

Traffic Management and Remote Configuration in a Gateway-Based Network

FIELD OF THE SUBJECT MATTER

[0001] The presently disclosed subject matter relates to communications networks. More particularly, the presently disclosed subject matter is directed to
5 apparatus and methodologies for traffic management including remote configuration in gateway-based networks.

BACKGROUND OF THE SUBJECT MATTER

10 [0002] In a typical advanced metering infrastructure (AMI) network, a collector may provide coverage for 1000 to 10,000 meters. By contrast, in a gateway-based network, a gateway may read a few meters, often just a single meter. In the gateway-based network, the traffic management and collector configuration issues are magnified by such difference in the collector to meter scale or ratio.

15 [0003] Various prior U.S. patent publication documents have addressed network communications, including such as U.S. Patent No. 6,345,294 to O'Toole et al. entitled "Methods And Apparatus For Remote Configuration Of An Appliance On A Network;" U.S. Patent No. RE, 41,030 to Pham et al. entitled "System And Method Of Network Independent Remote Configuration On Internet Server
20 Appliance;" and U.S. Patent Application Publication Number U.S. 2006/0079999 to Husein entitled "Building Management With Remote Configuration."

[0004] While various implementations of networks have been developed, and while various combinations of management and configuration implementations have be made available, no design has emerged that generally encompasses all of
25 the desired characteristics as hereafter presented in accordance with the presently disclosed subject matter.

SUMMARY OF THE SUBJECT MATTER

[0005] In view of the recognized features encountered in the prior art and addressed by the presently disclosed subject matter, an improved Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) has been provided comprising, for example, at least one remotely configurable gateway, at least one utility consumption measuring device coupled for communications with such at least one remotely configurable gateway, an Internet Protocol (IP) based communications network, and at least one utility central facility server coupled for communications over such network. Preferably, in such exemplary embodiment, such at least one remotely configurable gateway is coupled for IP-based communications with such network so that configuration data may be multicast from such at least one utility central facility server to such at least one remotely configurable gateway.

[0006] In certain present exemplary embodiments, the at least one remotely configurable gateway may be coupled for wireless communications with the network while in other present exemplary embodiments the gateway may be coupled for wired communications with the network.

[0007] In yet other present exemplary embodiments, the gateway may be configured for communications with a plurality of consumption measuring devices and may be configured to communicate wirelessly or by wired communications with the plurality of consumption measuring devices. In certain present embodiments, the gateway may be coupled for two-way IP-based communications with the network.

[0008] The presently disclosed subject matter also equally relates to corresponding and/or associated methodology. One present exemplary method may relate to configuring a gateway coupled between one or more utility consumption measuring devices and a utility provider, comprising coupling at least one utility consumption measuring device to a remotely configurable gateway for Internet Protocol (IP) based communications with an Internet Service Provider (ISP), coupling a utility provider central facility server to the ISP via an Internet Protocol (IP) based communications network, and multicasting configuration information from the utility provider central facility server to the gateway.

[0009] Additional embodiments of the presently disclosed subject matter are set forth in, or will be apparent to, those of ordinary skill in the art from the detailed description herein. Also, it should be further appreciated that modifications and variations to the specifically illustrated, referred and discussed features and elements hereof may be practiced in various embodiments and uses of the presently disclosed subject matter without departing from the spirit and scope of the presently disclosed subject matter. Variations may include, but are not limited to, substitution of equivalent means, features, or steps for those illustrated, referenced, or discussed, and the functional, operational, or positional reversal of various parts, features, steps, or the like.

[0010] Still further, it is to be understood that different embodiments, as well as different presently preferred embodiments, of the presently disclosed subject matter may include various combinations or configurations of presently disclosed features, steps, or elements, or their equivalents (including combinations of features, parts, or steps or configurations thereof not expressly shown in the figures or stated in the detailed description of such figures). Additional embodiments of the presently disclosed subject matter, not necessarily expressed in the summarized section, may include and incorporate various combinations of aspects of features, components, or steps referenced in the summarized embodiments above, and/or other features, components, or steps as otherwise discussed in this application. Those of ordinary skill in the art will better appreciate the features and aspects of such embodiments, and others, upon review of the remainder of the specification.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0011] A full and enabling disclosure of the presently disclosed subject matter, including the best mode thereof, directed to one of ordinary skill in the art, is set forth in the specification, which makes reference to the appended figure, in which:

[0012] Figure 1 is a block diagram of an exemplary advanced metering infrastructure (AMI) incorporating the presently disclosed subject matter; and

[0013] Figure 2 illustrates a flow chart of an exemplary methodology that may be employed to configure a gateway in accordance with the presently disclosed subject matter.

[0014] Repeat use of reference characters throughout the present specification and appended drawings is intended to represent same or analogous features, elements, or steps of the presently disclosed subject matter.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE SUBJECT MATTER

10 [0015] As discussed in the Summary of the Subject Matter section, the presently disclosed subject matter is particularly concerned with the provision of multicasting capabilities within a gateway-based network to rapidly implement configuration and/or reconfiguration of a gateway device or devices.

[0016] Selected combinations of aspects of the presently disclosed subject matter correspond to a plurality of different embodiments of the presently disclosed subject matter. It should be noted that each of the exemplary embodiments presented and discussed herein should not insinuate limitations of the presently disclosed subject matter. Features or steps illustrated or described as part of one embodiment may be used in combination with aspects of another embodiment to yield yet further embodiments. Additionally, certain features may be interchanged with similar devices or features not expressly mentioned which perform the same or similar function.

20 [0017] Reference is made herein in detail to exemplary presently preferred embodiments of the subject Traffic Management and Remote Configuration operations in a Gateway-Based AMI Network. Referring to the drawings, Figure 1 illustrates a block diagram of an exemplary Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) generally 100 incorporating the presently disclosed subject matter.

[0018] Several considerations differentiate the implementation of AMI 100 in accordance with the presently disclosed subject matter from prior standard such networks. In a first aspect, gateways 110, 110', ..., 110^N are provided at a utility service location to convert information from utility consumption measurement devices such as meters 120, 120', ..., 120^N to an Internet Protocol (IP) based communications protocol. Respective communications connections from meters

120, 120', ..., 120^N to gateways 110, 110', ..., 110^N may correspond to either representative wireless connection 122 or representative wired connection 124. In addition, connections 122, 124 may correspond to one-way connections 126 from meters 120, 120', ..., 120^N or two-way connections 128 as required or as appropriate or as desired. Those of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that each of the gateways 110, 110', ..., 110^N provide the same combination of communications possibilities although labeling of connections is not included in order to avoid unnecessary clutter of the present illustrations.

[0019] Those of ordinary skill in the art should also appreciate that, in accordance with the presently disclosed subject matter, each of the alternative communications options may be paired with each of the alternate communications mediums, and that the same combination is not required for each situation. In other words, one-way communications may per presently disclosed subject matter be provided in an individual configuration over wireless or wired communications channels or, alternatively, two way communications may be similarly provided over either wireless or wired communications channels.

[0020] A second aspect of the presently disclosed subject matter provides that information from, or alternatively to and from, meters 120, 120', ..., 120^N will then be routed from the various gateway 110, 110', ..., 110^N devices to and/or from the utility over a combination of private, i.e., consumer, networks including representative private ISP 130 via appropriate exemplary coupling devices 132, and public networks representatively illustrated as coupling device 142 to a utility via their own ISP 140.

[0021] As with all transmissions that occur across public networks, and as will be well understood by those of ordinary skill in the art, routing and security concerns should be addressed. In accordance with presently disclosed subject matter, security measures may be addressed at least in part by way of the provision of a firewall 144 providing protection for the utility's central facility including server 146 and associated data storage 148.

[0022] Further in accordance with presently disclosed subject matter, data communication between utility consumption sites and utility providers, whether such is one-way or two-way and whether conducted wirelessly or via wired communications or combinations thereof, may be configured to operate under

multiple methodologies. For example, in exemplary configurations, a network configured in accordance with the presently disclosed subject matter may be operated as a Polling-Based Network or as a Push-Based System.

[0023] When operated as a Polling-Based Network, acquisition of meter

5 readings, in a first exemplary configuration, may be controlled from the utility's systems by polling gateways 110, 110', ..., 110^N to return time-stamped information read from utility consumption measurement devices such as meters 120, 120', ..., 120^N that an individual gateway 110, 110', ..., 110^N holds in its memory. Alternatively, in a second exemplary configuration, the utility system may
10 control gateways 110, 110', ..., 110^N to request the most current information from it associated meter 120, 120', ..., 120^N, as well as any other information that may be held in the meter's memory that the utility may request. Such request may be made either concurrently with a present communication or from a previous communication. It should be further appreciated that the utility system may also
15 control gateways 110, 110', ..., 110^N to request information from other types of devices including without limitation other endpoints, transformers, relays, routers, and other systems and device from which information significant to the utility may be collected. Those of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate without requiring additional discussion that multiple requests can be sent and handled by multiple
20 software and/or hardware processors to increase the throughput of such polling approach.

[0024] When the AMI in accordance with the presently disclosed subject matter is operated as a Push-Based System embodiment, the various gateway devices may be configured by the utility to periodically push readings and other relevant
25 information including, for example, alarms, tampers, etc., to the utility's head-end systems. Optionally, as part of a push, the individual gateways 110, 110', ..., 110^N may check for pending requests from the head-end to send any other information that the utility desires. Responses for such requests may come from the gateway's memory or from interrogation of the meter or the meter's own memory.

30 [0025] In accordance with the presently disclosed subject matter, configuration of the gateway itself may be undertaken as a portion of such communications. When considering network traffic management configuration for gateway-based networks, a number of options are available to the end user. These include, for

example, consideration of whether the configuration would include assignment of a gateway to a specific meter or group of meters, or type of meter or if it should report every meter it hears.

[0026] Alternatively, consideration may be given to whether the gateway should only report meters it hears reliably based on a reception frequency or signal strength threshold or meters that belong to a certain utility. Such parameters may be configured from the utility's central facility including server 146 and recorded in a memory associated with the gateway. Additional configuration parameters might also include settings that insure that a meter's reading is real and reliable before reporting or that might be used to configure a schedule for how often to push data and what data to push.

[0027] In typical systems, a modest amount of system resources are spent on traffic management and other configuration of collectors. Such configurations include setting filtering parameters, setting schedules for various operations, and returning radio performance statistics.

[0028] In a gateway-based system, in accordance with the presently disclosed subject matter, a low overhead approach is taken to manage the large number of gateways 110, regardless of the push or polled paradigm of the network. One approach is to configure gateways on a one-by-one basis, such as when the device is polled or as a response when a gateway pushes its readings.

[0029] In accordance with the presently disclosed subject matter, a more efficient methodology has been provided through the implementation of a multicast approach to gateway configuration that provides significant advantage regardless of whether a push or polled network architecture is employed or occurring.

Multicast addressing provides delivery of data to a group of destinations, for example, gateways, simultaneously by transmitting messages over the network only once.

[0030] In accordance with the presently disclosed subject matter, individual gateways 110 are assigned to one or multicast groups. Such group assignments might be made in accordance with utility type, i.e., electric, gas, or water; geographic areas including routes or districts; the particular Internet Service Provider (ISP) serving the gateway; or by service type, that is, based on whether the service is residential or commercial.

[0031] Multicast transmission of gateway configuration information provides a mechanism whereby a large numbers of nodes may be rapidly configured with a high degree of reliability. Typically per practice of the presently disclosed subject matter, only a few multicasts of a configuration are required to deliver configuration instructions to greater than 95-98% of the multicast subscribers.

[0032] The ability provided to utilities by the presently disclosed subject matter may be employed in a number of ways that could be of significant value to a utility. For example, such ability could be used to rapidly configure and/or reconfigure a large number of gateways to assist in determining the extent of a power or service outage. Under such circumstances, gateways that may have been previously configured to report data from a single meter that they were paired with could be quickly reconfigured to report all meters that they can hear. Such a reconfiguration could easily be used to map a power outage or identify that certain of the serving ISP's or a customer's premises equipment (CPE) wasn't powered, but that electricity had been restored.

[0033] The presently disclosed subject matter also permits exploitation of public broadband networks for the collection and transmission of meter reading data, as well as for providing a mechanism to manage network traffic including providing remote configuration of gateways while avoiding the installation of specifically purposed collection infrastructure. Such approach of the presently disclosed subject matter inherently reduces potential infrastructure cost, of course, but also increases deployment flexibility for utilities.

[0034] With present reference to Figure 2 there is illustrated a flow chart 200 of an exemplary methodology usable to configure a gateway in accordance with the presently disclosed subject matter. As described herein, the presently disclosed subject matter provides for coupling a consumption measuring device (step 202) to a gateway, for example, gateway 110 and meter 120, both of Figure 1. As should be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art, such consumption device may correspond to any measuring device capable of measuring and/or recording consumption of any product or resource including, without limitation, electricity, water, gas, oil or any other such consumable resources. Further, as previously discussed, such coupling may take on multiple forms including both wired and

wireless as well as one way and two way communications capabilities or combinations thereof.

[0035] Further in accordance with methodologies of the presently disclosed subject matter, the gateway is coupled (step 204) to an Internet Service Provided (ISP). In a manner similar to coupling the gateway to an ISP, a Central Server is also couple (step 206) to an ISP for Internet Protocol communications therewith. In certain embodiments, the ISP to which the gateway is coupled may be the same ISP to which the Central Server is couple or a different ISP so that an interim coupling device may be provide to couple the ISP coupled to the gateway to the ISP coupled to the Central Server.

[0036] Finally, following coupling of the gateway and Central Server to an ISP, configuration information for the gateway is multicast (step 208) to program or reprogram the gateway. It should be appreciated that multiple gateways may be couple to the Central Server via one or more ISP connections and that each of these gateways may be programmed by way of the multicast transmission.

[0037] While the presently disclosed subject matter has been described in detail with respect to specific embodiments thereof, it will be appreciated that those skilled in the art, upon attaining an understanding of the foregoing may readily produce alterations to, variations of, and equivalents to such embodiments. Accordingly, the scope of the present disclosure and appended claims is by way of example rather than by way of limitation, and the subject disclosure does not preclude inclusion of such modifications, variations, and/or additions to the presently disclosed subject matter as would be readily apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art.

CLAIMS

1. An Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI), comprising:
 - a plurality of remotely configurable gateways;
 - a plurality of devices coupled for communications with the plurality of remotely configurable gateways;
 - an Internet Protocol (IP) based communications network, wherein the plurality of remotely configurable gateways is coupled for IP-based communications with the network; and
 - at least one central facility server coupled for communications over the network, wherein the at least one central facility server is configured to determine an extent of a power or service outage by multicasting configuration information to the plurality of remotely configurable gateways to reconfigure selected of the plurality of remotely configurable gateways to report on more meters than originally configured to report upon.
2. The AMI of claim 1, wherein the configuration information assigns the selected remotely configurable gateways to report data from at least one specific meter.
3. The AMI of claim 1, wherein the configuration information assigns the selected remotely configurable gateways to report data from a specific type of meter.
4. The AMI of claim 1, wherein the configuration information assigns the selected remotely configurable gateways to report data from every meter each gateway hears.
5. The AMI of claim 1, wherein the configuration information configures the selected remotely configurable gateways to operate within a Polling-Based Network.
6. The AMI of claim 1, wherein the configuration information configures the selected remotely configurable gateways to operate within a Push-Based System.
7. The AMI of claim 1, wherein the configuration information configures each of the plurality of remotely configurable gateways into two or more multicast groups, each of the two or more multicast groups comprising:
 - a utility-type multicast group;
 - a geographic area based multicast group;
 - an internet service provider based multicast group; or
 - a service type multicast group based on residential vs. commercial service.

8. The AMI of claim 1, wherein the configuration information instructs the plurality of remotely configurable gateways to assist in determining the extent of the power or service outage at least in part by instructing the plurality of remotely configurable gateways to report data from all meters that each gateway from among the plurality of remotely configurable gateways can hear.

9. A method in a remotely configurable gateway for configuring the remotely configurable gateway to determine an extent of a power or service outage, the remotely configurable gateway coupled between one or more utility consumption measuring devices and a utility provider, the method comprising:

- communicating with at least one utility consumption measuring device using Internet Protocol (IP) based communications;

- communicating with the utility provider; and

- receiving configuration information via multicast from the utility provider, wherein the configuration information configures the remotely configurable gateway to report on more meters than previously configured to report on.

10. The method of claim 9, wherein the configuration information configures the remotely configurable gateway to periodically push readings, alarms and/or tampers to the utility provider.

11. The method of claim 9, wherein the configuration information configures the remotely configurable gateway to return time-stamped information in response to polling by the utility provider.

12. The method of claim 9, wherein the configuration information configures the remotely configurable gateway to set filtering parameters, set schedules for operations and/or return radio performance statistics to the utility provider.

13. The method of claim 9, wherein the configuration information configures the remotely configurable gateway, previously configured to report data from a single meter, to report data from all meters heard by the remotely configurable gateway.

14. A method of determining an extent of a power or service outage by a computing device of a utility provider, the utility provider coupled with one or more utility consumption measuring

devices in an Internet Protocol (IP) based communications network via a plurality of remotely configurable gateways, the method comprising multicasting configuration information to the plurality of remotely configurable gateways to reconfigure selected of the plurality of remotely configurable gateways to report on more meters than previously configured to report on.

15. The method of claim 14, wherein the configuration information reconfigures the selected gateways to perform in a different manner.

16. The method of claim 14, wherein the configuration information assigns the selected gateways to report only meters it hears reliably with a signal strength over a threshold value.

17. The method of claim 14, wherein the configuration information configures the selected gateways to operate within a Polling-Based Network.

18. The method of claim 14, wherein the configuration information configures the selected gateways to operate within a Push-Based System.

19. The method of claim 14, wherein the configuration information configures each of the selected gateways, previously configured to report data from a single meter, to report data from all meters heard by the respective selected gateways.

20. The method of claim 14, wherein the configuration information assigns the selected gateways to report data from a specific type of meter.