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(71) Applicant (for all designated States except US):

TEKELEC, INC. [US/US]; 5200 Paramount Parkway,
Morrisville, NC 27560 (US).

(72) Inventors; and

(75) Inventors/Applicants (for US only): **JACKSON, Kenneth, Charles** [US/US]; 14816 Hayes Street, Overland Park, KS 66221 (US). **BANIEL, Uri** [IL/US]; 1255 Deerfield Parkway Unit 201, Buffalo Grove, IL 60089 (US).

(74) Agent: **HUNT, Gregory, A.**; Jenkins, Wilson, Taylor & Hunt, P.A., Suite 1200, University Tower, 3100 Tower Boulevard, Durham, NC 27707 (US).

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(54) Title: METHODS, SYSTEMS, AND COMPUTER READABLE MEDIA FOR STEERING A SUBSCRIBER BETWEEN ACCESS NETWORKS

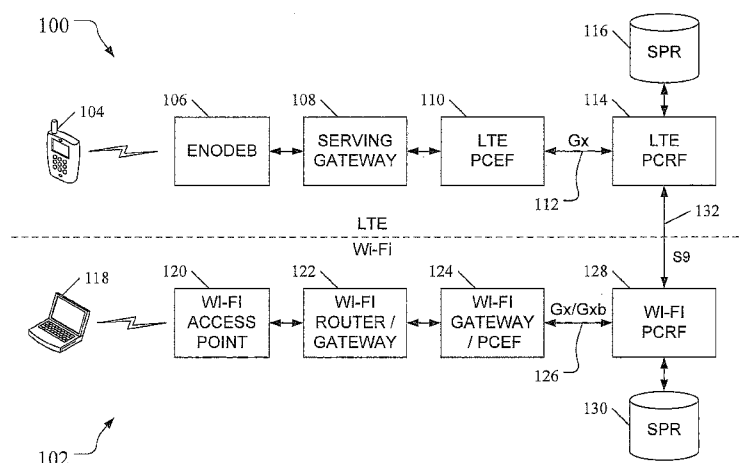


FIG. 1

(57) Abstract: Methods, systems, and computer readable media for steering a subscriber between access networks are disclosed. According to one aspect, a method for steering a subscriber between access networks includes, at a first policy and charging rules function (PCRF) that serves a first access network, identifying a subscriber of the first access network as a candidate for steering to a second access network that is served by a second PCRF, querying the second PCRF to determine whether the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access network, and, upon a determination that the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access network, steering the candidate subscriber to the second access network.

DESCRIPTION
METHODS, SYSTEMS, AND COMPUTER READABLE MEDIA FOR
STEERING A SUBSCRIBER BETWEEN ACCESS NETWORKS

PRIORITY CLAIM

This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent
5 Application Serial No. 61/483,607, filed May 6, 2011; the disclosure of which
is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

TECHNICAL FIELD

The subject matter described herein relates to policy and charging
10 rules functions (PCRFs). More particularly, the subject matter described
herein relates to methods, systems, and computer readable media for
steering a subscriber between access networks.

BACKGROUND

15 A policy and charging rules function (PCRF) may want to refer a user
to a different access network that is controlled or policed by a different
PCRF. For example, a PCRF within an LTE access network may want to
offload a user to a Wi-Fi network. Before the referrer PCRF can do that,
however, it needs to verify with the target PCRF that the user is authorized
20 to use the target access network. There is no known mechanism to allow
this kind of verification to take place. Accordingly, there exists a need for
steering a subscriber between access networks.

SUMMARY

25 According to one aspect, a method for steering a subscriber between
access networks includes, at a first policy and charging rules function
(PCRF) that serves a first access network, identifying a subscriber of the first
access network as a candidate for steering to a second access network that
is served by a second PCRF, querying the second PCRF to determine
30 whether the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access
network, and, upon a determination that the candidate subscriber is allowed

access to the second access network, steering the candidate subscriber to the second access network.

According to another aspect, the subject matter described herein includes a system for steering a subscriber between access networks, the system including a first policy and charging rules function (PCRF) for serving a first access network. The first PCRF is configured to identify a subscriber of the first access network as a candidate for steering to a second access network that is served by a second PCRF, query the second PCRF to determine whether the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access network, and, upon a determination that the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access network, steer the candidate subscriber to the second access network.

The subject matter described herein can be implemented in software in combination with hardware and/or firmware. For example, the subject matter described herein can be implemented in software executed by a processor. In one exemplary implementation, the subject matter described herein can be implemented using a non-transitory computer readable medium having stored thereon computer executable instructions that when executed by the processor of a computer control the computer to perform steps. Exemplary computer readable media suitable for implementing the subject matter described herein include non-transitory computer-readable media, such as disk memory devices, chip memory devices, programmable logic devices, and application specific integrated circuits. In addition, a computer readable medium that implements the subject matter described herein may be located on a single device or computing platform or may be distributed across multiple devices or computing platforms.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Preferred embodiments of the subject matter described herein will now be explained with reference to the accompanying drawings, wherein like reference numerals represent like parts, of which:

Figure 1 is a block diagram illustrating an exemplary system for steering a subscriber between access networks according to an embodiment of the subject matter described herein;

Figure 2 is a flow chart illustrating an exemplary process for steering
5 a subscriber between access networks according to an embodiment of the subject matter described herein; and

Figure 3 is a signaling message flow diagram illustrating exemplary messages for steering a subscriber between access networks being communicated between nodes in a telecommunications network according
10 to an embodiment of the subject matter described herein.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

In accordance with the subject matter disclosed herein, methods, systems, and computer readable media for steering a subscriber between
15 access networks are provided. In an example application, inter-PCRF communication is utilized for the purpose of offloading a candidate subscriber from an LTE network to a Wi-Fi network, an action herein referred to as "Wi-Fi offloading". The subject matter described herein is not limited to just this application, however, but may be applied to steer a subscriber in
20 any direction (e.g., Wi-Fi to LTE) and between other types of access networks.

Reference will now be made in detail to exemplary embodiments of the present invention, examples of which are illustrated in the accompanying drawings. Wherever possible, the same reference numbers will be used
25 throughout the drawings to refer to the same or like parts.

Figure 1 is a block diagram illustrating an exemplary system for steering a subscriber between access networks according to an embodiment of the subject matter described herein. In one embodiment, the system includes a first network **100** and a second network **102**. In the embodiment
30 illustrated in Figure 1, first network **100** is an LTE network and second network **102** is a Wi-Fi network, but in alternative embodiments, other network types may be used.

In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 1, a mobile device or other user equipment (UE) **104** within LTE network **100** is communicating over a radio or wireless interface with an enhanced node B (eNode B) **106**, which communicates through a serving gateway **108** to an LTE policy and charging enforcement function (LTE PCEF) **110**. LTE PCEF **110** communicates via a first Gx interface **112** with an LTE policy and charging rules function (PCRF) **114**. In one embodiment, LTE PCRF **114** may communicate with a subscriber profile repository (SPR) **116**, which stores information about home and visiting subscribers to LTE network **100**. Multiple eNodeBs may be supported or served by a single serving gateway, multiple serving gateways may be supported or served by a single PCEF, and multiple PCEFs may be supported or served by a single PCRF. Other network topologies are also within the scope and meaning of the subject matter described herein.

In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 1, a Wi-Fi-capable device **118** within Wi-Fi network **102** is communicating with a Wi-Fi access point **120**, which communicates through a Wi-Fi router / gateway **122** to a Wi-Fi gateway / PCEF **124**. Wi-Fi gateway / PCEF **124** communicates via Gx/Gxb interface **126** with a Wi-Fi PCRF **128**. In one embodiment, Wi-Fi PCRF **128** may communicate with its own SPR **130**. Multiple Wi-Fi access points may be supported or served by a single Wi-Fi router, multiple Wi-Fi routers may be supported or served by a single Wi-Fi gateway, and multiple Wi-Fi gateways may be supported or served by a single Wi-Fi PCRF. Other network topologies are also within the scope and meaning of the subject matter described herein.

An S9 interface **132** is used for providing transfer of quality of service (QoS) policy and charging control information between a home PCRF and a visited PCRF according to the Third Generation Partnership Project (3GPP) technical specification (TS) 23.401. In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 1, S9 interface **132** is used to transfer QoS policy and charging control information between LTE PCRF **114** and Wi-Fi PCRF **128**. In contrast to a conventional PCRF, however, a PCRF according to an embodiment of the

subject matter describe herein is configured to use the S9 interface in a non-standard way to query another PCRF.

In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 1, for example, LTE PCRF **114** may lead Wi-Fi PCRF **128** to believe that user device **104** is attempting to gain access to Wi-Fi network **102**, i.e., as if user device **104** had attempted to connect to Wi-Fi access point **120**, even though user device **104** has not actually attempted to make this connection. This is referred to herein as “faking a user attachment to the second network.” By representing to the second PCRF that the candidate subscriber is requesting access to the second network, LTE PCRF **114** leads Wi-Fi PCRF **128** to provide information to LTE PCRF **114** that will tell LTE PCRF **114** whether or not user device **104** would be allowed onto Wi-Fi network **102**. LTE PCRF **114** then uses this information to steer (or not steer) user device **104** onto Wi-Fi network **102**. From the point of view of Wi-Fi PCRF **128**, LTE PCRF **114** may appear to be one of the gateways, such as Wi-Fi gateway / PCEF **124**, that normally make such requests to Wi-Fi PCRF **128**. In this manner, LTE PCRF **114** uses S9 interface **132** not for its normal purpose of transferring QOS policy and charging control information between itself and Wi-Fi PCRF **128**, but instead for a purpose for which Gx/Gxb interface **126** is normally used.

Figure 2 is a flow chart illustrating an exemplary process for steering a subscriber between access networks according to an embodiment of the subject matter described herein. In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 2, the process starts at block **200**, in which a first PCRF that serves a first access network identifies a subscriber of the first access network as a candidate for steering to a second access network that is served by a second PCRF. As illustrated in Figure 1, the first and second access networks may be different types of access networks, such as LTE and Wi-Fi, for example.

A candidate subscriber may be identified in any number of ways, including, but not limited to identifying a subscriber that is accessing or attempting to access the first access network. That is, the candidate subscriber is not necessarily a subscriber that is already using or has

already gained access to the first access network, but may be a subscriber that is only requesting access but has not been given access yet. Alternatively, a subscriber that is using or attempting to use a particular network application or service may be identified as a candidate subscriber.

- 5 For example, a subscriber that wants to use a relatively high bandwidth service, such as streaming video, web browsing, music or multimedia content delivery, or IMS services, or even particular low-to-moderate bandwidth services, such as voice, may be identified as candidates for steering to a faster, lower-cost, or lower-congestion access network. In one
10 embodiment, candidates having a particular service plan or subscriber profile may be identified as candidates for steering. For example, a subscriber may be identified as a candidate for steering based on services requested and authorizations or permissions or lack thereof. A subscriber's current activity or historical activity may also identify them as a candidate for
15 steering to another access network.

Steering may be prompted by detection of other types of triggers, as well. For example, subscribers may be steered to a second or alternate access network based on network conditions of either the first or second networks, such as actual or predicted network congestion, as well as based
20 on general network health, such as detected equipment failure or other network impairment, scheduled network maintenance, and so on.

At block **202**, the first PCRF queries the second PCRF to determine whether the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access network. In one embodiment, the first PCRF may send the query to the
25 second PCRF via an S9 interface that connects the first and second PCRFs. In one embodiment, the first PCRF may send a credit control request (CCR) message to the second PCRF, and may receive a credit control answer (CCA) message from the second PCRF. In one embodiment, by sending the CCR message to the second PCRF, the first PCRF is representing to the
30 second PCRF that the candidate subscriber is requesting access to the second access network, even if the subscriber is not actually attempting to do this. In one embodiment, from the viewpoint of the second PCRF, the

first PCRF is presenting itself as a gateway of the second PCRF, even though the second PCRF is not actually a gateway.

In one embodiment, in order to determine whether or not the candidate subscriber will be allowed access to the second access network, the first PCRF may need to determine how the candidate subscriber should be identified to the second access network. This may be accomplished in a number of ways. For example, this second subscriber identifier may be retrieved by a database lookup, conversion, translation, or other mechanism that maps the subscriber identifier used by the first access network, herein referred to as the "first subscriber identifier", to the subscriber identifier used by the second access network, herein referred to as the "second subscriber identifier." In one embodiment, the first PCRF may query an SPR, HSS, or other database to retrieve an identifier by which the candidate subscriber is known to the second access network and/or to the second PCRF. In an alternative embodiment, if both the first and second PCRFs use the same subscriber identifier, this additional conversion or mapping would not be necessary.

In one embodiment, the queried database may have the ability to store different user IDs or other subscriber identifiers for a number of different access networks. In this embodiment, a PCRF may have the ability to ask for the subscriber identifier to be used with the particular access network to which the PCRF wants to steer the candidate subscriber. Alternatively, the PCRF may query the database and select the target access network based on the subscriber identifiers that are available or not available for the candidate subscriber.

Thus, the referrer PCRF may download the candidate subscriber's profile from a database, such as a subscriber profile repository (SPR), a home subscriber server (HSS), or other database which has data for the referrer access network, and retrieve the user-ID used by the target access network.

In one embodiment, the method involves faking a user attachment to justify or allow a query-response between the PCRFs. During the query, the referrer PCRF may use the original user-ID, e.g., the identifier known to the

referrer PCRF, or it may use the user-ID or other identifier known to the target PCRF.

At block **204**, upon a determination that the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access network, the first PCRF steers the candidate subscriber to the second access network. The candidate subscriber may be steered to the second access network in any number of ways, including but not limited to: generating a first policy rule that results in the throttling of use of the first access network by the candidate subscriber and sending that policy rule to the appropriate PCEF or like node; notifying the candidate subscriber of the availability of the second access network; sending a message, such as a text message, voice message, email, etc., to the candidate subscriber suggesting that he or she use the second access network instead; and so on. A candidate subscriber may be steered from one access network to another access network by using techniques that range from encouragement to coercion.

A detailed example of the operation of one embodiment of the subject matter described herein, that of LTE PCRF **114**, will now be described using Figure 3.

Figure 3 is a signaling message flow diagram illustrating exemplary messages for steering a subscriber between access networks being communicated between nodes in a telecommunications network according to an embodiment of the subject matter described herein. In one embodiment, these messages may be exchanged between PCRFs for the purpose of Wi-Fi offloading. In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 3, user equipment UE **300** is operating within an LTE network that includes a policy and charging enforcement function PCEF **302**, which is controlled by a policy and charging rules function that serves the LTE network, LTE PCRF **304**. UE **300** is also operating within a Wi-Fi network that includes a broadband remote access server BRAS **306** which communicates with a Wi-Fi PCRF **308** that serves the Wi-Fi network.

In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 3, UE **300** sends an attach request **310** to PCEF **302**. In response to receiving the attach request, PCEF **302** sends a Diameter credit control request initial (CCR-I) message

312 to LTE PCRF **304**, which sends a query **314** to a subscriber profile repository (SPR) **316**. SPR **316** sends a response **318** to LTE PCRF **304** that indicates whether UE **300** is allowed access to the LTE network and that includes information about services and features that UE **300** may use.

5 Based on this information, LTE PCRF **304** determines what actions to be taken. In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 3, for example, LTE PCRF **304** may allow UE **300** access to the network but recommend that UE **300** be steered off of the LTE network and onto an available Wi-Fi network (block **320**).

10 LTE PCRF **304** may then attempt to determine whether UE **300** will be allowed to access the Wi-Fi network by issuing a second CCR-I message **322** to Wi-Fi PCRF **308**. Wi-Fi PCRF **308** may then send a query **324** to its own SPR **326** and receive from SPR **326** a response message **328**. In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 3, Wi-Fi PCRF **308** responds to CCR-I **322**
15 with a credit control answer initial (CCA-I) message **330** indicating that UE **300** is allowed access to the Wi-Fi network.

Now that LTE PCRF **304** has confirmed that UE **300** will be allowed access to the Wi-Fi network, LTE PCRF **304** can begin offloading or steering UE **300** off of the LTE network and onto the Wi-Fi network. Figure 3
20 illustrates two actions that LTE PCRF **304** may take to steer UE **300** onto a Wi-Fi network.

First, as part of the response to the original CCR message **312**, LTE PCRF **304** may issue a CCA-I message **332** that allows UE **300** to access the LTE network but at a reduced level of quality of service, or QoS. In this
25 manner LTE PCRF **304** may instruct PCEF **302** to install a charging rule that limits or curtails the QoS made available to UE **300**. In response, PCEF **302** may issue an attach response **334** to UE **300**, which allows UE **300** to access the LTE network. PCEF **302** then activates the installed charging rules (block **336**) which provides application service **338** between UE **300**
30 and the Internet **340**, but at a lower bandwidth, lower priority, higher latency, or other manifestation of a low QoS.

The second action that LTE PCRF **304** may take to steer UE **300** onto a Wi-Fi network is to send a short message service (SMS) message (i.e., a

“text” message) or a multimedia message service (MMS) message **342** to UE **300**, to inform the user of UE **300** of the availability of the Wi-Fi network and suggest that the user use the Wi-Fi network instead.

Alternatively, UE **300** may be commanded or forced to offload to the
5 Wi-Fi network, e.g., by denying access to the LTE network or providing access for a limited time or with severely limited bandwidth before terminating access.

As UE **300** is steered to the Wi-Fi network, UE **300** issues another attach request **344**, but this time to BRAS **306** within the Wi-Fi network. In
10 one embodiment, the attach request comes in the form of a dynamic host control protocol (DHCP) request from UE **300** to BRAS **306**. In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 3, in response to receiving DHCP request **344** from UE **300**, BRAS **306** may issue its own CCR-I request **346** to Wi-Fi PCRF **308**. For simplicity, it is assumed that Wi-Fi PCRF **308** still maintains
15 the results from response **328** and thus does not need to query SPR **326** a second time, but in other embodiments Wi-Fi PCRF **308** may query SPR **326** again. In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 3, Wi-Fi PCRF **308** responds with a CCA-I message **348**, which includes an instruction to install a charging rule to provide normal QoS to UE **300**. BRAS **306** sends an
20 attach response **350** to UE **300** and allows normal application service **352** between UE **300** and the network **340**.

In one embodiment, only users that are authorized to use the first access network are considered for steering to a second access network. In an alternative embodiment, however, a subscriber may be authorized for
25 some but not all services in the first access network. In this scenario, steering the subscriber to the second access network may be triggered when the subscriber attempts to use a service that the subscriber is not authorized for in the first access network but may be able to receive in the second access network. For example, an LTE subscriber attempting to
30 download streaming media may be steered to a nearby Wi-Fi network for that purpose. Steering may be appropriate when the desired service is not available from the first access network either because of congestion or lack of authorization, etc.

The following is an example of steps performed in a use case. An IP
CAN session establishment request is sent from a user and received by an
LTE PCEF. In response, the LTE PCEF sends a CCR-I to the Wi-Fi PCRF.
The Wi-Fi PCRF looks up the user profile in the SPR and determines that
5 the user is entitled to LTE service. However, due to offload logic, the LTE
PCRF decides to query the WI-FI PCRF about that user. The LTE PCRF
sends a query to the WI-FI PCRF, thus faking a user attachment using the
Wi-Fi id of the user as retrieved from the LTE SPR. The LTE PCRF installs
rules to throttle down the user (in order to encourage the user to switch over
10 to WIFI). The LTE PCRF sends an SMS message to the user suggesting
that the user switch to WIFI access. In response to the message, the user
attaches to Wi-Fi (DHCP etc.) The Wi-Fi router goes to the BRAS, which
authorizes the user with the Wi-Fi PCRF. The user is assigned a normal
bandwidth.

15 It will be understood that various details of the subject matter
described herein may be changed without departing from the scope of the
subject matter described herein. Furthermore, the foregoing description is
for the purpose of illustration only, and not for the purpose of limitation.

20

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A method for steering a subscriber between access networks, the method comprising:
 - 5 at a first policy and charging rules function (PCRF) that serves a first access network:
 - identifying a subscriber of the first access network as a candidate for steering to a second access network that is served by a second PCRF;
 - querying the second PCRF to determine whether the candidate
 - 10 subscriber is allowed access to the second access network; and
 - upon a determination that the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access network, steering the candidate subscriber to the second access network.
- 15 2. The method of claim 1 wherein querying the second PCRF to determine whether the candidate subscriber is allowed to access the second access network comprises sending the query via an S9 interface connecting the first and second PCRFs.
- 20 3. The method of claim 1 wherein querying the second PCRF to determine whether the candidate subscriber is allowed to access the second access network comprises sending to the second PCRF a credit control request (CCR) message.
- 25 4. The method of claim 1 wherein determining whether the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access network comprises receiving from the second PCRF a credit control answer (CCA) message.
- 30 5. The method of claim 1 wherein the first access network is of a different type than the second access network.

6. The method of claim 5 wherein one of the first and second access networks comprises a long term evolution (LTE) network and the other of the first and second access networks comprises a Wi-Fi access network.

5

7. The method of claim 1 wherein querying the second PCRF to determine whether the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access network comprises representing to the second PCRF that the candidate subscriber is requesting access to the second access network.

10

8. The method of claim 7 wherein the first PCRF presents itself to the second PCRF as a gateway of the second PCRF.

9. The method of claim 7 wherein representing to the second PCRF that the candidate subscriber is requesting access to the second network comprises identifying the candidate subscriber using a subscriber identifier that is known to the second PCRF.

10. The method of claim 9 wherein identifying the candidate subscriber using a subscriber identifier that is known to the second PCRF comprises mapping a first subscriber identifier that is known to the first PCRF to a second subscriber identifier that is known to the second PCRF and identifying the subscriber to the second PCRF using the second subscriber identifier.

25

11. The method of claim 10 wherein mapping a first subscriber identifier that is known to the first PCRF to a second identifier that is known to the second PCRF comprises querying a database that maps the first subscriber identifier to the second subscriber identifier.

30

12. The method of claim 11 wherein querying a database that maps the first subscriber identifier to the second subscriber identifier

comprises querying a subscriber profile repository (SPR) or home subscriber server (HSS).

13. The method of claim 1 wherein steering the candidate
5 subscriber to the second access network comprises at least one of:
generating by the first PCRF a policy rule that results in the throttling
of use of the first access network by the candidate subscriber;
notifying the candidate subscriber of an availability of the second
access network; and
10 sending a message to the candidate subscriber suggesting that the
candidate subscriber use the second access network.

14. The method of claim 1 wherein identifying a subscriber of the
first access network as a candidate for steering comprises identifying a
15 subscriber that is accessing or attempting to access the first access network.

15. The method of claim 1 wherein identifying a subscriber of the
first access network as a candidate for steering comprises identifying a
subscriber that is using or attempting to use a network application or service.
20

16. The method of claim 15 wherein the network application or
service comprises at least one of: a streaming video service; a web browsing
service; a voice service; a messaging service; a music delivery service; a
multimedia content delivery service; and an IMS service.
25

17. The method of claim 1 wherein identifying a subscriber of the
first access network as a candidate for steering comprises identifying a
subscriber based on the subscriber's profile, authorizations, permissions,
current activity or historical activity.
30

18. The method of claim 1 wherein identifying a subscriber of the
first access network as a candidate for steering comprises detecting a trigger
for steering candidate subscribers to the second access network.

19. The method of claim 18 wherein detecting a trigger for steering candidate subscribers to the second access network comprises detecting a network condition, wherein the network condition comprises at least one of: actual network congestion, predicted network congestion, detected network impairment, and scheduled network maintenance.

20. A system for steering a subscriber between access networks, the system comprising:

a first policy and charging rules function (PCRF) for serving a first access network, the first PCRF configured to:

identify a subscriber of the first access network as a candidate for steering to a second access network that is served by a second PCRF;

query the second PCRF to determine whether the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access network; and

upon a determination that the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access network, steer the candidate subscriber to the second access network.

21. The system of claim 20 wherein querying the second PCRF to determine whether the candidate subscriber is allowed to access the second access network comprises sending the query via an S9 interface connecting the first and second PCRFs.

22. The system of claim 20 wherein querying the second PCRF to determine whether the candidate subscriber is allowed to access the second access network comprises sending to the second PCRF a credit control request (CCR) message.

23. The system of claim 20 wherein determining whether the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access network comprises receiving from the second PCRF a credit control answer (CCA) message.

24. The system of claim 20 wherein the first access network is of a different type than the second access network.

25. The system of claim 24 wherein one of the first and second
5 access networks comprises a long term evolution (LTE) network and the other of the first and second access networks comprises a Wi-Fi access network.

26. The system of claim 20 wherein querying the second PCRF to
10 determine whether the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access network comprises representing to the second PCRF that the candidate subscriber is requesting access to the second access network.

27. The system of claim 26 wherein the first PCRF presents itself
15 to the second PCRF as a gateway of the second PCRF.

28. The system of claim 26 wherein representing to the second PCRF that the candidate subscriber is requesting access to the second network comprises identifying the candidate subscriber using a subscriber
20 identifier that is known to the second PCRF.

29. The system of claim 26 wherein identifying the candidate subscriber using a subscriber identifier that is known to the second PCRF comprises mapping a first subscriber identifier that is known to the first
25 PCRF to a second subscriber identifier that is known to the second PCRF and identifying the subscriber to the second PCRF using the second subscriber identifier.

30. The system of claim 26 wherein mapping a first subscriber
30 identifier that is known to the first PCRF to a second identifier that is known to the second PCRF comprises querying a database that maps the first subscriber identifier to the second subscriber identifier.

31. The system of claim 26 wherein querying a database that maps the first subscriber identifier to the second subscriber identifier comprises querying a subscriber profile repository (SPR) or home subscriber server (HSS).

5

32. The system of claim 20 wherein steering the candidate subscriber to the second access network comprises at least one of:

generating by the first PCRF a policy rule that results in the throttling of use of the first access network by the candidate subscriber;

10 notifying the candidate subscriber of an availability of the second access network; and

sending a message to the candidate subscriber suggesting that the candidate subscriber use the second access network.

15 33. The system of claim 20 wherein identifying a subscriber of the first access network as a candidate for steering comprises identifying a subscriber that is accessing or attempting to access the first access network.

20 34. The system of claim 20 wherein identifying a subscriber of the first access network as a candidate for steering comprises identifying a subscriber that is using or attempting to use a network application or service.

25 35. The system of claim 34 wherein the network application or service comprises at least one of: a streaming video service; a web browsing service; a voice service; a messaging service; a music delivery service; a multimedia content delivery service; and an IMS service.

30 36. The system of claim 20 wherein identifying a subscriber of the first access network as a candidate for steering comprises identifying a subscriber based on the subscriber's profile, authorizations, permissions, current activity or historical activity.

37. The system of claim 20 wherein identifying a subscriber of the first access network as a candidate for steering comprises detecting a trigger for steering candidate subscribers to the second access network.

5 38. The system of claim 37 wherein detecting a trigger for steering candidate subscribers to the second access network comprises detecting a network condition, wherein the network condition comprises at least one of: actual network congestion, predicted network congestion, detected network impairment, and scheduled network maintenance.

10

39. A non-transitory computer readable medium having stored thereon executable instructions that when executed by the processor of a computer control the computer to perform steps comprising:

15 at a first policy and charging rules function (PCRF) that serves a first access network:

 identifying a subscriber of the first access network as a candidate for steering to a second access network that is served by a second PCRF;

 querying the second PCRF to determine whether the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access network; and

20 upon a determination that the candidate subscriber is allowed access to the second access network, steering the candidate subscriber to the second access network.

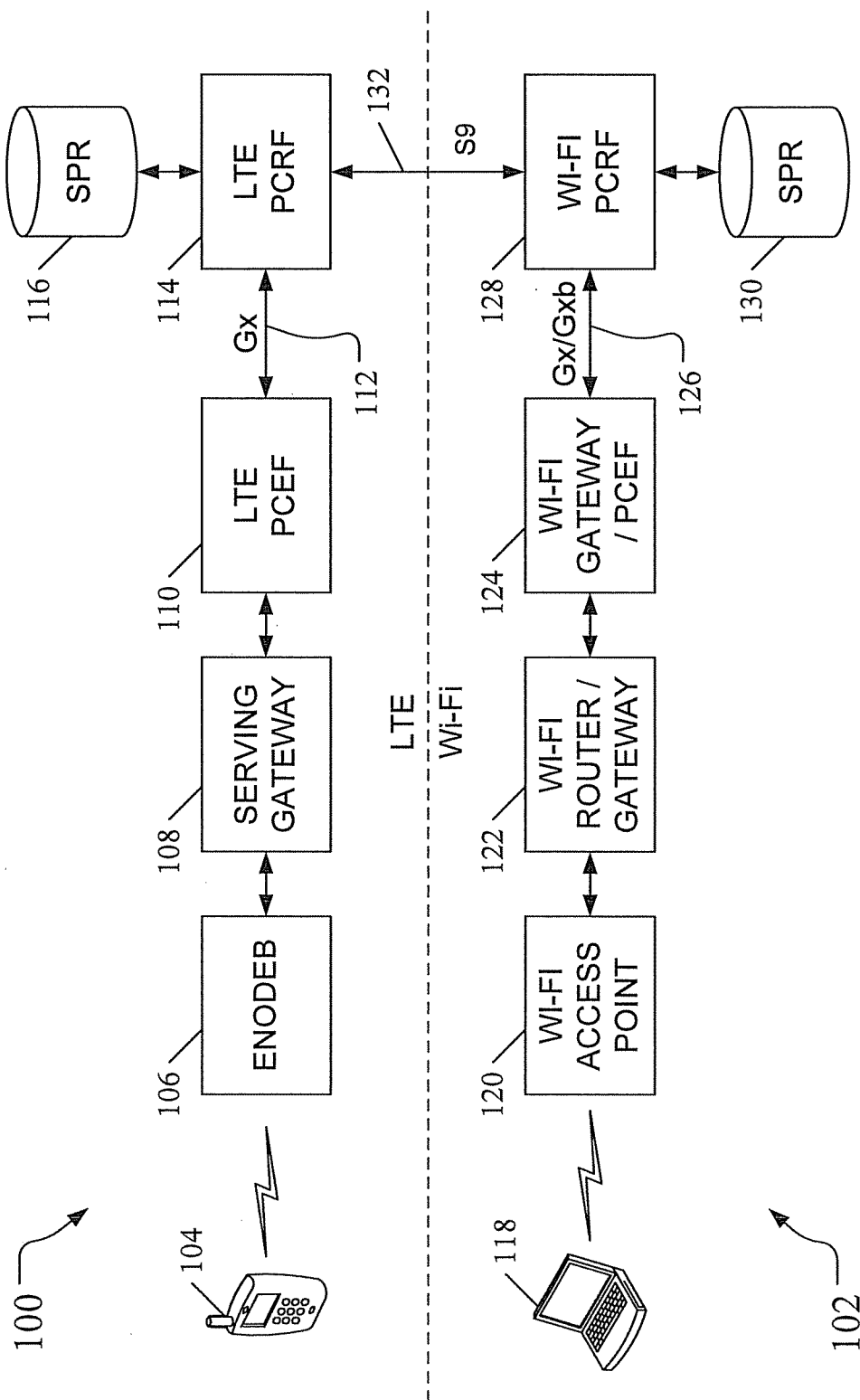


FIG. 1

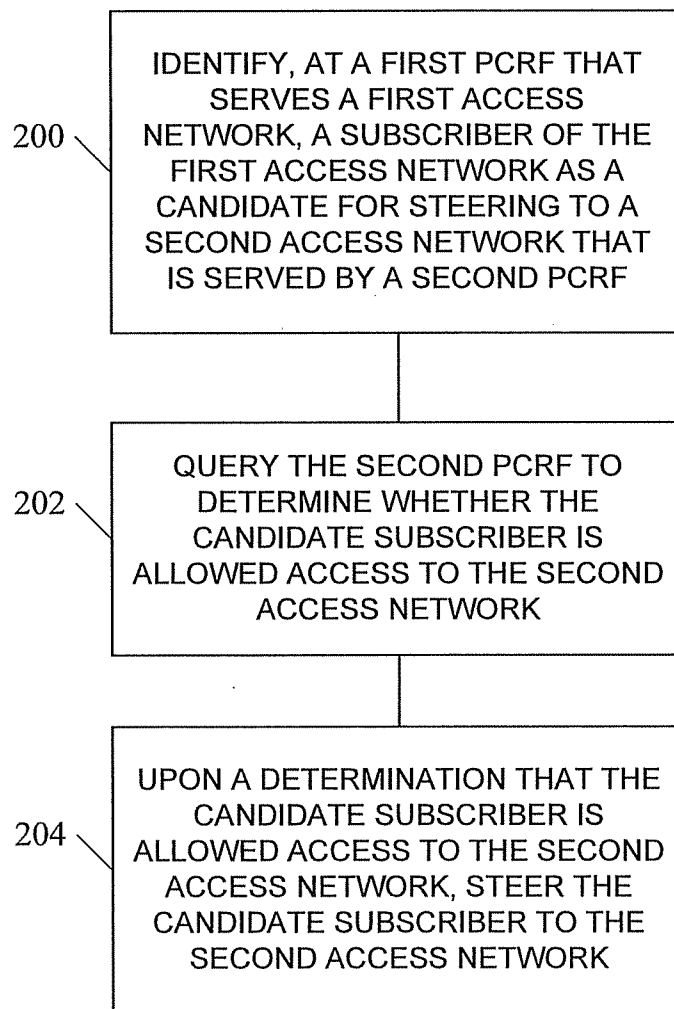


FIG. 2

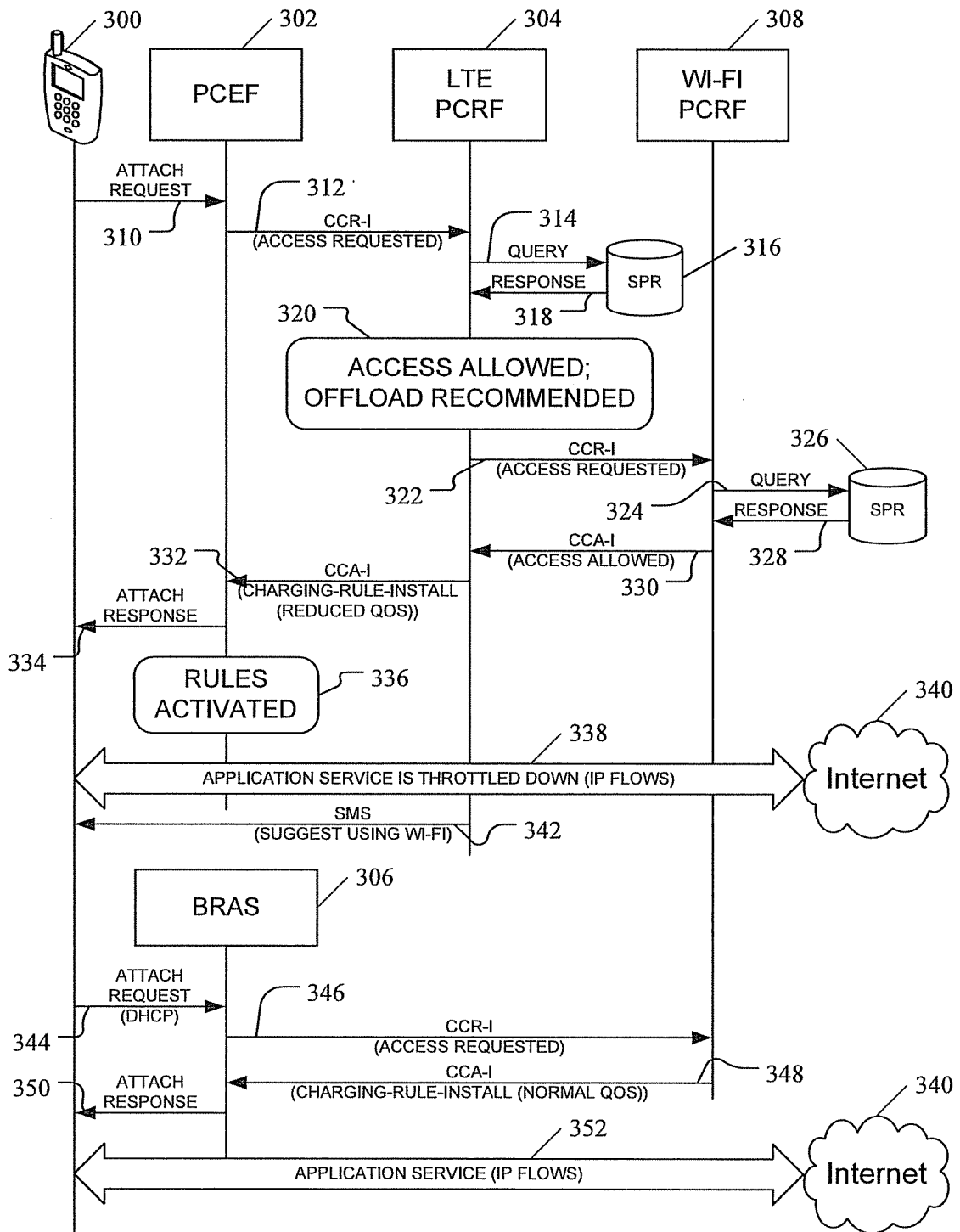


FIG. 3