The Network Stack (1)

Lecture 5, Part 1: Network Stacks
Prof. Robert N. M. Watson
2021-2022
Introduction to Network Stacks

Rapid tour across hardware and software:
• Networking and the sockets API
• Network-stack design principles
• Memory flow across hardware + software
• Network-stack work flows
• Recent network-stack research
Networking: A key OS function (1)

• Communication between computer systems
  • Local-Area Networks (LANs)
  • Wide-Area Networks (WANs)
  • Inter-VM communication on a single host

• A network stack provides:
  • Sockets API and extensions
  • Interoperable, feature-rich, high-performance protocol implementations (e.g., IPv4, IPv6, ICMP, UDP, TCP, SCTP, 802.1, 802.11, …)
  • Security functions (e.g., cryptographic tunneling, firewalls…)
  • Device drivers for Network Interface Cards (NICs)
  • Monitoring and management interfaces (BPF, ioctl)
  • Plethora of support libraries (e.g., DNS)
Networking: A key OS function (2)

• Dramatic changes over 30 years:
  1980s: Early packet-switched networks, UDP+TCP/IP, Ethernet
  1990s: Large-scale migration to IP; Ethernet VLANs
  2000s: 1-Gigabit, then 10-Gigabit Ethernet; 802.11; GSM data
  2010s: Deployment of IPv6; 40/100-Gbps Ethernet; 3G to 5G;
    ... billions $\rightarrow$ trillions of devices?

• Vanishing technologies
  • UUCP, IPX/SPX, ATM, token ring, SLIP, ...
The Berkeley Sockets API (1983)

• The Design and Implementation of the 4.3BSD Operating System
  • (but APIs/code first appeared in 4.2BSD)
• Now universal TCP/IP (POSIX, Windows)
• Kernel-resident network stack serves networking applications via system calls
• Reuses file-descriptor abstraction
  • Same API for local and distributed IPC
  • Simple, synchronous, copying semantics
  • Blocking/non-blocking I/O, select()
• Multi-protocol (e.g., IPv4, IPv6, ISO, …)
  • TCP-focused but not TCP-specific
  • Cross-protocol abstractions and libraries
  • Protocol-specific implementations
  • “Portable” applications

close()
read()
write()
...
accept()
bind()
connect()
getsockopt()
listen()
recv()
select()
send()
setsockopt()
socket()
...

...
BSD network-stack principles (1980s-1990s)

Multi-protocol, packet-oriented network research framework:

- **Object-oriented**: multiple protocols, socket types, but one API
  - **Protocol-independent**: streams vs. datagrams, sockets, socket buffers, socket addresses, network interfaces, routing table, packets
  - **Protocol-specific**: connection lists, address/routing specialization, routing, transport protocol itself – encapsulation, decapsulation, etc.

- **Packet-oriented**:
  - Packets and packet queueing as fundamental primitives
  - Best effort: If there is a failure (overload, corruption), drop the packet
  - Work hard to maintain packet source ordering
  - Differentiate ‘receive’ from ‘deliver’ and ‘send’ from ‘transmit’
  - Heavy focus on TCP functionality and performance
  - Middle-node (forwarding), not just edge-node (I/O), functionality
  - High-performance packet capture: Berkeley Packet Filter (BPF)
FreeBSD network-stack principles (1990s-2010s)

All of the 1980s features and also ...

• **Hardware:**
  • Multi-processor scalability
  • NIC offload features (checksums, TSO/LRO, full TCP)
  • Multi-queue network cards with load balancing/flow direction
  • Performance to 10s or 100s of Gigabit/s
  • Wireless networking

• **Protocols:**
  • Dual IPv4/IPv6
  • Pluggable congestion control, delay-based congestion control (BBR)
  • Security/privacy: firewalls, IPSec, ...

• **Software model:**
  • Flexible memory model integrates with VM for zero-copy
  • Fine-grained locking and lockless algorithms (e.g., RCU)
  • Network-stack virtualisation
  • Userspace networking via netmap