I_C(j)c_{ij}$$

Step 4: For $k = 0$

Do {

Temporarily close CS u that corresponds to the highest T_i , $u \notin Z$

(a) Find the best iSOLN using Equation 7 (Here iSOLN means

intermediate solution) out of three
returned assignments $A_C[j]$'s of three
first phase algorithms with $\{F_S^G - \{u\}\}$
as CSs open for assignment.
If ($iSOLN < SOLN$) then
permanently close CS u and $F_S^G = F_S^G - \{u\}$; $SOLN = iSOLN$;
Recalculate T_i as above with the
CS u closed and arrange in de-
scending order; Else, $Z = Z \cup \{u\}$;
(b) $k = k + 1$; } Repeat till
 $k = m$;

Step 5: $A_C[j]$ of $SOLN$ corresponds to the
best assignment found by this algo-
rithm. The total cost is $SOLN$.

For example if we use all three Phase-I algorithms,
and taking best allocation returned by them, the re-
sulting complexity is $O(m^3n^2)$.

4 Results and Discussions

LP formulation, hard but not NP, provides best solu-
tion relaxing the constraints. It is interesting to see
how Algorithm 3.4 fares for some test samples.

We generated the test cases randomly. The cost
 $c_{ij} \in [1, 1000]$ is generated arbitrarily. So also,
 $d_j \in [1, 5]$ and $f_i \in [1, 1000]$ are chosen. l_i are
changed across test samples as per Table 1 (shown
here a sample of many test cases). As higher densi-
ties of clients can be seen in geographical proximities,
and each client may be billed differently, we refrain
from the use of triangular inequality on the physical
distance between CS and a client even though it may
reduce the complexity of the problem. In such cases
our algorithm converges faster than those with ran-
dom inputs

Table 1 is meant to give an overall picture for dif-
ferent test scenarios. It shows the ratio of perfor-
mance of LP to that of Algorithm 3.4. Algorithm 3.4
achieves results very close to the optimum solution
compared to using Algorithm 3.1 alone in assignment
(first) phase. The heuristic may not give a solution,
though one exists. Yet heuristic algorithms serve as a
good starting point to group clients. Moreover, with
many heuristics the possibility of finding a solution,

when one exists, is enhanced.

Now we shall get back to the question of how these
algorithms are used in our allocation of CSs. We sug-
gest that these algorithms be implemented on SIPS
in each domain. Once they receive information about
a new client added to the conference, the algorithm is
invoked. This requires information regarding the new
column in $[c_{ij}]$ and the demand from the new client.
Since, this information can be exchanged across SIPS
while supporting the conference [5] unique alloca-
tion can be found at every SIPS. If the conference
is booked earlier this algorithm can be used only in
the beginning.

The allocation found using the above heuristics
should answer the questions raised in Section 2. Like-
lihood of success of allocation can also be increased
by some pragmatic assumptions. For example, in case
of an isolated client, the nearest CS can serve it and
multiple streams from CS to client can be mixed at
that CS to reduce the bandwidth. There are some
open issues here. One such issue concerns the method
of implementing this algorithm in the proposed dis-
tributed conference setup [6, 5].

5 Conclusions

The problem considered here is a hard problem and
not attempted in literature without relaxing some of
the constraints. The heuristic algorithms presented
here address problems involving (i) assignment of
clients to CSs that do not have unit demands and
hence not solvable using transportation problem; and
(ii) reducing the total cost by opening an 'optimum'
number of CSs. Their performance is comparable to
LP solution, thus they are nearer to the optimal solu-
tion given by IP. They can be easily deployed. They
are portable to the generic class of Facility Location
problems as well as a host of End System Multicast or
Overlay Network applications. Custom tuning these
algorithms for online applications – when participants
join and leave conference at will similar to the case of
participants in a real conference hall – is one of the
next logical steps.

Table 1: Comparison of Heuristic Algorithms with LP solution

Number of CSs	Number of Clients	Range of l_i	LP Solution	Heuristic Algorithm 3.4 with Phase-I Algorithm(s)			Ratio of Heuristic to LP
				3.1	best of (3.1 & 3.2)	best of (3.1, 3.2 & 3.3)	
10	50	1-50	9707	10309	10309	10309	1.062
10	100	1-50	13000.4	13207	13037	13037	1.003
10	150	1-150	20439.6	22620	21155	21015	1.028
10	500	1-500	53541.5	57047	53876	53852	1.005
10	1000	1-1000	99698	102049	99951	99951	1.003
10	1000	1-800	100376	112422	101813	101734	1.014
10	1000	1-1000	105684	127217	111214	111420	1.052
10	1200	1-1000	174134	179141	174443	174443	1.002
12	1000	1-1000	93761.8	102985	94732	94732	1.011

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