A QoS-Based Framework for Distributed Content Adaptation

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Abstract.
The tremendous growth of the Internet has introduced a number of interoperability problems for distributed multimedia applications. These problems are related to the heterogeneity of client devices, network connectivity, content formats, and user's preferences. The purpose of this paper is to present an infrastructure for trans-coding multimedia streams. The infrastructure takes into consideration the profile of communicating devices, network connectivity, exchanged content format, context description, and available adaptation services to find a chain of adaptation services that could be applied to the content. Part of the infrastructure is a QoS-based selection algorithm that finds the best sequence of adaptation services that can maximize the user's satisfaction with the delivered content.

1. Introduction

Diversity and heterogeneity of Internet clients is a trend that is here to stay. Clients range from a small single-task audio player to a complex, multi-task, multi-function desktop computer. The diversity of clients varies along different axes including display capabilities, storage space, processing power, as well as the forms of network connectivity that these clients use to access the Internet. In addition to heterogeneity in terminal capabilities and network connectivity, there is also the heterogeneity in data formats they can consume and produce, installed applications and services, and personal preferences of their users.

On the other hand, vast amount of multimedia content already exists on the Internet. Most of this content is produced and formatted for the PC users, and cannot be rendered directly on all types of client devices. Yahoo [1] and e-bay [2] have taken recently the costly approach of creating different versions of content for different access devices.

Content adaptation is considered an effective and attractive solution to the problem of mismatch in content format, device capability and user's preferences. The process of adaptation, also refereed to as trans-coding, is usually applied to the sender's content in order to satisfy the device constrains and the preferences of the receiver. Possible trans-codings include, but are not limited to: text summarization, format change, reduction of image quality, removal of redundant information, audio to text conversion, video to key frame or video to text conversion, content extraction to list a few.

Most currently available content adaptation schemes are best suitable for Web content. Examples of such adaptations schemes include conversion of HTML pages to WML (Wireless Markup Language) pages, conversion of *jpeg* images to black and white *gif* images, conversion of HTML tables to plain text, or stripping of Java applets / JavaScript. These adaptation schemes do not have the same requirements and challenges of real-time multimedia content adaptations, which involve large volumes of data making trans-coding a computationally very expensive task [3,4]. To solve this problem, some trans-coders have been implemented in hardware and can be deployed on intermediate nodes or proxies [5]. This approach cannot keep the pace with the constant and quick introduction of new types of clients, and requires investments in specialized hardware devices. Another more suitable approach to address the computational challenge of multimedia trans-coding is based on the observation that the general trans-coding process can be defined as combinatorial [6], and that multiple trans-coders can be chained effectively together to perform a complex trans-coding task. So, instead of having all trans-coding done by one single trans-coder, a number of trans-coders can collaborate to achieve a composite adaptation task. For instance, trans-coding a 256-color depth *jpeg* image to a 2-color depth *gif* image can be carried out in two stages: the first stage covers converting 256-color to 2-color depth, and the second step converts *jpeg* format to *gif* format.

Given a composite adaptation task that can be carried out in a number of stages, and given that there could be a number of possible configurations to adapt the sender's content to make it presentable at the receiver's device, the challenge is to find the best configuration of these trans-coders that best fits the requirements of the device, and at the same time, maximizes the user's satisfaction with the final delivered content. In this paper, we will discuss a Quality of Service (QoS) selection algorithm for providing personalized content. The function of the algorithm is to find the most appropriate path of trans-coders between the sender and the receiver, and also to select the configuration for each trans-coder. The algorithm uses the user's satisfaction with the trans-coded content as the optimization metric for the path selection. Our approach is inspired by the work of Mao *et. al* [7], in the way we construct a chain of trans-coders to match the capabilities of the sender and receiver. Our approach is different though in the way we select the sequence of trans-coders. While Mao *et. el.* used network based characteristics such as data throughput, jitter, or delay to select the trans-coders, our approach is more of a user centric which uses the user's satisfaction as the only selection criterion. This approach is based on the observation [8,9,10,11,12] that different transport level QoS may generate similar user satisfaction, and that it is best to select a trans-coding path based on the end result, which is the user's satisfaction, and not based on single, independent, low-level factors such as delay, bandwidth, or throughput.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: In Section 2, we will content adaptation as a solution for interoperability, and the different approaches used in content adaptation. Section 3 lists all the required elements for providing customized content adaptation. In Section 4, we present our methodology for using the required element from Section 3 to construct a graph of trans-coders; the algorithm for selecting the chain of trans-coders is then presented. The selection criterion for the algorithm is also introduced in Section 4, and finally, end Section 4 with an example that shows step-by-step the results of the algorithm. Our conclusion is presented in Section 5.

2. Content Adaptation

In today's Internet, there is a wide range of client devices in terms of both hardware and software capabilities. Device capabilities vary in different dimensions, including processing power, storage space, display resolution and color depth, media type handling, and much more. This variety on device capabilities makes it extremely difficult for the content providers to produce a content that is acceptable and appreciated by all the client devices [13], making application-level adaptation a necessity to cover the wide population of clients.

There are two main approaches for handling this diversity in content formats: static content adaptation and dynamic content adaptation, with a number of hybrids combining both approaches [14,15]. These two approaches differ in the time when the different content variants are created [16] to match the requested format. In static adaptation, the content creator generates and stores different variants of the same content on a content server, with each variant formatted for a certain device or class of devices. Hafid *et. al.* [17] presented an architecture for news-on-demand using this scheme. Static adaptation has three main advantages: (1) it is highly customized to specific classes of client devices, and (2) it does not require any runtime processing, so no delay is incurred, and (3) the content creator has the full control on how the content is formatted and delivered to the client. On the other hand, static adaptation has a number of disadvantages, mainly related to the management and maintenance of different variants of the same content [14]: (1) different content formats need to be created for each sort of device or class of devices, and needs to be re-done when new devices are introduced, and (2) it requires large storage space to keep all variants of the same content.

With dynamic content adaptation, the content is trans-coded from one format to the other only when it is requested. Depending on the location where the trans-coding takes place, dynamic content adaptation technologies can be classified into three categories: server-based, client-based, and proxy-based. In the server-based approach [18], the content server is responsible for performing the trans-coding; the content provider has all the control on how the content is trans-coded and presented to the user. Additionally, it allows the content to be trans-coded before it is encrypted, making it secure against malicious attacks. On the other hand, server-based adaptation does not scale properly for a large number of users and requires high-end content and delivery server to handle all requests.

As for the client-based approach [19,20], the client does the trans-coding when it receives the content. The advantage of this approach is that the content can be adapted to match exactly to the characteristics of the client. But at the same time, client-based adaptation can be highly expensive in terms of bandwidth and computation power, especially for small devices with small computational power and slow network connectivity, with large volume of data might be wastefully delivered to the device to be dropped during trans-coding.

The third adaptation approach is the proxy-based approach [3,21,22,23], where an intermediary computational entity can carry out content adaptation on the fly, on behalf of the server or client. Proxy adaptation has a number of benefits including leveraging the installed infrastructure and scaling properly with the number of clients. It also provides a clear separation between content creation and content adaptation. On the other hand, some content provider may argue that they prefer to control themselves how their content is presented to the user. Also, using proxies for adaptation does not allow the use of end-to-end security solutions.

3. Required Elements for Content Adaptation

Advances in computing technology have led to a wide variety of computing devices, and made interoperability very difficult. Added to this problem is the diversity of user preferences when it comes to multimedia communications. This diversity in devices and user preferences has made content personalization an important requirement in order to achieve results that satisfy the user. Generally speaking, the flexibility of any system to provide content personalization depends mainly on the amount of information available on a number of aspects involved in the delivery of the content to the user. The more information about these aspects is made available to the system, the more the content can be delivered in a format that is highly satisfactory to the user. These relevant aspects are: user preferences, media content profile, network profile, context profile, device profile, and the profile of intermediaries (or proxies) along the path of data delivery. We will briefly describe each of these aspects; interested readers might refer to [24] for more details.

User Profile: The user's profile captures the personal properties and preferences of the user, such as the preferred audio and video receiving/sending qualities (frame rate, resolution, audio quality…). Other preferences can also be related to the quality of each media types for communication with a particular person or group of persons. For instance, a customer service representative should be able to specify in his profile the preference to use high-resolution video and CD audio quality when talking to a client, and to use telephony quality audio and low-resolution video when communicating with a colleague at work. The user's profile may also hold the user's policies for application adaptations, such as the preference of the user to drop the audio quality of a sport-clip before degrading the video quality when resources are limited. Some other information in the user profile might include also the user's authorization, authentication and accounting information.

One of the most notable work on user profiles is the MPEG-21 standard [25], which describes attributes of the end user of multimedia content, including besides name and contact information, also content preferences, presentation preferences, accessibility and mobility preferences. These preferences are used for instance to provide effective and efficient access (search, filtering and browsing) to multimedia content.

Content Profile: Multimedia content might enclose different media types, such as audio, video, text, and each type can have different formats [16]. Each type and format has a number of characteristics and parameters that can be used to describe the media. Such information, referred to as meta-data information, is usually included in the content profile. Some of this meta-data about the content may include:

- Information about the storage features of the content, such as the type of media (video, audio, etc), the transport protocol (RTP/UDP/IP, H.320, etc), and the format (H.261 video, MPEG video, etc).
- Information about available variants of the content, such as colored-and-black and white variants,
- Information about the author and production of the content, such as the title, and date of creation.

- Information related to the usage of the content, such as copyright, application adaptations, and usage history.

The MPEG-7 standard [26], formally named “Multimedia Content Description Interface”, offers a comprehensive set of standardized description tools to describe multimedia content. These tools allow for a complete description of what is depicted in the content, the form (coding format and size), the condition for accessing the material, the classification, the context and the links to other relevant material. MPEG-7 provides also tools for describing variations of the content such as summaries and abstracts; scaled, compressed and low-resolution versions; and versions with different languages and modalities – audio, video, image, text, and so forth. Using the content profile, a content adaptation system can decide what type of adaptations can be applied to the content.

Context Profile: The notion of context and its implications has been a research topic for a number of research groups [27,28,29] and is still attracting more interest. According to [30] and [31], the context can be generally defined as: “any information that can be used to characterize the situation of an entity. An entity is a person, place or object that is considered relevant to the interaction between a user and an application, including the user and the application themselves.” Based on this definition, a context profile would include any dynamic information that is part of the context or current status of the user. Context information may include the physical (e.g. location, weather, temperature), social (e.g. sitting for dinner), or organizational information (e.g. acting senior manager). Some context information, such as the role or task of the user, can be manually keyed in by the user, while other information, such as location, time of the day, weather condition, can be easily gathered using sensing devices. Some other information, such as the current status of the user, can be gathered from other sources such as the calendar of the user or from a meeting attendees list. The MPEG 21 standard includes tools for describing the natural environment characteristics of the user, including location and time, as well as the audio and illumination characteristics of the user’s environment. Resource adaptation engines can use these elements to deliver the best experience to the user.

Device Profile: To ensure that a requested content is properly rendered on the user’s device, it is essential to include the capabilities and characteristics of the device into the content personalization process. Information about the rendering device may include the hardware characteristics of the device, such as the device type, processor speed, processor load, screen resolution, color depth, available memory, number of speakers, the display size, the input and output capabilities. The software characteristics such as the operating system (vendor and version), audio and video codecs supported by the device should also be included in the device profile. The User Agent Profile (UAProf) created by the WAP Forum [32] and the MPEG 21 standard [25], both include description tools for describing device capabilities.

Network Profile: Streaming multimedia content over a network poses a number of technical challenges due to the strict QoS requirements of multimedia contents, such as low delay, low jitter, and high throughput [33]. Failing to meet these requirements may lead to a bad experience of the user [34,35]. With a large variety of wired and wireless network connectivity, it is necessary to include the network characteristics into content personalization and to dynamically adapt the multimedia content to the fluctuating network resources [36]. Achieving this requires collecting information about the available resources in the network, such as the maximum delay, error rate, and available throughput on every link over the content delivery path. A description tool for network capabilities, including utilization, delay and error characteristics are included in the MPEG 21 standard.

Profile of Intermediaries: When the content is delivered to the user across the network, it usually travels over a number of intermediaries. These intermediaries have been traditionally used to apply some added-value services, including on-the-fly content adaptations services [21,22,23]. Using intermediaries for applying adaptations alleviates the problem of clients with limited-resources [37] and overloaded servers [18].

For the purpose of content adaptation, the profile of an intermediary would usually include a description of all the adaptation services that an intermediary can provide. These services can be described using any service description language such as JINI [38], SLP [39], or WSDL [40]. The description of an adaptation service would include, for instance, the possible input and output format to the service, the required processing and computation power of the service, and even the cost for using the service. The profile would also include information about the available resources at the intermediary (such as CPU cycles, memory) to carry out the services. Note that the available bandwidth through an intermediary can also be included in the intermediary profile, but for clarity reasons, we have decided to include it in the network profile.

4. QoS Selection Algorithm

In this section, we will describe the overall QoS selection algorithm that finds the most appropriate path of trans-coders between the sender and the receiver, and also selects the configuration for each trans-coder. We will first start by defining the user's satisfaction as the selection criterion for the algorithm, and then we will show how to construct the directed graph for adaptation, using the sender's content profile, receiver's device profile, and the list of available trans-coders. After constructing the graph, we will show how to apply some optimization techniques on the graph to remove the extra edges in the graph, and finally present the actual QoS path and parameter selection algorithm.

4.1 User's Satisfaction as Selection Criteria

Most Internet users do not care much about the underlying technologies such as protocols, codecs, or resource reservation mechanisms that enable their communication session. They also do not care about network level QoS characteristics, such as bandwidth, delay, or throughput. All what they care about in the end, is making the connection work in a satisfactory way: for instance, hearing without jitter and seeing without irregularity.

As we mentioned earlier, the user's preferences expressed in the user's profile can be, earlier, classified as application layer QoS parameters. In order to compute the user's satisfaction for all values of the application layer configuration parameters, we have used the approach presented in [41] by Richards *et. al.*, where each application level QoS parameter is represented by a variable x_i over the set of all possible values for that QoS parameter. The satisfaction or appreciation of a user with each quality value is expressed as a satisfaction function $S_i(x_i)$. All satisfaction functions have a range of [0..1], which corresponds to the minimum acceptable (M) and ideal (I) value of x_i. Generally speaking, the satisfaction function $S_i(x_i)$ can take any shape, with the condition that it must increase monotonically over the domain. Figure 1 shows a possible satisfaction function for the frame rate variable.

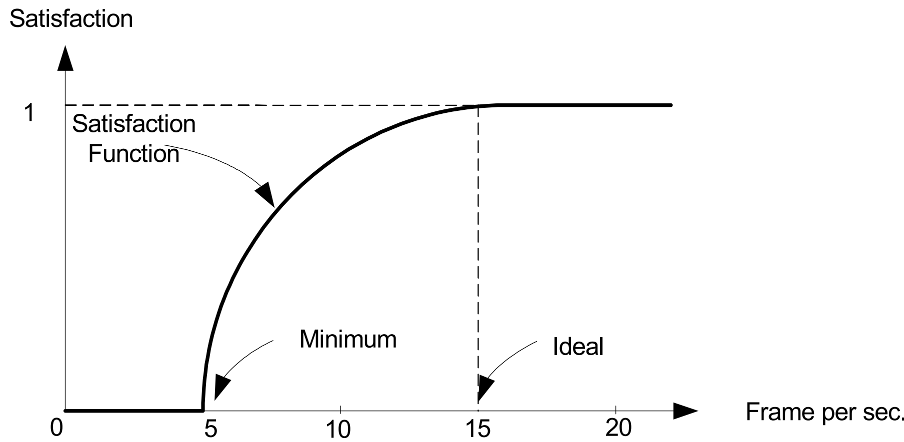

Figure 1. Possible satisfaction function for the frame rate.

In the case when there are more then one application parameter (frame rate, resolution, color depth, audio quality,…), Richards *et. al.* proposed using a combination function f_{comb} that determines the total satisfaction S_{tot} from the satisfactions s_i for the individual parameters as follows:

$$S_{tot} = f_{comb}(s_1, s_2, s_3 \ldots, s_n) = \frac{n}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} \frac{1}{s_i}} \qquad \text{(Equa. 1)}$$

The function f_{comb} has two important properties:

- One individual low satisfaction is enough to bring the total satisfaction to a low value.
- The total satisfaction of equal individual satisfactions s_i is equal to the satisfactions s_i.

We note also that f_{comb} is a many to one mapping function, and hence different combinations of individual satisfaction values are possible for one value of S_{tot}. To find out what is the best possible combination of individual satisfaction functions, another selection criterion is needed. The most reasonable selection criterion is the charging cost. Providing a tariff structure which determines the cost for the different values x_i of the individual application parameters, one can devise an optimization strategy for finding application parameter values that minimize the cost for a given global satisfaction S_{tot}, or maximize the satisfaction S_{tot} for a given cost value.

4.2 Constructing Directed Graph

Now that we have decided on the selection criteria, the first step of the QoS selection algorithm would be to construct a directed acyclic graph for adaptation, using the content profile, device profile, and the list of available trans-coders. Using this graph, the route selection algorithm would then determine the best path through the graph, from the sender to the receiver, which maximizes the user's satisfaction with the final received adapted content. The elements of the directed graph are the following:

1. Vertices in the graph represent intermediate trans-coders. Each vertex of the graph has a number of properties, including the computation and memory requirements of the corresponding trans-coder. Each vertex has a number of input and output links. The input links to the vertex represent the possible input formats to the trans-coder. The output links are the output formats of the trans-coder. Figure 2 shows a trans-coder T1, with two input formats, F5 and F6, and four possible output formats, F10, F11, F12 and F13. The sender node is a special case vertex, with only output links, while the receiver node is another special vertex with only input links.
   To find the input and output links of each vertex, we rely on the information in different profiles. The output links of the sender are defined in the content profile, which include as we mentioned earlier, meta-data information (including type and format) of all the possible variants of the content. Each output links of the sender vertex corresponds to one variant with a certain format. The input links of the receiver are exactly the possible decoders available at the receiver's device. This information is available through the description of the receiver's device in the device profile. The input and output links of intermediate vertices are described in the intermediaries profile. Each intermediary profile includes the list of available trans-coders, each with the list of possible input and output formats. Each possible input format is represented as an input link into the vertex, and the output format is represented as an output link.

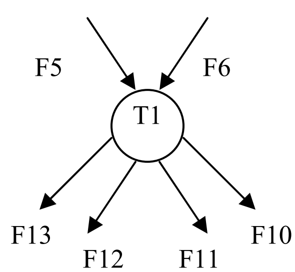

Figure 2. Trans-coder with multiple input and output links

2. Edges in the graph represent the network connecting two vertices, where the input link of one vertex matches the output link of another vertex. To construct the adaptation graph, we start with the sender node, and then connect the outgoing edges

of the sender with all the input edges of all other vertices that have the same format. The same process is repeated for all vertices. To make sure that the graph is acyclic, the algorithm continuously verifies that all the formats along any path from the sender are distinct.

Figure 3 shows an example of a one adaptation graph, constructed with one sender, one receiver, and six intermediate vertices, each representing a trans-coder. As we can see from the graph, the sender node is connected to the trans-coder T1 along the edge labeled F5. This means that the sender S can deliver the content in format F5, and trans-coder T1 can convert this format into format F10, F11, F12, or F13.

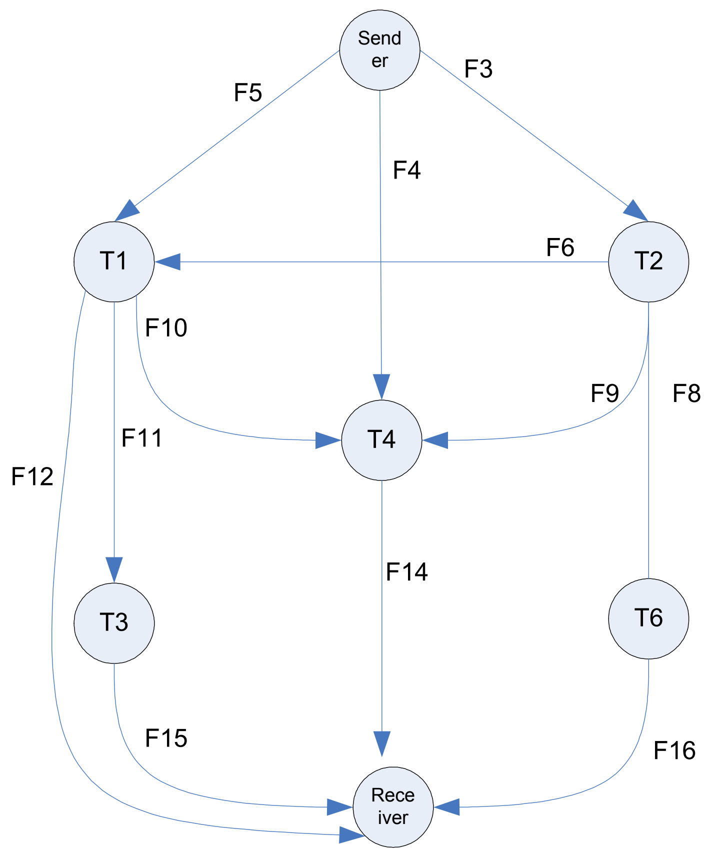

Figure 3. Directed Trans-coding graph

4.3 Adding Constraints to the Graph

As we have discussed earlier, the optimization criterion we have selected for the QoS selection algorithm is the user's satisfaction computed using the function f_{comb} presented in 4.1. The maximum satisfaction achieved by using a trans-coder T_i depends actually on a number of factors.

The first factor is the bandwidth available for the data generated by the trans-coder T_i. The more bandwidth is available to the trans-coder, the more likely the trans-coder will be able to generate trans-coded content that is more appreciated by the receiver. The available bandwidth between two trans-coders is restricted by the amount of bandwidth available between the intermediate servers where the trans-coder T_i is running and the intermediate server where the next trans-coder or receiver is running. We can assume that connected trans-coders that run on the same intermediate server have an unlimited amount of bandwidth between them.

Other factors that can affect the user's satisfaction are the required amount of memory and computing power to carry out the trans-coding operation. Each of these two factors is a function of the amount of input data to the trans-coder.

4.4 Route Selection Algorithm

Once the directed acyclic adaptation graph has been constructed, the next step is to perform the QoS selection algorithm to find a chain of trans-coders, starting from the sender node and ending with the receiver node, which generates the maximum satisfaction of the receiver. Finding such as path can be similar to the problem of finding the shortest path in a directed weighted graph, except that the optimization criterion is the user's satisfaction, and not the available bandwidth or the number of hops.

The algorithm uses two sets of trans-coders, the set of already considered trans-coders, called VT, and the set of candidate trans-coders, called CS, which can be added next on the partially selected path. The candidate trans-coders set contains the trans-coders that have input edges coming from any trans-coder in the set VT. At the beginning of the algorithm, the set VT contains only the *Sender* node, and CS contains all the other trans-coders in the graph that are connected to *Sender*, and the *Receiver* also. At each step of the protocol, the satisfaction of the user is evaluated for adding each of the trans-coders in the CS set, and the trans-coder T_i that generates the highest satisfaction is selected and added to VT. The CS set is then updated with all the neighbor trans-coders of T_i. The algorithm stops when the CS set is empty, or when the *Receiver* node is selected to be added to VT. The complete description of the algorithm is given below:

Step 1: Let VT = {*Sender*} be the set of all considered trans-coders. Let CS be the set of all downstream neighbors of *Sender*.
Step 2: If CS is empty, then **TERMINATE**(FAILURE)
Step 3: Compute the perceived user's satisfaction for all the trans-coders in CS.
Step 4: Select the trans-coder T_i that has the highest satisfaction value.
Step 5: If the selected trans-coder T_i is the *Receiver* node, then **GOTO** Step 8.
Step 6: Add to CS all the trans-coders to which T_i is directly connected.
Step 7: **GOTO** Step 2
Step 8: Print path from the *Sender* to T_i

When the algorithm terminates, the algorithm would have computed the best path of trans-coders from the *Sender* to the *Receiver*. The user's satisfaction value computed on the last edge to the receiver node is the maximum value the user can achieve.

4.5 Example

In this section, we will present an example to show how the algorithm works. We will assume that the graph construction part of the algorithm has generated the graph shown in Figure 4. The graph shows also the selected path with and without trans-coder T_7 as part of the graph. The selected trans-coder, user satisfaction, as well as the best current path produced by the algorithm are also shown in Table 1. Each row shows the results for one iteration of the algorithm.

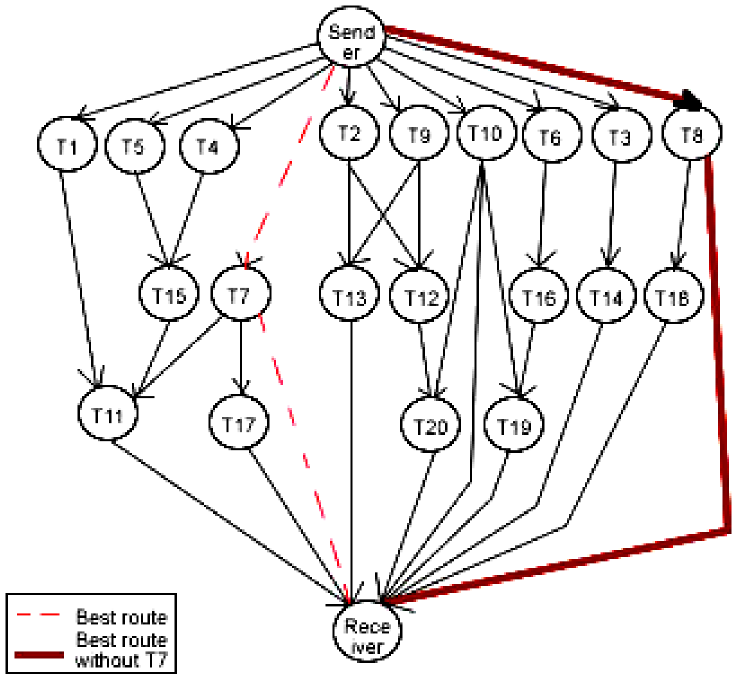

Figure 4. Example of trans-coding graph

Table 1. Results for each step of the path selection algorithm

Round	Considered Set (VT)	Candidate set (CS)	Selected trans-coder	Selected Path	User satisfaction
1	{Sender}	{T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T9, T10}	T10	Sender,T10	1.00
2	{Sender, T10}	{T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T9, T19, T20, Receiver}	T20	Sender,T10,T20	1.00
3	{Sender, T10, T20}	{T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T9, T19, Receiver}	T5	Sender,T5	0.90
4	{Sender, T10, T20, T5}	{T1, T2, T3, T4, T6, T7, T8, T9, T19, T15, Receiver}	T4	Sender,T4	0.90
5	{Sender, T10, T20, T5, T4}	{T1, T2, T3, T6, T7, T8, T9, T19, T15, Receiver}	T3	Sender,T3	0.76
6	{Sender, T10, T20, T5, T4, T3}	{T1, T2, T6, T7, T8, T9, T19, T15, T14, Receiver}	T2	Sender,T2	0.76
7	{Sender, T10, T20, T5, T4, T3, T2}	{T1, T6, T7, T8, T9, T19, T15, T14, T12, T13, Receiver}	T1	Sender,T1	0.76
8	{Sender, T10, T20, T5, T4, T3, T2, T1}	{T6, T7, T8, T9, T19, T15, T14, T12, T13, T11, Receiver}	T11	Sender,T1, T11	0.76
9	{Sender, T10, T20, T5, T4, T3, T2, T1, T11}	{T6, T7, T8, T9, T19, T15, T14, T12, T13, Receiver}	T13	Sender,T2, T13	0.76
10	{Sender, T10, T20, T5, T4, T3, T2, T1, T11, T13}	{T6, T7, T8, T9, T19, T15, T14, T12, Receiver}	T12	Sender,T2, T12	0.76
11	{Sender, T10, T20, T5, T4, T3, T2, T1, T11, T13, T12}	{T6, T7, T8, T9, T19, T15, T14, Receiver}	T14	Sender,T3,T14	0.76
12	{Sender, T10, T20, T5, T4, T3, T2, T1, T11, T13, T12, T14}	{T6, T7, T8, T9, T19, T15, Receiver}	T8	Sender, T8	0.66
13	{Sender, T10, T20, T5, T4, T3, T2, T1, T11, T13, T12, T14, T8}	{T6, T7, T9, T19, T15, Receiver}	T7	Sender, T7	0.66
14	{Sender, T10, T20, T5, T4, T3, T2, T1, T11, T13, T12, T14, T8, T7}	{T6, T9, T19, T15, Receiver}	T6	Sender, T6	0.66
15	{Sender, T10, T20, T5, T4, T3, T2, T1, T11, T13, T12, T14, T8, T7, T6}	{T9, T19, T15, Receiver}	Receiver	Sender, T7,Receiver	0.66

5. Summary

Content adaptation is a natural solution to the problem of heterogeneity in client devices, network connectivity, content format, and users' preferences. This paper presented a framework for adding several adaptation services to multimedia to make the content more satisfactory to the user. An important part of the framework is the QoS path selection algorithm that decides on the chain of adaptation services to add and the configuration parameters for each service.

We have already coded the algorithm, and we are currently integrating it into a prototype our Mobile Internet Telecommunication (MobInTel) [42] architecture. Performance results will be published in a future paper.

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