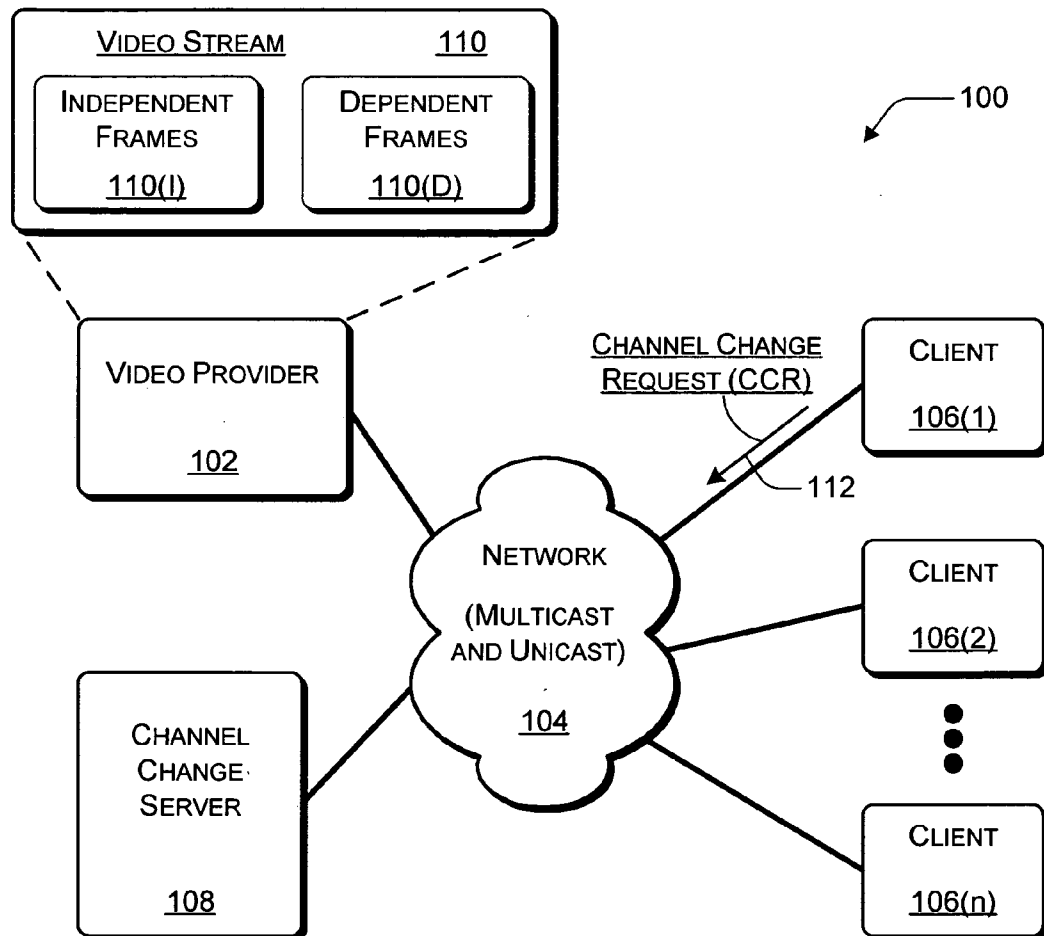




US 20050081244A1

(19) **United States**(12) **Patent Application Publication**
Barrett et al.(10) **Pub. No.: US 2005/0081244 A1**(43) **Pub. Date: Apr. 14, 2005**(54) **FAST CHANNEL CHANGE**(52) **U.S. Cl. 725/97; 725/86; 725/94; 725/38;
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SPOKANE, WA 99201**(21) **Appl. No.: 10/684,138**(22) **Filed: Oct. 10, 2003****Publication Classification**(51) **Int. Cl.⁷ H04N 7/173; G06F 13/00;
H04N 5/445; H04N 5/50**(57) **ABSTRACT**

In an exemplary server implementation, a server is configured to retain at least one independent frame for each video channel of multiple video channels that are being distributed using multicast communications and is adapted to respond to channel change requests from clients by transmitting the retained at least one independent frame of a requested video channel to a requesting client using a unicast communication. In an exemplary method implementation, a method for fast channel changing in a multicast video distribution architecture includes: detecting a channel change request that indicates a requested channel, the requested channel corresponding to a multicast group; and transmitting a retained intra frame for the requested channel as a unicast communication.



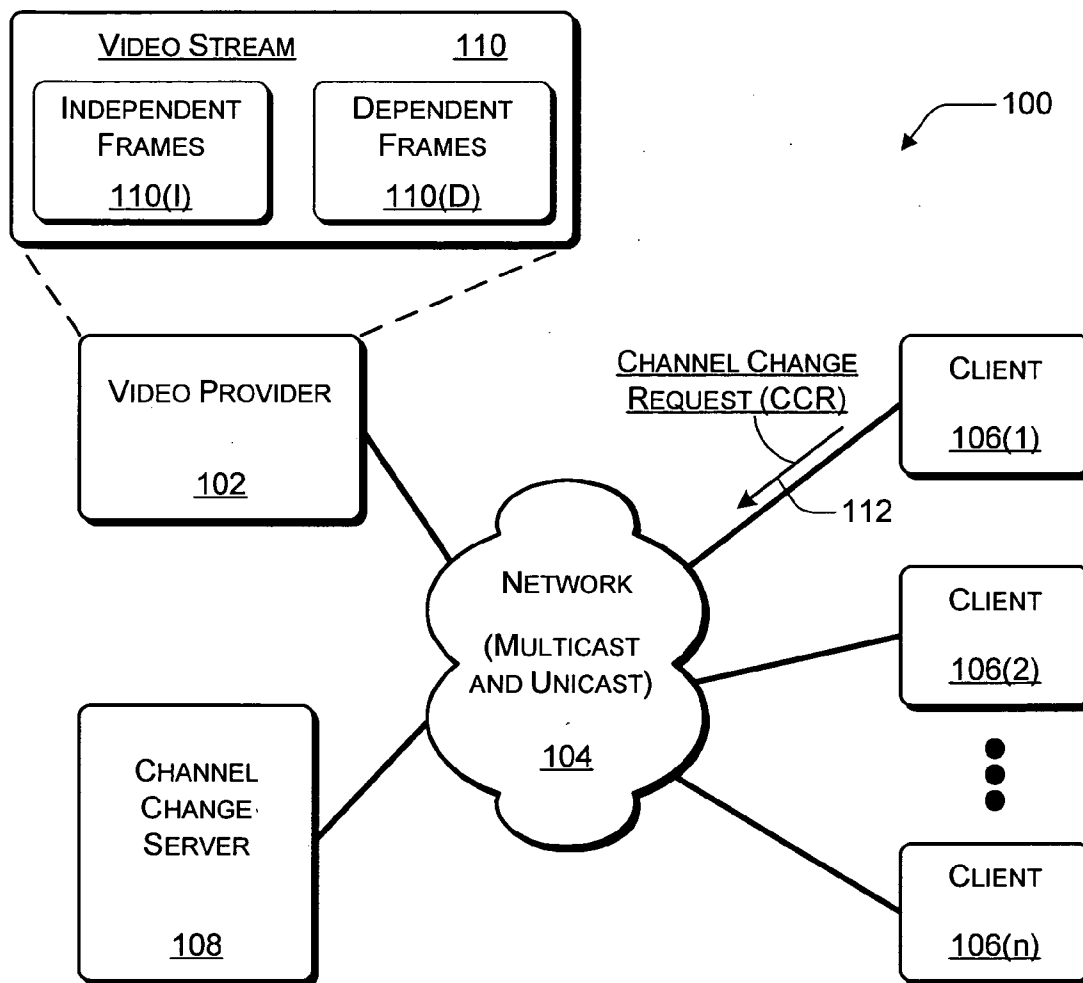


Fig. 1

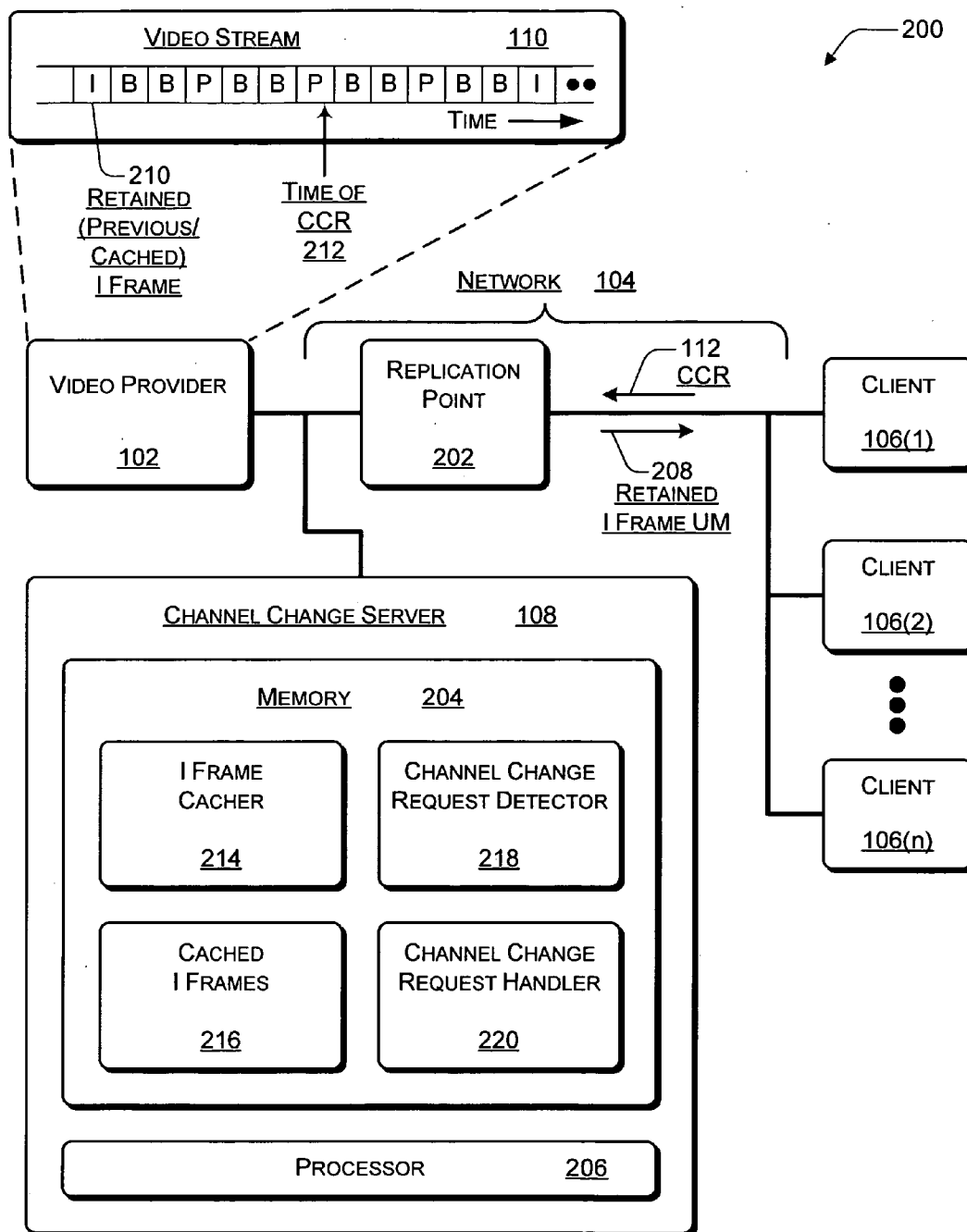
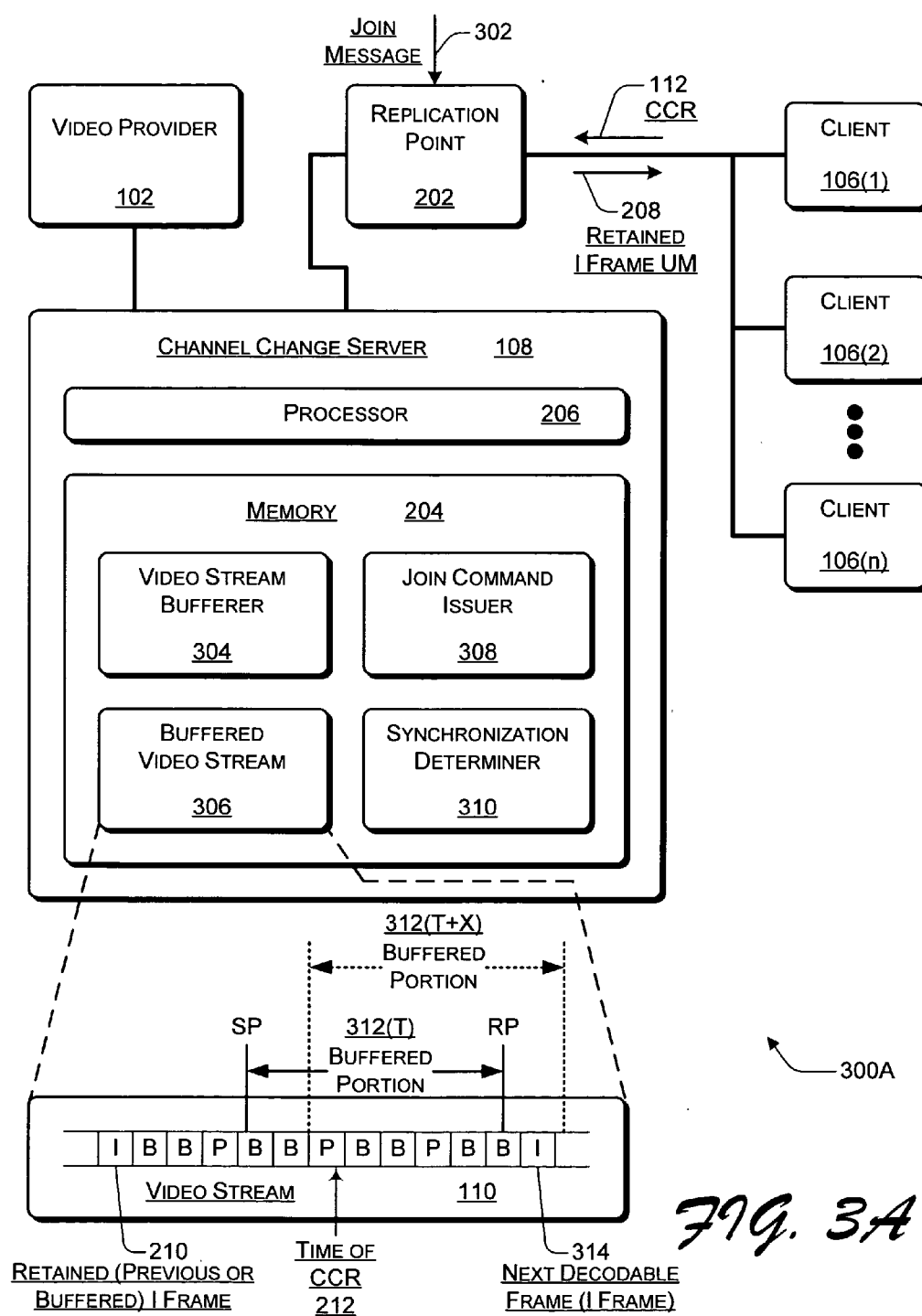


Fig. 2



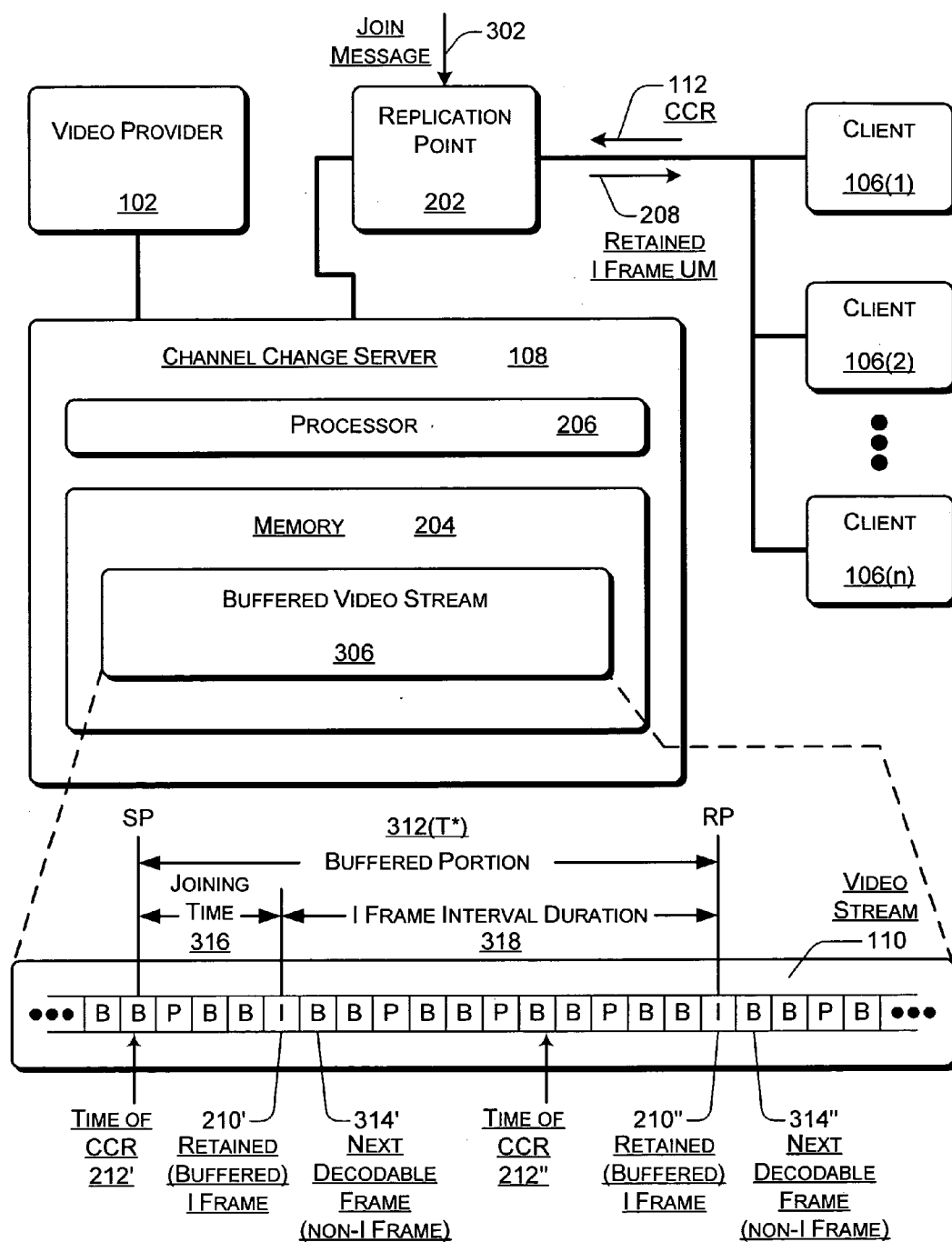


Fig. 3B

300B

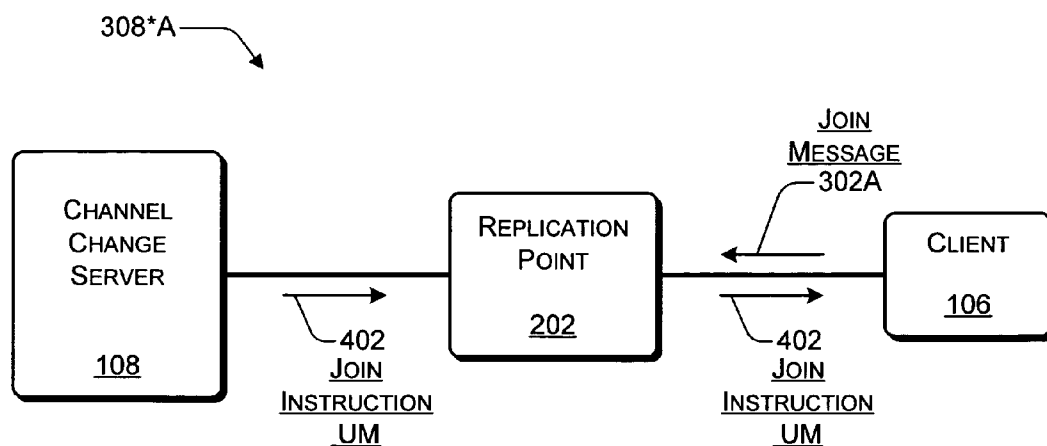


FIG. 4A

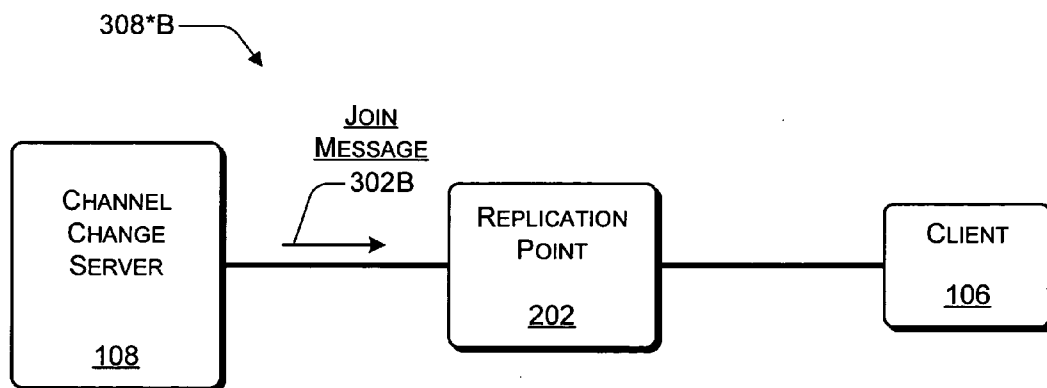


FIG. 4B

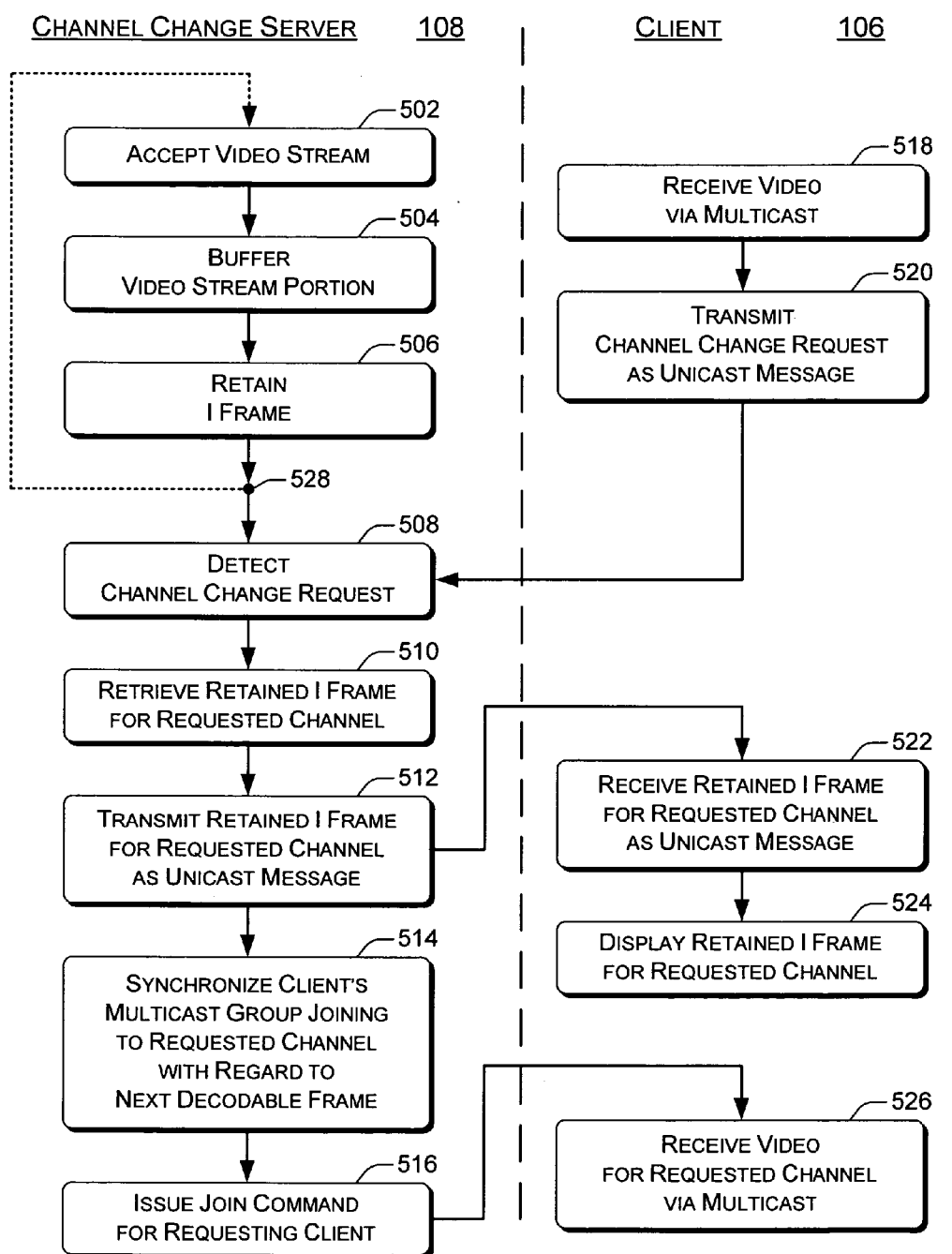


Fig. 5

500

FAST CHANNEL CHANGE

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0001] This disclosure relates in general to changing channels in a digital video environment and in particular, by way of example but not limitation, to reducing the video presentation latency when changing from one video channel to another video channel in a digital multicast network.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Television-based entertainment systems are expanding the programming and services that they offer. In addition to television programming content such as that found on broadcast and traditional cable networks, television service providers are adding on-demand video, as well as other interactive services, features, and applications. The existence of these specific services, features, and applications, as well as the continuing increase in the breadth of available general programming content, drives the adoption of digital network technology for television-based entertainment systems.

[0003] Digital technology enables satellite and cable operators to increase the number and kinds of services that they offer to subscribers and thus their average revenue per subscriber. Unfortunately, although digital technology offers many advantages to subscribers as compared to traditional analog networks, it also has a number of drawbacks. For example, changing channels in a digital television service typically takes longer than in an analog television service. This channel changing latency annoys and frustrates users of the digital television service.

[0004] This channel changing latency and other drawbacks of digital technology lead to higher rates of subscriber churn, which means that a large percentage of subscribers that try digital television service switch back to traditional analog service within a short time period. Switching subscribers from analog to digital service involves expenditures for network operators that range from broad, general marketing costs down to individual incentives and installation expenses. Furthermore, network operators usually have greater opportunity and/or ability to sell add-on services (e.g., extra channels, pay-per-view, etc.) in conjunction with digital network services. Consequently, reducing subscriber churn can financially benefit satellite and cable operators.

[0005] Accordingly, for e.g. television-based entertainment systems, there is a need for schemes and/or techniques to reduce the churn out of digital service and back to traditional analog service that results from subscribers being dissatisfied with the slower channel changing experienced with digital television service.

SUMMARY

[0006] In an exemplary server implementation, a server is configured to retain at least one independent frame for each video channel of multiple video channels that are being distributed using multicast communications and is adapted to respond to channel change requests from clients by transmitting the retained at least one independent frame of a requested video channel to a requesting client using a unicast communication. In an exemplary method implementation, a method for fast channel changing in a multicast

video distribution architecture includes: detecting a channel change request that indicates a requested channel, the requested channel corresponding to a multicast group; and transmitting a retained intra frame for the requested channel as a unicast communication.

[0007] Other method, system, approach, apparatus, server, device, media, procedure, arrangement, etc. implementations are described herein.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0008] The same numbers are used throughout the drawings to reference like and/or corresponding aspects, features, and components.

[0009] FIG. 1 illustrates an exemplary video distribution architecture that includes a network that is capable of both multicast and unicast communications.

[0010] FIG. 2 illustrates a video distribution architecture that includes an exemplary channel change server that is capable of providing an intra frame in a unicast message.

[0011] FIG. 3A illustrates a video distribution architecture that includes an exemplary channel change server that is capable of synchronizing a joining to a multicast group for a client using a join command.

[0012] FIG. 3B illustrates a video distribution architecture that includes an exemplary channel change server that is capable of synchronizing a joining to a multicast group for a client using a join command and that is capable of providing a smoother initial video presentation experience.

[0013] FIG. 4A illustrates a first exemplary mechanism for implementing a join command.

[0014] FIG. 4B illustrates a second exemplary mechanism for implementing a join command.

[0015] FIG. 5 is a flow diagram that illustrates an exemplary method for fast channel changing with a combination multicast and unicast network.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0016] FIG. 1 illustrates an exemplary video distribution architecture 100 that includes a network 104 that is capable of both multicast and unicast communications. Network 104 is implemented with multiple network elements (not separately shown in FIG. 1). Each network element may be capable of facilitating both multicast and unicast communications, or each network element may be capable of facilitating either multicast or unicast communications. Furthermore, network 104 may include some network elements that participate in both multicast and unicast communications and other network elements that participate in either multicast or unicast communications (but not necessarily both).

[0017] As illustrated, a video provider 102, a channel change server 108, and one or more clients 106(1), 106(2) . . . 106(n) are coupled to network 104. Video provider 102 is capable of providing video for multiple channels to clients 106 utilizing a multicast scheme over network 104. Likewise, clients 106 are capable of receiving video for multiple channels from video provider 102 via a multicast scheme

over network **104**. Video as used herein may optionally include audio and/or associated audio/video presentation control information.

[0018] In a described implementation, video provider **102** receives, stores, and/or otherwise has access to video information for multiple channels as represented by the illustrated video stream **110** for a given particular channel. Each video stream **110** is comprised of independent frames **110(I)** and dependent frames **110(D)**. Independent frames **110(I)** may be decoded without reference to other video frames. Independent frames **110(I)** include, for example, intra (I) frames. In contradistinction, dependent frames **110(D)** are decoded with reference to one or more other video frames. Dependent frames **110(D)** include, for example, predicted (P) frames and bidirectional (B) frames. Consequently, because independent frames **110(I)** may be decoded without waiting for any subsequent frames, independent frames **110(I)** may be decoded more quickly and/or sooner than dependent frames **110(D)**, at least for a video stream **110** that is being received in real-time.

[0019] Generally, video stream **110** is distributed from video provider **102** over network **104** to selected clients **106** using a multicast scheme. For example, video provider **102** may correspond to a multicast source, network **104** may include multiple multicast replication points, and clients **106** may correspond to multiple multicast receivers. Furthermore, each video stream **110** for a particular video channel may correspond to a multicast stream in a multicast video distribution scheme.

[0020] In operation, each given client **106** that requests to receive a particular video channel is joined to a multicast group corresponding to that particular video channel. Thereafter, network **104** forwards a duplicate of the associated video stream **110** for the particular video channel that corresponds to the multicast group to which the given client **106** has been joined. Network **104** forwards duplicates of video stream **110** to selected clients **106** via one or more replication points (not separately shown in FIG. 1).

[0021] When a given client **106** (e.g., client **106(1)**) wishes to change channels, client **106(1)** transmits a channel change request (CCR) **112** toward a video distribution headend or similar server or system. Channel change request **112** includes, in addition to an identifier of client **106(1)**, an indication of the requested video channel. As illustrated, video provider **102** and channel change server **108** separately or jointly comprise a video distribution headend. Channel change request **112** precipitates a multicast group change to a multicast group corresponding to the requested video channel.

[0022] After the multicast group change, video stream **110** can then be directed to the requesting client **106(1)**. However, a long channel changing latency may be experienced by the user of client **106(1)** if client **106(1)** begins receiving video stream **110** during a time period of dependent frames **110(D)**, which cannot be independently decoded. Client **106(1)** waits to decode video until a next independent frame **110(I)** is received by client **106(1)**.

[0023] In a described implementation, channel change server **108** responds to channel change request **112** to ameliorate this channel changing latency. Specifically, channel change server **108** is adapted to unicast an independent

frame **110(I)** for the requested video channel to client **106(1)**. More specifically, channel change server **108** is adapted to transmit a retained independent frame **110(I)** for the video stream **110** that is associated with the requested video channel to client **106(1)** in a unicast communication. This retained independent frame **110(I)** may then be decoded (and displayed) relatively quickly without regard to other frames **110(I or D)** and without having to wait for the next independent frame **110(I)**.

[0024] Channel change server **108** may operate in any one or more of three exemplary modes when unicasting a retained independent frame. In a first mode, a retained independent frame comprises a cached previous independent frame. This first mode is described further below with reference to FIG. 2. In a second mode, a retained independent frame comprises a cached previous (or possibly buffered) independent frame. This second mode is described further below with reference to FIG. 3A. In a third mode, a retained independent frame comprises a buffered independent frame. This third mode is described further below with reference to FIG. 3B. The second and third modes are implementations that can also involve synchronized joining of clients to a relevant multicast group.

[0025] FIG. 2 illustrates a video distribution architecture **200** that includes an exemplary channel change server **108** that is capable of providing an intra frame in a unicast message **208**. With respect to video distribution architecture **100** (of FIG. 1), video provider **102**, channel change server **108**, and clients **106(1, 2 . . . n)** remain connected to network **104**. However, additional details regarding network **104** are provided.

[0026] As illustrated, network **104** includes at least one replication point **202**. Network **104** usually includes many such replication points **202**. In fact, multiple replication points **202** are typically located between a multicast source (e.g., video provider **102** and/or channel change server **108**) and a multicast receiver (e.g., any client of clients **106**). In other words, although only one replication point **202** is explicitly shown, video stream **110** may be communicated (e.g., forwarded and/or duplicated) by multiple replication points **202** between video provider **102** and clients **106**.

[0027] In a described implementation, replication points **202** are realized as any of many different types of network elements or nodes. For example, replication points **202** may be routers, switches, and so forth. As multicast-capable nodes, replication points **202** are adapted to facilitate group membership, to duplicate/forward multicast communications, to handle multicast streams as identified by source and group address (S,G), to perform other multicast-related functions, some combination or subset thereof, and so forth. For example, replication points **202** may be capable of implementing communications in accordance with a multicast routing protocol (e.g., protocol independent multicast-sparse mode (PIM-SM)), in accordance with a group management protocol (e.g., internet group management protocol (IGMP)), and so forth.

[0028] IGMP is used by receiver hosts (e.g., at least clients **106**) and replication points **202** to notify each other about conditions and changes to group membership. PIM-SM is used to propagate forwarding state information between and among replication points **202**. IGMP defines messages that are used to join clients **106** to a group and to notify

replication points **202** that a client **106** is leaving a group. Although an implementation is described primarily in the context of IGMP, other multicast protocols may alternatively be employed.

[0029] Video stream **110** is illustrated as an exemplary stream of I, P, and B frames. Video stream **110** may be coded using any video compression algorithm or technology, such as the Moving Pictures Expert Group 4th standard (MPEG-4: ISO/IEC 14496-1/2/3). The video frame series shown in **FIG. 2** is "IBBPBBPBBPBBP"; however, any video frame series may be present. In fact, the frame series for video stream **110** may be changing in an unknown and/or unpredictable fashion.

[0030] Channel change server **108** includes one or more processors **206** and at least one memory **204**. Memory **204** includes processor-executable instructions that may be executed by processor **206** to perform function(s) as described further below. These processor-executable instructions may comprise hardware, firmware, software, some combination thereof, and so forth. Modules having processor-executable instructions that are stored as part of memory **204** include: I frame cacher **214**, cached I frames **216**, channel change request detector **218**, and channel change request handler **220**. These modules are described further herein below.

[0031] As noted generally above with reference to video stream **110**, I frames can be independently decoded, but P and B frames usually cannot. P frames reference up to one other frame, and B frames reference up to two other frames. When a particular client **106** joins a new multicast group corresponding to a different video channel, the particular client **106** is unable to begin decoding video stream **110** (or display any video for the user) until an I frame is received. Under an MPEG-4 video coding paradigm, the average delay between a channel change request **112** and receipt of an I frame during normal stream flow can be 1-2 seconds. This delay can lengthen to 5-10 seconds with next generation coding paradigms. Channel change server **108** can reduce this average delay and thereby ameliorate user frustrations arising from long channel changing delays.

[0032] In a described implementation, client **106(1)** initially determines that a video channel change is desired (e.g., as a result of user input) and/or being demanded. Client **106(1)** formulates a channel change request **112** that indicates a requested channel and identifies (perhaps implicitly) client **106(1)**. Channel change request **112** is transmitted upstream (e.g., as a unicast message) through one or more replication points **202**.

[0033] Channel change request detector **218** configures channel change server **108** to be monitoring network **104** for channel change requests **112**. When channel change request **112** from client **106(1)** is detected, channel change request handler **220** is activated to respond to it. Specifically, channel change request handler **220** responds by sending a previous I frame for the requested channel to client **106(1)** in a unicast message.

[0034] In order to be able to send previous I frames for requested channels to clients **106**, channel change server **108** secures access to such previous I frames by retaining them at least temporarily. Specifically, I frame cacher **214** tracks each video stream **110** that is associated with each video

channel and stores at least the immediately most recent previous I frame for each video stream **110**. These most recent previous I frames are stored as cached I frames **216**.

[0035] As illustrated in **FIG. 2**, the activation time of channel change request **112** is indicated along video stream **110** as time of CCR **212**. This time of CCR **212** falls between two I frames. Hence, retained I frame **210**, which comprises a cached or previous I frame in this mode, has already been stored at cached I frames **216** by I frame cacher **214**. Channel change request handler **220** extracts retained I frame **210** from cached I frames **216**. Channel change request handler **220** also formulates a unicast message (UM) that includes retained I frame **210** and transmits it as retained I frame UM **208** toward client **106(1)**.

[0036] Client **106(1)** receives retained I frame UM **208** and can decode and display retained I frame **210** thereof while awaiting the next I frame of video stream **110** that is associated with the requested channel. The faster that retained I frame UM **208** is received by client **106(1)**, the shorter the delay between when a user requests a channel change and when a full (initially static) video frame is displayed and the less likely that transmission of retained I frame **210** in retained I frame UM **208** is to interfere with the reception of current and possibly more-relevant (e.g., newer) frames of video stream **110**. Hence, transmission bandwidth at least between client **106(1)** and the replication point **202** that is most proximate thereto can be an issue. Addressing this transmission bandwidth issue is described below with reference to **FIGS. 3A and 3B**.

[0037] **FIG. 3A** illustrates a video distribution architecture **300A** that includes an exemplary channel change server **108** that is capable of synchronizing a joining to a multicast group for client **106(1)** using a join command. With respect to video distribution architecture **200** (of **FIG. 2**), video provider **102**, channel change server **108**, and clients **106(1, 2 . . . n)** remain connected to network **104**. However, video provider **102** provides video streams **110** via channel change server **108**. Although shown separately, video provider **102** and channel change server **108** (e.g., in **FIGS. 1-3B**) may be co-located and/or combined into a single server or system.

[0038] In a described implementation, channel change server **108** is adapted to buffer video stream **110** to delay it in time before multicast streaming distribution thereof. Channel change server **108** is capable of synchronizing a joining to a new channel to just prior to a new I frame for a video stream **110** that is associated with the new channel by "predicting" the occurrence of a next I frame. This quasi-prediction is accomplished using the time delay aspect of the buffered portion of video stream **110**.

[0039] As illustrated, channel change server **108** includes memory **204** that has processor-executable instructions, which may be executed by processor **206** to perform function(s) as described further below. Modules having processor-executable instructions that are stored as part of memory **204** include: video stream bufferer **304**, buffered video stream **306**, join command issuer **308**, and synchronization determiner **310**. The functions of modules **304**, **306**, **308**, and **310** may be implemented in conjunction with or separately from those of modules **214**, **216**, **218**, and **220** (of **FIG. 2**).

[0040] Channel change server **108** accepts video stream **110** (for each video channel) from video provider **102**. Video

stream bufferer **304** creates a buffered portion **312(T)** of video stream **110** between a receive point (RP) and a send point (SP). Each currently-buffered buffered portion **312** is stored as buffered video stream **306**. Buffered portion **312(T)** corresponds to a current time “T”. The receive point corresponds to the point along video stream **110** at which channel change server **108** is currently receiving from video provider **102**. The send point corresponds to the point along video stream **110** at which channel change server **108** is currently sending toward clients **106**.

[0041] In a described implementation, client **106(1)** transmits upstream (e.g., as a unicast message) channel change request **112**, possibly through one or more replication points **202** depending on the upstream path. The activation time of CCR **212** is indicated with respect to video stream **110** and buffered portion **312(T)**. Retained I frame **210** may be sent in retained I frame UM **208** by channel change request handler **220** (as described above with reference to FIG. 2). In this mode, retained I frame **210** comprises a cached or buffered I frame. If the retained I frame **210** happens to be within buffered portion **312(T)**, it may be retrieved directly from buffered video stream **306**, possibly even prior to being cached as part of cached I frames **216** if I frames are not cached until they are sent at the send point SP.

[0042] Because full decoding of true motion video does not start until reception of the next upcoming I frame, transmission of intervening P and/or B frames can be considered unnecessary bandwidth usage. To avoid such bandwidth squandering and to increase the likely speed at which retained I frame UM **208** is received by client **106(1)**, synchronization determiner **310** is capable of causing client **106(1)** to be joined to the multicast group corresponding to the requested channel just in time to receive the next decodable frame. This may, for example, amount to as little “excess bandwidth” utilization as a few packets before the next I frame to as much “excess bandwidth” as multiple frames. In this mode, the next decodable frame comprises another I frame.

[0043] Specifically, synchronization determiner **310** ascertains whether the next I frame is present within the current buffered portion **312** of video stream **110**. At time of CCR **212**, the next decodable frame **314** is not within buffered portion **312(T)**. However, after “X” unit(s) of time, the next decodable frame **314** is within buffered portion **312(T+X)**. When synchronization determiner **310** ascertains that the next decodable frame **314** is within the current buffered portion **312**, synchronization determiner **310** determines that it is time to issue a join command and thus activates or prompts join command issuer **308**.

[0044] Join command issuer **308**, once activated, issues a join command over network **104** (not explicitly indicated in FIG. 3A for clarity). The join command causes a join message **302** to be received at replication point **202**. Join message **302** notifies replication point **202** that client **106(1)** is to begin receiving the multicast stream that corresponds to the requested channel by joining client **106(1)** to the multicast group for that multicast stream. This join message **302** may be transmitted from client **106(1)** or join command issuer **308** of channel change server **108**. The former is described further below with reference to FIG. 4A, and the latter is described further below with reference to FIG. 4B.

In the latter implementation, the join command that is issued by join command issuer **308** may comprise join message **302**.

[0045] In a described implementation, the size of buffered portion **312** relates to an expected (including a known) time that is consumed when joining a client **106** to a multicast group of a multicast channel. This time may include a time period to effectuate a leave operation. By way of example, buffered portion **312** may correspond to a worst case (e.g., absolute or reasonable worst case) scenario for effectuating a join operation for any of the relevant clients **106**. Alternatively, the size of buffered portion **312** may correspond to an average time to effectuate a multicast join operation, may be tailored for each individual or designated set of clients **106** if conditions of network **104** vary spatially or temporally, and so forth.

[0046] FIG. 3B illustrates a video distribution architecture **300B** that includes an exemplary channel change server **108** that is capable of synchronizing a joining to a multicast group for client **106(1)** using a join command and that is capable of providing a smoother initial video presentation experience. Video distribution architecture **300A** can result in a video gap or discontinuity that is experienced by a user of a client **106**. This video gap/discontinuity results from the consecutive display of two non-consecutive I frames, which have multiple intervening undisplayed non-I frames. Video distribution architecture **300B** ameliorates this video gap/discontinuity by smoothing the video presentation as described below.

[0047] For the sake of clarity, video stream bufferer **304**, join command issuer **308**, and synchronization determiner **310** are not shown in FIG. 3B. However, a longer segment of video stream **110** is illustrated. Buffered portion **312(T*)** is longer than buffered portion **312(T)** (of FIG. 3A). Buffered portion **312(T*)** includes a joining time **316** and an I frame interval duration **318**, as described below.

[0048] In a described implementation for this third mode, channel change server **108** is adapted to buffer video stream **110** to delay it in time, before multicast streaming distribution thereof, by at least the maximum distance between I frames plus the maximum join-time for client **106(1)** to become joined to the multicast group corresponding to the requested channel. Channel change server **108** is capable of synchronizing a joining to a new channel to just after a new I frame for a video stream **110** that is associated with the new channel by “predicting” the occurrences of I frames. This quasi-prediction is accomplished using the time delay aspect of the buffered portion **312(T*)** (e.g., the delay window) of video stream **110**.

[0049] Channel change server **108** is adapted to retain I frames within buffered portion **312(T*)**. The retained I frames may be retained by I frame cacher **214** as cached I frames **216** or as recorded pointers/indexes to I frames that are in the buffered window. Alternatively, the retained I frames may be retained within buffered portion **312(T*)** without using an I frame cacher **214**. In a described implementation for this mode, retained I frame **210** comprises a buffered I frame.

[0050] When client **106(1)** requests a channel change via a CCR **112**, channel change server **108** provides the oldest retained I frame **210** within the delay window of buffered

portion 312(T*) for which client 106(1) still has time to receive a retained I frame UM 208 and to join the multicast group in time to receive the frame immediately subsequent to the oldest retained I frame 210. In this manner, client 106(1) receives a contiguous set of frames, with the first frame being a retained I frame 210 arriving via a retained I frame UM 208 and the (initial) subsequent frames being non-I frames arriving via the multicast group. Client 106(1) pauses on the retained I frame 210 because it is sent "ahead of time", and client 106(1) then begins full motion video when it is time to play the immediately subsequent frame that is obtained from the delayed multicast stream.

[0051] Joining time 316 corresponds to the time consumed when joining a client 106 to a multicast group, as described above with reference to FIG. 3A. I frame interval duration 318 corresponds to the greatest possible time period between successive I frames for the given coding scheme. As illustrated, a first time of CCR 212' is shown arriving just as joining time 316 is about to start. Consequently, a first retained I frame 210', which is a buffered I frame in this implementation of the third mode, and a first next decodable frame 314' are the first two frames that a client 106 receives to start video decoding. A second time of CCR 212" is shown arriving after expiration of joining time 316 with respect to retained I frame 210' but prior to expiration of a joining time 316 (not explicitly shown) with respect to retained I frame 210". Consequently, a second retained I frame 210", and a second next decodable frame 314" are the first two frames that a client 106 receives to start video decoding for second time of CCR 212".

[0052] FIG. 4A illustrates a first exemplary mechanism 308*A for implementing a join command. Exemplary mechanism 308*A involves participation by client 106 as well as channel change server 108 and replication point 202. Specifically, channel change server 108 transmits a join instruction UM 402 to client 106 via replication point 202. Join instruction UM 402 stipulates to client 106 when to transmit its join message responsive to the determination made by synchronization determiner 310 (of FIGS. 3A and 3B) of channel change server 108. At the appointed stipulated time, client 106 transmits join message 302A to replication point 202 so that client 106 is joined to the multicast group corresponding to the requested channel in time to receive the next decodable frame 314 and without receiving a significant amount of earlier non-I (or inter) frame(s) or otherwise non-decodable frame(s).

[0053] This joining delay of the multicast stream facilitates bandwidth availability for the unicast delivery of retained I frame 210 (of FIGS. 2, 3A, and 3B). Replication point 202 may be, for example, the replication point 202 that is closest to client 106 and capable of multicasting the desired video stream 110.

[0054] To the extent that the join operation is precipitated by a join message 302A that is transmitted from client 106, exemplary mechanism 308*A comports with a more-typical multicast joining procedure. However, the logistics involved are non-trivial inasmuch as three network elements are involved in the instigation of the join message and because setting time constraints (e.g., as reflected by the size of buffered portion 312) becomes concomitantly more difficult and/or more extreme for worst case analysis. The joining procedure can be simpler and more certain if client 106 is not obligated to participate.

[0055] FIG. 4B illustrates a second exemplary mechanism 308*B for implementing a join command. Exemplary mechanism 308*B involves participation by channel change server 108 and replication point 202. Specifically, channel change server 108 transmits a join message 302B to replication point 202. Join message 302B is transmitted responsive to the determination made by synchronization determiner 310 and likely involves less lead time for effectuating the joining operation with sufficient clearance to receive the next decodable frame 314. Join message 302B notifies replication point 202 that client 106 is to be joined to the multicast group corresponding to the requested channel. Exemplary mechanism 308*B entails enabling non-receiver hosts, such as sender/source hosts, to be capable of precipitating join operations on behalf of receiver hosts.

[0056] FIG. 5 is a flow diagram 500 that illustrates an exemplary method for fast channel changing with a combination multicast and unicast network. Flow diagram 500 includes thirteen (13) blocks 502-526. Although the actions of flow diagram 500 may be performed in other environments and with a variety of e.g. software schemes, FIGS. 2, 3A-3B, and 4A-4B are used in particular to illustrate certain aspects and examples of the method.

[0057] For example, the actions of blocks 502-526 may be performed by a channel change server 108 and a client 106, possibly in conjunction with one or more replication points 202 of a network 104. As illustrated, channel change server 108 performs the actions of blocks 502-516, and client 106 performs the actions of blocks 518-526.

[0058] At block 502, a video stream is accepted. For example, channel change server 108 may accept one or more video streams 110 from an associated video provider 102. At block 504, a portion of the accepted video stream is buffered. For example, video stream bufferer 304 may delay each video stream 110 that is associated with each channel to create buffered portion 312 for each video stream 110. The buffered portions 312 may be stored as a set of buffered video streams 306 with frames that enter at the receiving point (RP) and "move" toward the sending point (SP).

[0059] At block 506, at least one I frame is retained. For example, I frame cacher 214 of channel change server 108 may retain the retained frame (e.g., retained I frame 210) of each video stream 110 that is associated with each channel as a set of cached I frames 216 or a set of indexes/pointers to frames in a buffered portion 312(T*). Alternatively, I frames may be retained by being buffered at known or determinable locations of buffered portion 312(T*). As indicated by the dashed arrow that diverges from point 528, the actions of blocks 502-506 are ongoing for channel change server 108.

[0060] At block 518, video is being received via multicast communication. For example, client 106 may be receiving video stream 110 from video provider 102 and/or channel change server 108 as a multicast stream over one or more replication points 202 of network 104. At block 520, a channel change request is transmitted as a unicast message. For example, client 106 may transmit a channel change request 112 as a unicast message toward channel change server 108. This channel change request 112 is effectively a request to switch from a first multicast group corresponding to a first video channel to a second multicast group corre-

sponding to a second video channel, with the requested second video channel being indicated by channel change request **112**.

[0061] At block **508**, a channel change request is detected. For example, channel change request detector **218** of channel change server **108** may detect channel change request **112**. If video distribution architecture **200** is implemented, channel change server **108** may be monitoring links of and/or interfaces to network **104** in the vicinity of video provider **102** for channel change requests **112**, or video provider **102** may be forwarding channel change requests **112** (or channel change server **108** may be the intended recipient of channel change requests **112**). If video distribution architecture **300A** or **300B** is implemented, channel change server **108** may be the intended recipient of channel change requests **112**, and so forth.

[0062] At block **510**, a retained I frame for the requested channel is retrieved. For example, channel change request handler **220** accesses cached I frames **216** and/or buffered portion **312(T*)** of buffered video stream **306** to retrieve the retained I frame (e.g., retained I frame **210**, including **210'** and **210''**) for the video stream **110** associated with the requested channel. At block **512**, the retained I frame for the requested channel is transmitted as a unicast message. For example, channel change request handler **220**, after appropriate formulation, transmits retained I frame UM **208** toward client **106**.

[0063] At block **522**, the retained I frame for the requested channel is received as a unicast message. For example, client **106** may receive retained I frame UM **208**, which is an example of a unicast communication, even though client **106** usually receives video streams **110** as multicast streams during standard video channel reception. At block **524**, the retained I frame for the requested channel is displayed. For example, client **106** extracts the retained I frame for the requested channel from the retained I frame UM **208** and causes the retained I frame to be displayed. Depending on the time period until the next decodable frame **314** (including **314'** and **314''**) is due, this static I frame presentation may continue for a noticeable time (e.g., up to 1-2 seconds in a typical MPEG-4 video coding implementation).

[0064] At block **514**, the client's joining to the multicast group that corresponds to the requested channel is synchronized with regard to the next decodable frame. For example, for video distribution architectures **300A** and **300B**, synchronization determiner **310** of channel change server **108** may ascertain when the next decodable frame **314** is due to be sent to (and thereby when next decodable frame **314** is likely to be received or will be received in a worst-case scenario by) client **106**. This next decodable frame **314** ascertainment may be performed with reference to buffered portion **312** (including buffered portion **312(T*)**) and joining time **316** thereof for the video stream **110** that is associated with the requested channel. Once the timing of next decodable frame **314** is ascertained, synchronization determiner **310** determines the appropriate timing for the multicast joining operation of client **106** to the multicast group corresponding to the requested channel.

[0065] At block **516**, a join command is issued for the requesting client. For example, join command issuer **308** may issue a join command with respect to client **106** responsive to a synchronization determination by synchro-

nization determiner **310**. The join command may comprise a join instruction unicast message **402** that is sent to client **106** to prompt client **106** to transmit a join message **302A** at an appointed time to a replication point **202** (e.g., exemplary mechanism **308*A** for implementing a join command). Alternatively, the join command may comprise a join message **302B** that is sent "directly" to a replication point **202** on behalf of client **106** (e.g., exemplary mechanism **308*B** for implementing a join command).

[0066] At block **526**, video for the requested channel is received via multicast communication. For example, client **106** may receive video stream **110** that is associated with the requested channel via a corresponding multicast streaming group over network **104** using multiple replication points **202**. In other words, after a replication point **202** has caused client **106** to be joined to the corresponding multicast streaming group responsive to a join message **302**, at least that one replication point **202** duplicates (as necessary) and forwards video stream **110** to client **106**.

[0067] The actions of blocks **512** and **516** may, in particular, be performed in a myriad of orders. For example, the issuance of block **516** may occur after the transmission of block **512**, or the issuance and transmission of blocks **516** and **512** may occur substantially simultaneously or at least without consideration of the order of either. Alternatively, the issuance of block **516** may be performed after the transmission of block **512** unless a next I frame is of such temporal proximity (e.g., closer than a predetermined threshold period) that waiting to issue the join command jeopardizes the ability of a channel changing client to receive the next I frame.

[0068] The actions, aspects, features, components, etc. of FIGS. 1-5 are illustrated in diagrams that are divided into multiple blocks. However, the order, interconnections, layout, etc. in which FIGS. 1-5 are described and/or shown is not intended to be construed as a limitation, and any number of the blocks can be combined, rearranged, augmented, omitted, etc. in any manner to implement one or more systems, methods, devices, procedures, media, apparatuses, servers, arrangements, etc. for fast channel changing. Furthermore, although the description herein includes references to specific implementations, the illustrated and/or described implementations can be implemented in any suitable hardware, software, firmware, or combination thereof and using any suitable video distribution architecture(s), network element(s) and organization(s), video encoding standard(s), multicast and unicast scheme(s), and so forth.

[0069] With particular reference to FIGS. 2 and 3A-3B, a video provider **102** and/or a server **108** may include a variety of processor-accessible media. Such media may be any available media that is accessible by a computing or other (e.g., electronic) device. Such media may include both volatile and non-volatile media, removable and non-removable media, and storage (e.g., memory **204**) and transmission media (e.g., links or nodes of network **104**). The media may include processor-executable instructions.

[0070] Implementations for fast channel changing may be described in the general context of processor-executable instructions. Generally, processor-executable instructions include routines, programs, protocols, objects, interfaces, components, data structures, etc. that perform and/or enable particular tasks and/or implement particular abstract data

types. Fast channel changing, as described in certain implementations herein, may also be practiced in distributed processing environments where tasks are performed by remotely-linked processing devices that are connected through a communications link and/or network. Especially but not exclusively in a distributed computing environment, processor-executable instructions may be located in separate storage media, executed by different processors, and/or propagated over transmission media.

[0071] Although systems, media, devices, methods, procedures, apparatuses, techniques, schemes, approaches, procedures, arrangements, and other implementations have been described in language specific to structural, logical, algorithmic, and functional features and/or diagrams, it is to be understood that the invention defined in the appended claims is not necessarily limited to the specific features or diagrams described. Rather, the specific features and diagrams are disclosed as exemplary forms of implementing the claimed invention.

1. A method for fast channel changing in a multicast video distribution architecture, the method comprising:

detecting a channel change request that indicates a requested channel, the requested channel corresponding to a multicast group; and

transmitting a retained intra frame for the requested channel as a unicast communication.

2. The method as recited in claim 1, further comprising:

caching at least one previous intra frame for each channel of a plurality of channels as a set of cached intra frames; and

retrieving, responsive to the detecting, the retained intra frame for the requested channel from the set of cached intra frames, the retained intra frame comprising a previous intra frame.

3. The method as recited in claim 1, wherein:

the detecting comprises detecting the channel change request from a particular client; and

the transmitting comprises transmitting the retained intra frame to the particular client.

4. The method as recited in claim 1, further comprising:

synchronizing a multicast joining operation to the multicast group corresponding to the requested channel with regard to a next decodable frame of the requested channel.

5. The method as recited in claim 4, further comprising:

buffering a video stream portion;

wherein the synchronizing comprises determining when the next decodable frame is present within the buffered video stream portion.

6. The method as recited in claim 4, further comprising:

buffering a video stream portion,

wherein the synchronizing comprises determining when the retained intra frame reaches a joining time of the buffered video stream portion.

7. The method as recited in claim 4, further comprising:

issuing a join command responsive to the synchronizing.

8. The method as recited in claim 7, wherein the issuing comprises:

transmitting a join instruction communication to a client that made the channel change request, the join instruction communication stipulating a time at which the client is to transmit a join message to a replication point.

9. The method as recited in claim 7, wherein the issuing comprises:

transmitting a join message to a replication point.

10. The method as recited in claim 1, further comprising:

caching at least one previous intra frame for each channel of a plurality of channels as a set of cached intra frames;

retrieving, responsive to the detecting, the retained intra frame for the requested channel from the set of cached intra frames, the retained intra frame comprising a previous intra frame;

buffering a video stream portion;

synchronizing a multicast joining operation to the multicast group corresponding to the requested channel based, at least partially, on whether a next intra frame is present within the buffered video stream portion; and

issuing a join command responsive to the synchronizing.

11. The method as recited in claim 1, further comprising:

buffering a video stream portion;

buffering at least two intra frames for each channel of a plurality of channels to produce buffered intra frames;

retrieving, responsive to the detecting, the retained intra frame for the requested channel from the buffered intra frames with regard to a joining time of the buffered video stream portion;

synchronizing a multicast joining operation to the multicast group corresponding to the requested channel based, at least partially, on whether a next decodable frame is outside the joining time; and

issuing a join command responsive to the synchronizing.

12. One or more processor-accessible media comprising processor-executable instructions that, when executed, direct an apparatus to perform the method as recited in claim 1.

13. A channel change server comprising:

cached intra frames for a plurality of video streams, each respective video stream of the plurality of video streams associated with a respective channel of a plurality of channels;

a channel change request detector that is capable of detecting channel change requests from individual clients of a plurality of clients; and

a channel change request handler that is configured to respond to a detected channel change request from a particular client of the plurality of clients by extracting a most recent intra frame of a video stream associated with a requested channel from the cached intra frames and by transmitting the extracted most recent intra frame to the particular client using a unicast communication;

wherein the channel change server is associated with multicast video distribution of the plurality of video streams.

14. The channel change server as recited in claim 13, further comprising:

an intra frame cacher that is adapted to extract intra frames from the plurality of video streams and to cache at least a most recent intra frame for each video stream of the plurality of video streams.

15. The channel change server as recited in claim 13, further comprising:

a join command issuer that is adapted to send a join message to a replication point to cause the replication point to join the particular client to a multicast group corresponding to the requested channel.

16. The channel change server as recited in claim 13, further comprising:

a join command issuer that is adapted to send a join instruction message to the particular client, the join instruction message stipulating an appointed time at which the particular client is to transmit a join message to a replication point.

17. The channel change server as recited in claim 13, further comprising:

a synchronization determiner that is adapted to synchronize a multicast joining operation for the particular client to a multicast group corresponding to the requested channel with regard to a next intra frame of the video stream associated with the requested channel.

18. The channel change server as recited in claim 17, wherein the synchronization determiner is further adapted to synchronize the multicast joining operation for the particular client to the multicast group corresponding to the requested channel using a quasi-predicted time of the next intra frame of the video stream associated with the requested channel.

19. The channel change server as recited in claim 17, further comprising:

a time-delayed buffered portion of the video stream that is associated with the requested channel;

wherein the synchronization determiner is further adapted to synchronize the multicast joining operation for the particular client to the multicast group corresponding to the requested channel with regard to the time-delayed buffered portion of the video stream that is associated with the requested channel.

20. The channel change server as recited in claim 19, wherein a size of the time-delayed buffered portion corresponds to a likely or possible time period consumed when joining the particular client to the multicast group corresponding to the requested channel.

21. The channel change server as recited in claim 19, wherein the synchronization determiner is further adapted to determine that a join command is to be issued when the synchronization determiner ascertains that the next intra frame is present within the time-delayed buffered portion of the video stream that is associated with the requested channel.

22. The channel change server as recited in claim 19, wherein the synchronization determiner is further adapted to prompt issuance of a join command as soon as the next intra frame is ascertained to be present within the time-delayed

buffered portion of the video stream that is associated with the requested channel even if the extracted most recent intra frame of the video stream associated with the requested channel has not been fully delivered to the particular client using the unicast communication.

23. A channel change server comprising:

retained intra frames for a plurality of video streams, each respective video stream of the plurality of video streams associated with a respective channel of a plurality of channels;

a channel change request detector that is capable of detecting channel change requests from individual clients of a plurality of clients; and

a channel change request handler that is configured to respond to a detected channel change request from a particular client of the plurality of clients by extracting a retained intra frame of a video stream associated with a requested channel from the retained intra frames and by transmitting the extracted retained intra frame to the particular client using a unicast communication;

wherein the channel change server is associated with multicast video distribution of the plurality of video streams.

24. The channel change server as recited in claim 23, further comprising:

a video stream bufferer that is adapted to buffer each video stream of the plurality of video streams to create a plurality of respective buffered portions.

25. The channel change server as recited in claim 23, further comprising:

a join command issuer that is adapted to send a join message to a replication point to cause the replication point to join the particular client to a multicast group corresponding to the requested channel.

26. The channel change server as recited in claim 23, further comprising:

a join command issuer that is adapted to send a join instruction message to the particular client, the join instruction message stipulating an appointed time at which the particular client is to transmit a join message to a replication point.

27. The channel change server as recited in claim 23, further comprising:

a synchronization determiner that is adapted to synchronize a multicast joining operation for the particular client to a multicast group corresponding to the requested channel with regard to a next decodable frame of the video stream associated with the requested channel.

28. The channel change server as recited in claim 27, wherein the synchronization determiner is further adapted to synchronize the multicast joining operation for the particular client to the multicast group corresponding to the requested channel using a quasi-predicted time of the next decodable frame of the video stream associated with the requested channel.

29. The channel change server as recited in claim 27, further comprising:

a time-delayed buffered portion of the video stream that is associated with the requested channel;

wherein the synchronization determiner is further adapted to synchronize the multicast joining operation for the particular client to the multicast group corresponding to the requested channel with regard to the time-delayed buffered portion of the video stream that is associated with the requested channel.

30. The channel change server as recited in claim 29, wherein a size of the time-delayed buffered portion corresponds to a likely or possible time period consumed when joining the particular client to the multicast group corresponding to the requested channel.

31. The channel change server as recited in claim 29, wherein a size of the time-delayed buffered portion corresponds to a combination of a multicast joining time and an intra frame interval duration.

32. The channel change server as recited in claim 29, wherein a joining time of the time-delayed buffered portion corresponds to a likely or possible time period consumed when joining the particular client to the multicast group corresponding to the requested channel.

33. The channel change server as recited in claim 29, wherein the synchronization determiner is further adapted to determine that a join command is to be issued when the synchronization determiner ascertains that the next decodable frame is proximate to a joining time of the time-delayed buffered portion of the video stream that is associated with the requested channel.

34. The channel change server as recited in claim 29, wherein the synchronization determiner is further adapted to prompt issuance of a join command as soon as the next decodable frame is ascertained to be entering a joining time of the time-delayed buffered portion of the video stream that is associated with the requested channel even if the extracted retained intra frame of the video stream associated with the requested channel has not been fully delivered to the particular client using the unicast communication.

35. An arrangement for channel changing, comprising:

retention means for retaining at least one intra frame for each video stream of a plurality of video streams, each respective video stream associated with a respective channel of a plurality of channels;

detection means for detecting a channel change request from a client that indicates a requested channel, the channel change request from the client signifying a demand to switch from a first multicast group to a second multicast group that corresponds to the requested channel; and

handler means for handling the channel change request by transmitting a retained intra frame to the client via a unicast communication, the retained intra frame retained by the retention means from a respective video stream that is associated with the requested channel.

36. The arrangement as recited in claim 35, further comprising:

buffer means for buffering each respective video stream of the plurality of video streams to establish a respective buffered portion for each respective video stream; and

synchronization means for synchronizing a joining of the client to the second multicast group (i) with reference to a respective buffered portion for the respective video stream that is associated with the requested channel and

(ii) with regard to a next decodable frame of the respective video stream that is associated with the requested channel.

37. The arrangement as recited in claim 36, further comprising:

issuance means for issuing a join command responsive to the synchronization means.

38. The arrangement as recited in claim 35, wherein the retention means comprises at least one of (i) buffering means for buffering the at least one intra frame for each video stream of the plurality of video streams and (ii) caching means for caching at least one intra frame for each video stream of the plurality of video streams.

39. The arrangement as recited in claim 35, wherein the arrangement comprises at least one server.

40. The arrangement as recited in claim 35, wherein the arrangement comprises one or more processor-accessible media.

41. A server that is configured to retain at least one independent frame for each video channel of a plurality of video channels that are being distributed using multicast communications and that is adapted to respond to channel change requests from clients by transmitting the retained at least one independent frame of a requested video channel to a requesting client using a unicast communication.

42. The server as recited in claim 41, wherein the server is capable of multicasting the plurality of video channels to the clients.

43. The server as recited in claim 41, wherein the server is capable of synchronizing a multicast joining operation for the requesting client with regard to a next decodable frame of the requested video channel.

44. The server as recited in claim 43, wherein the next decodable frame of the requested video channel comprises a next independent frame.

45. The server as recited in claim 43, wherein the next decodable frame of the requested video channel comprises a next dependent frame.

46. The server as recited in claim 41, wherein the server is capable of synchronizing a multicast joining operation for the requesting client with regard to a next decodable frame of the requested video channel; and wherein the server is further adapted to refrain from transmitting the retained at least one independent frame of the requested video channel to the requesting client if transmission of the retained at least one independent frame jeopardizes timely reception of the next decodable frame of the requested video channel.

47. The server as recited in claim 41, wherein the server is further adapted to issue a join command irrespective of a complete or an incomplete delivery to the requesting client of the retained at least one independent frame of the requested video channel.

48. A system comprising:

at least one processor; and

one or more media including processor-executable instructions that are capable of being executed by the at least one processor, the processor-executable instructions adapted to direct the system to perform actions comprising:

multicasting a plurality of channels;

retaining at least one intra frame for each channel of the plurality of channels; and

transmitting a retained intra frame for a requested channel as a unicast communication responsive to a channel change request.

49. The system as recited in claim 48, wherein the system comprises a video provider and a channel change server.

50. The system as recited in claim 48, wherein the system comprises a video provider and a channel change server that are co-located.

51. The system as recited in claim 48, wherein the system comprises a channel change server that receives the plurality of channels from a video provider; and wherein the channel change server performs the action of multicasting the plurality of channels.

52. The system as recited in claim 48, wherein the processor-executable instructions are adapted to cause the system to perform a further action comprising:

synchronizing a multicast joining operation to a multicast group corresponding to the requested channel with regard to a next decodable frame of the requested channel.

53. The system as recited in claim 52, wherein the processor-executable instructions are adapted to cause the system to perform a further action comprising:

buffering a video stream portion of a video stream that is associated with the requested channel;

wherein the action of synchronizing comprises an action of determining when the next decodable frame is present within the buffered video stream portion of the video stream that is associated with the requested channel, the next decodable frame comprising a next intra frame.

54. The system as recited in claim 52, wherein the processor-executable instructions are adapted to cause the system to perform a further action comprising:

buffering a video stream portion of a video stream, which is associated with the requested channel, to a length that at least equals a sum of a multicast joining time and an intra frame interval duration;

wherein the action of synchronizing comprises an action of determining when the next decodable frame is entering the multicast joining time part of the buffered video stream portion of the video stream, the next decodable frame comprising a next non-intra frame.

55. The system as recited in claim 52, wherein the processor-executable instructions are adapted to cause the system to perform a further action comprising:

issuing a join command responsive to the synchronizing.

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