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(54) METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR INVITING NON-RICH MEDIA ENDPOINTS TO JOIN A CONFERENCE SIDEBAR SESSION

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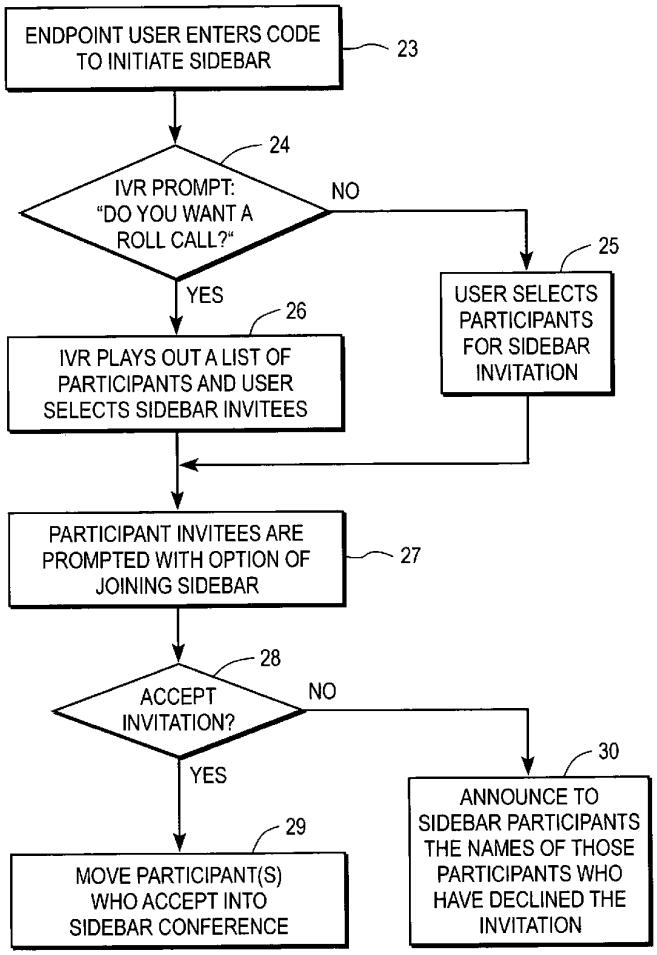
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A conferencing system and method includes, during the conference session, invoking an interactive voice response (IVR) routine that provides names of one or more conference participants to a user of an audio-only endpoint device responsive to a request from the user to create a sidebar session. An invitation to join the sidebar session is then communicated to each of one or more participants selected by the user, the invitation being communicated via a private media channel separate from a media stream associated with the conference session. It is emphasized that this abstract is provided to comply with the rules requiring an abstract that will allow a searcher or other reader to quickly ascertain the subject matter of the technical disclosure. It is submitted with the understanding that it will not be used to interpret or limit the scope or meaning of the claims.



Meta EX1012
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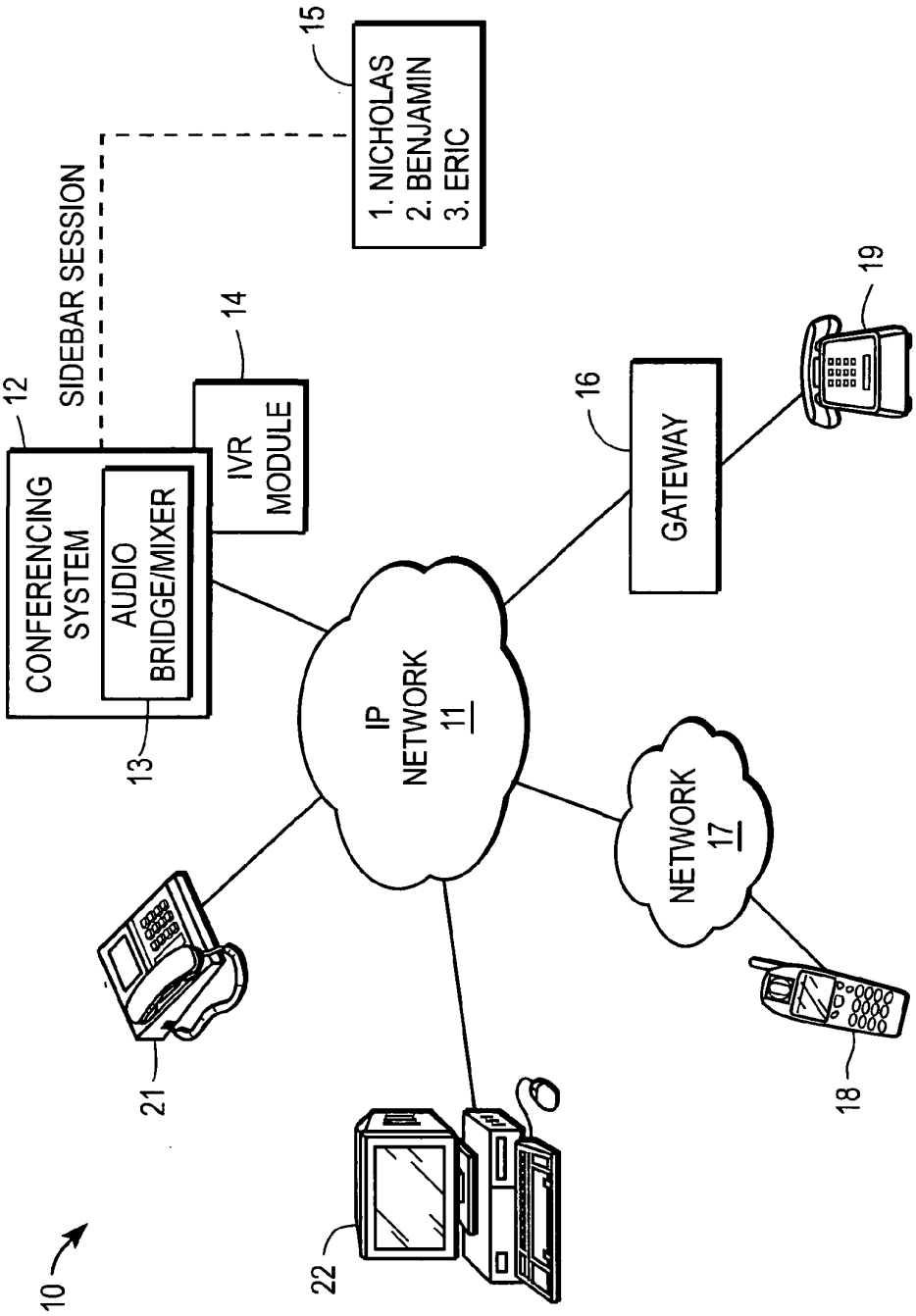
10
12
CONFERENCING SYSTEM
AUDIO BRIDGE/MIXER
13
SIDEBAR SESSION
14
IVR MODULE
15
1. NICHOLAS
2. BENJAMIN
3. ERIC
IP NETWORK 11
16
GATEWAY
19
NETWORK 17
18
21
22

FIG. 1

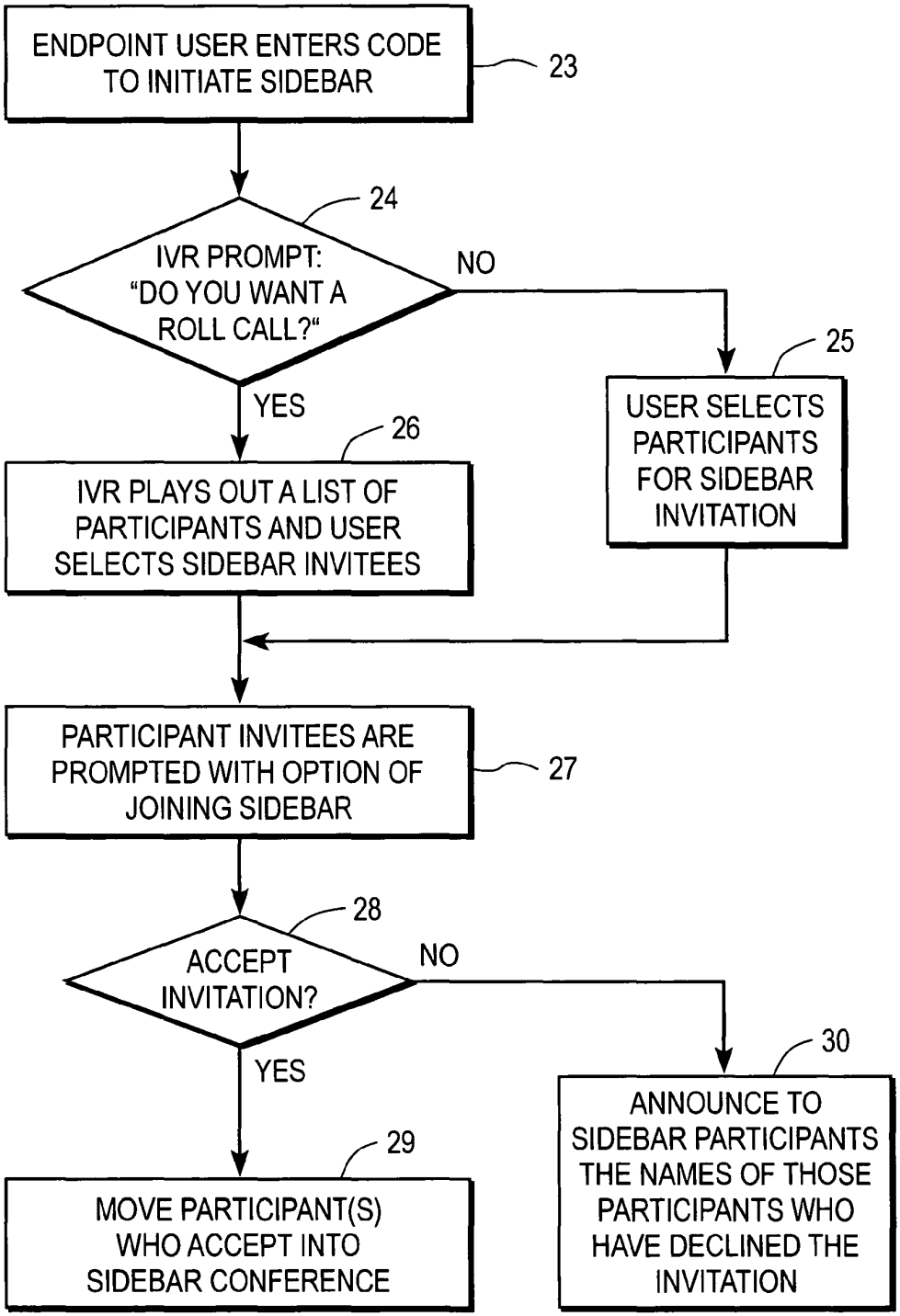
ENDPOINT USER ENTERS CODE TO INITIATE SIDEBAR
23
24
IVR PROMPT: "DO YOU WANT A ROLL CALL?"
NO
25
USER SELECTS PARTICIPANTS FOR SIDEBAR INVITATION
YES
26
IVR PLAYS OUT A LIST OF PARTICIPANTS AND USER SELECTS SIDEBAR INVITEES
PARTICIPANT INVITEES ARE PROMPTED WITH OPTION OF JOINING SIDEBAR
27
28
ACCEPT INVITATION?
NO
30
YES
ANNOUNCE TO SIDEBAR PARTICIPANTS THE NAMES OF THOSE PARTICIPANTS WHO HAVE DECLINED THE INVITATION
29
MOVE PARTICIPANT(S) WHO ACCEPT INTO SIDEBAR CONFERENCE

FIG. 2

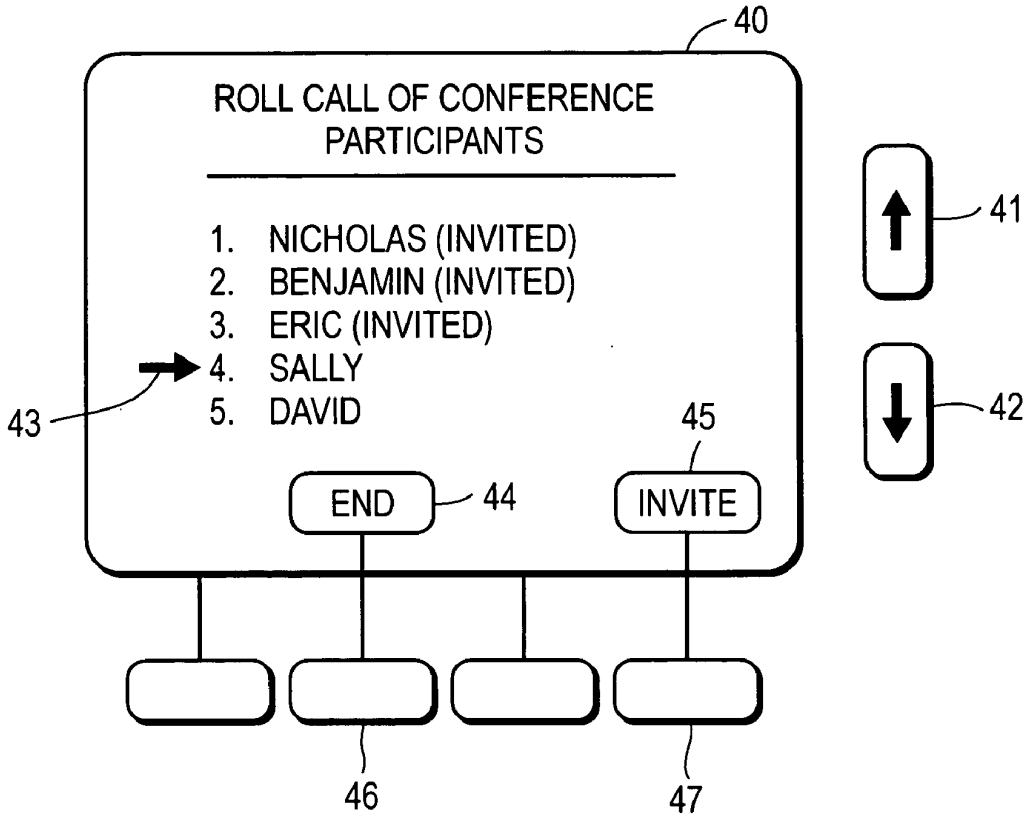
40
ROLL CALL OF CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS
1. NICHOLAS (INVITED)
2. BENJAMIN (INVITED)
3. ERIC (INVITED)
4. SALLY
5. DAVID
43
41
42
45
END
44
INVITE
46
47

FIG. 3

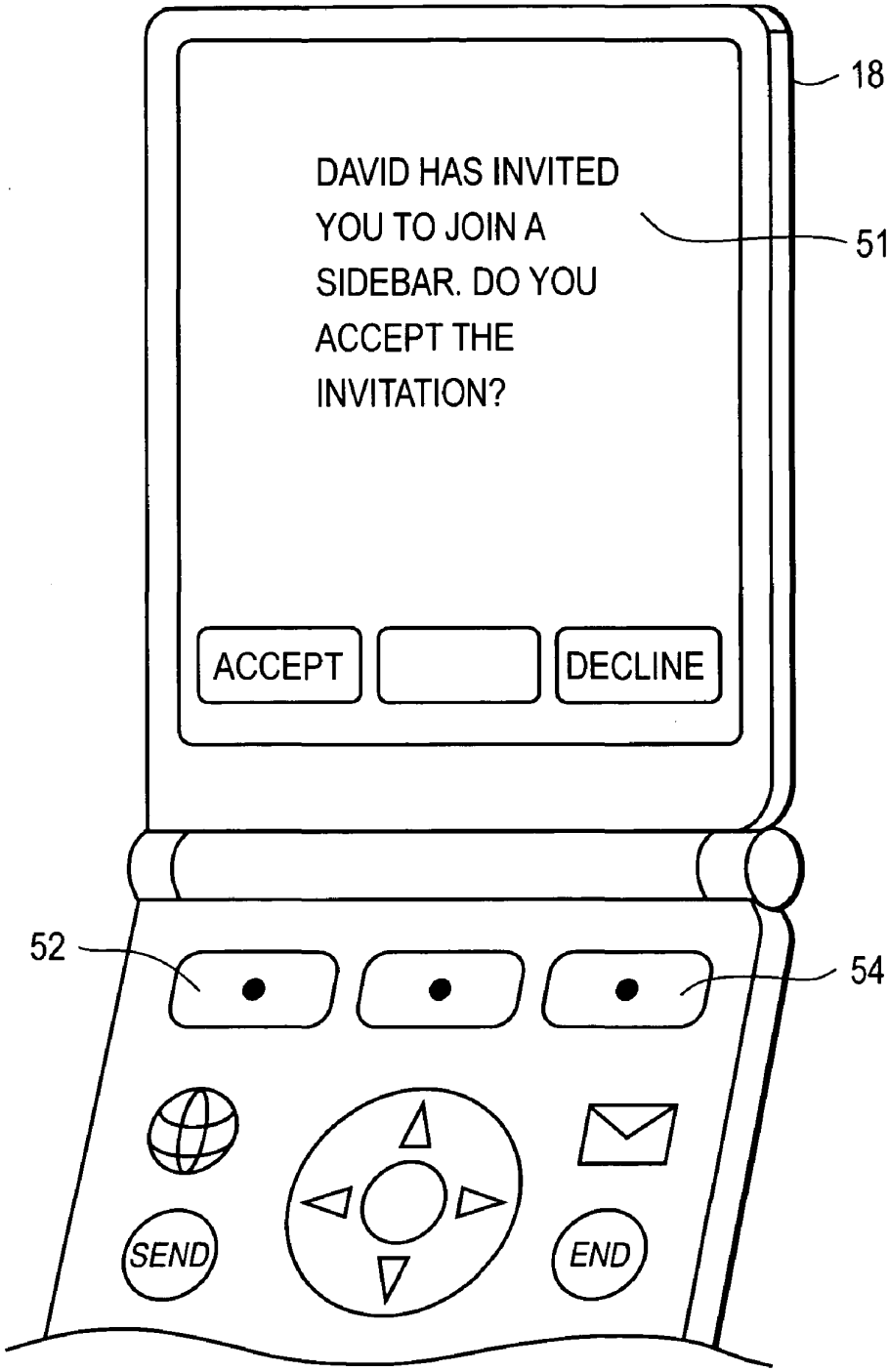
18
DAVID HAS INVITED
YOU TO JOIN A
SIDEBAR. DO YOU
ACCEPT THE
INVITATION?
51
ACCEPT
DECLINE
52
54
SEND
END

FIG. 4

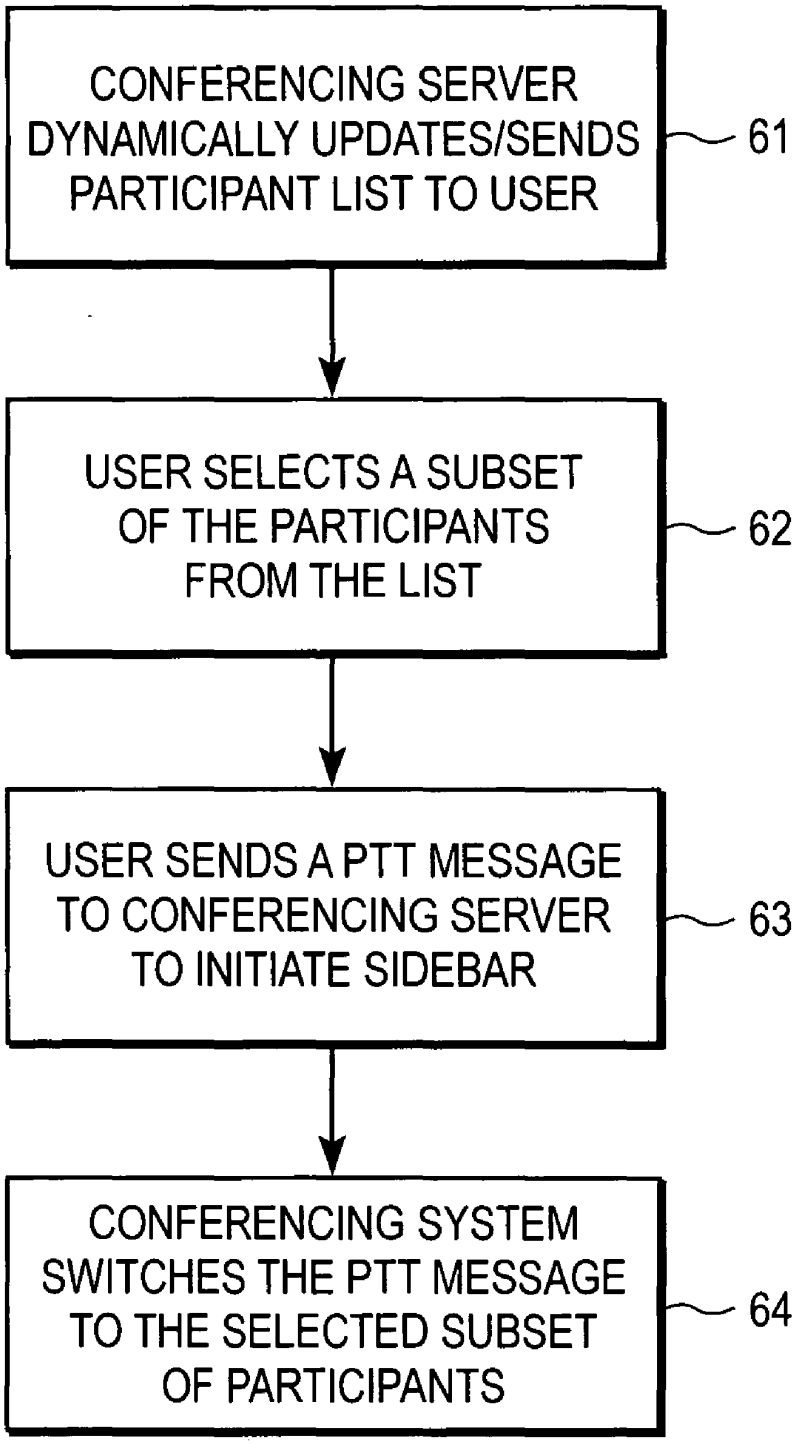
CONFERENCING SERVER DYNAMICALLY UPDATES/SENDS PARTICIPANT LIST TO USER
61
USER SELECTS A SUBSET OF THE PARTICIPANTS FROM THE LIST
62
USER SENDS A PTT MESSAGE TO CONFERENCING SERVER TO INITIATE SIDEBAR
63
CONFERENCING SYSTEM SWITCHES THE PTT MESSAGE TO THE SELECTED SUBSET OF PARTICIPANTS
64

FIG. 5

METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR INVITING NON-RICH MEDIA ENDPOINTS TO JOIN A CONFERENCE SIDEBAR SESSION

RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application is related to pending application entitled, "System With User Interface For Sending/Receiving Messages During A Conference Session", which application is assigned to the assignee of the present application.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention relates generally to the fields of data networks and communication systems; more specifically, to conferencing systems and methods for group communications over a telephony network.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] Conferencing systems and methods, in which participants communicate in a conference session or meeting over existing voice and data networks, have been in existence for some time. Recent examples of conference calling systems include U.S. Pat. No. 6,865,540, which teaches a method and apparatus for providing group calls via the Internet; U.S. Pat. No. 6,876,734, which teaches an Internet-enabled conferencing system accommodating public switched telephone network (PSTN) and Internet Protocol (IP) traffic; U.S. Pat. No. 6,931,001, which discloses a system for interconnecting packet-switched and circuit-switched voice communications; and U.S. Pat. No. 6,671,262, which teaches a system with conference servers for combining IP packet streams in a conference call into combined packet streams, such that the combined IP packet stream utilizes no more bandwidth than each of the original packet streams.

[0004] A variety of different features and approaches for scheduling, control, and management of conference call sessions are also known. For instance, a conferencing system that facilitates a conference call by enabling a participant in the call session to determine and categorize the identities of the other participants is taught in U.S. Pat. No. 6,931,113. A conference calling system in which each participant may individually control incoming audio streams from other participants, and in which participants may communicate privately with each other in the context of the conference call, is disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 6,501,739. U.S. Pat. No. 6,816,469 teaches an IP telephony network and PSTN network that allows one or more call waiting callers to dynamically join in an existing multiple party conference call session.

[0005] In addition, commercially-available IP communication system products such as Cisco's MeetingPlace™ conferencing application allow users to schedule meeting conferences in advance or, alternatively, to set up conferences immediately by dialing out to participant parties. Cisco MeetingPlace™ is typically deployed on a corporate network behind the firewall, and facilitates scheduling of business conferences from a touch-tone or voice over IP (VoIP) telephone, or a computer, using various software clients, such as Microsoft® Outlook, or a web browser.

[0006] Often times during a meeting or conference session certain participants want to exchange messages or engage in discussions without disturbing the other participants of the conference session. For instance, in the middle of a conference session several participants may want to have a sidebar conversation to discuss some important topic. Existing conferencing systems such as Cisco's MeetingPlace™ software product allow a subset of meeting participants to enter a "breakout" session or "room" in which individuals can establish their own private communication group session apart from the main conference session by pressing a predetermined keypad code or sequence (e.g., by pressing #1(1-9)).

[0007] In a rich media conferencing system, such as where each of the conference participants are in front of a PC, then everyone can communicate using an instant messaging (IM) client or similar web-based tool to invite selected participants to enter a breakout session. However, for conference participants that have endpoints devices with non-rich media capabilities, such as audio-only endpoints, this is a problem. Using existing conferencing systems, the only practical way to invite a person with an audio-only endpoint device to join a breakout or sidebar session is to interrupt the conference discussions in order to ask that person to join the sidebar session. Naturally, this disturbs the other participants and interferes with the ongoing discussions. For privacy reasons it may also be desirable to keep others from knowing that the sidebar conversation is currently in progress.

[0008] What is needed therefore is a conferencing system and method that overcomes the drawbacks of the prior art and which enables audio-only endpoints to receive an invitation to participant in a sidebar session conference session without disturbing the other participants to the conference session.

[0009] By way of further background, a U.S. Pat. Nos. 6,608,820 and 6,236,854 teach methods for controlling a conference call that allows a controlling party using a mobile handset to engage in a private conversation with only one of the subject parties in a conference. A mobile station includes a store for storing a special conference call participant "set-up number" in relation to the subject party number and/or name. In addition, U.S. Pat. No. 5,729,687 describes a computer conferencing system having a plurality of participants coupled by a communication medium, each participant of the plurality of participants having a meeting manager, a process and apparatus for joining participants in the conferencing system.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0010] The present invention will be understood more fully from the detailed description that follows and from the accompanying drawings, which however, should not be taken to limit the invention to the specific embodiments shown, but are for explanation and understanding only.

[0011] FIG. **1** is a conceptual diagram of a conferencing system in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

[0012] FIG. **2** is a flowchart diagram that illustrates a method of operation according to one embodiment of the present invention.

[0013] FIG. **3** is an Internet Protocol (IP) telephone device with a display window that may be utilized to invite selected participants into a sidebar session in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

[0014] FIG. **4** illustrates a display window and portion of a keypad of a cellphone that may be utilized to accept/decline an invitation to join a sidebar session in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

[0015] FIG. **5** is a flowchart diagram that illustrates a method of operation according to another embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0016] A method and apparatus that enables an audio-only endpoint device to initiate a sidebar session, or to receive and accept (or decline) a sidebar invitation during a conference session without disturbing the other participants to the conference session and without speaking into the main audio mixer of the system is described. In the following description specific details are set forth, such as device types, system configurations, protocols, methods, etc., in order to provide a thorough understanding of the present invention. However, persons having ordinary skill in the relevant arts will appreciate that these specific details may not be needed to practice the present invention.

[0017] According to one embodiment of the present invention, a mechanism is provided in which a conference participant can invite other participants to a sidebar (i.e., breakout) session regardless of whether any of the invitees, or the participant extending the invitation, has an audio-only (i.e., non-rich media) telephone device. That is, the endpoint devices utilized by participants during a conference session need not have display, IM, or web-access capabilities.

[0018] Referring to FIG. **1**, an exemplary system **10** in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention is shown including a conference system **12** (e.g., a server) coupled with, or which includes, an audio bridge/mixer **13** that mixes audio signals received from each of the conference or meeting participants. In this example, the conference participants are shown by endpoint devices **18**, **19**, **21**, and **22**. Endpoint device **19** is an analog (audio-only) Plain-Old Telephone System (POTS) device coupled with conferencing system **12** via gateway device **16** and IP network **11**. Endpoint device **18** is a cellular telephone that is coupled with conferencing system **12** via cellular telephone network **17** and IP network **11**. Endpoint device **22** comprises a PC with built-in softphone capabilities (i.e., a PC that has phone capabilities installed or incorporated therein). Endpoint device **21** is a VoIP telephone with display capabilities that is coupled with conferencing system **12** via cellular telephone IP network **11**. In general, an endpoint represents an end user, client, or person who is capable of participating in an audio conference session via conferencing system **12**. Other endpoint devices not specifically shown in FIG. **1** that may be used to initiate or participate in a conference session include a personal digital assistant (PDA), a laptop or notebook computer, a non-IP telephone device, a audio/video appliance, a streaming client, a television device, or any other device, component, element, or object capable of initiating or participating in voice exchanges with conferencing system **12**.

[0019] It is appreciated that the media path for the conference participants may include audio (voice) transmissions across a variety of different networks (e.g., Internet, intranet, PSTN, etc.), protocols (e.g., IP, Asynchronous Transfer Mode (ATM), Point-to-Point Protocol (PPP)), with connections that span across multiple services, systems, and devices (e.g., private branch exchange (PBX) systems, VoIP gateways, etc.). Practitioners in the arts will understand that each of the component modules and units shown in FIG. **1** may be implemented by hardware, firmware, or software component elements that implement the various functions described herein.

[0020] An interactive voice response (IVR) system module **14** is shown associated with conferencing system **12**. IVR module **13** may be implemented in software, firmware, or hardware residing on the conference server, or comprise a separate module in system **10** accessible via IP network **11**. In one embodiment, a non-rich media endpoint device, such as endpoint device **19**, utilizes IVR module **14** to select participants to be invited to a sidebar session. By way of example, FIG. **1** illustrates a sidebar session **15** that has been created by conference system **12** in response to IVR prompts received from endpoint device **19**. Sidebar session **15** is shown including three invited participants: Nicholas, Benjamin and Eric. To facilitate creation of the sidebar session, the user of endpoint device **19** may initiate sidebar invitation operations by entering a predefined input code, e.g., "#55". In response to the user dialing is code, IVR module **14** responds by prompting the user with an audio roll call of each of the participants to the conference. For instance, after each name is readout the IVR system may ask the user, "Do you want to invite this person to the sidebar session?" An affirmative response results in the participant's name being added to a list of participants to be invited into the sidebar session, where as a negative response results in the IVR system skipping over that person and moving on to the next person in the roll call list.

[0021] Alternatively, IVR module **14** may simply prompt the user to speak the names of the conference participants he wishes to invite to the sidebar session. For example, if there are a large number of participants in a conference session, the inviting participant may be prompted to perform a directory search for invitee participants. Various natural language automatic speech recognition (ASR) programs/modules associated with conferencing system **12** may be utilized for interpreting and parsing speech of the participants in order to assist in the process of correctly identifying the individual participants who are to be invited to join the sidebar session. In one embodiment, a speech recognition module may collect the names of all conference participants (e.g., upon initially joining the general session). The speech recognition module may also utilize or incorporate standard speech-to-text (STT) and text-to-speech (TTS) converter modules. (It is appreciated that IVR module **14**, ASR module, and any other modules/units may either be incorporated into conferencing system **12**, be separate components entirely, or included in other components of system **10**.)

[0022] Once the inviting user has gone through the entire roll call of conference participants or otherwise completed his selection of sidebar session invitees, conferencing system **12** allocates sufficient conferencing resources (i.e., bandwidth, memory, etc.) for the sidebar and then begins the process of inviting each of the selected participants to join the sidebar session. Note that the invitation process can occur in several ways: visually, audibly, or both. A visual indication is basically a text display of the invitation and includes the name of the person who has extended the invitation. A purpose or subject of the sidebar session may optionally be included in the text display.

[0023] FIG. **4** illustrates a cellphone device **18** having a display panel **51** that shows a visual text message invitation to join a sidebar session to an invitee participant to a

conference session. The text message reads, "David has invited you to join a sidebar. Do you accept the invitation?" Note that the text message display may be preceded by, or be presented simultaneously with, an audible tone (e.g., a "beep-beep" sound) that alerts the user to the arrival of the text message. This audible tone, however, is not heard by the other participants in the conference session. That is, the audible tone is not mixed into the output media stream sent from audio bridge/mixer **13** to those endpoint devices participating in the conference session. Rather, the audible tone is delivered on a separate audio channel to the participant who has been invited to the sidebar session so that it is not heard by other conference participants.

[0024] In the example in FIG. **4**, the user may accept the invitation to join the sidebar session by pressing keypad button **52**. Upon acceptance, the cellphone user is automatically moved into the sidebar session that has been created or allocated by the conferencing system. Alternatively, the user may decline the invitation by pressing keypad button **54** on cellphone device **18**. In one implementation, declining a sidebar invitation results in a message being sent to the inviting participant, notifying him that the named invitee has declined his invitation to join the sidebar session.

[0025] An audio invitation to join a sidebar session occurs automatically via the IVR system. The IVR menu or invitation prompt is delivered to the invitee participant on an audio channel that is separate from that used by audio bridge/mixer **13** so that it is not heard by other conference participants. In other words, the interactions between the IVR and the invitee participant are kept private and excluded from the main audio media stream sent from the mixer to each of the endpoints participating in the general conference discussions. Each invited participant may be played a prompt indicating the name of the person that invited him to join the sidebar conversation, along with an option to accept/reject the invitation. If the participant accepts the invitation and elects to join the sidebar session, he is automatically moved him into the sidebar session that the conferencing system previously allocated. On the other hand, if the invitee refuses the invitation, his refusal may be announced in the sidebar session (e.g., "Joe has declined to join the sidebar session.".

[0026] In another implementation, instead of being played an IVR prompt, a rich media endpoint (e.g., PC **22** in FIG. **1**) may receive an Instant Message (IM) to join a sidebar session directly from the conferencing system.

[0027] In yet another embodiment, the conferencing system application may be configured to obtain presence information from each of the conference participants in order to determine the appropriate mechanism or channel to present the sidebar invitation to the conference participant. For example, conferencing system **12** may determine that since the participant associated with endpoint device **19** (see FIG. **1**) has dialed into the conference through a telephone device without display capabilities, the appropriate notification modality for any sidebar invitation should be via an IVR prompt. On the other hand, the participant associated with endpoint device **21** may be notified via a text message displayed on his VoIP phone, with the phone's softkeys being configured for one or more appropriate responses. In the case of endpoint device **22**, the invitation may be sent via a web-based IM ("pop-up") message.

[0028] FIG. **2** is a flowchart diagram that illustrates an exemplary method of operation according to one embodiment of the present invention. The method starts when, during a conference session, one of the conference participants (i.e., an endpoint user) enters a command or code that initiates the process of selecting participants to invite to the sidebar session (block **23**). Note that if the endpoint user who is initiating the sidebar session is doing so from a rich media endpoint device, a specialized graphical user interface (GUI) may be utilized to facilitate the invitation process. This aspect of the present invention will be discussed in more detail below. The embodiment of FIG. **2**, however, is for a method of operation applicable to an audio-only endpoint device.

[0029] Once the inviting participant has initiated the sidebar invitation process, the IVR system begins by asking him whether he wishes a roll call listing of all of the conference participants (block **24**). This step basically gives the inviting participant the opportunity to directly select the invitee participants (block **25**)—assuming that he knows their names—thereby avoiding a potentially lengthy roll call listing of all the names of the participants to the conference session. Of the user may also perform a directory lookup search at this point in lieu of a roll call listing. This search can be based on first or last name, and should have common expansion options, such as providing all the names that match the spelling of the first three letters of a person's last name. In the event that the user elects to have the system provide him with a roll call of the conference participants, each participant name provided is followed by an IVR prompt asking whether that particular person should be invited to join the sidebar session (block **26**). The user may select whether to invite that particular participant to the sidebar session by simply saying "yes" or pressing an appropriate keypad or softkey button on his telephone device (e.g., "1" or "#").

[0030] Regardless of the manner of how each of invitees is selected, after the user has completed the selection process the conferencing system automatically sends an invitation prompting the participant to join the sidebar session (block **27**). Each invitee is prompted to either accept or decline the invitation (block **28**). As discussed mentioned, the actual form of the invitation and the method of response by the invitee (e.g., telephony user interface) may vary depending upon the type of endpoint device utilized by the invitee participant. For example, in the case where the invitee has dialed into the conference session using an ordinary POTS phone an IVR menu prompt or "whisper" tone invitation message may be played to the person.

[0031] Acceptance of the invitation results in a participant being automatically moved out of the main conference session and into the sidebar session allocated by the conferencing system (block **29**). In other words, when a participant accepts a sidebar invitation, the conferencing system immediately switches the audio media stream from his associated endpoint device so that it is no longer mixed and output to the general conference session. Instead, the audio stream of the endpoint device is mixed and sent out to those participants of the sidebar session only. Finally, in the embodiment of FIG. **2** the name of any participant who has declined an invitation to join the sidebar session is announced to the other sidebar participants (block **30**).

[0032] According to one embodiment of the present invention, the process of initiating and inviting participants to a sidebar session may be facilitated through a specialized user interface implemented on an endpoint device. For example,

in one implementation, PC **22** (see FIG. **1**) may also include a graphical user interface (GUI) comprising a collaborative web-based application that is accessed by the browser software running on PC **22**. In other instances, the GUI running on PC **22** may comprise a downloaded application of computer-executable code that may be loaded or accessed by PC **22**. The GUI may facilitate downloading and graphical presentation of a roll call listing of conference participants allowing a user to select sidebar invitees simply by "right-clicking" on their displayed names, or by clicking and dragging their names between different fields (e.g., from a conference session field to a sidebar session field).

[0033] FIG. **3** illustrates a display screen **40** of an IP phone (e.g., VoIP phone) according to one embodiment of the present invention. Display screen **40** comprises a specialized user interface useful in displaying conference participants and selecting participants to be invited to a sidebar session. The user interface shown in FIG. **3** may be generated by software (i.e., code) running on the user's IP phone. In this case, the IP phone can be equipped with a special "softkey" assignment button used to invoke or initiate a sidebar session. The template for this softkey button can be instantiated once the user joins the main conference session, or simply be located under a main conferencing menu on the telephone device. For example, to initiate a sidebar session a participant can simply the press the "sidebar" softkey button on his IP phone, resulting in the conferencing system sending a roll call listing of the conference participants to display **40**, as shown in FIG. **3**.

[0034] Note that in the example of FIG. **3**, other than the user of the IP phone, five participants are presently in the conference session: Nicholas, Benjamin, Eric, Sally, and David. Of these four, Nicholas, Benjamin and Eric have already been invited by the user to join the sidebar session. The cursor arrow **43** is currently shown positioned by Sally's name. The user has the option of moving cursor arrow **43** up or down by pressing scrolling buttons **41** and **42**, respectfully. An invitation to join the sidebar session is made by pressing softkey **47**, which corresponds to icon **45** ("INVITE") on display screen **40**. When the user is finished making his selections, he may end the invitation process by pressing softkey button **46**, which corresponds to icon **44** ("END") on display screen **40**. Ending the invitation process automatically causes the conferencing system to sending IVR menu prompts or text (e.g., IM) message invitations to each of the participants selected by the user.

[0035] It should be understood that the conference participant roll call list can be dynamically updated by the conferencing server as soon as individual endpoint devices join/leave the conference session, as opposed to a one-time download when the "sidebar" button is pressed. For example, if, during the selection process, a new endpoint device joins the main conference session, that person's name may be dynamically added to the roll call listing being presented on display screen **40**.

[0036] FIG. **5** is a flowchart diagram that illustrates a method of operation according to another embodiment of the present invention. The embodiment of FIG. **5** operates with endpoints having integrated presence capability, for example, cell phones or Wi-Fi phones that have push-to-talk (PTT) capabilities. PTT is a two-way communication service that works like a walkie-talkie. A normal cell phone call is full-duplex, meaning both parties can hear each other at the same time. PTT is half-duplex, meaning communication can only travel in one direction at any given moment. Many PTT systems in the concept known as "buddy" lists, which can be used to send messages simultaneously to a selected group of people whose names/numbers are stored as such in a memory. The buddy participant list can be dynamically updated by the conference server as soon as a participant joins in a conference (block **61**). When the participant wishes to invite one or more other participants into a sidebar he may select a subset of participants from his buddy participant list (block **62**) and send a PTT message to the conferencing server (block **63**). The conferencing system responds to the PTT message by individually contacting each participant to ask them to join a particular sidebar session. The conferencing server may do this simply by switching the PTT message sent by the user to the selected subset of participants on the user's buddy list.

[0037] It should be understood that elements of the present invention may also be provided as a computer program product which may include a machine-readable medium having stored thereon instructions which may be used to program a computer (e.g., a processor or other electronic device) to perform a sequence of operations. Alternatively, the operations may be performed by a combination of hardware and software. The machine-readable medium may include, but is not limited to, floppy diskettes, optical disks, CD-ROMs, and magneto-optical disks, ROMs, RAMs, EPROMs, EEPROMs, magnet or optical cards, propagation media or other type of media/machine-readable medium suitable for storing electronic instructions. For example, elements of the present invention may be downloaded as a computer program product, wherein the program may be transferred from a remote computer or telephonic device to a requesting process by way of data signals embodied in a carrier wave or other propagation medium via a communication link (e.g., a modem or network connection).

[0038] Additionally, although the present invention has been described in conjunction with specific embodiments, numerous modifications and alterations are well within the scope of the present invention. Accordingly, the specification and drawings are to be regarded in an illustrative rather than a restrictive sense.

We claim:

1. A processor-implemented method of operation involving a plurality of conference participants using a corresponding plurality of endpoint devices, comprising:

during the conference session, receiving a request to allocate a sidebar session from a user of an audio-only endpoint device;

providing, via an interactive voice response (IVR) system, names of one or more conference participants to the user of the audio-only endpoint device responsive to the request; and

communicating an invitation to join the sidebar session to each of one or more participants selected by the user, the invitation being communicated via a private media channel separate from a media stream associated with the conference session.

2. The processor-implemented method of claim **1** wherein providing the names comprises:

providing a roll call listing of all of the conference participants.

3. The processor-implemented method of claim **1** further comprising:

providing a roll call listing of all of the conference participants.

4. The processor-implemented method of claim **1** wherein the invitation comprises an IVR prompt.

5. The processor-implemented method of claim **1** further comprising:

receiving an invitation acceptance from a first conference participant; and

moving the first conference participant out of the conference session and into the sidebar session.

6. The processor-implemented method of claim **5** further comprising:

receiving an invitation declination from a second conference participant; and

announcing in the sidebar session that the second conference participant has declined the invitation to join the sidebar session.

7. Logic for conducting a conference session, the logic being encoded in one or more media for execution and when executed is operable to:

during the conference session, invoke an interactive voice response (IVR) routine that provides names of one or more conference participants to a user of an audio-only endpoint device responsive to a request from the user to create a sidebar session; and

communicate an invitation to join the sidebar session to each of one or more participants selected by the user, the invitation being communicated via a private media channel separate from a media stream associated with the conference session.

8. The logic of claim **7** wherein the IVR routine comprises a sequence of queries such that the user of the audio-only endpoint device need only make an affirmative response or a negative response to each query.

9. The logic of claim **8** wherein the affirmative response and the negative response are both verbal responses.

10. The logic of claim **7** wherein the media, when executed, is further operable to:

perform a directory search based on a partial spelling or a first or last name of a conference participant.

11. The logic of claim **7** wherein the invitation comprises an IVR prompt.

12. The logic of claim **7** wherein the media, when executed, is further operable to:

receive an invitation acceptance from a first conference participant; and

move the first participant out of the conference session and into the sidebar session.

13. The logic of claim **7** wherein the media, when executed, is further operable to:

receive an invitation declination from a second conference participant; and

announce in the sidebar session that the second conference participant has declined the invitation to join the sidebar session.

14. A system for conferencing a plurality of conference participants in a conference session comprising:

a mixer that mixes audio streams received from two or more of the conference participants, the mixer outputting a mixed audio stream for delivery to the conference participants;

an interactive voice response (IVR) module; and

means responsive to input from a user interface of an endpoint device during the conference session for allocating a sidebar session and for communicating with the endpoint device via a first private channel to obtain names of a subset of the conference participants to be invited to join the sidebar session, the means also for communicating an invitation to join the sidebar session to each of the conference participants in the subset of conference participants, wherein the invitation to at least one of the conference participants comprises an IVR menu prompt provided by the IVR module communicated via a second private channel.

15. The system of claim **14** wherein the means is further for moving each of the conference participants who accept the invitation out of the conference session and into the sidebar session.

16. The system of claim **14** wherein the user interface comprises a graphical user interface.

17. The system of claim **14** wherein the first private channel comprises an Internet protocol (IP) network connection.

18. The system of claim **14** wherein the endpoint device comprises a voice over Internet protocol (IP) telephone device having a display screen.

19. An Internet protocol (IP) phone for connecting with a conferencing system via an IP network, comprising:

a display;

a plurality of softkey buttons;

a program that runs on the IP device to produce a user interface that integrates the display and the softkey buttons such that the softkey buttons operate to invoke functions displayed on corresponding icon areas of the display, the user interface providing a user of the IP phone with a first menu option to request the conferencing system to create a sidebar session during a conference session, selection of the first menu option causing the IP phone to present a roll call list of conference participants on the display, the roll call list being downloaded from the conferencing system, the user interface providing the user with the ability to select a subset of the conference participants to be invited to join the sidebar session by the conferencing system.

20. A processor-implemented method for operation in a conference session involving a plurality of conference participants, comprising:

receiving, at a conference server, a push-to-talk (PTT) message sent by a first conference participant, the PTT message being associated with a list of participants selected by the first conference participant, the list of participants being a subset of the plurality of conference participants, the PTT message including an invitation to join a sidebar session;

sending, by the conference server, the PTT message to each of the conference participants included in the list of participants; and

moving each of the conference participants included in the list of participants into the sidebar session upon acceptance of the invitation,

wherein communication of the PTT message between the conferencing server and each of the conference participants occurs on a private media channel separate from a media stream associated with the conference session.

21. The processor-implemented method of claim **20** further comprising:

allocating the sidebar session by the conference server.

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