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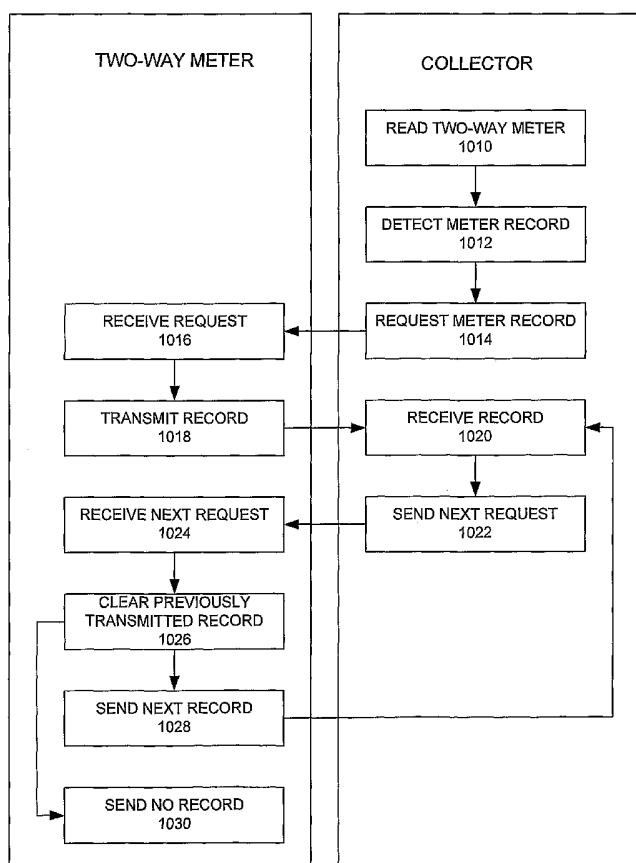
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(54) Title: SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR IMPROVED TRANSMISSION OF METER DATA



(57) Abstract: The system includes a number of first meters, which are typically battery powered transmit only devices. The system includes a number of two-way meters, which are operable to both transmit and receive data. The first meters transmit their data to the collector either directly or indirectly via the two-way meters, which serve as intermediaries. Multiple records from each first meter may be stored at each of the two-way meters, thereby ensuring that records from a one-way meter will not be blocked when an attempt is made to forward them to the collector. Furthermore, multiple records from each first meter may be stored at the collector, thereby enabling the transmission and storage of meter records in a number of different formats. Additionally, records from each first meter are marked to reflect a sequence in which they are generated, thereby ensuring that the collector will store the most recent data records available.



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SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR IMPROVED TRANSMISSION OF METER DATA

Cross Reference to Related Applications

[0001] This application is related by subject matter to U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 10/185,074, filed June 28, 2002, entitled "Data Collector for an Automated Meter Reading System" (Attorney Docket No. ABME-0793/ E20020100) and to U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 10/185,664, filed June 27, 2002, entitled "Dynamic Self-Configuring Metering Network" (Attorney Docket No. ABME-0796/E20020120), the contents of which are hereby incorporated by reference in their entireties.

[0002] This application is also related to U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 10/831,903, filed April 26, 2004, entitled "Method And System For Configurable Qualification And Registration In A Fixed Network Automated Meter Reading System" (Attorney Docket No. ELSE-0839) and to U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 10/832,410, filed April 26, 2004, entitled "System And Method For Efficient Configuration In A Fixed Network Automated Meter Reading System" (Attorney Docket No. ELSE-0838), both of which are also hereby incorporated by reference in their entireties.

Field of the Invention

[0003] The present invention relates to metering systems, and more particularly, to wireless networks for gathering metering data.

Background

[0004] The collection of meter data from electrical energy, water, and gas meters has traditionally been performed by human meter-readers. The meter-reader

travels to the meter location, which is frequently on the customer's premises, visually inspects the meter, and records the reading. The meter-reader may be prevented from gaining access to the meter as a result of inclement weather or, where the meter is located within the customer's premises, due to an absentee customer. This methodology of meter data collection is labor intensive, prone to human error, and often results in stale and inflexible metering data.

[0005] Some meters have been enhanced to include a one-way radio transmitter for transmitting metering data to a receiving device. A person collecting meter data that is equipped with an appropriate radio receiver need only come into proximity with a meter to read the meter data and need not visually inspect the meter. Thus, a meter-reader may walk or drive by a meter location to take a meter reading. While this represents an improvement over visiting and visually inspecting each meter, it still requires human involvement in the process.

[0006] An automated means for collecting meter data involves a fixed wireless network. Devices such as, for example, repeaters and gateways are permanently affixed on rooftops and pole-tops and strategically positioned to receive data from enhanced meters fitted with radio-transmitters. Data is transmitted from the meters to the repeaters and gateways and ultimately communicated to a central location. While fixed wireless networks greatly reduce human involvement in the process of meter reading, such systems require the installation and maintenance of a fixed network of repeaters, gateways, and servers. Identifying an acceptable location for a repeater or server and physically placing the device in the desired location on top of a building or utility pole is a tedious and labor-intensive operation. Furthermore, each meter that is installed in the network needs to be manually configured to communicate with a particular portion of the

established network. When a portion of the network fails to operate as intended, human intervention is typically required to test the effected components and reconfigure the network to return it to operation. Thus, while existing fixed wireless systems have reduced the need for human involvement in the daily collection of meter data, such systems require substantial human investment in planning, installation, and maintenance and are relatively inflexible and difficult to manage.

Summary

[0007] A dynamic self-configuring system for collecting meter data is disclosed herein. In an illustrative embodiment, a plurality of meter devices, which operate to track usage of a service or commodity such as, for example, electricity, water, and gas, are operable to wirelessly communicate. One of the meter devices, which is referred to as a collector, broadcasts messages to identify one or more of the meters with which it can directly communicate. The meters with which the collector is operable to directly communicate may be referred to as level one meters. Data designating these meters as level one meters is stored on the collector and the level one meters.

[0008] The collector communicates instructions to the level one meters to scan for meters that are operable to directly communicate with the level one meters. Meters that directly communicate with the level one meters may be referred to as level two meters. Data identifying the level two meters and the communication path to the level two meters is stored on the collector and the level two meters.

[0009] The collector continues the process of scanning the last defined level of meters for new meters that communicate with the last defined level. This process gradually provides identification of the meters in the network and the paths by which to

communicate with each meter. Additionally, when new meters are added to the network, they are identified via subsequent scans.

[0010] In an embodiment of the invention, the system includes a number of first meters, which are typically battery powered transmit only devices. The system includes a number of two-way meters, which are operable to both transmit and receive data. The first meters transmit their data to the collector either directly or indirectly via the two-way meters, which serve as intermediaries. Multiple records from each first meter may be stored at each of the two-way meters, thereby ensuring that records from a one-way meter will not be blocked when an attempt is made to forward them to the collector. Furthermore, multiple records from each first meter may be stored at the collector, thereby enabling the transmission and storage of meter records in a number of different formats. Additionally, records from each first meter are marked to reflect a sequence in which they are generated, thereby ensuring that the collector will store the most recent data records available.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0011] Other features of systems and methods for gathering metering data are further apparent from the following detailed description of exemplary embodiments taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, of which:

[0012] Figure 1 is a diagram of a wireless system for collecting meter data;

[0013] Figure 2 depicts a flow chart of a process for exception handling;

[0014] Figures 3A and 3B depicts a flow chart of a process for registering nodes with a collector;

[0015] Figure 4 depicts a flow chart of a process for registering a newly added meter;

[0016] Figure 5 depicts a flow chart of a process for switching the communication path for a registered node to a new collector;

[0017] Figure 6 depicts a flow chart of a process for reading usage data;

[0018] Figure 7 depicts a flow chart of a process for reading data from a one-way meter;

[0019] Figure 8 depicts a block diagram of a meter suitable for use with the disclosed embodiments;

[0020] Figure 9 depicts a flow chart of an exemplary process for transmitting meter data from a first meter to a collector;

[0021] Figure 10 depicts a flow chart of an exemplary process for transmitting meter data from an intermediate two-way meter to a collector;

[0022] Figure 11 depicts a flow chart an exemplary process for storing a meter record at a collector; and

[0023] Figure 12 is a diagram of a general purpose computing device.

Detailed Description

[0024] Exemplary systems and methods for gathering meter data are described below with reference to FIGURES 1-12. It will be appreciated by those of ordinary skill in the art that the description given herein with respect to those figures is for exemplary purposes only and is not intended in any way to limit the scope of potential embodiments.

[0025] Generally, a plurality of meter devices, which operate to track usage of a service or commodity such as, for example, electricity, water, and gas, are operable to wirelessly communicate with each other. A collector meter is operable to automatically identify and register meters for communication with the collector meter. When a meter is installed, the meter becomes registered with the collector that can provide a communication path to the meter. The collectors receive and compile metering data from a plurality of meter devices via wireless communications. A communications server communicates with the collectors to retrieve the compiled meter data.

[0026] Figure 1 provides a diagram of an exemplary metering system 110. System 110 comprises a plurality of meters 114, which are operable to sense and record usage of a service or commodity such as, for example, electricity, water, or gas. Meters 114 may be located at customer premises such as, for example, a home or place of business. Meters 114 comprise an antenna and are operable to transmit data, including service usage data, wirelessly. Meters 114 may be further operable to receive data wirelessly as well. In an illustrative embodiment, meters 114 may be, for example, electrical meters manufactured by Elster Electricity, LLC.

[0027] System 110 further comprises collectors 116. Collectors 116 are also meters operable to detect and record usage of a service or commodity such as, for example, electricity, water, or gas. Collectors 116 comprise an antenna and are operable to send and receive data wirelessly. In particular, collectors 116 are operable to send data to and receive data from meters 114. In an illustrative embodiment, meters 114 may be, for example, an electrical meter manufactured by Elster Electricity, LLC.

[0028] A collector 116 and the meters 114 for which it is configured to receive meter data define a subnet 120 of system 110. For each subnet 120, data is collected at

collector 116 and periodically transmitted to communication server 122. Communication server 122 stores the data for analysis and preparation of bills. Communication server 122 may be a specially programmed general purpose computing system and may communicate with collectors 116 wirelessly or via a wire line connection such as, for example, a dial-up telephone connection or fixed wire network.

[0029] Thus, each subnet 120 comprises a collector 116 and one or more meters 114, which may be referred to as nodes of the subnet. Typically, collector 116 directly communicates with only a subset of the plurality of meters 114 in the particular subnet. Meters 114 with which collector 116 directly communicates may be referred to as level one meters 114a. The level one meters 114a are said to be one “hop” from the collector 116. Communications between collector 116 and meters 114 other than level one meters 114a are relayed through the level one meters 114a. Thus, the level one meters 114a operate as repeaters for communications between collector 116 and meters 114 located further away in subnet 120.

[0030] Each level one meter 114a directly communicates with only a subset of the remaining meters 114 in the subnet 120. The meters 114 with which the level one meters 114a directly communicate may be referred to as level two meters 114b. Level two meters 114b are one “hop” from level one meters 114a, and therefore two “hops” from collector 116. Level two meters 114b operate as repeaters for communications between the level one meters 114a and meters 114 located further away from collector 116 in the subnet 120.

[0031] While only two levels of meters are shown (collector 114, first level 114a, second level 114b) in Figure 1, a subnet 120 may comprise any number of levels of meters 114. For example, a subnet 120 may comprise one level of meters but might

also comprise eight or more levels of meters 114. In an embodiment wherein a subnet comprises eight levels of meters 114, as many as 1024 meters might be registered with a single collector 116.

[0032] Each meter 114 and collector 116 that is installed in the system 110 has a unique identifier stored thereon that uniquely identifies the device from all other devices in the system 110. Additionally, meters 114 operating in a subnet 120 comprise information including the following: data identifying the collector with which the meter is registered; the level in the subnet at which the meter is located; the repeater meter with which the meter communicates to send and receive data to the collector; an identifier indicating whether the meter is a repeater for other nodes in the subnet; and if the meter operates as a repeater, the identifier that uniquely identifies the repeater within the particular subnet, and the number of meters for which it is a repeater. Collectors 116 have stored thereon all of this same data for all meters 114 that are registered therewith. Thus, collector 116 comprises data identifying all nodes registered therewith as well as data identifying the registered path by which data is communicated with each node.

[0033] Generally, collector 116 and meters 114 communicate with and amongst one another using any one of several robust wireless techniques such as, for example, frequency hopping spread spectrum (FHSS) and direct sequence spread spectrum (DSSS).

[0034] For most network tasks such as, for example, reading data, collector 116 communicates with meters 114 in the subnet 120 using point-to-point transmissions. For example, a message or instruction from collector 116 is routed through a defined set of meter hops to the desired meter 114. Similarly, a meter 114 communicates with collector 117 through the same set of meter hops, but in reverse.

[0035] In some instances, however, collector 117 needs to quickly communicate information to all meters 114 located in its subnet 120. Accordingly, collector 117 may issue a broadcast message that is meant to reach all nodes in the subnet 120. The broadcast message may be referred to as a "flood broadcast message." A flood broadcast originates at collector 116 and propagates through the entire subnet 120 one level at a time. For example, collector 116 may transmit a flood broadcast to all first level meters 114a. The first level meters 114a that receive the message pick a random time slot and retransmit the broadcast message to second level meters 114b. Any second level meter 114b can accept the broadcast, thereby providing better coverage from the collector out to the end point meters. Similarly, the second level meters 114b that receive the broadcast message pick a random time slot and communicate the broadcast message to third level meters. This process continues out until the end nodes of the subnet. Thus, a broadcast message gradually propagates out the subnet 120.

[0036] The flood broadcast packet header contains information to prevent nodes from repeating the flood broadcast packet more than once per level. For example, within a flood broadcast message, a field might exist that indicates to meters/nodes which receive the message, the level of the subnet the message is located; only nodes at that particular level may re-broadcast the message to the next level. If the collector broadcasts a flood message with a level of 1, only level 1 nodes may respond. Prior to re-broadcasting the flood message, the level 1 nodes increment the field to 2 so that only level 2 nodes respond to the broadcast. Information within the flood broadcast packet header ensures that a flood broadcast will eventually die out.

[0037] Generally, a collector 116 issues a flood broadcast several times, e.g. five times, successively to increase the probability that all meters in the subnet 120

receive the broadcast. A delay is introduced before each new broadcast to allow the previous broadcast packet time to propagate through all levels of the subnet.

[0038] Meters 114 may have a clock formed therein. However, meters 114 often undergo power interruptions that can interfere with the operation of any clock therein. Accordingly, the clocks internal to meters 114 cannot be relied upon to provide an accurate time reading after a power interruption. Having the correct time is necessary, however, when time of use metering is being employed. Indeed, in an embodiment, time of use schedule data may also be comprised in the same broadcast message as the time. Accordingly, collector 116 periodically flood broadcasts the real time to meters 114 in subnet 120. Meters 114 use the time broadcasts to stay synchronized with the rest of the subnet 120. In an illustrative embodiment, collector 116 broadcasts the time every 15 minutes. The broadcasts may be made near the middle of 15 minute clock boundaries that are used in performing load profiling and time of use (TOU) schedules so as to minimize time changes near these boundaries. Maintaining time synchronization is important to the proper operation of the subnet 120. Accordingly, lower priority tasks performed by collector 116 may be delayed while the time broadcasts are performed.

[0039] In an illustrative embodiment, the flood broadcasts transmitting time data may be repeated, for example, five times, so as to increase the probability that all nodes receive the time. Furthermore, where time of use schedule data is communicated in the same transmission as the timing data, the subsequent time transmissions allow a different piece of the time of use schedule to be transmitted to the nodes.

[0040] Exception messages are used in subnet 120 to transmit unexpected events that occur at meters 114 to collector 116. In an embodiment, the first 4 seconds of every 32-second period are allocated as an exception window for meters 114 to transmit

exception messages. Meters 114 transmit their exception messages early enough in the exception window so the message has time to propagate to collector 116 before the end of the exception window. Collector 116 may process the exceptions after the 4-second exception window. Generally, a collector 116 acknowledges exception messages, and collector 116 waits until the end of the exception window to send this acknowledgement.

[0041] In an illustrative embodiment, exception messages are configured as one of three different types of exception messages: local exceptions, which are handled directly by the collector 116 without intervention from communication server 122; an immediate exception, which is generally relayed to communication server 122 under an expedited schedule; and a daily exception, which is communicated to the communication server 122 on a regular schedule.

[0042] Figure 2 presents a flowchart of a process employed by collector 116 for handling these exceptions. At step 210, the exception is received at collector 116. At step 212, collector 116 identifies the type of exception that has been received. If a local exception has been received, at step 214, collector 116 takes an action to remedy the problem. For example, when collector 116 receives an exception requesting a node scan request such as discussed below, collector 116 transmits a command to initiate a scan procedure to the meter 114 from which the exception was received.

[0043] If an immediate exception type has been received, at step 220, collector 116 makes a record of the exception. An immediate exception might identify, for example, that there has been a power outage. Collector 116 may log the receipt of the exception in one or more tables or files. In an illustrative example, a record of receipt of an immediate exception is made in a table referred to as the "Immediate Exception Log Table."

[0044] At step 222, collector 116 waits a set period of time before taking further action with respect to the immediate exception. For example, collector 116 may wait 64 seconds. This delay period allows the exception to be corrected before communicating the exception to communication server 122. For example, where a power outage was the cause of the immediate exception, collector 116 may wait a set period of time to allow for receipt of a message indicating the power outage has been corrected.

[0045] If at step 224 the exception has not been corrected, at step 226, collector 116 communicates the immediate exception to communication server 122. For example, collector 116 may initiate a dial-up connection with communication server 122 and download the exception data. After reporting an immediate exception to communications server 122, collector 116 may delay reporting any additional immediate exceptions for a period of time such as ten minutes. This is to avoid reporting exceptions from other meters 114 that relate to, or have the same cause as the exception that was just reported.

[0046] If a daily exception was received, at step 230, the exception is recorded in a file or a database table. Generally, daily exceptions are occurrences in the subnet 120 that need to be reported to communication server 122, but are not so urgent that they need to be communicated immediately. For example, when collector 116 registers a new meter 114 in subnet 120, collector 116 records a daily exception identifying that the registration has taken place. In an illustrative embodiment, the exception is recorded in a database table referred to as the "Daily Exception Log Table." At step 232, collector 116 communicates the daily exceptions to communications server 122. Generally, collector 116 communicates the daily exceptions once every 24 hours.

[0047] According to an aspect of the disclosed system 110, a collector 116 may dynamically identify meters 114 that are operable to communicate with it in a subnet 120 as well as identify more efficient communication paths for previously registered meters. For example, when a collector 116 is initially brought into system 110, it needs to identify and register meters in its subnet 120. A “node scan” refers to a process of communication between connectors 116 and meters 114 whereby a collector may identify and register new nodes in a subnet 120 and allow previously registered nodes to switch paths. A collector 116 can implement a node scan on the entire subnet, referred to as a “full node scan,” or a node scan can be performed on specially identified nodes, referred to as a “node scan retry.”

[0048] A full node scan may be performed, for example, when a collector is first installed. The collector 116 must identify and register nodes from which it will collect usage data. Figures 3A and 3B depict a flow chart of a process for performing a “full node scan.” As shown, at step 310, the collector 116 initiates the node scan by broadcasting a request, which may be referred to as a Node Scan Procedure request. Generally, the Node Scan Procedure request directs that all unregistered meters 114 or nodes that receive the request respond to the collector 116. The request may comprise information such as the unique address of the collector that initiated the procedure. The signal by which collector 116 transmits this request may have limited strength and therefore is detected at meters 114 that are in proximity of collector 116. Meters 114 that receive the Node Scan Procedure request respond by transmitting their unique identifier as well as other data.

[0049] Collector 116 receives a response from one of the meters 114 at step 312. At step 313, collector 116 identifies a received signal strength (RSSI) value for the

response from meter 114. At step 314, collector 116 stores in memory the meter's 114 unique identifier along with the corresponding RSSI value.

[0050] Preferably, collector 116 attempts to register meters 114 that will have a reliable data communication path. Accordingly, at step 316, collector 116 compares the RSSI value of the node scan response with a selected threshold value. For example, the threshold value may be -60 dBm. RSSI values above this threshold are sufficiently reliable. Collector 116 maintains a list of meters 114 that responded but which do not satisfy the RSSI threshold. For example, a database table referred to as the Straggler table may be employed to store for each meter that responded to a Node Scan Response and did not meet the RSSI value, the meter's unique identifier and the RSSI value of the response. Accordingly, if at step 316 the RSSI value is not greater than the established threshold, at step 318, collector 116 updates its list to include the meter's unique identifier and RSSI value. Thereafter, processing continues at step 326.

[0051] If at step 316, the RSSI value exceeds the threshold, at step 324, collector 116 registers the node. Registering a meter 114 comprises updating a list of the registered nodes at collector 116. For example, the list may be updated to identify the meter's system-wide unique identifier and the communication path to the node. Collector 116 also records the meter's level in the subnet (i.e. whether the meter is a level one node, level two node, etc.), whether the node operates as a repeater, and if so, the number of meters for which it operates as a repeater. Upon initialization, the data indicates the node is not a repeater and the number of meters for which it operates as a repeater is zero. The registration process further comprises transmitting registration information to the meter 114. For example, collector 116 forwards to meter 114 an indication that it is registered, the unique identifier of the collector with which it is

registered, the level the meter exists at in the subnet, and the unique identifier of the meter with which it should communicate data. The meter stores this data and begins to operate as part of the subnet by responding to commands from its collector 116.

[0052] At step 326, collector 116 determines if there are additional responses to the node scan request. If so, processing continues at step 314.

[0053] Steps 310 through 326 may be performed several times so as to insure that all meters 114 that may receive the Node Scan Procedure, have an opportunity for their response to be received at collector 116. Accordingly, at step 328, collector 116 determines whether the Node Scan should be implemented again. Generally, this is determined by comparing the number of times the steps have been completed with a predefined limit. If the limit has not been met, processing continues at step 310. If the limit has been met, a first portion of the node scan procedure is complete. It is presumed that all first level meters 114 have been identified and registered at this point in the process. The Straggler list may identify one or more meters 114 that did not satisfy the RSSI threshold. The node scan process continues by performing a similar process as that described above at each of the now registered level one nodes. This process results in the identification and registration of level two nodes. After the level two nodes are identified, a similar node scan process is performed at the level two nodes to identify level three nodes, and so on.

[0054] Figure 3B is a flow chart of the process for identifying and registering meters located above the level one meters. At step 340, collector 116 transmits a command, which may be referred to as an Initiate Node Scan Procedure, to the first of the meters 114 registered at steps 310 through 328, to initiate a node scan process at the particular meter 114. The request comprises several data items that the receiving meter

may use in completing the node scan. For example, the request may comprise the number of timeslots available for responding nodes, the unique address of the collector that initiated the request, and a measure of the reliability of the communications between the target node and the collector. As described below in connection with Figure 4, the measure of reliability is employed during a process for identifying more reliable paths for previously registered nodes.

[0055] The meter that receives the Initiate Node Scan Response request responds by performing a node scan process similar to that described above at steps 310 through 328. More specifically, the meter broadcasts a request to which all unregistered nodes respond. The request comprises the number of timeslots available for responding nodes (which is used to set the period for the node to wait for responses), the unique address of the collector that initiated the node scan procedure, a measure of the reliability of the communications between the sending node and the collector (which is used in the process of determining whether a meter's path may be switched as defined below in connection with Figure 5), the level within the subnet of the node sending the request, and an RSSI threshold (which is used in the process of determining whether a registered meter's path may be switched as described below in connection with Figure 4). The meter issuing the node scan request waits for and receives responses. For each response, the meter stores in memory the unique identifier and the RSSI value of the response. At step 342, collector 116 waits while the response are collected at the meter that issued the node scan. At step 344, collector 116 retrieves the node information that has been collected by the meter. At step 346, collector 116 parses the information and selects one of the meters or potential nodes in the list of retrieved data.

[0056] Collector 116 attempts to register meters 114 that will have a reliable data communication path. Accordingly, at step 348, collector 116 compares the RSSI value for the selected meter 114 with a selected threshold value. If the RSSI value is not greater than the threshold value, at step 350, collector 116 determines if the particular meter was previously identified as having responded to a Node Scan Response request but having not met the RSSI threshold. Specifically, collector 116 may refer to its Straggler table or similar file where it maintains a list of meters 114 that meet this criteria. If so, at step 352, collector 116 compares the RSSI value with the previously stored value. If the new RSSI value is greater than the previous value, at step 354, collector updates the Straggler table to identify the new RSSI value and the new communication path. If at step 352, the new RSSI value is not greater than the previous value, processing continues at step 362. If at step 350, it is determined that the particular meter 114 is not in the Straggler table, processing continues at step 354, where the Straggler table is updated to reflect the meter identifier, the communication path to this meter and the RSSI value. Thereafter, processing continues at step 362.

[0057] If at step 348, the RSSI value exceeded the threshold, at step 360, collector 116 registers the node. Registering a meter 114 comprises updating a list of the registered nodes at collector 116. For example, the list may be updated to identify the meter's unique identifier and the level of the meter in the subnet, i.e. whether the meter is a level one node, level two node, etc. Additionally, the collector's 116 registration information is updated to reflect that the meter 114 from which the scan process was initiated is identified as a repeater for the newly registered node. The registration process further comprises transmitting information to the newly registered meter as well as the meter that will serve as a repeater for the newly added node. For example, the

node that issued the node scan request is updated to identify that it operates as a repeater and, if it was previously registered as a repeater, increments a data item identifying the number of nodes for which it serves as a repeater. Thereafter, collector 116 forwards to the newly registered meter an indication that it is registered, an identification of the collector 116 with which it is registered, the level the meter exists at in the subnet, and the unique identifier of the node with which it communicates to forward information to collector 116.

[0058] At step 362, collector 116 determines if there are additional nodes identified in the information retrieved from the meter 114 that performed the node scan request. If so, processing continues at step 346.

[0059] If at step 362, there are no potential nodes to be evaluated, at step 364, collector 116 determines if there are other registered nodes on the same level that have not been directed to perform a node scan. For example, if level 1 nodes are being scanned for potential level 2 nodes, at step 364 collector 116 determines if there are any level 1 nodes that have not yet performed a node scan procedure. If so, processing continues at step 340 wherein collector requests that a node scan procedure be performed at the node.

[0060] If at step 364, all nodes at the level of the subnet under evaluation have been reviewed, processing continues at step 366, with collector 116 determining if there are registered meters at the next level of the subnet. If so, processing continues at step 340 with node scans being performed at this next level.

[0061] If at step 366 there are no registered nodes at the next higher level, at step 370, collector 116 registers the nodes identified in the list of meters that have responded but did not meet the RSSI threshold. At this point in the process, presumably,

the list comprises the best path identified for each of the unregistered meters that responded, even if that path does not meet the desired RSSI threshold. If during operation of the network, a meter registered in this manner fails to perform adequately, it may be assigned a different path or possibly to a different collector as described below.

[0062] As previously mentioned, a full node scan may be performed when a collector 116 is first introduced to a network. At the conclusion of the full node scan, a collector 116 will have registered a set of meters 114 with which it communicates and reads metering data. Full node scans might be periodically performed by an installed collector to identify new meters 114 that have been brought on-line since the last node scan and to allow registered meters to switch to a different path.

[0063] In addition to the full node scan, collector 116 may also perform a process of scanning specific meters 114 in the subnet 120, which is referred to as a “node scan retry.” For example, collector 116 may issue a specific request to a meter 114 to perform a node scan outside of a full node scan when on a previous attempt to scan the node, the collector 116 was unable to confirm that the particular meter 114 received the node scan request. Also, a collector 116 may request a node scan retry of a meter 114 when during the course of a full node scan the collector 116 was unable to read the node scan data from the meter 114. Similarly, a node scan retry will be performed when an exception procedure requesting an immediate node scan is received from a meter 114.

[0064] According to an aspect of the disclosed embodiment, system 110 automatically reconfigures to accommodate a new meter 114 that may be added. More particularly, the system identifies that the new meter has begun operating and identifies a path to a collector 116 that will become responsible for collecting the metering data. A flow chart of a process for adding a new meter is depicted in Figure 4. As shown, at step

410, the new meter broadcasts an indication that it is unregistered. In one embodiment, this broadcast might be, for example, embedded in, or relayed as part of a request for an update of the real time as described above. At step 412, the broadcast is received at one of the registered meters 114 in proximity to the meter that is attempting to register. At step 414, the registered meter 114 forwards the time to the meter that is attempting to register. At step 416, the registered node also transmits an exception request to its collector 116 requesting that the collector 116 implement a node scan, which presumably will locate and register the new meter. At step 418, the collector 116 transmits a request that the registered node perform a node scan. At step 420, the registered node performs the node scan during which it requests that all unregistered nodes respond. At step 422, the newly added, unregistered meter responds to the node scan. At step 424, the unique identifier of the newly added node along with the RSSI value of its response are stored on the registered node. At step 426, collector 116 retrieves the response data. If at step 428 the RSSI value of the response from the new meter exceeds the established RSSI threshold, at step 430 collector 116 updates its data files to identify the new meter as being registered and transmits a registration notification to the new meter. If at step 428 the RSSI value does not exceed the threshold, the unique identifier is added to the list of unregistered nodes, at step 432. The newly added meter will continue to broadcast that it is unregistered and ultimately will be registered through a meter with which it satisfies the RSSI threshold.

[0065] A collector 116 periodically retrieves meter data from the meters that are registered with it. For example, meter data may be retrieved from a meter every 4 hours. Where there is a problem with reading the meter data on the regularly scheduled interval, the collector will try to read the data again before the next regularly scheduled interval.

Nevertheless, there may be instances wherein the collector 116 is unable to read metering data from a particular meter 114 for a prolonged period of time. The meters 114 store an indication of when they are read by collector 116 and keep track of the time since their data has last been collected by the collector 116. If the length of time since the last reading exceeds a defined threshold such as for example, 18 hours, presumably a problem has arisen in the communication path between the particular meter 114 and the collector 116. Accordingly, the meter 114 changes its status to that of an unregistered meter and attempts to locate a new path to a collector 116 via the process described above in connection with Figure 4. Thus, the exemplary system is operable to dynamically reconfigure itself to address inadequacies in the system.

[0066] In some instances, while a collector 116 may be able to retrieve data from a registered meter 114 occasionally, the level of success in reading the meter may be inadequate. For example, if a collector 116 attempts to read meter data from a meter 114 every 4 hours but is able to read the data, for example, only 70 percent of the time or less, it may be desirable to find a more reliable path for reading the data from that particular meter. Where the frequency of reading data from a meter 114 falls below a desired frequency, the collector 116 transmits a message to the meter 114 to respond to node scans going forward. The meter 114 remains registered but will respond to node scans such as are described above in connection with Figure 3. If the meter 114 responds to a node scan procedure, the collector 116 recognizes the response as originating from a registered meter. The collector 116 verifies that the RSSI value of the node scan response exceeds the established threshold. If it does not, the potential path is not acceptable. However, if the RSSI threshold is met, the collector 116 initiates a qualification procedure whereby it makes several attempts to reach the meter through the

potential path. If the collector is successful in establishing communication with the meter through the potential path more than an acceptable percentage of the time, e.g. 80 percent, then the collector registers the meter in the new path. The registration process comprises updating the collector 116 and meter 114 with data identifying the repeater with which the meter 114 will communicate. Additionally, if the repeater has not previously performed the operation of a repeater, the repeater would need to be updated to identify that it is a repeater. Likewise, the repeater with which the meter previously communicated is updated to identify that it is no longer a repeater for the particular meter 114.

[0067] In some instances, a more reliable communication path for a meter may exist through a collector other than that with which the meter is registered. A meter may automatically recognize the existence of the more reliable communication path, switch collectors, and notify the previous collector that the change has taken place. Figure 5 provides a flow chart of a method for switching the registration of a meter from a first collector to a second collector. As shown, at step 510, a registered meter 114 receives a node scan request from a collector 116 other than that with which the meter is registered. Typically, a registered meter 114 does not respond to node scan requests. However, if the request is likely to result in a more reliable transmission path, even a registered meter may respond. Accordingly, at step 512, the meter determines if the new collector offers a potentially more reliable transmission path. For example, the meter 114 may determine if the path to the potential new collector 116 comprises fewer hops than the path to the collector with which the meter is registered. If not, the path may not be more reliable and the meter 114 will not respond to the node scan. The meter 114 might also determine if the RSSI of the node scan packet exceeds an RSSI threshold identified in

the node scan information. If so, the new collector may offer a more reliable transmission path for meter data. If not, the transmission path is not acceptable and the meter does not respond. Additionally, if the reliability of communication between the potential new collector and the repeater that would service the meter meets a threshold established when the repeater was registered with its existing collector, the communication path to the new collector may be more reliable. If the reliability does not exceed this threshold, however, the meter 114 does not respond to the node scan.

[0068] If at step 512, it is determined that the path to the new collector may be better than the path to its existing collector, at step 514, the meter 114 responds to the node scan. Included in the response is information regarding any nodes for which the particular meter may operate as a repeater. For example, the response might identify the number of nodes for which the meter serves as a repeater.

[0069] At step 516, collector 116 determines if it has the capacity to service the meter and any meters for which it operates as a repeater. If not, the collector 116 does not respond to the meter that is attempting to change collectors. If, however, the collector 116 determines that it has capacity to service the meter 114, at step 518, the collector 116 stores registration information about the meter 114. At step 520, collector 116 transmits a registration command to meter 114. At step 522, the meter 114 updates its registration data to identify that it is now registered with the new collector. At step 524, collector 116 communicates instruction to the meter 114 to initiate a node scan request. Nodes that are unregistered, or that had previously used meter 114 as a repeater respond to the request to identify themselves to collector 116. The collector registers these nodes as is described above in connection with registering new meters/nodes.

[0070] Under some circumstances it may be necessary to change a collector. For example, a collector may be malfunctioning, and need to be taken off-line. Accordingly, a new communication path must be provided for collecting meter data from the meters serviced by the particular collector. The process of replacing a collector is performed by broadcasting a message to unregister, usually from a replacement collector, to all of the meters that are registered with the collector that is being removed from service. According to an aspect of the disclosed embodiment, registered meters may be programmed to only respond to commands from the collector with which they are registered. Accordingly, the command to unregister may comprise the unique identifier of the collector that is being replaced. In response to the command to unregister, the meters begin to operate as unregistered meters and respond to node scan requests. To allow the unregistered command to propagate through the subnet, when a node receives the command it will not unregister immediately, but rather remain registered for a defined period, which may be referred to as the "Time to Live". During this time to live period, the nodes continue to respond to application layer and immediate retries allowing the unregistration command to propagate to all nodes in the subnet. Ultimately, the meters register with the replacement collector as described above in connection with Figure 3.

[0071] One of collector's 116 main responsibilities within subnet 120 is to retrieve metering data from meters 114. The self-configuring and self-healing characteristics of system 110 provide that collectors 116 have improved reliability in reading usage data. Generally, meters 114 store data regarding usage of electricity, gas, water, etc. in memory. Collector 116 periodically retrieves this data from nodes in its subnet 120. In an embodiment, collector 116 has as a goal to obtain at least one

successful read of the metering data per day from each node in its subnet. Collector 116 attempts to retrieve the data from all nodes in its subnet 120 at a configurable periodicity. For example, collector 116 may be configured to attempt to retrieve metering data from meters 114 in its subnet 120 once every 4 hours. Figure 6 depicts a flow chart of a process for retrieving data from meters 114 in a subnet 120. As shown, at step 610, collector 116 identifies one of the meters 114 in its subnet 120. For example, collector 116 reviews a list of registered nodes and identifies one for reading. At step 612, collector 116 communicates a command to the particular meter 114 that it forward its metering data to the collector 116. If at step 614, the meter reading is successful and the data is received at collector 116, at step 616 collector 116 determines if there are other meters that have not been read during the present reading session. If so, processing continues at step 610. However, if all of the meters 114 in subnet 120 have been read, at step 618, collector waits a defined length of time, such as, for example, 4 hours, before attempting another read.

[0072] If at step 614, the meter data was not received at collector 116, at step 620 collector 116 begins a retry procedure wherein it attempts to retry the data read from the particular meter. Collector 116 continues to attempt to read the data from the node until either the data is read or the next subnet reading takes place. In an embodiment, collector 116 attempts to read the data every 60 minutes. Thus, wherein a subnet reading is taken every 4 hours, collector 116 may issue three retries between subnet readings.

[0073] The inability to read metering data may be the result of communication failures that can take place at the packet communication level. For example, if for each hop the probability of successful communications is 95%, a level 8 node requires 16 message hops, which would result in a 44% probability a successful round trip message.

If 2 immediate retries are used for each hop, the per hop probability increases from 95% to 99.98% and the probability of a successful round trip message increases to 99.8%. Accordingly, in an embodiment of the disclosed system, with each successive retry to read data from a node, the number of packet level retries increases. For example, if during a normal read attempt one packet level retry is undertaken, when an application level retry to read the data is made by the collector, two or more packet level retries may be implemented. Thus, as the number of application level retries increases, so does the number of packet level retries. Furthermore, the number of packet level retries varies according to the level at which the particular meter 114 exists in the subnet 120. The higher the level, the greater the number of packet level retries. The table below lists exemplary packet level retries for various subnet levels and various numbers of prior application level retry attempts.

	Application Layer Attempt		
	1	2	≥ 3
Levels 1 and 2	1	2	3
Levels 3 and 4	2	3	4
Levels 5-6	2	3	4
Levels > 6	3	4	5

[0074] In an embodiment of system 120, meters 114 are typically two-way meters – i.e. they are operable to both receive and transmit data. However, one-way meters that are operable only to transmit and not receive data may also be deployed in the system 110. Figure 7 provides a flow chart of a process for reading data from one-way meters deployed in the system. As shown, at step 710 a one-way meter broadcasts their usage data. At step 712, this data is received at one or more two-way meters that are in proximity to the one-way meter. At step 714, the data is stored on the two-way meter, and designated as having been received from the one-way meter. At step 716, the

data from the one-way meter is communicated to the collector with which the two-way meter is registered. For example, when the collector reads the two-way meter data, it recognizes the existence of meter data from the one-way meter and reads it as well. At step 718, after the data from the one-way meter has been read by the collector from the two-way meter, the data is removed from memory of the two-way meter.

[0075] A block diagram for an exemplary meter device operable to perform as meter 114 or collector 116 as described above is depicted in Figure 8. As shown, meter device 810 comprises metering electronics 812 for physically measuring the amount of a service or commodity that is used, and wireless communications electronics 814 for transmitting and receiving data to other meter devices. Device 810 further comprises memory 816 for storing data and executable instructions for performing methods as described above. Processor 818 is operable to execute the instructions stored in memory 816. Device 810 may further comprise visual display 818 for displaying metering data at device 810. Wire-based communications electronics 820 provides the capability to communicate with device 810 via means other than wirelessly. For example, wire-based communications electronics 820 may comprise a modem for communicating over telephone lines or a network protocol transceiver for communicating over a dedicated local area or wide area network.

[0076] In an embodiment of the invention, the system includes a number of meters which will be referred to as “first” meters. The first meters are typically battery powered devices. However, the first meters may also use other energy sources in place of or in addition to battery power. Furthermore, the first meters are typically one-way meters which are transmit only devices. However, the first meters may also be two-way

meters, which are operable to both transmit and receive data. The first meters transmit their data to the collector either directly or indirectly via intermediate two-way meters.

[0077] A number of improvements may be implemented with respect to the transfer of meter data from the first meters. In one such improvement, intermediate two-way meters store multiple records from each first meter, thereby ensuring that records from a one-way meter will not be blocked when an attempt is made to forward them to the collector. In another improvement, each data record includes a unique identifier (UID) that identifies the particular first meter from which it is generated. Additionally, each data record includes an update sequence marker (USM) that identifies the sequence in which records are generated. The USM ensures that, a newer message will not be overwritten with the older message. Furthermore, each data record includes a data format code that identifies a data format of the record. The collector may store multiple records for a first meter, each corresponding to a particular data format. In another improvement, each record from a first meter is assigned a corresponding timestamp when it is received at either a two-way meter or the data collector. The timestamp allows system 120 to calculate time sensitive information from the first meters.

[0078] A flowchart of an exemplary method for transmitting meter data from a first meter to a data collector in accordance with the present invention is shown in Fig. 9. At step 908, a meter record is generated at the first meter, and, at step 910, the meter record is transmitted. As stated above, the meter record may be received either directly by the data collector or by an intermediate two-way meter. As also stated above, the transmitted meter record may be assigned the UID of the first meter at which it is generated, a USM, and a data format code. The USM is preferably a one byte field that wraps around to zero after reaching a maximum value of 255.

[0079] If, at step 910, the meter record is transmitted indirectly to the collector, then, at step 912, the meter record is received by an intermediate two-way meter. At step 914, the meter record is timestamped by the two-way meter. As stated above, the timestamp allows system 120 to calculate time sensitive information from the first meters. Such time dependent information may be, for example, interval data, leak detection information, or time of use related data. First meters are typically battery powered devices designed to consume as little power as possible, and, therefore, do not have a highly accurate real time clock. Thus, timestamps are provided by the two-way meter (or possibly by the collector as will be discussed later) rather than by the first meters themselves. To minimize storage space, the timestamp is preferably a value between 0 and 95 that indicates a 15-minute interval during the day in which a record is received. As should be appreciated, the timestamp may, if desired, include greater resolution than 0-95.

[0080] At step 916, the two-way meter stores the received meter record. As stated above, the two way meters are capable of storing multiple records from each first meter. To preserve the life of the two-way meter's non-volatile memory, the number of memory writes may be limited by implementing the memory as a "circular table". For example, if an initial first meter record is stored in a first memory location, then a later received first meter record will be stored in a second memory location. This is true even if the later received record is received after the initial record has already been forwarded to the collector and cleared from the first memory location.

[0081] At step 918, the meter record is transmitted to the collector. The meter record may be transmitted to the collector using one of two methods. In the first method, the meter record is detected and requested by the collector during a read of data from the

two-way meter. The first method is described in detail below with reference to Fig. 10. In the second method, the meter record is forwarded to the collector using the exception message technique as described above with reference to Fig. 7.

[0082] When an exception message is forwarded the collector, the collector returns a response to the two-way meter to acknowledge the exception and clear the transmitted meter record from its memory location. Other meter records may remain at the two-way meter and be transferred in a future exception window. If the exception message is unsuccessful, the collector may detect and retrieve the data when the collector detects one way node data during a normal, periodic read of the two-way node according to the first method. It should be recognized that the receipt of the meter record by the collector could cause the collector to send "Read Exceptions" messages until all one-way node records are cleared from the two-way node.

[0083] In both the first and the second methods, the transmitted meter record includes a record number that identifies the memory location of the meter record at the two-way meter. After receiving the meter record, the collector returns instructions to delete the memory location identified by the transmitted record number.

[0084] The first method is generally the faster method, but the second method is generally the more reliable method. However, both the first and the second methods may be simultaneously enabled, thereby enabling both fast and reliable transfers.

[0085] At step 920, the meter record is received by the collector. Upon receiving the meter record, the collector may verify the validity of the timestamp. The timestamp may be invalid if, for example, the meter record was received at the two-way node shortly after a power failure and before the two-way node received time information from the network. The validity of the timestamp may be verified by

comparing the timestamp with a timestamp of a matching record that is already stored at the collector. Such a matching record may be identified by a matching first meter UID, a matching USM, and a matching data format code. If the collector contains a matching record with an invalid timestamp, then it will overwrite the invalid matching record timestamp with the valid received timestamp.

[0086] If, at step 910, the meter record is transmitted directly to the collector, then, at step 922, the meter record is received directly by the collector. At step 924, the collector timestamps the meter record. At step 926, the collector stores the meter record. An exemplary method for storing the meter record is discussed in detail below with reference to Fig. 11.

[0087] A flowchart of an exemplary method for transmitting meter data from an intermediate two-way meter to the collector in accordance with the present invention is shown in Fig. 10. The method described in Fig. 10 may be implemented at step 918 of Fig. 9. Alternatively or in addition to the method described in Fig. 10, the meter record may be forwarded to the collector using the exception message technique as described above with reference to Fig. 7.

[0088] At step 1010, the collector reads the two-way meter, and, at step 1012, the collector detects a first meter record at the two-way meter. The collector may, for example, detect an exception flag set by the two-way meter. At step 1014, the collector requests the meter record from the two-way meter. The collector may request the meter record by sending a read exceptions message to the two-way meter. At step 1016, the two-way meter receives the request for the meter record, and, at step 1018, the two-way meter transmits the meter record to the collector in response to the request. At step 1020, the collector receives the meter record from the two-way meter.

[0089] At step 1022, the collector sends a next request for a next meter record from the two-way meter. The next request sent at step 1022 includes instructions to the two-way meter to clear the previously transmitted meter record from its memory. At step 1024, the two-way meter receives the next request, and, at step 1026, the two-way meter clears the previously transmitted meter record from its memory.

[0090] If there is another meter record that is stored at the two-way node, then, at step 1028, the other meter record is transmitted to the collector. The method then returns to step 1020, at which the other meter record is received by the collector. If there are no remaining meter records stored at the two-way node, then, at step 1030, the two-way node sends a response indicating such.

[0091] A flowchart of an exemplary method for storing a meter record at the collector in accordance with the present invention is shown in Fig. 11. The method described in Fig. 11 may be implemented at step 926 of Fig. 9.

[0092] At step 1110, after receiving the meter record, the collector determines if there is already stored in its memory an existing record with the same first meter unique identifier (UID) and data format code as the received record. If not, then, at step 1112, the collector stores the meter record. If so, then, at step 1114, the collector compares the USM of the received meter record with the USM of the existing record to determine which of the two-records was more recently generated by the first meter.

[0093] The following logic may be used to determine whether the received meter record is more recent than the existing meter record. If the received USM is greater than the existing USM, then the received meter record is more recent if:

$$(\text{Received USM}) - (\text{existing USM}) < 128$$

[0094] If the received USM is less than the existing USM, then the received meter record is more recent if:

$$(\text{Received USM}) - (\text{existing USM}) > 128$$

[0095] If the received meter record is more recent than the existing meter record, then, at step 1116, the collector overwrites the existing meter record with the received meter record. If, on the other hand, the existing meter record is more recent than the received meter record, then, at step 1118, the collector discards the received meter record.

[0096] Thus, the present invention includes a number of improvements with respect to the transfer of data from first meters. As should be appreciated, data from a particular first meter may be transmitted to, received by, and stored at multiple two-way meters and multiple collectors. As discussed above, a collector will determine if a meter record should be stored as a new record, be used to overwrite a previously stored record, or be discarded. This determination is made without regard to whether the meter record is received via an intermediate two-way meter or directly from a first meter. Ultimately, a remote automated meter reading (AMR) server software may receive the meter data from all of the collectors in the system and filter out duplicate or old records to reconstruct data from first meters. The AMR server intelligence may also take multiple first meter records and allow time dependent information such as, for example, load profile data to be constructed for a longer period of time than can be held in a single record. After the AMR server software reads the meter data from a collector, the data in the collector may be cleared, and the collector memory may be made available for new or different meter data, since the data is safely stored and maintained by the AMR server.

[0097] Figure 12 is a diagram of a generic computing device, which may be operable to perform the steps described above as being performed by communications server 122. As shown in Figure 12, communications server 1222 includes processor 1222, system memory 1224, and system bus 1226 that couples various system components including system memory 1224 to processor 1222. System memory 1224 may include read-only memory (ROM) and/or random access memory (RAM). Computing device 1220 may further include hard-drive 1228, which provides storage for computer readable instructions, data structures, program modules, data, and the like. A user (not shown) may enter commands and information into the computing device 1220 through input devices such as keyboard 1240 or mouse 1242. A display device 1244, such as a monitor, a flat panel display, or the like is also connected to computing device 1220. Communications device 1243, which may be a modem, network interface card, or the like, provides for communications over a network. System memory 1224 and/or hard-drive 1228 may be loaded with any one of several computer operating systems such as WINDOWS NT operating system, WINDOWS 2000 operating system, LINUX operating system, and the like.

[0098] Those skilled in the art understand that processor readable instructions for implementing the above-described processes, such as those described with reference to Figures 2-7 and 9-11 can be generated and stored in processor-readable memory and processor-readable media such as a magnetic disk or CD-ROM. Further, a computing system such as that described with reference to Figure 12 may be arranged with metering devices such as that described in Figure 8, and the devices loaded with processor-readable instructions for performing the above described processes. Specifically,

referring to Figures 8 and 12, processors 1222 and 818 may be programmed to operate in accordance with the above-described processes.

[0099] Thus, systems and methods for improved transmission of meter data have been disclosed. Multiple records from each first meter may be stored at intermediate two-way meters, thereby ensuring that records are not prematurely overwritten before they are forwarded to the collector. Furthermore, multiple records from each first meter may be stored at the collector, thereby enabling the transmission and storage of meter records in a number of different formats. Additionally, records from each first meter are marked to reflect a sequence in which they are generated, thereby ensuring that the collector will store only the most recent data records available.

[0100] While systems and methods have been described and illustrated with reference to specific embodiments, those skilled in the art will recognize that modification and variations may be made without departing from the principles described above and set forth in the following claims. For example, while communication server 122 has been described as communicating with collectors 116 via a dial-up connection, the communication may take place wirelessly or over a fixed network, such as a Lan, Wan, the Internet or an intranet. Additionally, although in the embodiments described above, the systems and methods of the present invention are described in the context of a network of metering devices, such as electricity, gas, or water meters, it is understood that the present invention can be implemented in any kind of network in which it is necessary to obtain information from or to provide information to end devices in the system, including without limitation, networks comprising meters, in-home displays, in-home thermostats, load control devices, or any combination of such

devices. Accordingly, reference should be made to the following claims as describing the scope of the present invention.

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A method for collecting a device record generated at a first device, the device record comprising a sequence number identifying a sequence in which the device record is generated, the method comprising:

receiving the device record at a collector;

storing the received device record at the collector if the update sequence number indicates that the received device record is more recently generated than an existing device record from the first device already stored at the collector.

2. The method of claim 1, comprising receiving the device record at a plurality of collectors.

3. The method of claim 2, further comprising transmitting device data from the plurality of collectors to a server.

4. The method of claim 1, comprising receiving the device record at the collector from the first device, which is a one-way meter device.

5. The method of claim 1, comprising receiving the device record at the collector from the first device, which is a battery powered meter device.

6. The method of claim 1, comprising receiving the device record at the collector from the first device, which is a two-way meter device.

7. The method of claim 1, comprising receiving the device record at the collector directly from the first device.

8. The method of claim 1, comprising receiving the device record at the collector indirectly from the first device via an intermediate two-way device.

9. The method of claim 8, wherein receiving the device record at the collector indirectly from the first device via an intermediate two-way device comprises:

performing a periodic read of the intermediate two-way device;
detecting that at least one device record from at least one first device is available; and

sending a request for each of the detected device records until all of the detected device records have been retrieved at the collector.

10. The method of claim 8, further comprising timestamping the device record at the intermediate two-way device.

11. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
upon receiving the time stamped device record at the collector, comparing the received timestamped device record to another time stamped device record already stored at the collector;

determining that the other timestamp is invalid; and
overwriting the other timestamped device record with the received timestamped device record.

12. The method of claim 1, further comprising timestamping the device record at the collector.

13. The method of claim 1, wherein storing the received device record at the collector comprises:

identifying a data format of the received device record and the existing device record;

determining whether the received device record has the same data format as the existing device record;

if not, then storing the received device record at the collector; and

if so, then comparing the sequence marker of the received device record with a sequence marker of the existing device record and overwriting the existing device record with the received device record if the received device record is more recently generated than the existing device record.

14. The method of claim 1, wherein storing the received device record at the collector comprises storing the received device record along with previous received device records from the first device.

15. A method for transmitting a device record generated at a first device to a two-way device, the method comprising:

receiving the device record at the two-way device; and

storing the device record at the two-way device in one of a plurality of memory locations.

16. The method of claim 15, comprising storing the device record in one of the plurality of memory locations implemented as a circular table whereby a number of memory writes to each particular memory location is minimized.

17. The method of claim 15, comprising receiving the device record at the two-way device from the first device, which is a one-way meter device.

18. The method of claim 15, comprising receiving the device record at the two-way device from the first device, which is a battery powered meter device.

19. The method of claim 15, comprising receiving the device record at the two-way device from the first device, which is a two-way meter device.

20. The method of claim 15, further comprising:
transmitting from the two-way device to a collector an exception message including the device record; and
receiving at the two-way device from the collector an acknowledgement that causes the two-way device to clear the device record from its memory location.

21. The method of claim 15, further comprising:
receiving at the two-way device from a collector a first request to read the device record;
transmitting the device record from the two-way device to the collector;
receiving at the two-way device from the collector a second request for a next device record associated with the first device, the second request comprising

instructions to clear the previously transmitted device record from its memory location at the two-way device; and

clearing the previously transmitted device record from its memory location at the two-way device.

22. The method of claim 21, further comprising recursively transmitting device records from the two-way device to the collector until all device records associated with the first device are cleared from the memory at the two-way device.

23. The method of claim 15, further comprising timestamping the device record at the two-way device.

24. An automated device reading system comprising:
a first device that generates and transmits a device record comprising a sequence number identifying a sequence in which the device record is generated; and
a collector that receives the device record from the one way device and stores the received device record if the sequence number indicates that the received device record is more recently generated than an existing device record from the first device already stored at the data collector.

25. The method of claim 24, wherein the collector is one of a plurality of collectors receiving the device record.

26. The method of claim 25, further comprising a server that receives device data from the plurality of collectors.

27. The system of claim 24, wherein the first device is a one-way meter device.

28. The system of claim 24, wherein the first device is a battery powered meter device.

29. The system of claim 24, wherein the first device is a two-way meter device.

30. The system of claim 24, wherein the device record further comprises a first data format code identifying a data format of the device record.

31. The system of claim 24, wherein the collector determines whether the existing device record has a same data format as the received device record, and overwrites the existing device record with the received device record if the sequence number of the received device record indicates that the received device record is more recently generated than the existing device record.

32. The system of claim 24, wherein the collector timestamps the device record when the device record is received by the collector.

33. The system of claim 24, further comprising an intermediate two-way device that relays the device record from the first device to the collector.

34. The system of claim 33, wherein the intermediate two-way device timestamps the device record when the device record is received by the intermediate two-way device.

35. An automated device reading system comprising:
a first device that generates and transmits a device record;
a two-way device that receives the device record from the one way device and stores the device record in one of a plurality of memory locations.

36. The system of claim 35, wherein the plurality of memory locations are implemented as a circular table whereby a number of memory writes to each particular memory location is minimized.

37. The system of claim 35, wherein the first device is a one-way meter device.

38. The system of claim 35, wherein the first device is a battery powered meter device.

39. The system of claim 35, wherein the first device is a two-way meter device.

40. The system of claim 35, further comprising a collector.
41. The system of claim 40, wherein the two-way device transmits to the collector an exception message including the device record.
42. The system of claim 40, wherein the two-way device receives from the collector a request to read the device record, and transmits the device record to the collector in response to the request.
43. The system of claim 35, wherein the two-way device timestamps the device record when the device record is received by the two-way device.
44. A processor-readable medium having stored thereon instructions for establishing a wireless communication network among a plurality of devices, the instructions, when executed by a processor at a collector, causing the processor at said collector to:
- receive a device record generated at a first device, the device record comprising a sequence number identifying a sequence in which the device record is generated;
 - store the received device record if the update sequence number indicates that the received device record is more recently generated than an existing device record from the first device already stored at the collector.
45. The processor-readable medium of claim 44, wherein the collector is one of a plurality of collectors receiving the device record.

46. The processor-readable medium of claim 45, further comprising a server that receives device data from the plurality of collectors.

47. The processor-readable medium of claim 44, wherein the first device is a one-way meter device.

48. The processor-readable medium of claim 44, wherein the first device is a battery powered meter device.

49. The processor-readable medium of claim 44, wherein the first device is a two-way meter device.

50. The processor-readable medium of claim 44, wherein the device record further comprises a first data format code identifying a data format of the device record.

51. The processor-readable medium of claim 44, wherein the instructions cause the processor to store the received device record by determining whether the existing device record has a same data format as the received device record, and overwriting the existing device record with the received device record if the sequence number of the received device record indicates that the received device record is more recently generated than the existing device record.

52. The processor-readable medium of claim 44, wherein the instructions further cause the processor to timestamp the device record when the device record is received by the collector.

53. The processor-readable medium of claim 44, further comprising an intermediate two-way device that relays the device record from the first device to the collector.

54. The processor-readable medium of claim 53, wherein the intermediate two-way device timestamps the device record when the device record is received by the intermediate two-way device.

55. The processor-readable medium of claim 54, wherein the instructions further cause the processor to

upon receiving the timestamped device record at the collector, compare the received timestamped device record to another timestamped device record already stored at the collector;

determine that the other timestamp is invalid; and

overwrite the other timestamped device record with the received timestamped device record.

56. A processor-readable medium having stored thereon instructions for establishing a wireless communication network among a plurality of devices, the instructions, when executed by a processor at a two-way device, causing the processor at said two-way device to:

receive a device record generated at a first device; and
store the device record in one of a plurality of memory locations.

57. The processor-readable medium of claim 56, wherein the plurality of memory locations are implemented as a circular table whereby a number of memory writes to each particular memory location is minimized.

58. The processor-readable medium of claim 56, wherein the first device is a one-way meter device.

59. The processor-readable medium of claim 56, wherein the first device is a battery powered meter device.

60. The processor-readable medium of claim 56, wherein the first device is a two-way meter device.

61. The processor-readable medium of claim 56, wherein the instructions further cause the processor to transmit to a collector an exception message including the device record.

62. The processor-readable medium of claim 56, wherein the instructions further cause the processor to:

receive from a collector a request to read the device record; and
transmit the device record to the collector in response to the request.

63. The processor-readable medium of claim 56, wherein the instructions further cause the processor to timestamp the device record when the device record is received by the two-way device.

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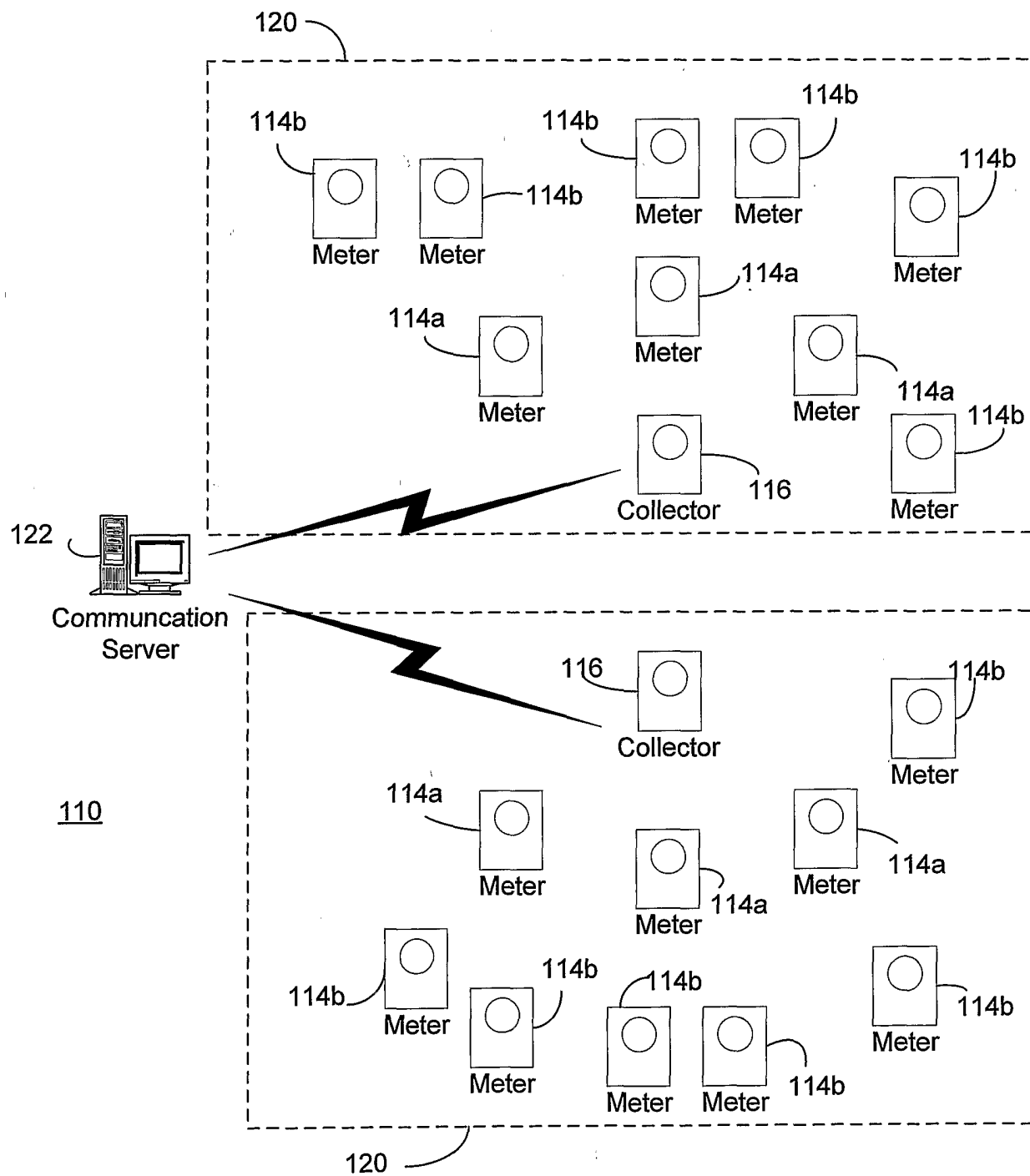


Figure 1

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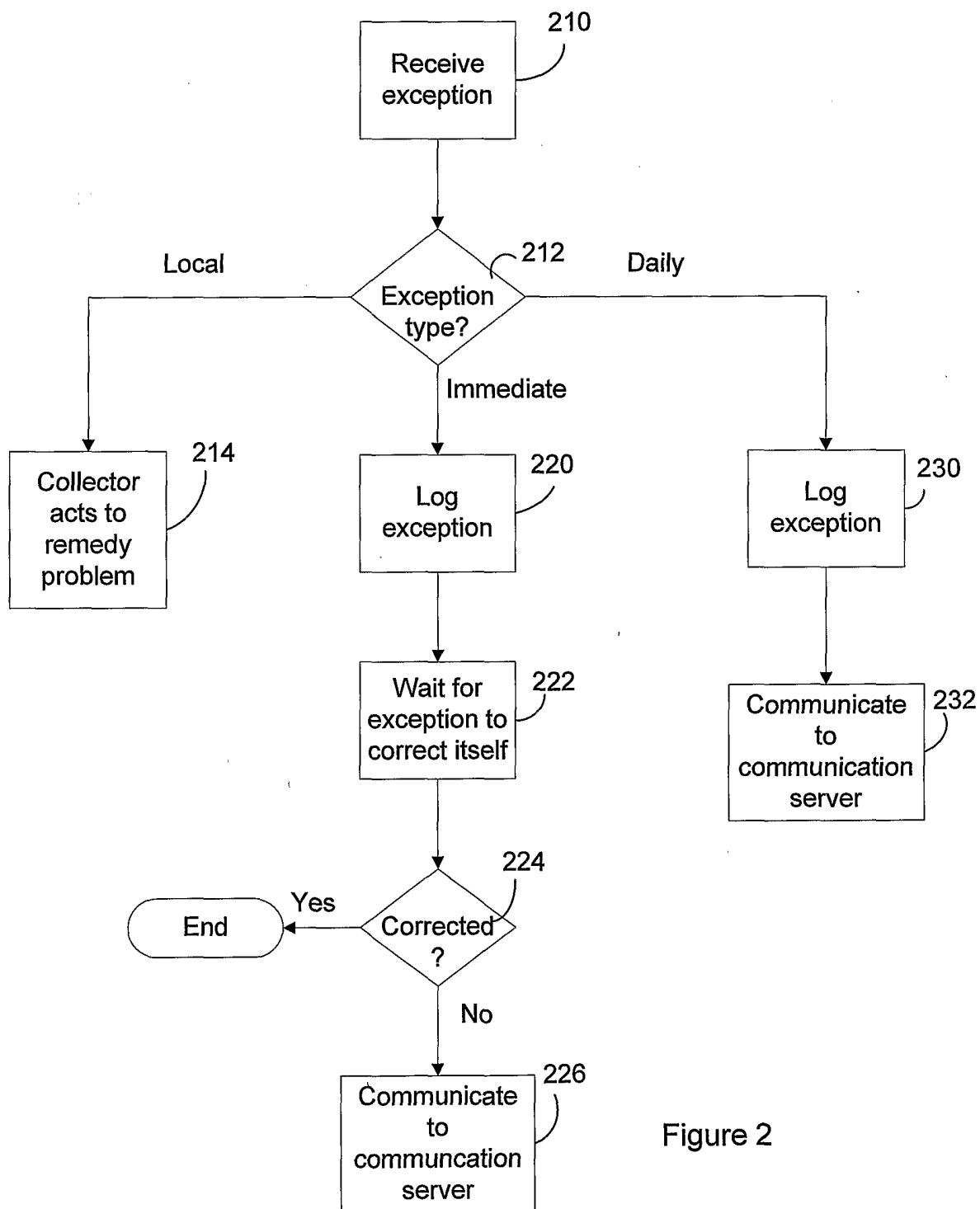


Figure 2

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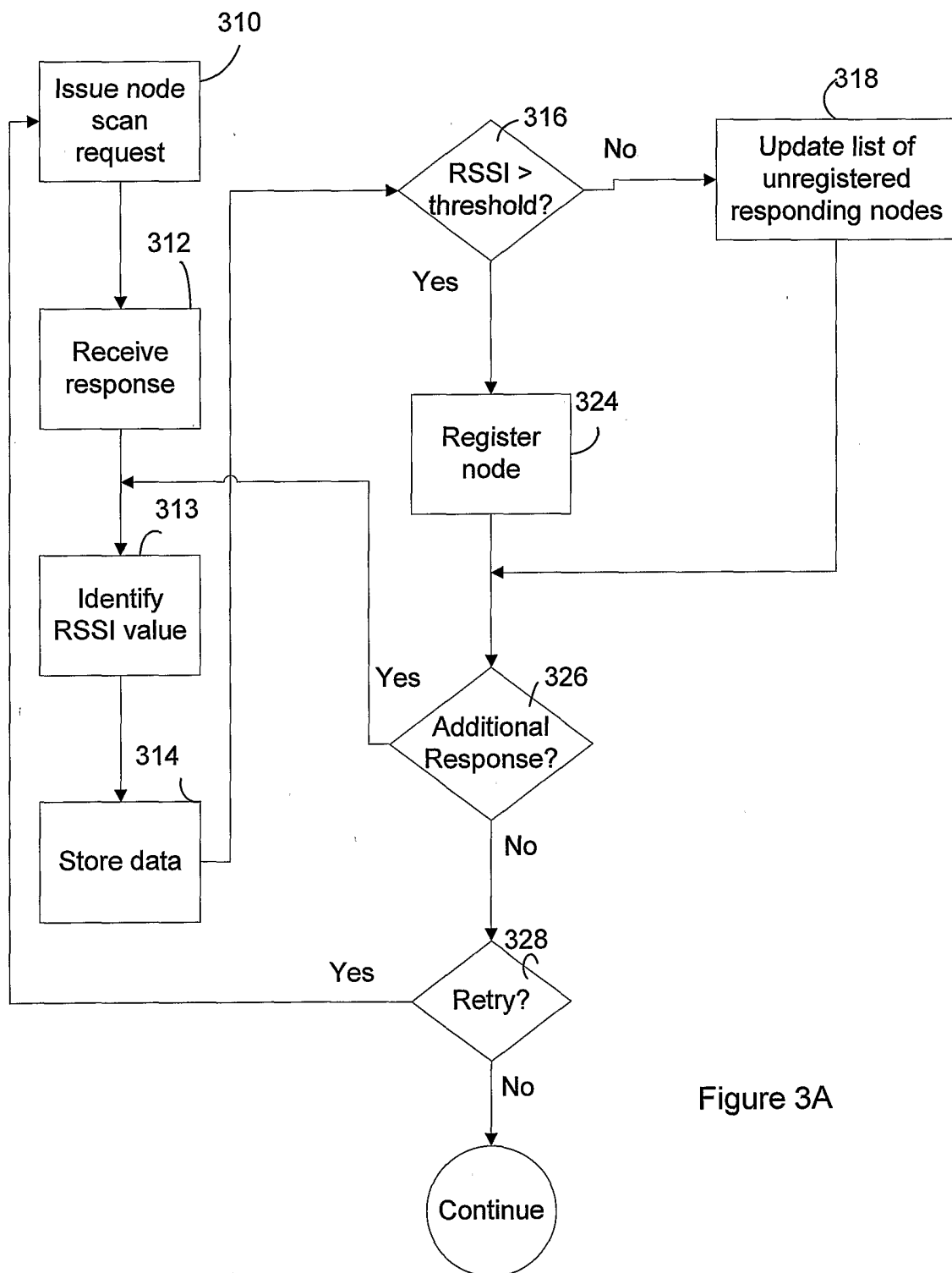


Figure 3A

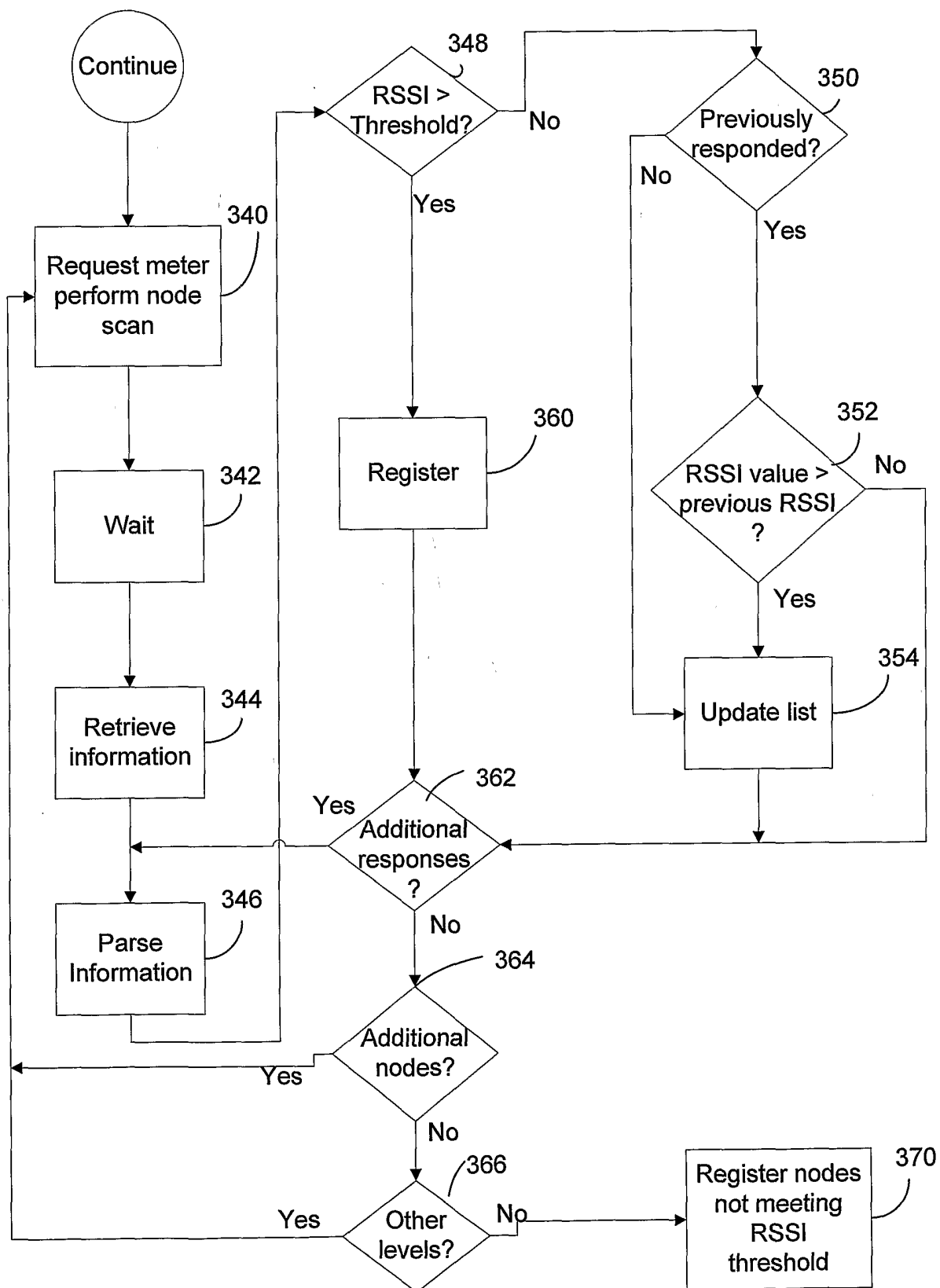


Figure 3B

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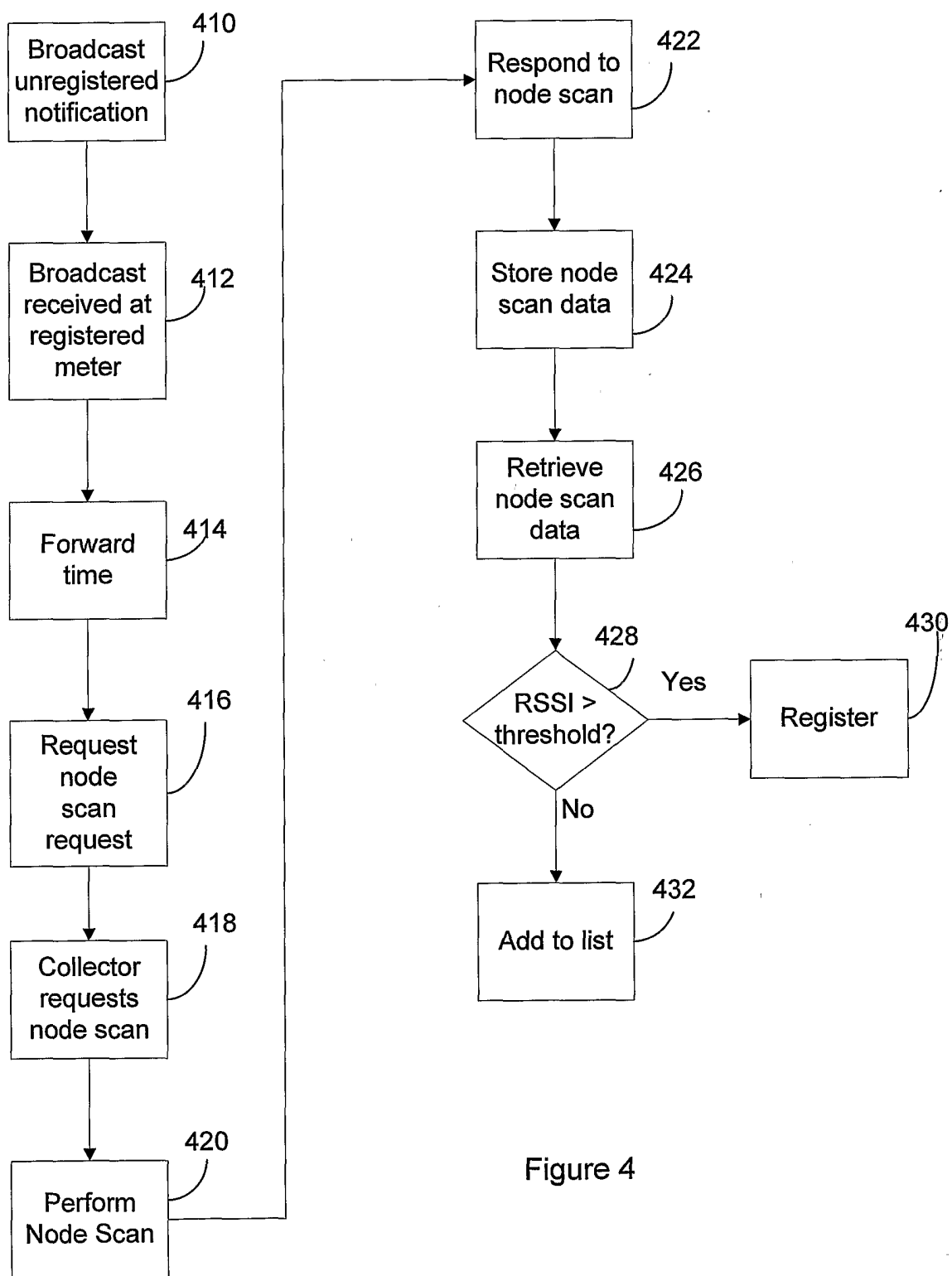


Figure 4

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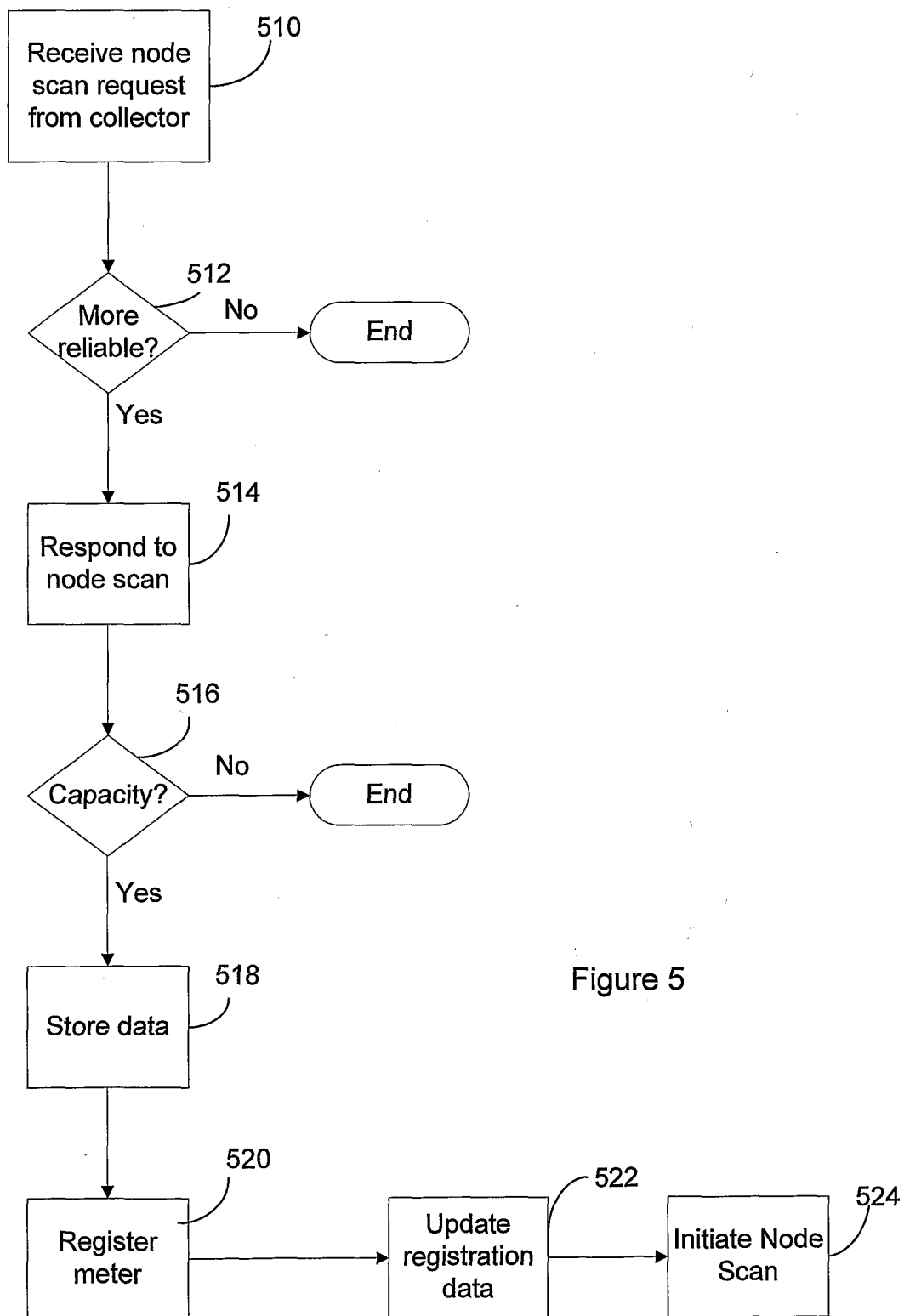


Figure 5

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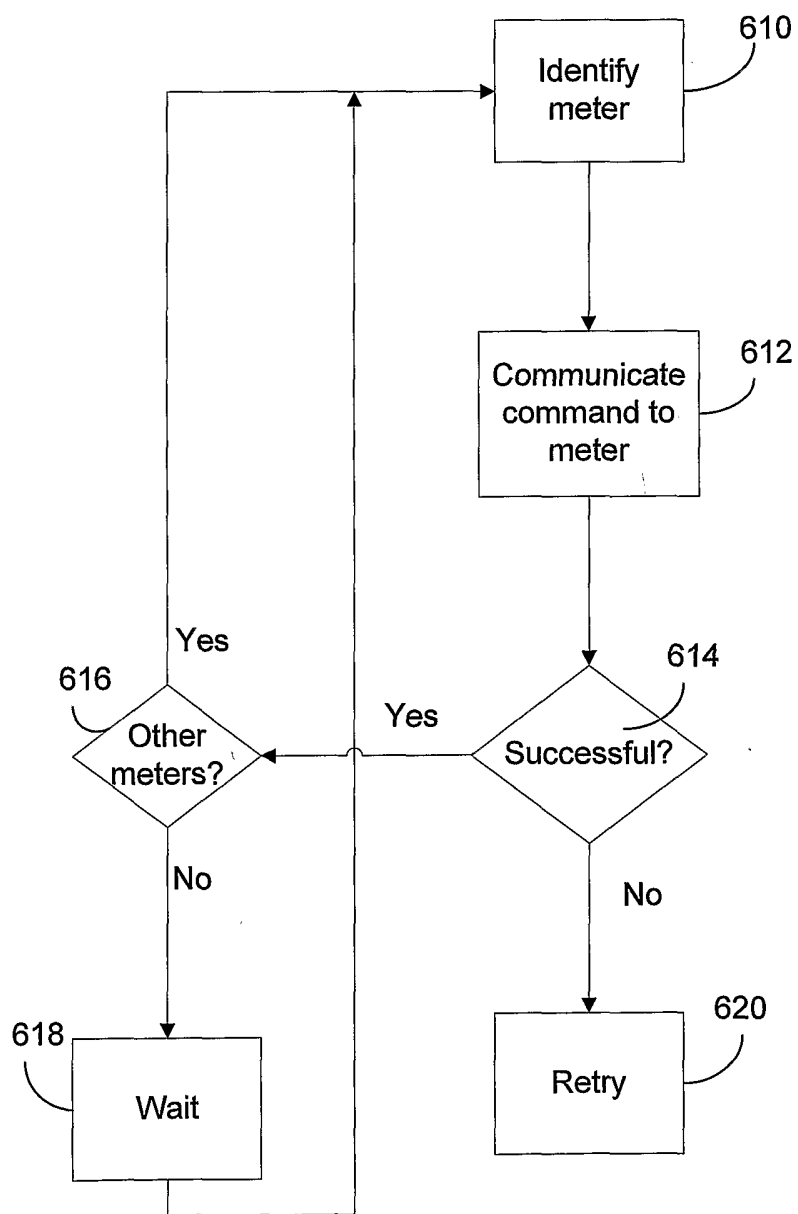


Figure 6

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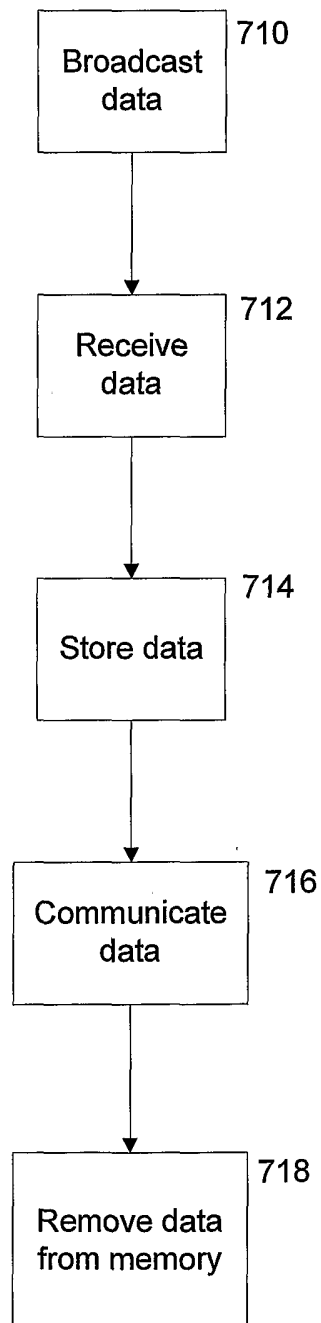


Figure 7

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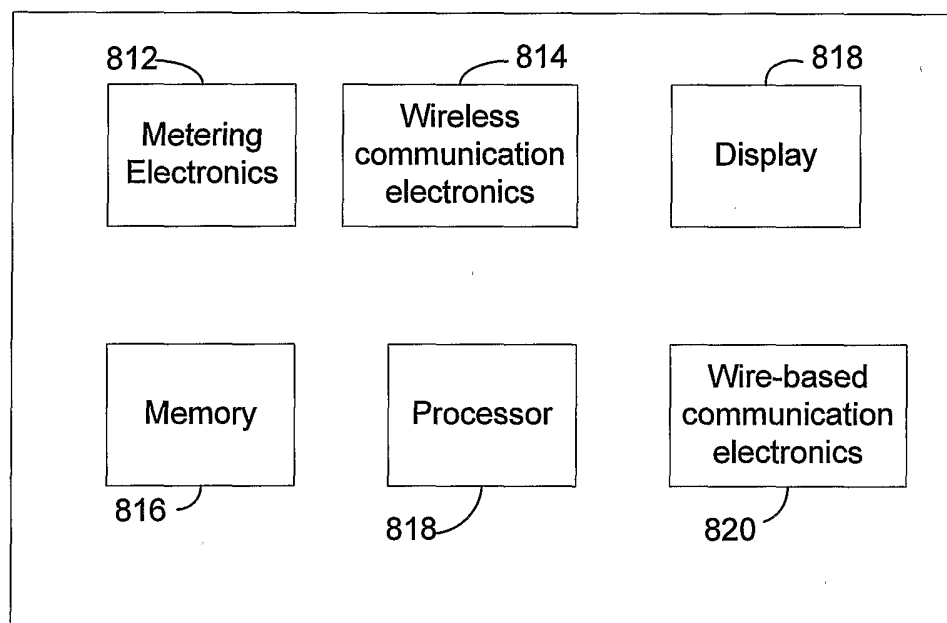
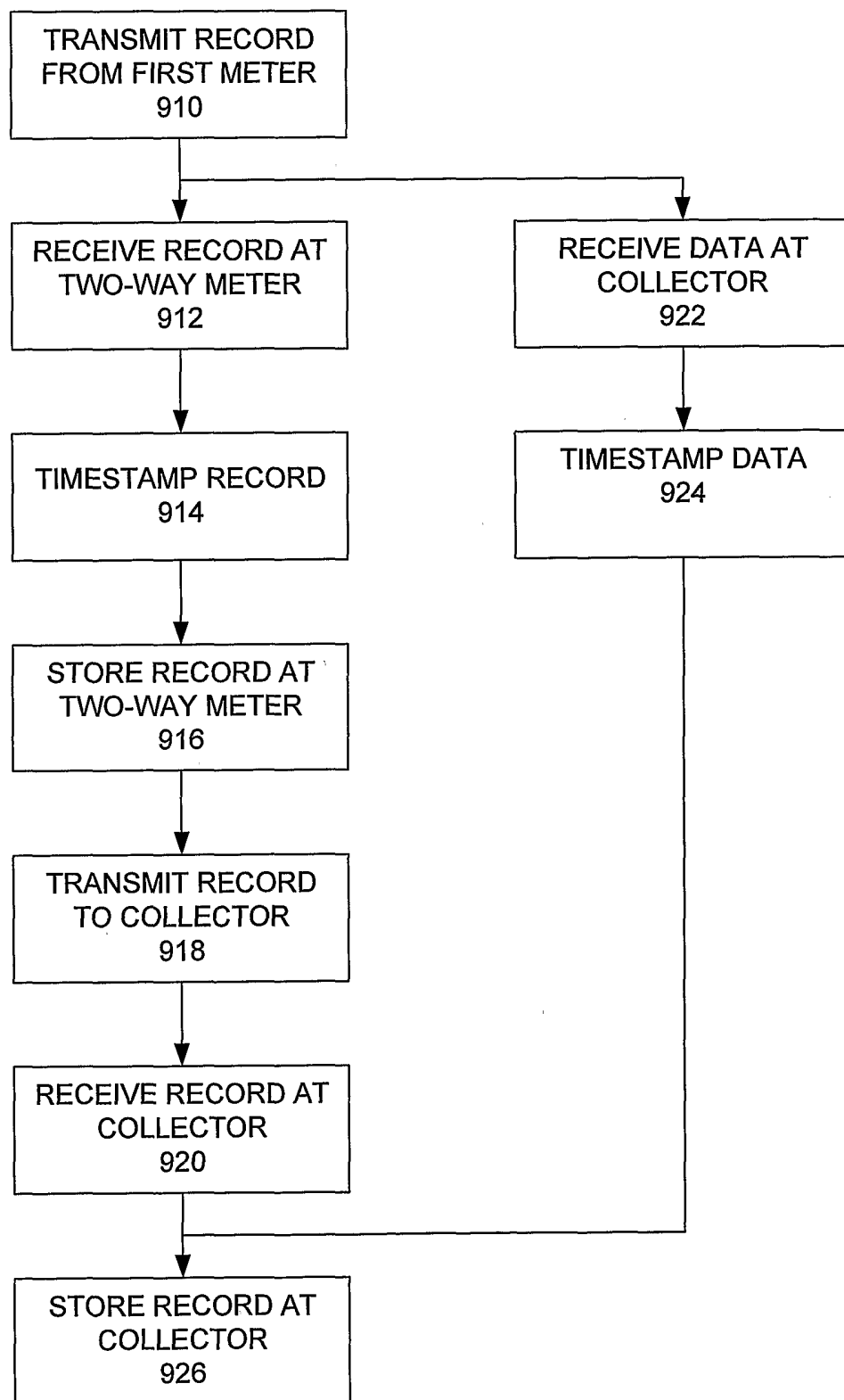
810

Figure 8

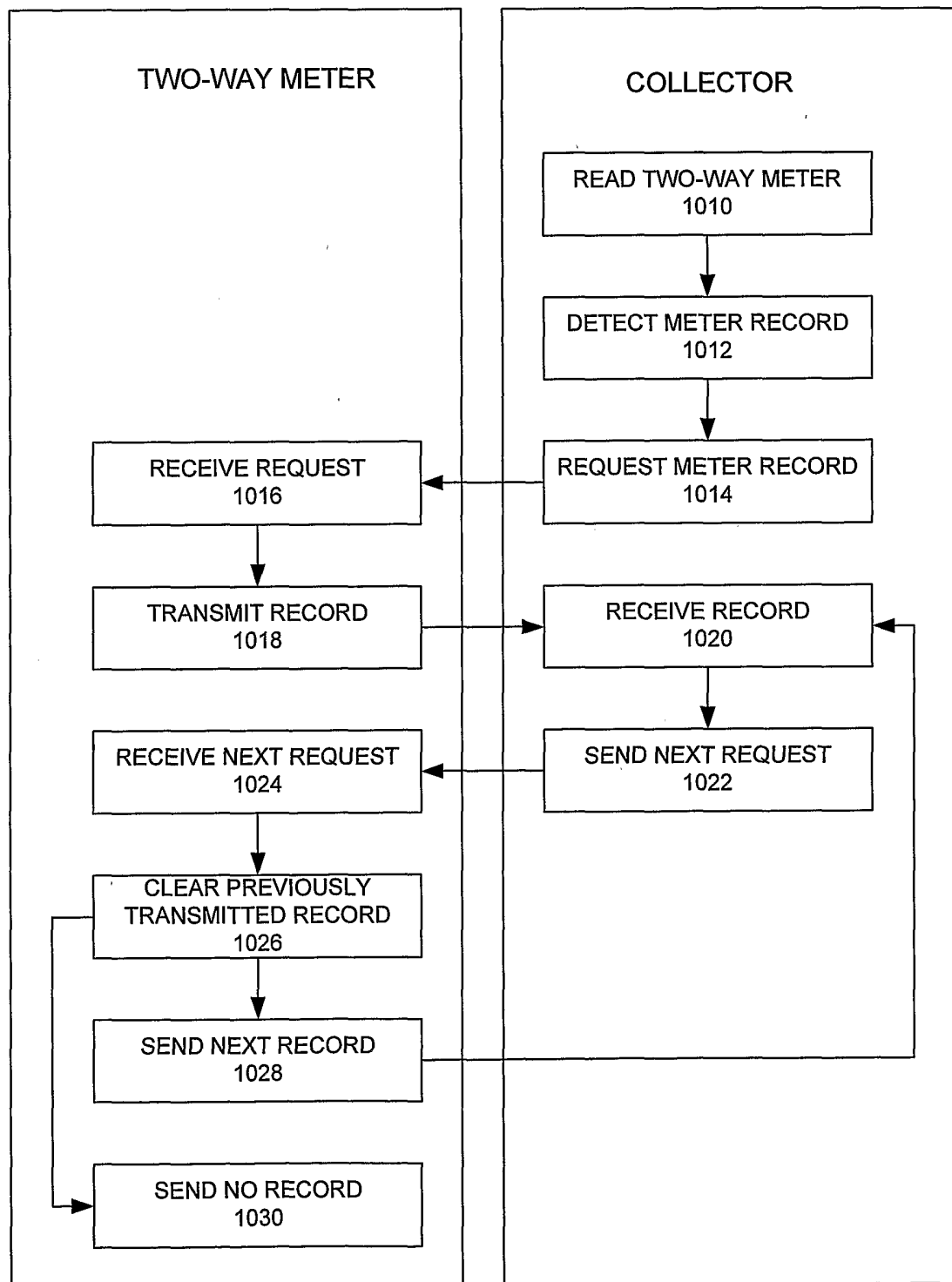
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Figure 9



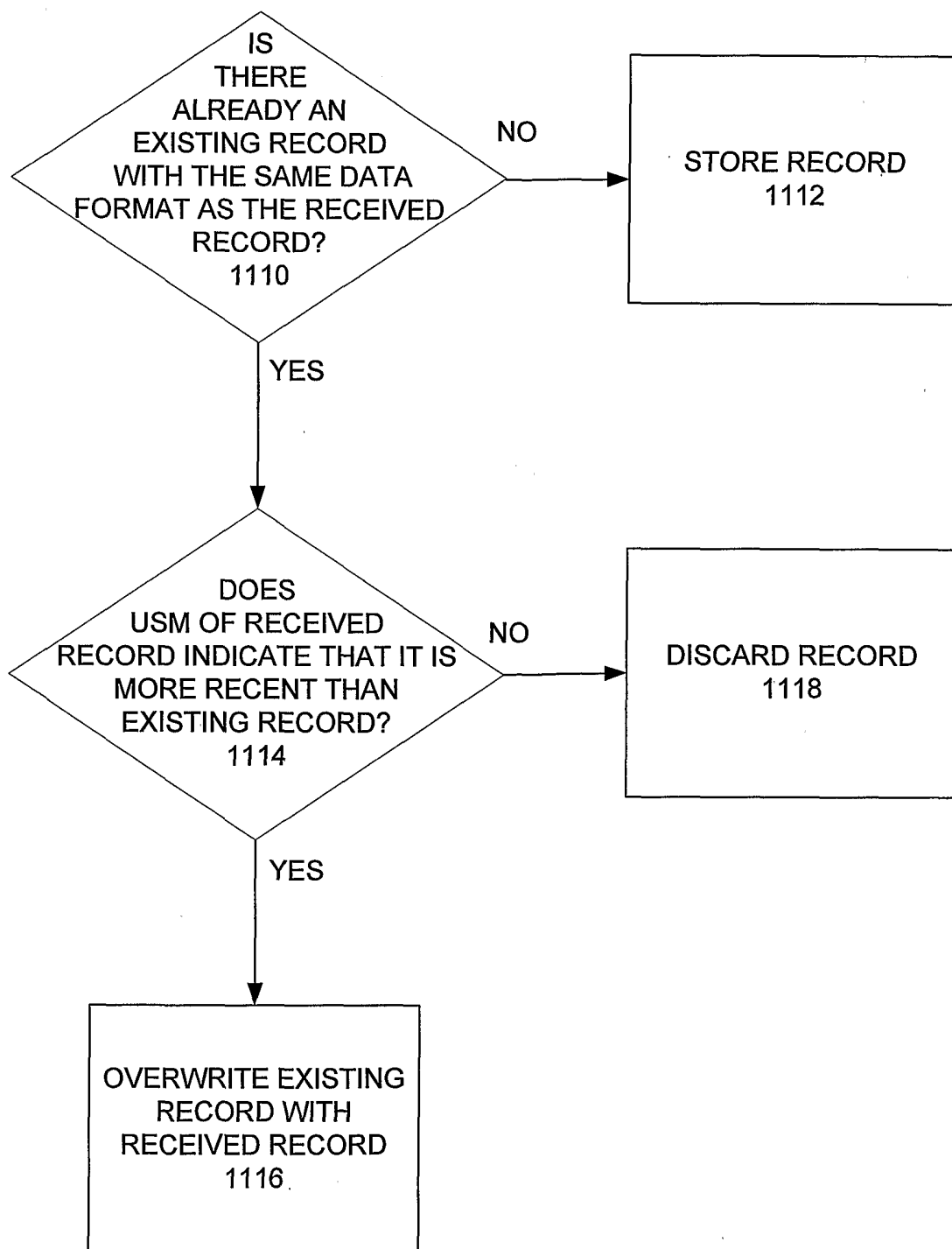
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Figure 10



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Figure 11



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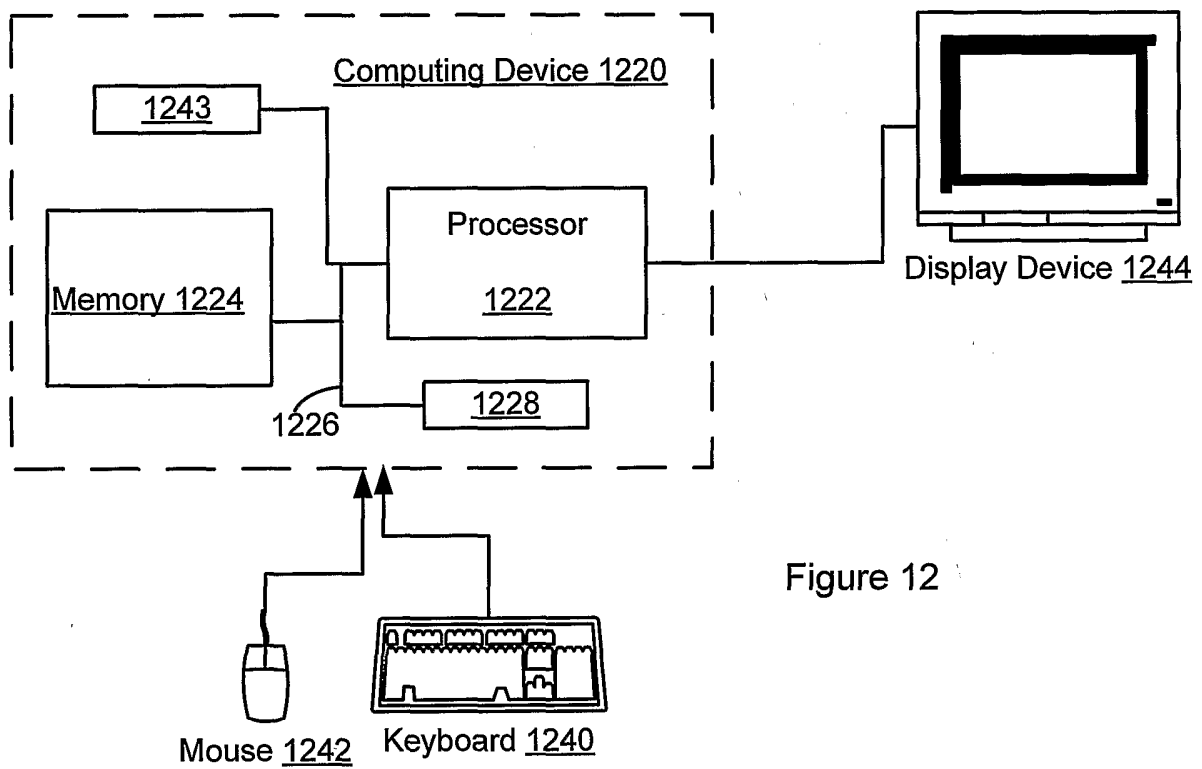


Figure 12

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US05/14033

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
IPC(7) : G08B 23/00; G08C 15/06, 19/22; H04Q 9/00; G06F 15/16
US CL : 340/870.02, 870.07; 709/219

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
U.S. : 340/870.02, 870.07; 709/219

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)
Please See Continuation Sheet

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X --- Y	US 5,553,094 (JOHNSON et al) 03 September 1996 (03.09.1996), see entire document	1,2,4,6,8,10,11,15,17,1 9,23,24,35,37,39,40,42 -45,47,49,53- 56,58,60,62 ----- 5,7,12,18,24,25,27- 29,32- 34,38,48,52,59,63
Y	US 6,037,169 (SHUEY et al) 06 June 2000 (06.06.2000), see column 5, lines 25-30.	3,26,46
P,Y	US 2004/0113810 A1 (MASON, JR. et al) 17 June 2004 (17.06.2004), see paragraph [0037].	15
A	US 5,986,574 (COLTON) 16 November 1999 (16.11.1999), see entire document.	1-63
A	US 6,437,692 B1 (PETITE et al) 20 August 2002 (20.08.2002), see entire document.	1-63

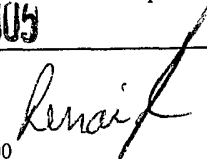


Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.



See patent family annex.

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"E" earlier application or patent published on or after the international filing date	"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone
"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)	"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art
"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means	
"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed	"&" document member of the same patent family

Date of the actual completion of the international search 20 July 2005 (20.07.2005)	Date of mailing of the international search report 01 SEP 2005
Name and mailing address of the ISA/US Mail Stop PCT, Attn: ISA/US Commissioner for Patents P.O. Box 1450 Alexandria, Virginia 22313-1450 Facsimile No. (703) 305-3230	Authorized officer Michael Horabik Telephone No. 703/305-4700 

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US05/14033

Continuation of B. FIELDS SEARCHED Item 3:
US-PGPUB; USPAT; EPO; DERWENT

search terms: see search notes