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(74) Agent: **DECARLO, James, J.**; Greenberg Traurig, LLP,
Met Life Building, 200 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10166
(US).

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(71) Applicant (for all designated States except US): **YAHOO!
INC.** [US/US]; 701 First Avenue, Sunnyvale, CA 94089
(US).

(72) Inventors; and

(75) Inventors/Applicants (for US only): **SZETO, Christo-
pher, T.** [US/US]; 915 La Mesa Terrace #C, Sunnyvale,
CA 94086 (US). **DHOMSE, Vinod, P.** [IN/US]; 291
Fairmeadow Way, Milpitas, CA 95035 (US). **BEAUPRE,
Todd** [US/US]; 390 Hauser Blvd, Apt. 3E, Los Ange-
les, CA 90036 (US). **SCHIRO, Pierre** [FR/US]; 4160
Duquesne Avenue, #5, Culver City, CA 90232 (US).

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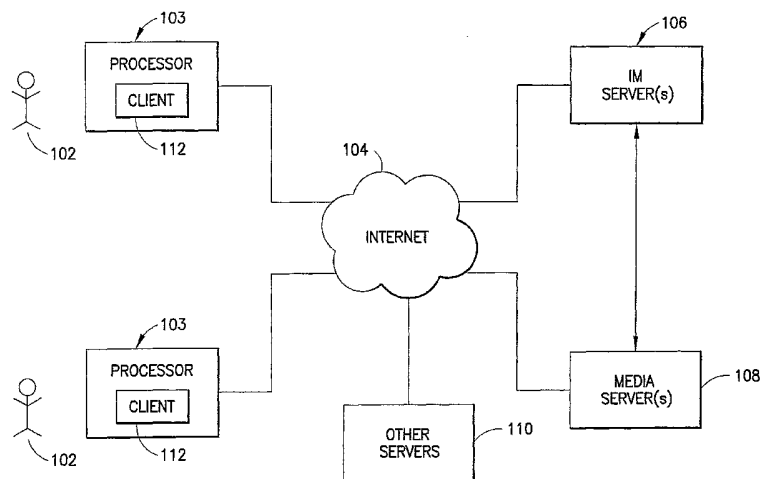
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(54) Title: A SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR ENHANCED MESSAGING AND COMMERCE



(57) Abstract: A system and method for enhancing the experience of a user (103) using a communication program over the Internet (104) or other network. The system and method according to one embodiment utilizes a user's status indicator in a communication program to share content such as music or videos (560) among users, and provides access to an electronic commerce application through which content may be obtained. One system and method according to the present invention allows a user to display an indicator and to set an actionable status message which indicates to other users the media content that the first user is experiencing. In another embodiment, a user is given the ability to access content that other users are listening to or viewing at that time. The system and method in an alternate embodiment broadcast metadata about the user's content to other users and the other users are able to utilize that metadata to receive and experience the same or similar content that the first user is experiencing. Access to an electronic commerce application through which content may be obtained is also facilitated.

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A SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR ENHANCED MESSAGING AND COMMERCE

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

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Field of the Invention

The present invention relates generally to a system and method for messaging.

Description of Related Art

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The expansion of the Internet and the worldwide web ("web") has provided computer users with an enhanced ability to communicate with one another, such as by e-mail, chat and instant messaging, to name a few methods. Instant messaging has become a popular form of communication in recent years. In an instant messaging system, two users are able to communicate with each other in real time or near real time by passing messages as well as other information, such as files, over the Internet. In an instant messaging system, the messages are generated and displayed using an instant messaging client software program that resides on each user's computer. In some instant messaging systems, other information about the user, such as a profile or his or her status (e.g., whether the user is online, offline, busy) can be shared with other users of the instant messaging system.

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Although instant messaging has become popular, it still does not utilize the global reaches of the Internet to the fullest extent possible. Although useful in exchanging text messages and files, current instant messenger platforms do not have the capability of sharing other practical information among users. While a user is utilizing their instant messaging program, they can also be doing numerous other things both at their computers and over the Internet. Current instant messaging programs do not allow users to easily share this experience with other instant messaging users.

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SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

When one user is making use of a particular application on a computer or over the Internet, it would be advantageous if he or she could let other users know what application they were using and easily share that experience with other users. Thus, for example, if a user were experiencing a particular item of media, for example a song or video clip, via a media player, it would be advantageous if another user could obtain information about the music being listened to and even listen to the same song, playlist, radio station or genre of music. This would create an additional level of shared experience between users that would allow for enhanced communication that goes far beyond the mere sharing of text messages and the like.

The present invention provides a system and method for enhancing the experience of a user using a communication program over the Internet or other network. In one embodiment, the experience of an instant messaging user is enhanced by utilizing a user status indicator in an instant messaging system to facilitate the sharing of the experience of content such as music or videos. One system and method according to one embodiment of the present invention allows a user to display an indicator and/or to set an actionable status message which alerts other users to media content that the first user is experiencing.

In one embodiment a user is given the ability to access the same or similar content that other users are listening to or viewing or otherwise experiencing at a particular time. In operation, the instant messaging system makes available data or metadata about the content a user is experiencing at a given time. Other users are then able to utilize that data or metadata to receive and experience the same or similar content that the user is experiencing or get more information related to the media or content. In one embodiment, the system performs a check to discern whether the other user making the request should be granted access to the particular content taking into consideration the appropriate digital rights.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a schematic illustrating an exemplary system architecture of one embodiment of the present invention;

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Figure 2 is an exemplary user interface of an exemplary instant messaging client according to one embodiment of the present invention;

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Figure 3 is an exemplary user interface portion of an exemplary instant messaging client according to one embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 4 is a schematic illustrating an exemplary process workflow according to one embodiment of the present invention; and

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Figure 5 is an exemplary user interface portion of an exemplary instant messaging client according to one embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

In general the present invention relates to a system and method for enhancing an experience among intercommunicating users to thereby engender affinity between users and a provider of the system and/or method. In certain exemplary embodiments, a system and method is described which enhances the user's experience by allowing improved interrelationships and activity sharing between users of an instant messaging system.

Certain embodiments of the present invention will now be discussed with reference to the aforementioned figures, wherein like reference numerals refer to like components. Referring now to Figure 1, the architecture of one embodiment of the present invention is shown in schematic form. As can be seen in Figure 1, a system according to one embodiment of the present invention is shown. In general, the system 100 allows users 102 to communicate with each other through the Internet utilizing an instant messaging platform as well as to share different information and data amongst themselves.

Each user 102 has a processor 103, such as a personal computer (PC), web enabled cellular telephone, personal digital assistant (PDA) or the like, coupled to the Internet 104 by any one of a number of known manners. Furthermore, each processor 103 preferably includes an Internet browser (not shown), such as that offered by Microsoft Corporation under the trade name INTERNET EXPLORER, or that offered by Netscape Corp. under the trade name NETSCAPE NAVIGATOR, and a media player (not shown), such as that offered by Microsoft Corporation under the trade name WINDOWS MEDIA PLAYER, or that offered by Real Networks Corp. under the trade name REAL PLAYER, or the software or hardware equivalent of the aforementioned components that enable intercommunication between users and service providers, among users, and that provide the ability to convert digital information or data into a perceptible form. In the described embodiment, processor 103 runs an instant messaging client software program 112 that is used to communicate with an instant messaging server 106 and exchange messages between users. One such example of an instant messaging client is Yahoo! Instant Messenger, or any other instant messaging client now known or hereafter to become known. It should be appreciated that although this embodiment is

described in terms of an instant messaging client, it can also utilize other forms of communication over the Internet heretofore or hereafter known. It should also be understood that although the present embodiment is described in terms of media content and specifically audio content, it is within the scope of the present invention to utilize any content or media format heretofore or hereafter known. Furthermore, it is to be understood that although the present embodiment is described within the context of streaming media, the present invention is applicable to digital content other than streaming media as well and could be an Internet destination reached via a URI or URL.

As will be discussed in greater detail below, the system 100 includes instant messaging (IM) server(s) 106 as well as media server(s) 108. Other servers 110 may also be accessible. The IM servers 106 act to exchange messages between users 102, as well as to pass along other information to both the users 102 and the media server 108. In addition to exchanging information with IM server(s) 106, media server(s) 108 store music content as well as stream various forms of music content to be received by users 102. Other servers 110 make other content and services available, and may provide administrative services such as managing user logins, service access permissions, digital rights management, storing user profile and preference information, and other services made available by a service provider. It should be appreciated that although some embodiments of the invention are described in terms of music, the embodiments can also encompass any form of streaming or non-streaming media including but not limited to news, entertainment, sports events, or any other webpage or perceptible audio or video content.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the users 102, the IM server(s) 106 and media server(s) 108 and other servers 110 are communicatively connected via the Internet 104. In alternate embodiments, different components of the system may be coupled differently, for example, each may be coupled directly to each other wirelessly or via an intranet or wide-area network (WAN) or the like.

Users 102 utilize the instant messaging client 112 on their processors 103 to communicate with other users via the instant messaging server(s). As can be seen from Figure 2, while using an instant messaging client, the user is given the ability to interact

with other users, by, for example, typing messages or sending files to another user. In addition to enabling a user to perform different functions (e.g., sending messages and/or items to another user, accessing web sites) in one part of the instant messenger window 202, the instant messaging client also enables a user to compile a "list of friends" 204 or
5 in other words, other users with which the user is acquainted. The instant messaging client displays a list of these other user's names, so that the user may easily access a group of other users with whom the user is in frequent contact. For example, in a known manner, by clicking on a friend's user name, the user will be able to send an instant message to his or her friend. Additionally, when clicking on a friend's user name, other
10 data about the user such as hobbies, likes, dislikes, or other information that the user has provided to the system can be displayed or made accessible. In addition, a user can group his or her friends into further categories (e.g., family, friends, etc.).

In certain known embodiments of instant messaging programs, each user is given
15 an option to set their status. For example, possible status indicators may include "available," "idle," "busy," "be right back," "not at my desk," "on vacation," or "out to lunch." When a user chooses to set his or her status, the user's id is flagged with a corresponding status indicator 224. Any other user that wishes to either instant message the first user or just wishes to obtain the first user's status, will be informed of the status
20 chosen by the first user. For example, if user Cris flags his status 224 as "busy," any other user that has identified user Cris their respective "friends list" or who wishes to view Cris's status or wishes to send an instant message to Cris will be advised through the status indicator 224 visible to the other user that Cris is "busy." It is to be appreciated that the use of status indicators creates an atmosphere where each user can easily make
25 available their status to other users without having to individually tell each user that, for example, he or she is busy. A user may set his status by choosing from a drop-down list or by using other widely known methods of selecting an item within a computer environment.

30 In various different atmospheres, different known status indicators can include various indicators regarding location of the user (e.g., home, work), what the user is in the middle of doing (e.g., busy, on the phone), what mood the user is in (e.g., sad, happy) or other details about the user. In the alternative, the user may choose to identify his status as

invisible which will hide the user from other users and it will appear to other users as if the first user is not connected to the system.

In another known embodiment, the user may also personalize a particular status as opposed to choosing one provided by the system. For example, a user may set a personalized message (e.g., good day to you all) as his or her status. Additionally a status indicator might be a universal resource locator (URL) or a hyperlink to another application. For example, one user might provide a link to their favorite website as his or her status indicator. When another instant messaging user would click on the first user's status indicator (e.g. the URL or link), the user will be directed to the website represented by that URL or link. In other embodiments additional applications and/or programs might be utilized through the status indicators. For instance, if a user has a web camera on their home computer, they may include a message in their status indicator that states for example, "view my web cam." When another user clicks on that status message, the image from the web camera will be displayed. In other embodiments, pictures or icons 210 may be displayed alongside the status indicator. For example, a picture of a camera can be displayed next to a status indicator that directs a user to another user's web cam, or a bright smiley face may indicate that the user is on the system, or a time clock may indicate that a user is idle. Other operations can be made available via buttons 224 or other interface options such as menus or hot links.

In operation of an embodiment of present invention, the instant messaging client 112 on user 102's computer 103 maintains a list of icons, messages or other information that can be displayed as a user's status indicator, or can obtain such information or indicators from IM server 106. When the IM server 106 determines that a change of status indicator is appropriate, for example because a user has logged off the system or the user has notified the system that they are busy for example, the IM server 106 recognizes this change in status and passes this information along to the instant messaging client on the other user 102's computer. The instant messaging client applies the applicable status indicator to the other user's display, and in this manner each user is able to view the updated status of other users.

In one embodiment of the present invention, (See Fig. 3) the user of the system is enabled to listen to music over the Internet through a user interface presented by the messaging client (or other streaming media application), which interface contains a messaging portion and a media player portion. This embodiment enables a user to share a music experience or the type of music that he or she is listening to with other users. In this embodiment, users are able to utilize a streaming media service (such as for example Yahoo!'s Launchcast™) within the media player portion of the instant messaging user interface. As can be seen from Figure 3, an exemplary instant messaging user interface is divided into a media player section 304 and a messaging section 312 for the user to allow the user to control access to and the experiencing of streaming media via a media player application while at the same time maintaining instant messaging capabilities.

The use of a media player and/or service such as Launchcast™ within an instant messaging system will now be described in more detail. Referring to Figure 3, a user that is utilizing an instant messaging (IM) client and wishes to listen to streaming media utilizing a media player within the instant messaging client is provided via known programming techniques with a media player within the user interface of the instant messaging client. In one embodiment, as seen in Figure 2, access to the media player can be enabled by clicking the button or tab containing an icon depicting a media-related image such as headphones 220 at the lower portion of IM window 202 or some other user interface choice.

Once the user (in the depicted example "Mark") chooses to utilize the player within the instant messaging client, as seen in Fig. 3, the upper portion 312 of the instant messaging client 302 displays his friends list and provides "conventional" instant messaging functions to users (e.g., chatting, Instant Messaging, seeing another user's status, etc.) as well as new features described herein. The lower portion 304 of the IM window 302, however, is transformed into a media player through which a user may play or otherwise experience the streaming media that has been requested and sent from media servers 108 in known manners. It should be appreciated that this results in the added benefit of being able to combine a user's instant messaging experience with a media playing experience. It should also be appreciated that all of this preferably transpires seamlessly from the user's perspective, further enhancing the instant messaging

experience. In other embodiments, the player can be located in a different location within the instant messaging window or can be located outside of the messaging window or screen portion in a separate window or screen portion. In one embodiment, the song 560 that the user "Mark" is experiencing through the media player is listed next to "Mark's" name at 580 in the upper portion 312 of IM window 302.

Thus, by way of further example as seen in Figure 3, and further described herein, a user 500 is identified with a status indicator 525 that indicates that user 500 is listening to music, while the same or a different indicator preferably identifies the name 550 of the particular song that user 500 is listening to. Thus, the user's displayed status indicator is interconnected with and indicative of the user's actual experience while using the inventive system and method.

As can further be seen in Figure 3, a user's status indicator can be utilized to allow other users to view the title of a song that a particular user is listening to. For example, as can be seen in the upper portion 312 of the instant messaging display 302, if user "Adrian" 500 is listening to the song "Faith" from the album "Faith" by George Michael, "Adrian's" song status indicator 550 will show "George Michael - Faith - Faith" indicating the artist, song and album. Therefore, other users will know that Adrian is currently listening to that song. In addition to the name of the song, the artist, and the album, the song status indicator 550 is preferably a hyperlink, or a separate hyperlink could be displayed near the status indicator. Thus, if a user utilizing the IM client displaying IM window 302 (in this instance "Mark") wishes to listen to the same song that user "Adrian" is listening to, user "Mark" would click on that song name 550 hyperlink. When "Mark" clicks on that hyperlink, he would then receive through his media player the song or portion of the song that "Adrian" is listening to, as will be explained in further detail with reference to Figure 4. Alternatively, an individual user can choose how their music status message appears. For example, instead of listing the song and the artist, a user may insert a personalized message or possibly no message at all, but rather just a link to the song.

An exemplary method of effectuating the above-described embodiment will now be described. IM server 106 stores, obtains and/or makes available data and/or metadata that is represented in whole or in part by status indicators 525, 550, or a combination

thereof. As used herein, data and metadata are used interchangeably. This “augmented” status indicator can represent the data associated with other status indicators such as for example a custom status message, category of status, and text for the status indicator. In addition to the data represented by the standard status indicator, the “augmented” status indicator also represents metadata related to the status. For example, in the case of an instant messaging user 500 who is listening to streaming media and wishes to share the listening experience with other users, the augmented status indicator will relate to and represent information such as, for example, a song identifier, which may comprise the identity of the artist, song title, album name, reviews, popularity information, or other information related to the song or item of media content, for example a user identifier, a popularity rating of a song or media item, or any other information that the player or messaging program would need or can utilize in order to stream the song or other media or provide additional information to the user. This relationship between data and the status indicator allows a user 500 to indicate to various other users, simultaneously, that song 550 is the song that he or she is listening to, and also in turn provides to those other users access to data and information associated with that indicator. Conversely, this also allows a single user to be able to view a list of the songs that his or her friends are listening to. A user need not install any new programs or plug-ins, nor does the user need to be running any additional software to find out what another user is listening to, but rather the user utilizes the instant messaging program and friend list functionality herein described to access this information. Further, each user 500 does not need to manually adjust their song status indicator 550 to indicate the song that they are listening to, but rather the system displays that information automatically as the user receives and experiences each new song or other media item, as a result of data arriving from the servers to the client software. It should be understood that this embodiment easily allows each user the benefit of being able to utilize an instant messaging “friends list” to instantly access data and information about music being experienced by each of their listed friends. The status indicators change as the user’s listening experience changes. So, for example, referring again to Fig. 3, if user Adrian 500 finishes listening to the song Faith and is now listening to the song Teen Angst by the group Cracker, Adrian’s status indicator would be updated to all users having Adrian on their friends list to reflect this new song title and artist. The amount of information contained in a status indicator is controllable either by the system provider, media provider, software provider, user, or

some combination thereof, as is the amount of data represented by or accessible from that indicator.

It should be appreciated that although the above discussion is described in terms of a particular song, the present invention can alternatively or simultaneously include the ability to listen to a variety of songs such as in a playlist. For example if the first user Todd 510 is listening to a particular playlist "Todd's Rock" which includes a variety of songs in sequence or at random, a status indicator 511 could display the name of Todd's playlist and allow another user to click on that playlist and listen to any or all of the songs in Todd's playlist. Once again, limits can be optionally set by the user or the messaging program provider as to how many songs in the playlist the second user is permitted to listen to (e.g., only the first song in the playlist, or only five songs from the playlist), or the order in which the songs are played, or other limits or manipulation of the playlist content.

In another embodiment, a user of the system of the present invention is able to listen to a "radio station" that another user is listening to in addition to merely a particular song or video. As is known in the art, applications exist that permit a user to create a personalized "radio station" that can be set up to stream media to the user that conforms with the user's selected preferences. An exemplary Internet website featuring the use of an Internet radio is that of Yahoo! Launch. Within the radio system, a user can set up a radio station that will, in accordance with a preprogrammed algorithm, conform to the preferences selected for that user's station. For example, if a user desires to hear a particular genre of music (e.g., jazz or rock), or identifies artists or albums that he or she enjoys, then the algorithm applied to that user's station will be influenced by the user's preferences.

In one embodiment of the present invention, if user Peter 515 has utilized a service to create a radio station that plays music in accordance with Peter's preferences, which Peter calls "Peter's Station", the status indicator 525 associated with Peter preferably also reflects the user's radio station identity, i.e. Peter's Station 575. Thus, when another user clicks on Peter's status indicator 525, or the Peter's Station indicator 575 which reflects the radio station 575 being listened to by Peter 515, the same or

similar algorithm to that which controls and serves media for Peter's Station will be utilized to stream content to that other user. It should be appreciated that this has the added benefit of not only allowing a user to share a particular music experience in the form of a song that he or she is listening to with another instant messaging user, but it also provides added flexibility in allowing a user to share a particular radio station or, in other words, particular criteria that the user has already set up in a radio station he or she is currently listening to or simply wishes to share whether or not listening to that station at the time the second user selects it.

Thus if another user clicks on the status indicator 525 or the name 575 which indicates Peter's radio station, the system will use Peter's radio station preferences to choose songs for the other user and will pass along such songs to the user. Also, if the radio system is a subscription system and different users are allowed varying access to different stations, the particular station may or may not be available to a particular user. In such instance, the IM server 106 or media server 108 or other server 110 or the client software can be configured to control access to the various available media so that users are restricted to media in accordance with pre-selected criteria such as subscription level, content restriction (adult versus minor), or other criteria selected by the user, content or service provider, or some combination of those entities.

In alternate embodiments link 575 need not be a static URI or one related solely to media, but can be dynamically changing to indicate the URI of a webpage being viewed by a user. Thus, referring again to Figure 3, if user "Moe" 590 is currently viewing the homepage for website Yahoo!, "Moe's" status indicator 595 can reflect the URI of that page. Status indicator 595 will change as "Moe" surfs to different pages and "Moe's" friends can click along and share Moe's browsing experience. In such instance the URI of a user can be tracked by the IM client, passed to the IM client by a browser, or made available in some other manner to be passed on to IM server 106 to enable updating of a user's status indicator as that user "surfs" the web, in the same manner that a song, playlist or radio station status indicator changes in accordance with user's listening changes.

An exemplary method of sharing a media experience by another instant messaging user according to one embodiment of the present invention is depicted in the flowchart of Figure 4. For example if User A is listening to a song with a player 304 that is within their instant messaging client display 302, Step 402, the media server 108 passes metadata
5 about the song (e.g., song ID, user ID or other data described herein) to IM server 106. Step 404. Once the IM Server receives the metadata about User A's song, the IM server may optionally check User A's settings to determine whether User A wishes to share information about the song that he or she is listening to with other users. Step 406. It should be understood that in different embodiments, users are allowed to choose which
10 information or data they wish to share with which users, or alternatively, the service provider can control access based on pre-selected user criteria or other criteria, for example through login control and subscription levels. If it is determined that User A does not wish to share any song information, or other system parameters indicate no information sharing should occur, then no information is shared. Step 407. If it is
15 determined that User A wishes to share his or her song information with other users (e.g., User A's friends), or if based on other criteria such information sharing is permitted, the IM server sends a status indicator representing the media with the media metadata to those users that User A wishes to share the information with (e.g., User A's friends). Step 408. Any user that is in the group of users that User A wished to share his or her media
20 data with will be able to view the status indicator (e.g., element 525 of Figure 3) and a display of the name of the song and/or artist (e.g., element 550 of Figure 3) as was discussed above with reference to Figure 3. Step 410. If for example User B wishes to experience the same media that User A is experiencing, User B would click on User A's status indicator 525 or indicator 550, or these indicators can be displayed as one indicator.
25 Step 412. Once User B clicks on that link 550, the media server(s) begin to stream User A's media to User B. Step 414. User B is then able to experience the same media that User A was experiencing on his or her player that is embedded within or operating along with his or her messaging client 304. Step 416. It should be appreciated that in different embodiments various checks can be performed by the system to determine whether each
30 user's messaging client and/or player is capable of receiving the media content that is being streamed. For example, the system may check if the user is running another media player on his or her system or listening to another song. If the user's player is not available, the system can also alert the user that he or she is already using the media

player and must close the player to access this new song, or alternatively, the system may close the open player or open an alternative player with or without alerting the user. Also, as described above, the indicator need not reflect a song, but can indicate a genre of music, a playlist, a radio station, a video, a URI, or other link to experienceable content a user wishes to experience along with another, and the indicator can be a combination of words and graphics, e.g. a picture of headphones and a song title.

In another embodiment, the system checks whether the user has appropriate rights to access the media that the first user was experiencing. It should be appreciated that this embodiment can include users with different levels of access or subscriptions and therefore one user may not be permitted to access every item of media that another user is experiencing or is capable of experiencing. In alternate embodiments, the media that is streamed to a second user will not be streamed in its entirety, or will or will not be streamed at the same time to both users. In other embodiments, the media may be abridged.

It should be appreciated that although the above description details playing media from a player within an instant messaging program, one embodiment can pass information regarding media being played from a media player distinct from the instant messaging program, by virtue of the instant messaging program containing an application that can capture URI or stream information from an existing, non-embedded player or browser.

With reference to Fig. 5, an additional embodiment incorporates the provision of electronic commerce features and functions into the system and method of enhanced messaging described herein. For example an additional icon, which maybe by way of non-limiting example in the form of a button or link or other selectable user interface element through which a user can interact with a program, can be provided by which a user can access electronic commerce features and systems that would facilitate the user obtaining content. For example a user could gain access to an electronic commerce application on a website or elsewhere to perform the online purchase or download of songs, albums or other materials or items of media that a user finds interesting as a result his or her experience with the enhanced messaging system and method as described

herein. Thus, a button or link 901 may be provided in lower portion 304 of the messaging user interface 302 which would permit a user to satisfy a desire to make a purchase while the user was experiencing an item of media using the messaging program. Thus, with continued reference to Fig. 5, if user "Mark", as referenced in an aforementioned example above, were to be listening to the song called "The Lady In Red", and wished to purchase a copy of that song, or a copy of the entire album that contained that song, or wished to purchase other media performed or involving the performing artist or similar artists and/or artists in the same or similar genre, Mark could click on button or icon 901 and be directed or linked to a shopping site through which Mark's purchase could be satisfied. In a preferred embodiment, at or near the time that the purchaser clicks the purchase icon 901, some or all of the data associated with the item of media being experienced by the potential purchaser would be transferred to the shopping site so that the shopping site may make use of the transferred data to present information to the user that would more readily facilitate the purchase of the item being experienced when the click takes place. Thus, continuing with our example of our user Mark, if he were to click the "buy now" icon 901 as seen in Fig. 5, Mark would be directed, through a browser or other application programming interface that would permit interaction with a commerce provider, to an electronic commerce site that would preferably display a purchase page containing information for the purpose of directing Mark in his potential purchase for either the song called The Lady In Red that Mark was listening to, and/or other items of purchasable media connected with the artist Chris De Burgh, and/or information pertaining to related genres and/or other similar songs, artists and the like. The system and method described herein can be flexibly configured to utilize the data associated with items of media to enhance a user's shopping experience should the user desire to purchase or otherwise obtain items of media while they are experiencing them, or sometime after if the system is configured to save information related to media experienced by the user at a previous time. Thus it can be seen that the system and method of this embodiment can provide significant purchasing potential to a commerce provider by providing the functionality of new and immediate gratification of an impulse purchase based on a user's satisfaction with media experienced by the user through interaction with the enhanced messaging system with commerce capability as described herein.

Alternatively, an additional or sole button or link 910 can be included in the upper portion 312 of the messaging interface 302. As described above in connection with icon or button 901, that functionality described above can be provided through the alternately placed icon 910 alone in upper portion 312. This would be useful if, for example, the media player portion were not incorporated as part of user interface 302. Alternatively the additional icon for commerce access can be provided at any location within or outside the interface 302, such as for example proximate the identifier of the item of media being experienced. Alternatively, icon 901 or 910 can be implemented in a manner such that when the button or icon is selected by a user, the user is presented with a query requesting the user to identify which item of media they wish to purchase, for example the item of media that user is currently experiencing or alternatively an item of media being experienced by another user in his or her friend's list. Thus, for example, if user Mark wished to purchase the song that user Adrian 500 was listening to, specifically the song "Faith" by George Michael, that could be facilitated by clicking on icon 910 and then subsequently clicking on the identifier 550 associated with that item of media, or another interface screen or query could be presented to prompt Mark to click on the icon or media item selection, or a drop down menu could be presented, and/or other known or hereafter to become known methods of providing the user with optional choices to select from based upon information appearing on the user's screen or data available to programs being interacted with by the user.

Thus, by providing the added functionality of electronic commerce to the enhanced messaging method and system presented herein, a provider of such an enhanced method and system will have the ability to reap additional profits and/or develop a closer affinity to its user population by providing ability to satisfy users' desires for items of media at or near the time they are actually experiencing the media. Additionally, a service provider providing a system and method such as that described herein may utilize the electronic commerce capability to associate itself with a business partner such that when a user selects a button or icon such as 901 or 910 described above, the user would be directed to a business partner's electronic commerce site to complete the user's impulse purchase, which can be a source of additional revenue for the service provider as well as for the commerce provider partner. Alternatively, if the provider of the system and method of the instant messaging system and method described herein also has its own

commerce capability, this would enhance its user relationship, increase profit potential and develop a deeper affinity by directing its users to its own commerce sites to complete their impulse purchases based upon the media being experienced utilizing the enhanced system and method of messaging as described herein.

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The commerce functions described above can be carried out by other servers 110 (see Fig. 1) which servers are either operated by the service provider controlling the instant messaging servers 106 and media servers 108, or other commerce providers affiliated with or associated with the operator of the instant messaging service. Thus, it is not necessary for the IM servers 106, media servers 108 or other servers 110 which provide additional functionality to be owned, operated or controlled by the same entity but rather can be operated through business associations and affiliations to provide the enhanced services as described herein. It will be recognized that the user can obtain content via download, or by having a CD copy sent, or any other method by which content can be transferred or otherwise made available.

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Although much of the above description is expressed in reference to an instant messaging environment, it should be appreciated that it can be utilized in reference to any communication system where a user wishes to make their availability known to other users and wishes to share information or experiences (e.g., music that they are listening to) with other users.

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Those skilled in the art will recognize that the method and system of the present invention has many applications, may be implemented in many manners and, as such, is not to be limited by the foregoing exemplary embodiments and examples. In other words, functional elements may be performed by single or multiple components, in various combinations of hardware and software, and individual functions can be distributed among software applications at the client or server level, as desired. In this regard, any number of the features of the different embodiments described herein may be combined into one single embodiment and alternate embodiments having fewer than or more than all of the features herein described are possible. Moreover, the scope of the present invention covers conventionally known and future developed variations and

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modifications to the system components described herein, as would be understood by those skilled in the art.

What is claimed is:

1. A method of providing an enhanced experience to a communication program user comprising the steps of:

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instantiating a status indicator for a first user, said status indicator indicating media content being experienced by said first user;

associating data with the status indicator;

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providing a second user access to said status indicator and said associated data, via said communication program, so as to enable said second user to selectively experience the media content experienced by said first user; and

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instantiating for either the first user or the second user or both of them a commerce icon via which a commerce program may be accessed through which said media content may be obtained.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein the data comprises a song identifier.

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3. The method of claim 1 wherein the data comprises a user identifier.

4. The method of claim 1 wherein the data comprises a universal resource identifier.

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5. The method of claim 1 wherein the media content comprises audio content.

6. The method of claim 1 wherein the media content comprises video content.

7. The method of claim 1 wherein the media content comprises a data stream.

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8. The method of claim 1 wherein the media content comprises media from a playlist.

9. The method of claim 1, wherein the media content comprises media from a radio station.

10. The method of claim 11, wherein the radio station operates utilizing an algorithm
5 representative of a radio station user preference.

11. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of:

determining whether the second user should be given access to the status indicator
10 before providing the second user access to the status indicator.

12. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of:

determining whether the second user should be given access to the associated data
15 before providing the second user access to the associated data.

13. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of:

determining whether the second user should be given access to media content
20 before streaming content to the second user.

14. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of:

determining whether the second user has an accessible media player before
25 enabling the second user to selectively experience the media content.

15. The method of claim 1 further comprising the step of passing a portion of said associated data to said commerce application.

30 16. A system for providing an enhanced experience to a communication program user comprising:

a first user communication program made available by a service provider;

a second user communication program made available by said service provider;

5 a messaging server in communication with said first and second programs that receives data associated with a status indicator that indicates media content being experienced by a first user, which indicator is made available to said second user;

10 a media server that communicates with the messaging server and selectively sends media content to a second user based on said data after said second user interacts with said indicator; and

15 an additional server by way of which either said first user or said second user or both of them may, by interacting with a commerce icon made available by each user's respective communication program, gain access to a commerce program through which said media content may be obtained.

17. The system of claim 16 wherein the data comprises a song identifier.

18. The system of claim 16 wherein the data comprises a user identifier.

20

19. The system of claim 16 wherein the data comprises a universal resource identifier.

20. The system of claim 16 wherein the media content comprises audio content.

25 21. The system of claim 16 wherein the media content comprises video content.

22. The system of claim 16 wherein the media content comprises a data stream.

23. The system of claim 16 wherein the media content comprises a playlist.

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24. The method of claim 16, wherein the media content comprises media from a radio station.

25. The method of claim 24, wherein the radio station operates utilizing an algorithm representative of a radio station user preference.

26. A method of broadcasting data associated with media being experienced by a plurality of users of a communication program, the method comprising:

streaming items of digital content to a plurality of users of a communication program, said plurality of users comprising a first user and other users;

receiving data associated with an item of digital content being experienced by said first user;

instantiating a status indicator representative of the data, said indicator being displayed to one or more of said other users of the communication program; and

instantiating an icon through which a commerce application can be accessed, which commerce application utilizes at least a portion of said data to facilitate at least one user of said plurality obtaining said.

27. The method of claim 26 further comprising making available at least a portion of the associated data to one or more other users of the communication program.

28. The method of claim 26 further comprising making available at least a portion of the associated data to said commerce program.

29. The method of claim 26 wherein the data comprises a song identifier.

30. The method of claim 26 wherein the data comprises a user identifier.

31. The method of claim 26 wherein the data comprises a universal resource identifier.

32. The method of claim 26 wherein the digital content is audio content.

33. The method of claim 26 wherein the digital content is video content.

34. The method of claim 26 wherein the digital content is a data stream.

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35. The method of claim 26 wherein the digital content is a playlist.

36. The method of claim 26, wherein the digital content comprises media from a radio station.

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37. The method of claim 36, wherein the radio station operates utilizing an algorithm representative of a radio station user preference.

38. The method of claim 26 further comprising the step of:

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determining whether the one or more second users should be provided access to the data.

39. An instant messaging user interface comprising:

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a list of selected users and a media player wherein the list of selected users further comprises a status indicator for each selected user, which status indicator is representative of media that each selected user is experiencing; and

25 a commerce icon via which a commerce program may be accessed through which said media may be obtained.

40. A method of providing an enhanced commerce comprising the steps of:

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providing access to a downloadable program comprising a user interface that displays a list of other users that a user of said program wishes to be associated with;

instantiating a status indicator for a first user of said program, said status indicator indicating data being experienced by said first user while utilizing said program;

5 displaying the status indicator to one or more other users associated with said first user;

 dynamically changing said displayed status indicator based on a change in data being experienced by the first user; and

10 instantiating a commerce icon via which a commerce program may be accessed through which said media content may be obtained.

41. The method of claim 40 wherein the data comprises media content.

15 42. The method of claim 40 wherein the data comprises a data stream.

43. An instant messaging computer program operative on computer hardware capable of running said program, said program, when operated by a user, performing the steps of:

20 instantiating a user interface comprising a user list portion and a media player portion;

 displaying a user identifier in said user list portion identifying a second user of said messaging program using second computer hardware;

25 displaying a selectable status indicator adjacent to said user identifier, said status indicator being indicative of second user media being experienced by said second user; and

30 displaying a commerce icon via which a commerce program may be accessed through which said media may be obtained.

44. The program of claim 43, wherein said program performs the further step of receiving media through said media player portion in response to said user selecting said selectable status indicator.

5 45. The program of claim 43, wherein said program performs the further step of receiving media through said media player portion in response to said user selecting said selectable status indicator, said media being similar media to said media being experienced by said second user.

10 46. The program of claim 43 wherein the program performs the further step of changing said selectable status indicator to reflect that the second user is experiencing different media.

47. The program of claim 43 wherein the program performs the further step of passing
15 information about said media to said commerce program.

48. An instant messaging computer program operative on computer hardware capable of running said program, said program, when operated by a user, performing the steps of:

20 instantiating a status indicator for a first user, said status indicator indicating media content being experienced by said first user;

associating data with the status indicator;

25 providing a second user access to said status indicator and said associated data, via said communication program, so as to enable said second user to selectively experience the media content experienced by said first user;

instantiating for either the first user or the second user or both of them a
30 commerce icon via which a commerce program may be accessed through which said media content may be obtained; and

passing a portion of said associated data to said commerce application.

49. The program of claim 48, wherein a provider of the computer program and a provider of the commerce program are different entities.

5 50. The program of claim 48, wherein a provider of the computer program and a provider of the commerce program are the same entity.

51. A method of providing an enhanced experience to a communication program user comprising the steps of:

10 instantiating a status indicator for a first user, said status indicator indicating media content being experienced by said first user;

associating data with the status indicator; and

15 providing a second user access to said status indicator and said associated data, via said communication program, so as to enable said second user to selectively experience the media content experienced by said first user.

52. The method of claim 51 wherein the data comprises a song identifier.

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53. The method of claim 51 wherein the data comprises a user identifier.

54. The method of claim 51 wherein the data comprises a playlist identifier.

25 55. The method of claim 51, wherein the data comprises a radio station identifier.

56. The method of claim 51 wherein the data comprises a universal resource identifier.

30 57. The method of claim 51 wherein the media content comprises audio content.

58. The method of claim 51 wherein the media content comprises video content.

59. The method of claim 51 wherein the media content comprises a data stream.

60. The method of claim 51 wherein the media content comprises media from a playlist.

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61. The method of claim 51, wherein the media content comprises media from a radio station.

62. The method of claim 61, wherein the radio station operates utilizing an algorithm representative of a radio station user preference.

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63. The method of claim 51 further comprising the step of:

determining whether the second user should be given access to the status indicator before providing the second user access to the status indicator.

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64. The method of claim 51 further comprising the step of:

determining whether the second user should be given access to the associated data before providing the second user access to the associated data.

20

65. The method of claim 51 further comprising the step of:

determining whether the second user should be given access to media content before streaming content to the second user.

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66. The method of claim 51 further comprising the step of:

determining whether the second user has an accessible media player before enabling the second user to selectively experience the media content.

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67. A system for providing an enhanced experience to a communication program user comprising:

a first user communication program made available by a service provider;

a second user communication program made available by said service provider;

5 a messaging server in communication with said first and second programs that receives data associated with a status indicator that indicates media content being experienced by a first user, which indicator is made available to said second user; and

10 a media server that communicates with the messaging server and selectively sends media content to a second user based on said data after said second user interacts with said indicator.

68. The system of claim 67 wherein the data comprises a song identifier.

15 69. The system of claim 67 wherein the data comprises a user identifier.

70. The system of claim 67 wherein the data comprises a playlist identifier.

20 71. The system of claim 67 wherein the data comprises a universal resource identifier.

72. The system of claim 67, wherein the data comprises a radio station identifier.

73. The system of claim 67 wherein the media content comprises audio content.

25 74. The system of claim 67 wherein the media content comprises video content.

75. The system of claim 67 wherein the media content comprises a data stream.

30 76. The system of claim 67 wherein the media content comprises a playlist.

77. The system of claim 67, wherein the media content comprises media from a radio station.

78. The system of claim 77, wherein the radio station operates utilizing an algorithm representative of a radio station user preference.

5 79. A method of broadcasting data associated with media being experienced by a plurality of users of a communication program, the method comprising:

streaming items of digital content to a plurality of users of a communication program, said plurality of users comprising a first user and other users;

10 receiving data associated with an item of digital content being experienced by said first user; and

instantiating a status indicator representative of the data, said indicator being displayed to one or more of said other users of the communication program.

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80. The method of claim 79 further comprising making available at least a portion of the associated data to one or more other users of the communication program.

81. The method of claim 79 wherein the data comprises a song identifier.

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82. The method of claim 79 wherein the data comprises a user identifier.

83. The method of claim 79 wherein the data comprises a playlist identifier.

25 84. The method of claim 79 wherein the data comprises a universal resource identifier.

85. The system of claim 79, wherein the data comprises a radio station identifier.

30 86. The method of claim 79 wherein the digital content is audio content.

87. The method of claim 79 wherein the digital content is video content.

88. The method of claim 79 wherein the digital content is a data stream.

89. The method of claim 79 wherein the digital content is a playlist.

5 90. The method of claim 79, wherein the digital content comprises media from a radio station.

91. The method of claim 90, wherein the radio station operates utilizing an algorithm representative of a radio station user preference.

10 92. The method of claim 79 further comprising the step of:

determining whether the one or more second users should be provided access to the data.

15 93. A method of broadcasting a status indicator associated with media being experienced by a user, the method comprising:

streaming digital content to a first user of a communication program;

20 receiving data associated with the first user's content;

instantiating a status indicator indicative of the data associated with the first user's content; and

25 broadcasting the status indicator to one or more other users of the communication program.

94. The method of claim 93 further comprising making the associated data available to one or more second users of the communication program.

30

95. The method of claim 93 wherein the data comprises a song identifier.

96. The method of claim 93 wherein the data comprises a user identifier.

97. The method of claim 93 wherein the data comprises a playlist identifier.

98. The method of claim 93 wherein the data comprises a universal resource
5 identifier.

99. The method of claim 93, wherein the data comprises a radio station identifier.

100. The method of claim 93 wherein the digital content is audio content.

101. The method of claim 93 wherein the digital content is video content.

102. The method of claim 93 wherein the digital content is a data stream.

103. The method of claim 93 wherein the digital content is a playlist.

104. The method of claim 93, wherein the digital content comprises media from a radio
station.

105. The method of claim 104, wherein the radio station operates utilizing an algorithm
representative of a radio station user preference.

106. The method of claim 93 further comprising the step of:

determining whether one or more second users should be given access to the data.

107. An instant messaging user interface comprising:

a list of selected users and a media player wherein the list of selected users further
30 comprises:

a status indicator for each selected user, which status indicator is representative of
media that each selected user is experiencing.

108. A method of providing an enhanced communication experience comprising the steps of:

5 providing access to a downloadable program comprising a user interface that displays a list of other users that a user of said program wishes to be associated with;

instantiating a status indicator for a first user of said program, said status indicator indicating data being experienced by said first user while utilizing said program;

10

displaying the status indicator to one or more other users associated with said first user; and

15 dynamically changing said displayed status indicator based on a change in data being experienced by the first user.

109. The method of claim 108 wherein the data comprises a webpage.

110. The method of claim 108 wherein the data comprises media content.

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111. The method of claim 108 wherein the data comprises a data stream.

112. An instant messaging computer program operative on computer hardware capable of running said program, said program, when operated by a user, performing the steps of:

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instantiating a user interface comprising a user list portion and a media player portion;

30 displaying a user identifier in said user list portion identifying a second user of said messaging program using second computer hardware; and

displaying a selectable status indicator adjacent to said user identifier, said status indicator being indicative of second user media being experienced by said second user.

113. The program of claim 112, wherein said program performs the further step of receiving media through said media player portion in response to said user selecting said selectable status indicator.

5

114. The program of claim 112, wherein said program performs the further step of receiving media through said media player portion in response to said user selecting said selectable status indicator, said media being similar media to said media being experienced by said second user.

10

115. The program of claim 112 wherein the program performs the further step of changing said selectable status indicator to reflect that the second user is experiencing different media.

116. An instant messaging computer program operative on computer hardware capable of running said program, said program when operated by a user performing the steps of:

instantiating a user interface comprising a user list portion;

20 displaying a user identifier in said user list portion identifying a second user of said messaging program using second computer hardware; and

25 displaying a selectable status indicator adjacent to said user identifier, said status indicator being indicative of a webpage being viewed by said second user on said second computer hardware.

30

117. The program of claim 116 wherein the program performs the further step of changing said selectable status indicator to reflect that the second user has navigated to a different webpage.

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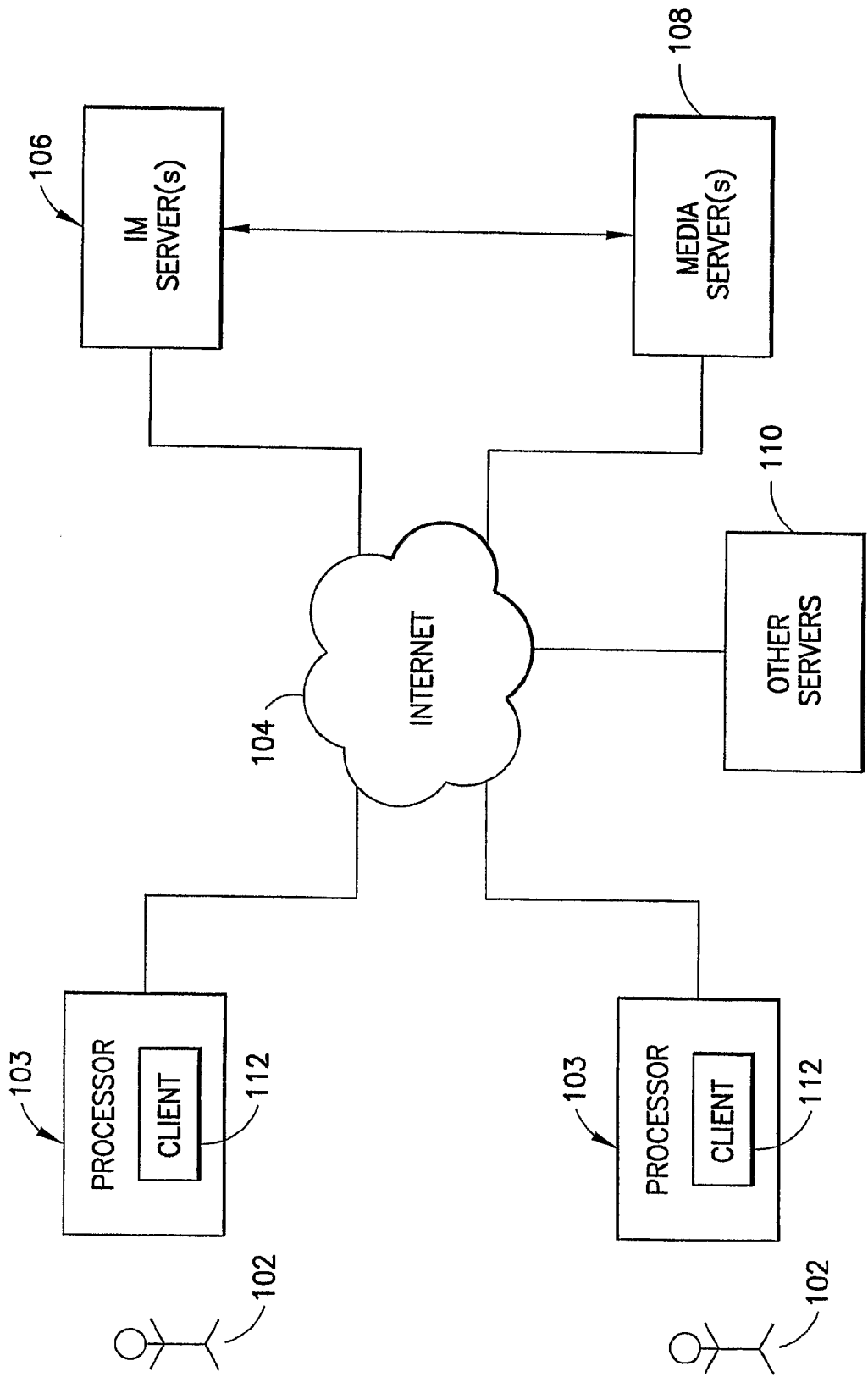


FIG.1

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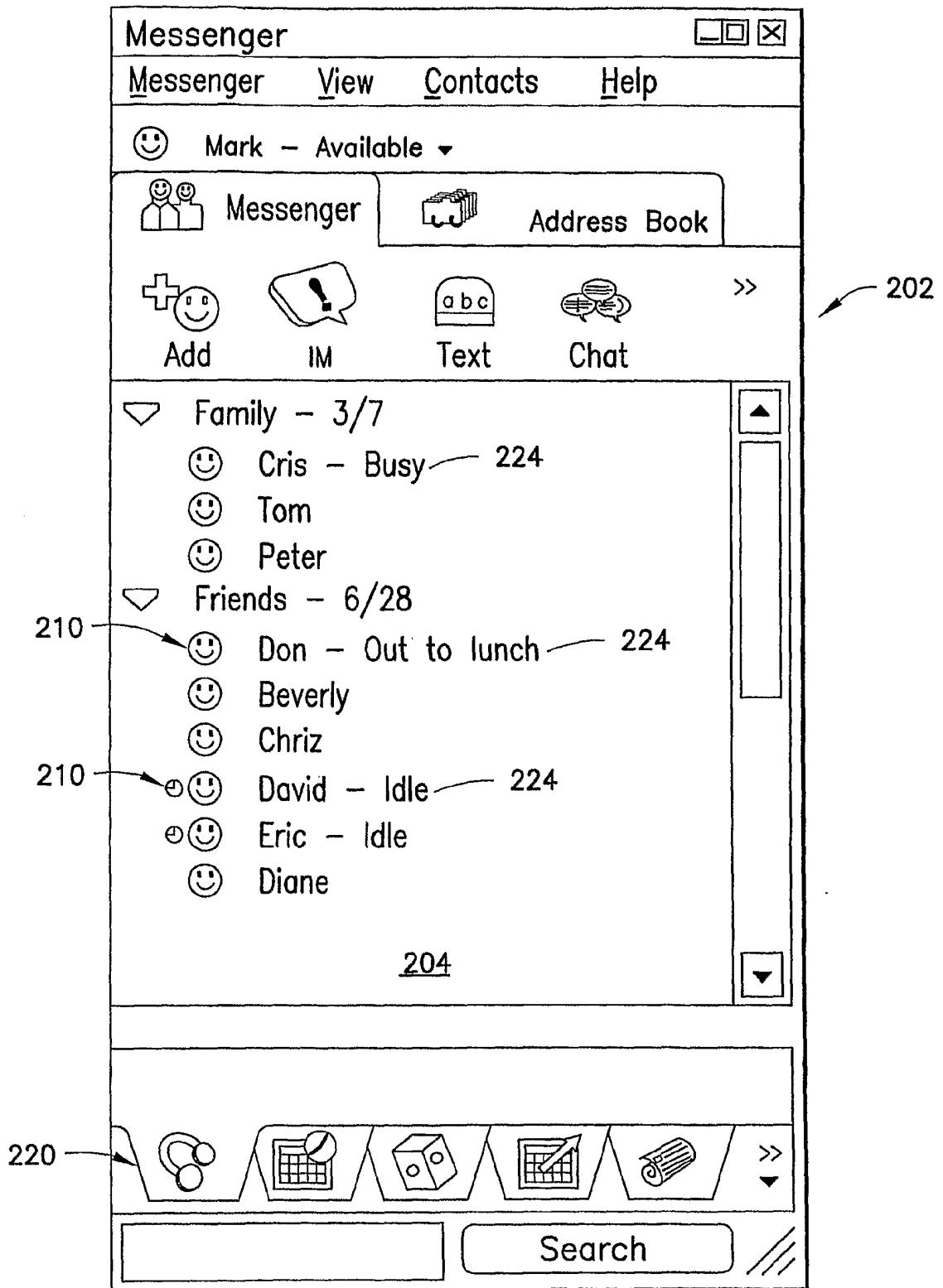
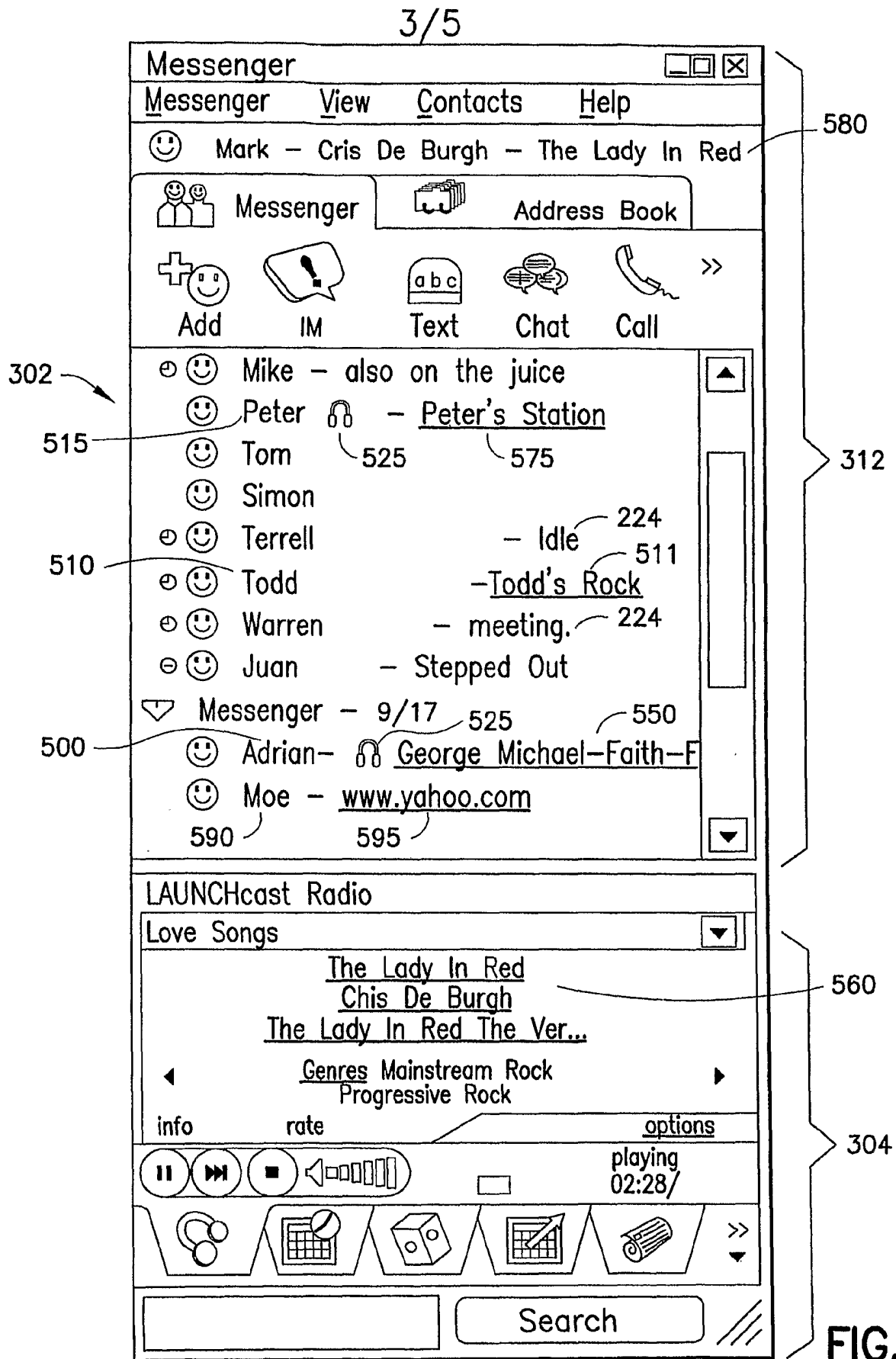


FIG.2



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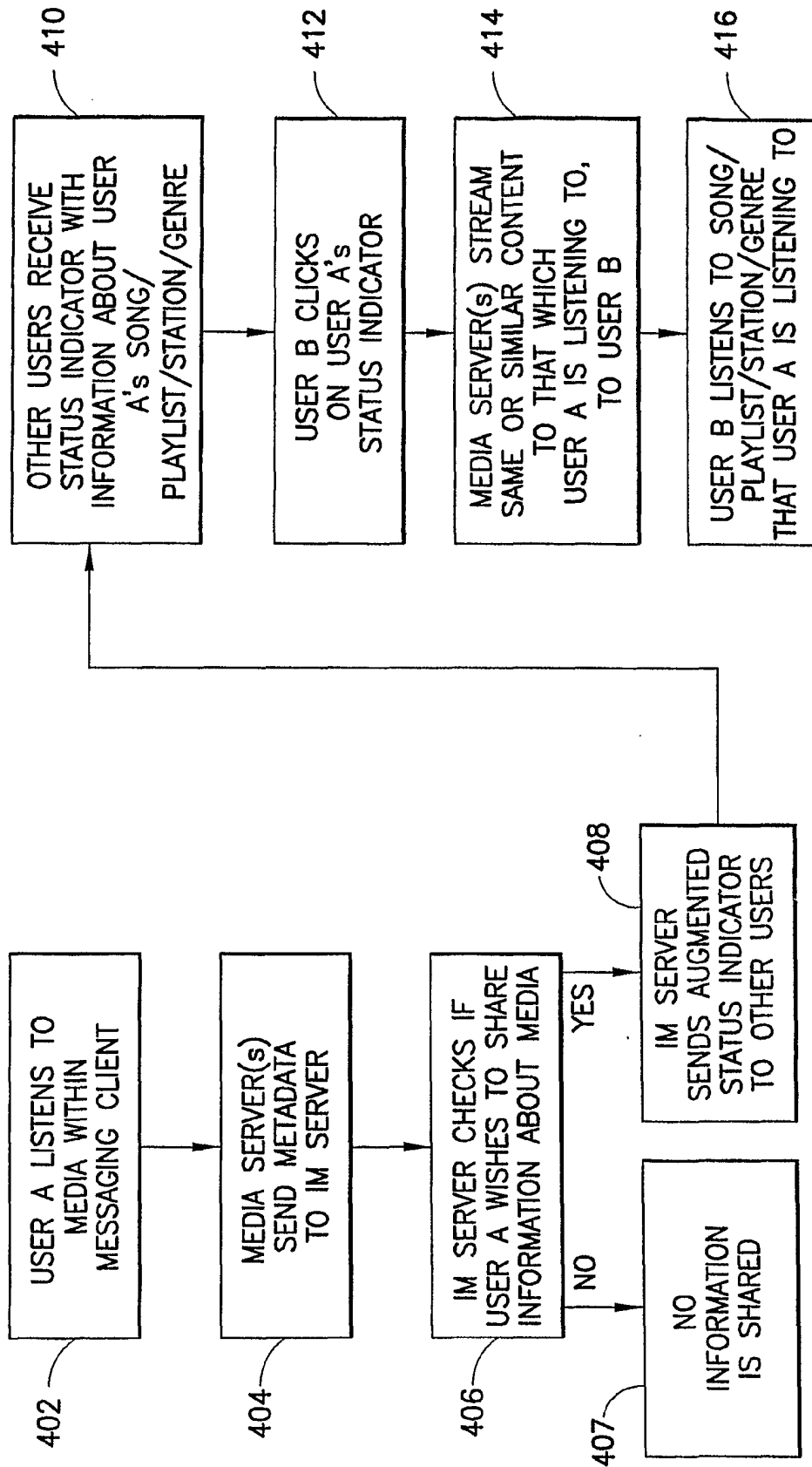


FIG. 4

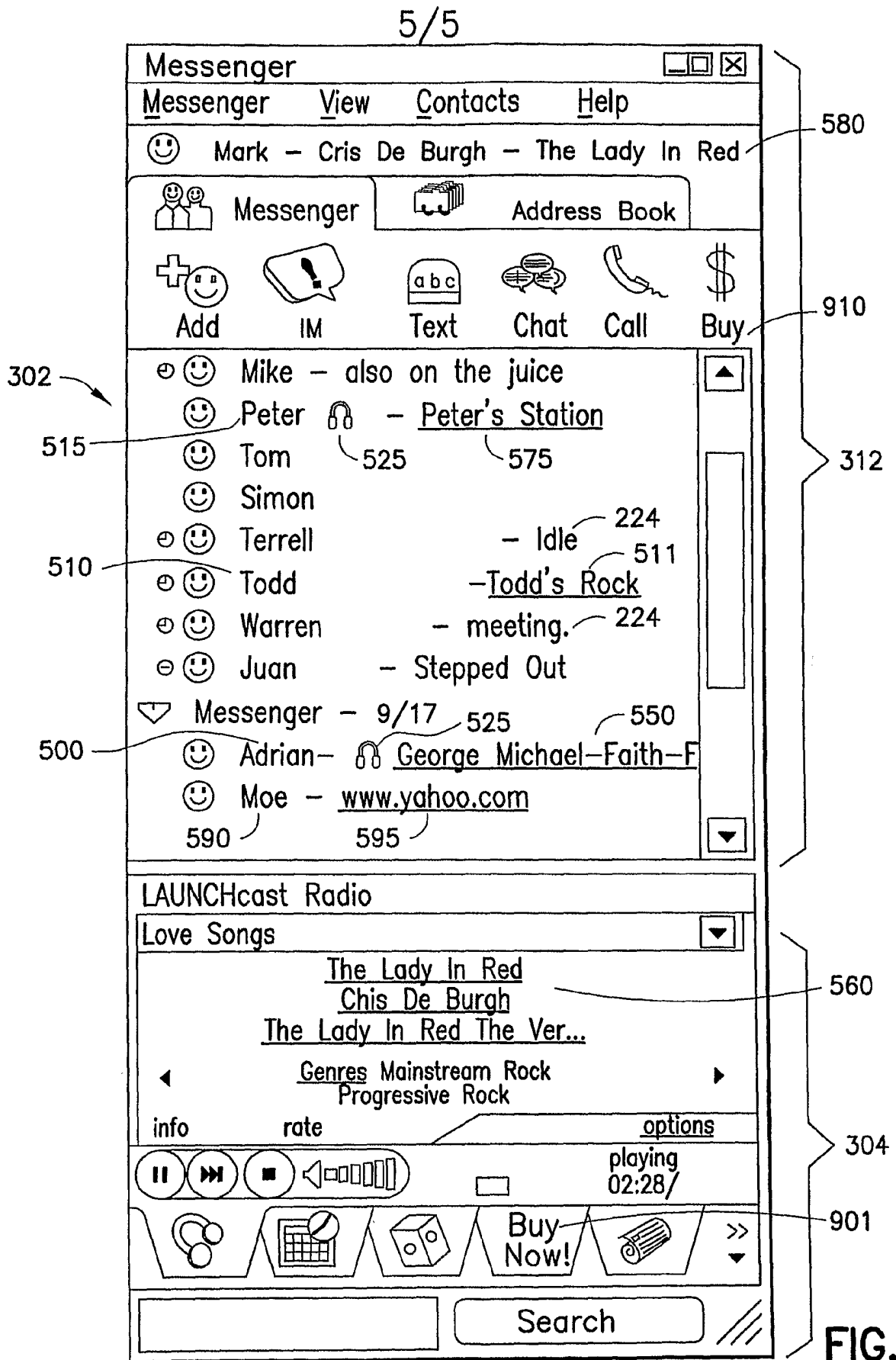


FIG.5

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US05/13774

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(7) : G06F 13/00

US CL : 709/204

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. : 709/204

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)
WEST Search Terms: (instant adj 1 messag\$) and (shar\$ near10 experience)

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X, P	US 2005/0086309 A1 (GALLI et al) 21 April 2005, Title, Abstract, figures 1-8, and paragraph [0001]-at al.	1-117
X	US 2004/0003090 A1 (DEEDS) 01 January 2004, Title, Abstract, figures 1-3, and paragraph [0001]et-al.	1-117

☐ Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.

☐ See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents:		"T"	later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention
"A"	document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance	"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
"E"	earlier application or patent published on or after the international filing date	"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
"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)	"&"	document member of the same patent family
"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		

Date of the actual completion of the international search

25 July 2005 (25.07.2005)

Date of mailing of the international search report

03 AUG 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. (571) 273-8300

Authorized officer

Robert B. Harrell

Telephone No. (571) 272-3895