DAIPaS: A Performance Aware Congestion Control Algorithm in Wireless Sensor Networks

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Abstract—As Wireless Sensor Networks are evolving to applications where high load demands dominate and performance becomes a crucial factor, congestion remains a serious problem that has to be effectively and efficiently tackled. Congestion in WSNs is mitigated either by reducing the data load or by increasing capacity. In either case due to the energy constraints and low processing capabilities of sensor nodes, congestion control and avoidance algorithms have to be kept as simple and efficient as possible while overhead must be limited. In this paper we propose a novel and simple Dynamic Alternative Path Selection Scheme (DAIPaS) that attempts to face congestion by increasing capacity while it attempts to maintain performance requirements. DAIPaS can efficiently and adaptively choose an alternative routing path in order to avoid congested nodes, by taking into consideration a number of critical parameters that affect the performance of a WSN while maintaining overhead in minimal levels. Simulation results show that the DAIPaS algorithm can achieve better performance over comparable schemes.

Keywords—Wireless Sensor Networks, Alternative Path Routing, Congestion Control, Energy Utilization

I. INTRODUCTION

Wireless Sensor Networks (WSNs) are wireless networks consisting of spatially distributed autonomous devices using sensors to cooperatively monitor physical or environmental conditions, such as temperature, sound, vibration, pressure, motion, or pollutants, at different locations [1]. Sensor nodes are low cost, light-weight, tiny devices with energy constraints. Frequently, sensor nodes are densely deployed near the event sources and sinks in a redundant manner [2]. Since power is a severe limitation for these nodes, dense deployment assists in the networks’ robust operation (e.g. due to node or link failure) and significantly contributes in the overall network performance. Congestion happens when the offered load is more than the available capacity of the network. Currently there are two ways to face congestion. Either by reducing the offered load (traffic control) or by increasing capacity (resource control) [3]. Both methods present advantages and disadvantages under specific scenarios. In general, traffic control methods can be considered as more effective when transient overload situation exist while resource control methods are more effective when persistent high load demands exist [3], [4]. Although traffic control is much simpler and less costly in comparison with resource control, the fact that the number of packets are reduced exactly at the moment where the monitored event is taking place, it renders it inappropriate for a number of critical applications. In such a case resource control methods, such as the one proposed in this paper, must apply.

The challenge in this case is twofold. At first, a simple algorithm with minor computations must be developed while at second it should be able to take into account a number of performance parameters before taking the decision for the alternate path. Choosing an alternate path in dense topologies when congestion arises, is a challenging task since various parameters, which are critical for the network’s mission need to be handled. These parameters include: (a) the node’s (in a microscopic way) and the network’s (in a macroscopic way) remaining energy, (b) congestion, in terms of buffer occupancy and interference, (c) the time to transmit data from the source to the sink, and (d) the packet loss rate of the network. Several research papers have addressed some of these problems using single path routing, either for energy efficiency [5] [6] or for congestion control [7] [8]. However, single path routing algorithms suffer from the problem of individual node power exhaustion, since they tend to use the shortest path to forward their data. This, eventually, leads to the discovery and creation of a new path, which is a power-consuming procedure. In addition, the best way to control congestion using single path routing, is by reducing the transmission rate of source nodes, an unacceptable condition for many applications [3].

In this paper we present a novel and simple Dynamic Alternative Path Selection Scheme (DAIPaS) which can efficiently choose an alternate routing path in case of congestion, taking into consideration a number of critical performance parameters such as the remaining power of nodes, the available buffer space, the medium interference, as well as the nodes’ distance from sink. This work takes in consideration the results presented in [4] and [9] and the target is to keep the algorithm as simple as possible in order to be feasibly implemented in wireless sensor nodes. The
novelty of this algorithm lies on the number of parameters that examines in relation with the minimal overhead. In addition, we believe that the simplicity of the algorithm, makes it ideal for low-processing-capable terminals.

II. RELATED WORK

Resource control as method for congestion control and avoidance as well as for reliable data transmission in WSNs has not attracted a lot of attention. Some notable efforts are presented below.

TARA (Topology Aware Resource Adaptation) [3]. This protocol focuses on the adaptation of network’s extra recourses in case of congestion, alleviating intersection hot spots. TARA copes with buffer occupancy as well as channel loading. In TARA, congestion alleviation is performed with the assistance of two important nodes. These are the distributor and the merger nodes. Between them a "detour path" is established starting at the distributor and ending at the merger. The distributor distributes the traffic coming from the hot spot between the original path and the detour path, while the merger merges the two flows. Thus, in case of congestion and creation of hot-spot, traffic is deflected from the hot spot through the distributor node along the detour and reaches the merge node, where the flows are merged. As soon as congestion has been alleviated the network stops using the detour path. For quick adaptation the distributor node keeps in its memory which neighbor is on the original path.

CADA (Congestion Avoidance Detection and Alleviation) [10]. In this algorithm the congestion level of a node is measured by an aggregation of the buffer occupancy and channel utilization. It actually counts the growing rate of the buffer’s occupancy and when it exceeds a certain limit, the node is considered congested. On the other hand if packet delivery ratio decreases drastically while the local channel loading reaches the maximum achievable channel utilization, it infers that there is channel congestion. For congestion mitigation CADA employs both resource control and rate control depending on the case. If congestion takes place in an intersection hotspot then resource control applies, while if congestion takes place in a convergence hotspot traffic control applies. Simulation results prove that CADA present better results concerning throughput, energy consumption, end to end delay and average per hop delay in comparison with TARA [3] and "no congestion control" algorithm.

GRAdient Broadcast (GRAB) [11] addresses the problem of robust packets forwarding from source to sink in WSNs using multipath routing. GRAB is divided in three main parts. The first one is source selection. To limit the number of forwarded packets a single node is selected in each area of stimuli, as the source that will forward the event packets. Source is selected as the node with the stronger signal and is called the Center of Stimuli (CoS). Following, the sink builds and maintains a cost field. The cost at a node is the minimum cost needed to forward a packet from this node to the sink. When a node is ready to forward a packet, it broadcasts this packet, having its cost included in the packet. Nodes, whose cost is equal or higher than the forwarding node’s cost, drop the packet. The rest broadcast the packet in the same way like the source. This procedure is repeated until the packet reaches the sink. Finally, to control the number of possible selected paths, the source assigns a credit to each packet it transmits. The sum of credit and source costs is the total budget that can be used to send a packet to the sink along a path. In this manner, the network mesh is wider near the source and becomes narrower near the sink.

Directed Diffusion [12] is a data centric protocol, because all communication is for named data. All nodes in a directed diffusion-based network are application-aware. This enables diffusion to achieve energy savings by selecting empirically good paths (small delay) by caching and processing data in-network (e.g., data aggregation). Directed Diffusion consists of four (4) basic elements: interests, data messages, gradients, and re-inforcements. An interest message is a query from a sink node to the network, which indicates what the application wants. It carries a description of a sensing task that is supported by a sensor network. Data in sensor networks is the collected or processed information of an event (e.g. physical phenomenon), it is named (addressed) using attribute-value pairs and a sensing task is diffused throughout the sensor network as an interest for named data. This dissemination sets up gradients within the network designed to ”draw” events (i.e., data matching the interest). A gradient is a direction state created in each node that receives an interest. This direction is set toward the neighboring node from which the interest was received. Events start flowing towards the sinks of interests along multiple gradient paths. To improve performance and reliability, the empirically ”good paths” (e.g small delay) are reinforced by the sink and their data rate increases. On the other hand, unreliable paths (e.g high delay) are negatively reinforced and pruned off.

HTAP [13] is a scalable and distributed framework for minimizing congestion and assuring reliable data transmissions in event based networks. As such, it does not employ rate limiting actions, but tries to maintain a high level of packet rate while minimizing packet losses. It is based on the creation of alternative paths from the source to sink, using the plethora of a network’s unused nodes, in order to safely transmit the observed data. The creation of alternative paths involves several nodes which are not in the initial shortest path from the source to the sink. The use of these nodes leads to a balanced energy consumption, avoiding the creation of “holes” in the network and prolonging network lifetime.
III. Dynamic Alternative Path Selection Scheme Description

DAlPaS is a congestion control and avoidance algorithm that attempts to choose an alternate path in case of congestion taking into account a number of basic performance parameters. Complementary to Energy Aware Protocols [14][15] that find the lowest energy route or energy sufficient paths to forward data and base their path alternation decision on these conditions, DAlPaS also takes into consideration the node’s congestion situation (both in terms of buffer occupancy and channel interference). On the other hand, while congestion control and reliable data transmission protocols like [3][11][13] base their "alternate path" decision on a congestion threshold or the path’s cost, DAlPaS also counts the node’s remaining power. DAlPaS is a completely dynamic and distributed algorithm. Besides the "Setup Phase", where the network is initially discovered, all subsequent decisions are based only on the condition of the node in the current data forwarding "epoch". The details of the algorithm are presented below:

A. Setup Phase

At the beginning of the Setup Phase the Sink broadcasts a "Hello" message marked as Level 0. Nodes that are in the radio range of the sink receive this packet, mark it as Level 1 and set themselves as Level 1 nodes. Level 1 nodes re-broadcast this "Hello" message transmitting in full power. Upon receiving a "Hello" message for the first time, a node adds one to its level and broadcasts it again. A node may receive more than one "Hello" messages (from different neighbors). In such a case it re-broadcasts the message only if it has changed (lowered) its current level information. In case there are many nodes at the immediately lower level, it keeps all in its neighbor table, along with all other connectivity information it overhears. With this procedure, nodes discover each other, build and initialize their neighbor tables, and at the same time record their minimum hop distance to the sink.

To explain this concept better let us consider the network in Fig. 1. In this scenario the sink (node 0) broadcasts a "Hello" message as Level 0 and nodes 1, 2, 3 and 4 receive this message and set themselves as Level 1 nodes. Level 1 nodes re-broadcast this "Hello" message transmitting in full power. Upon receiving a "Hello" message for the first time, a node adds one to its level and broadcasts it again. A node may receive more than one "Hello" messages (from different neighbors). In such a case it re-broadcasts the message only if it has changed (lowered) its current level information. In case there are many nodes at the immediately lower level, it keeps all in its neighbor table, along with all other connectivity information it overhears. With this procedure, nodes discover each other, build and initialize their neighbor tables, and at the same time record their minimum hop distance to the sink.

When node 8 broadcasts its "Hello" message (as Level 3), node 9 will also receive it. Node 9 will compare the level of this message with the level it already possesses (Level 2) and will ignore it. If for any reason node 9 receives the message from node 3 after the message from node 8, it will update its level from Level 3 to Level 2 and will re-broadcast the updated level. Fig. 2 shows the connectivity resulting from using only the lower level nodes.

An example of neighbor table is presented in Table I. The neighbor table maintains records for the ID of its neighbors, their buffer occupancy, their remaining power, their number of hops to sink, as well as as a field called "Flag", which indicates the node’s availability at the current moment. The Flag mechanism is explained later in this section. It is clear that the neighbor table holds information for all neighboring nodes and not only for the nodes that are one level closer to the sink. Using this "custom" flooding mechanism all possible routes, which can be used to forward packets upstream, are discovered.

B. DAlPaS Mechanisms

After the setup phase where all possible routes from each node to the sink have been discovered, nodes connected to the source begin to forward data. Initially, nodes forward
their data packets through the node that provides the shortest route to the sink. Each data packet header contains the sequence number of the packet, the sending node ID and well as the destination (receiving) node ID. When a data packet is received by a node the packet must be acknowledged. If the node has successfully received the packet, it broadcasts an ACK packet which its headers contains a set of fields as described in Table II. All nodes receiving this ACK packet, modify their neighbor table with the updated values.

DAlPaS employs two stages. A soft and a hard stage.

Soft Stage: The soft stage is introduced as a proactive way to face (or avoid) transient congestion situation as well as to balance and spread the traffic between as many nodes as possible. A node enters DAlPaS’s soft stage alert condition when it receives packets from more that one flows. Each node that faces this situation is a candidate congested node (in case that its receiving rate exceed the transmitting rate). In order to prevent this situation DAlPaS attempts at first to keep each node receiving data from only one flow. To achieve this, the node sets the "Next Packet Sequence Number" field in the ACK packet header to "False" for the specific node ID that would like to "inhibit" its transmission. When this node receives this ACK packet it is informed that it should check for next suitable path starting from a another node at the same level as before. The sending node is able to understand that the reason of this inhibition is another flow, since the Flag field in the ACK packet remains "True". Note, that in soft stage, receiving nodes just advise the sending nodes to find another path, so they keep receiving and forwarding their data until forwarding nodes decide to stop sending packets. In soft stage, receiving nodes always try to keep the flows with the bigger sending data rate. By employing this tactic besides the obvious benefit of buffer based congestion avoidance, the network utilizes its resources uniformly and routing holes are avoided.

Hard Stage: In case of high traffic load or in case where the performance requirements of the application especially in terms of delay are not satisfied through a new routing path, it is possible that an "inhibited" node decides to keep sending packets to the same next-hop node although it is aware that it is possible to cause congestion. If node exceeds a predetermined "performance threshold" it enters in hard stage.

Hard stage is a situation where the network forces the flows to change routing paths since the "performance threshold" has been exceeded. Responsible to monitor and apply performance thresholds is the "Flag Decision" algorithm which is described below.

Flag Decision Algorithm: The flag decision algorithm runs when a node enters in hard stage. In this stage a node becomes temporarily or permanently unable to accept any more packets from any flows. A node may become unable to receive data for the following reasons:

- **Buffer Occupancy is reaching its upper limit:** If a node is receiving packets at a higher rate than it can transmit, it will soon have its buffer overflowed. For example, in Fig.3 this can happen if nodes 10 and 11 send data to node 7 and their aggregation data rate is more that the forwarding ability of node 7. In this case, the buffer of node 7 soon overflows.

- **Low Remaining Power:** The "Flag Decision Algorithm" also applies in the case when a node is getting power exhausted. Each node is programmed to set its flag to "False" every time its Remaining Power falls below a certain percentage of the total. When this happens, whether during a data session or when a node runs in idle, the node alters its Flag to "False" and informs its neighbors for this event through an ACK or a "Hello" packet. The nodes that receive this message apply the same procedure as for the buffer occupancy case respectively. The remaining power threshold depends on the application. In time critical applications it is best to be kept low to make sure that we use the shortest available path for the longest time. In periodic applications it may be set to a higher level in order to maintain a more energy-uniform utilization of the network.

- **Lower level node unavailability:** Another case in which the "Flag Decision Algorithm" applies is when, although a node is available with respect to buffer and power there is no other node available at a level lower that itself (closer to the sink) to transmit data to. In this case, it is forced to advertise a "False" flag. If the nodes at the lower level are not available due to Power extinction, buffer occupancy or because they may have been physically removed from the network, this functionality protects the network from forwarding packets to network "black holes".

### Table I

**EXAMPLE OF NEIGHBOR TABLE FOR NODE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Node ID</th>
<th>Buffer Occupancy</th>
<th>Remaining Power</th>
<th>Number of Hops</th>
<th>Flag</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>True</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.953</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>True</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.972</td>
<td>0.961</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>True</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.961</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>True</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.933</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>True</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.933</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>True</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table II**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>node ID</th>
<th>Next Packet Sequence Number</th>
<th>Buffer Occupancy</th>
<th>Remaining Power</th>
<th>Number of Hops</th>
<th>Flag</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Alternative Path Creation:** Since the algorithm is dynamic, the number of hops to the sink for a node is possible to change when the state of nodes at a level closer to the sink changes. The choice of the next node to forward data, after avoiding the congested node, depends firstly on its availability (Flag) and the number of hops to the sink. Using this tactic each node can, in an easy and simple way, find the next node with minimum computation. It just sorts the number of available nodes in ascending order, with respect to their number of hops to the sink, and forwards the packets through the first node in the list. If the first node becomes unavailable in any way (soft or hard) the sender immediately chooses the next node in the list. In case that more than one nodes are in the same level (same number of hops to sink), the table is sorted based on the remaining power (above or below some specific thresholds). Finally in case that more than one nodes are above these thresholds they are sorted by their remaining buffer occupancy. In the extreme case where even this value is the same for more than one nodes, the algorithm chooses the node with the smaller node ID to forward the packet. Using this method the algorithm gives priority to the maintenance of performance metrics like the mean time for the transmission of packets from source to sink, as well as to the network’s uniform energy utilization thus avoiding the creation of “holes”.

For example let us consider figures 3 and 4. In this example node 14 forwards packets to the sink through nodes 9 and 3. If for any of the reasons explained above node 3 fails, node 9 will have to search in its neighbor table to find a node to replace node 3 since it cannot reach directly the sink. We note (from Fig. 2) that node 9 does not have any other “Level 1” nodes to connect to. Therefore, it must search for “Level 2” nodes. In this case it finds node 6, from which it will forward the rest of the data. In this case since node 6 is “Level 2” node, node 9, immediately becomes “Level 3” node. Concurrently all nodes connected to it (8, 10, 14) will update their tables.

**IV. EVALUATION**

To evaluate the performance of DAlPaS a series of simulation have been performed using Prowler [16], a probabilistic wireless network simulator. Prowler provides a radio fading model with packet collisions, static and dynamic asymmetric links, and a CSMA MAC layer. DAlPaS is compared with TARA [3]. TARA is a state of the art congestion control algorithm that also uses “resource increment” method to mitigate congestion. TARA is briefly explained in section II of this paper. The main difference between TARA and DAlPaS is the fact that TARA is using a capacity analysis model through a graph-theoretic approach and attempts each time to form a new topology that has just enough capacity to handle the traffic in case of congestion. TARA is focused on intersection hot spots in permanent congestion situations. On the other hand, DAlPaS, through soft and hard stage attempts to control both transient or permanent congestion situations, while it is always using the same topology that has been created in the setup phase.

**A. Simulation Environment**

To perform our simulations we have used the radio propagation model provided by Prowler. The transmission model is given by:

\[
P_{\text{rec,ideal}}(d) = P_{\text{transmit}} \frac{1}{1 + d^\gamma}
\]

where, \(2 \leq \gamma \leq 4\) and
\[ P_{rec}(i,j) \leftarrow P_{rec, ideal}(d_{i,j})(1 + a(i,j))(1 + \beta(t)) \] (2)

where \( P_{transmit} \) is the signal strength at the transmitter and \( P_{rec, ideal}(d) \) is the ideal received signal strength at distance \( d \). \( a \) and \( \beta \) are random variables with normal distributions \( N(0, \sigma_a) \) and \( N(0, \sigma_\beta) \), respectively. A node \( j \) can receive packets from node \( i \) if \( P_{rec}(i,j) > \Delta \) where \( \Delta \) is the threshold.

**B. Simulator Setup**

In our simulations we set \( \sigma_\alpha = 0.5 \), \( \sigma_\beta = 0.03 \) and \( p_{error} = 0.05 \). The reception threshold is set to be \( \Delta = 0.1 \).

The rest parameters we employ represent Mica-Z node and the most important of them are presented in next table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Simulation Parameters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Max Data Rate (kbps)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmission Power (dbm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receive Threshold (dbm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmission Current (mA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receive Current (mA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragment Size (bit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffer Size(Bytes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAC layer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Concerning DAlPaS we set the buffer occupancy threshold to 90% of total and the remaining power threshold to 8% total, thus assisting the node to forward all packets on fly avoiding their drops. 500 nodes were uniformly deployed in a 100m x 100m square area.

**C. Performance Metrics**

The following metrics are employed:

- The first metric we employ is total energy consumption. This parameter is an indication of the energy efficiency of the algorithms. In this metric we actually sum the remaining power of all nodes after the end of simulation. Total energy consumption is represented in (Eq. 3).

\[ E_{total} = \sum_{i=1}^{N} (e_{i, init} - e_{i, res}) \] (3)

where: \( N \) is the number of Nodes, \( e_{i, init} \) and \( e_{i, res} \) are the initial and residual energy levels of node \( i \).

- The second metric we employ is the percentage of successfully received packets (Eq. 4). This metric is particularly important for critical/emergency applications, where every packet has to be received from the sink.

\[ \text{ReceivedPktsRatio} = \frac{\text{SuccessfullyReceivedPkts}}{\text{TotalPktsSent}} \] (4)

- The third metric we employ is Average Hop- by- Hop delay a metric used to declare the time that is spent by a packet in order to be transmitted from one hop in another. This metric in case of congestion is an indication of the congestion control algorithm overhead.

**D. Simulation Results**

The results are presented in figures 5, 6, 7.

It is observed that DAlPaS presents better performance in comparison with TARA in this network configuration. The fact that DalPaS is able to effectively and efficiently utilizes resources by preventing transient congestion conditions, by employing "soft stage" provides the ability of using the
whole network resources in case of permanent congestion conditions. On the other hand in case of permanent congestion condition where "hard stage" is mostly used provides the network with alternative paths that avoid hotspots or resources insufficient areas. This leads to reduced total energy consumption. Also the simplicity of DAlPaS is depicted in Fig. 7 where it presents less overhead in comparison with TARA. Finally DAlPaS seems to present also good performance concerning its efficiency to successfully deliver data packets to sink even in case of heavy load.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

In this paper we propose a novel Congestion Control and avoidance algorithm called DAlPaS (Dynamic Alternative Path Selection) which is able to uniformly utilize network resources (sensor’s node power), while, at the same time maintain robust and reliable data delivery. The strength of the proposed algorithm is that it does the work correctly, with simplicity, and with improved performance. The DAlPaS advantages are based on the “soft stage” phase where each node attempts to avoid possible transient congestion situation since it attempts to serve just one flow and "Flag Decision Algorithm" with which the node makes itself available, or not, to the network with minor computation ("hard stage"). In addition, minor computations are also performed by the forwarding nodes. Those nodes just search in the neighbor list to find available nodes closer to the sink. This makes DAlPaS a uniquely suitable algorithm for distributed low-power deployment. Simulation results prove that DAlPaS compares favorably to an established and state of the art algorithm like TARA. We believe that this initial work can be extended to provide additional insights into the possible tradeoffs between Congestion and Propagation Delay and between Energy Consumption and Hop Count.

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