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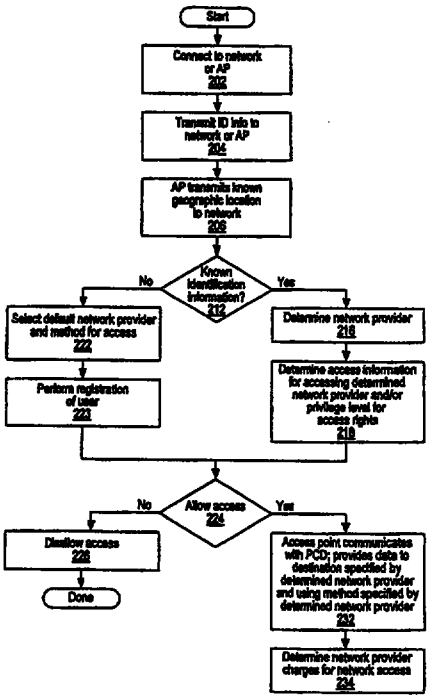
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(54) Title: DISTRIBUTED NETWORK COMMUNICATION SYSTEM WHICH ENABLES MULTIPLE NETWORK PROVIDERS TO USE A COMMON DISTRIBUTED NETWORK INFRASTRUCTURE



(57) Abstract: A system and method for providing access and/or roaming features on a network system. The network system includes a plurality of wireless and/or wired access points coupled to a network. Access points (APs) for the network may be widely distributed in various facilities, such as airports, mass-transit stations, and various businesses. The network may couple to a wide area network, such as the Internet. In one embodiment, a portable computing device (PCD) of a user may store identification information which uniquely indicates a network provider

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patent (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European patent (AT, BE, CH, CY, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, IE, IT, LU, MC, NL, PT, SE, TR), OAPI patent (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).

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of a plurality of possible network providers. The identification information may also or instead indicate an access or privilege level of the user. Each of the access points are operable to "listen for" or detect identification information associated with numerous different providers. When the access point receives the identification information from a PCD of a user, the access point may determine the appropriate network provider for the portable computing device using the identification information. Network access may then be provided to the portable computing device through the determined network provider. Thus the network system is useable by subscribers of each of the plurality of possible network providers, thereby enabling subscribers to "roam" on various wireless networks, including networks maintained by other providers. The access information may also include an access level which indicates the user's access or privilege level. Thus, the local network may provide various local resources which are available to users having a first access level, and users with a second access level may not be entitled to view or utilize these network resources on the network, but may be simply provided external Internet access.