2.6.2 Distributed Hash Tables (DHTs)

In this section, we will consider how to implement a simple database in a P2P network. Let's begin by describing a centralized version of this simple database, which will simply contain (key, value) pairs. For example, the keys could be social security numbers and the values could be the corresponding human names; in this case, an example key-value pair is (156-45-7081, Johnny Wu). Or the keys could be content names (e.g., names of movies, albums, and software), and the value could be the IP address at which the content is stored; in this case, an example key-value pair is (Led Zeppelin IV, 128.17.123.38). We query the database with a key. If there are one or more key-value pairs in the database that match the query key, the database returns the corresponding values. So, for example, if the database stores social security numbers and their corresponding human names, we can query with a specific social security number, and the database returns the name of the human who has that social security number. Or, if the database stores content names and their corresponding IP addresses, we can query with a specific content name, and the database returns the IP addresses that store the specific content.

Building such a database is straightforward with a client-server architecture that stores all the (key, value) pairs in one central server. So in this section, we'll instead consider how to build a distributed, P2P version of this database that will store the (key, value) pairs over millions of peers. In the P2P system, each peer will only hold a small subset of the totality of the (key, value) pairs. We'll allow any peer to query the distributed database with a particular key. The distributed database will then locate the peers that have the corresponding (key, value) pairs and return the key-value pairs to the querying peer. Any peer will also be allowed to insert new key-value pairs into the database. Such a distributed database is referred to as a **distributed hash table (DHT)**.

VideoNote
Walking through
distributed hash tables

Before describing how we can create a DHT, let's first describe a specific example DHT service in the context of P2P file sharing. In this case, a key is the content name and the value is the IP address of a peer that has a copy of the content. So, if Bob and Charlie each have a copy of the latest Linux distribution, then the DHT database will include the following two key-value pairs: (Linux, IP_{Bob}) and (Linux, $IP_{Charlie}$). More specifically, since the DHT database is distributed over the peers, some peer, say Dave, will be responsible for the key "Linux" and will have the corresponding key-value pairs. Now suppose Alice wants to obtain a copy of Linux. Clearly, she first needs to know which peers have a copy of Linux before she can begin to download it. To this end, she queries the DHT with "Linux" as the key. The DHT then determines that the peer Dave is responsible for the key "Linux." The DHT then contacts peer Dave, obtains from Dave the key-value pairs (Linux, IP_{Bob}) and (Linux, $IP_{Charlie}$), and passes them on to Alice. Alice can then download the latest Linux distribution from either IP_{Bob} or $IP_{Charlie}$.

Now let's return to the general problem of designing a DHT for general key-value pairs. One naïve approach to building a DHT is to randomly scatter the (key, value) pairs across all the peers and have each peer maintain a list of the IP addresses of all participating peers. In this design, the querying peer sends its query to all other peers, and the peers containing the (key, value) pairs that match the key can respond with their matching pairs. Such an approach is completely unscalable, of course, as it would require each peer to not only know about all other peers (possibly millions of such peers!) but even worse, have each query sent to *all* peers.

We now describe an elegant approach to designing a DHT. To this end, let's first assign an identifier to each peer, where each identifier is an integer in the range [0, $2^n - 1$] for some fixed n. Note that each such identifier can be expressed by an n-bit representation. Let's also require each key to be an integer in the same range. The astute reader may have observed that the example keys described a little earlier (social security numbers and content names) are not integers. To create integers out of such keys, we will use a hash function that maps each key (e.g., social security number) to an integer in the range [0, $2^n - 1$]. A hash function is a many-to-one function for which two different inputs can have the same output (same integer), but the likelihood of the having the same output is extremely small. (Readers who are unfamiliar with hash functions may want to visit Chapter 7, in which hash functions are discussed in some detail.) The hash function is assumed to be available to all peers in the system. Henceforth, when we refer to the "key," we are referring to the hash of the original key. So, for example, if the original key is "Led Zeppelin IV," the key used in the DHT will be the integer that equals the hash of "Led Zeppelin IV." As you may have guessed, this is why "Hash" is used in the term "Distributed Hash Function."

Let's now consider the problem of storing the (key, value) pairs in the DHT. The central issue here is defining a rule for assigning keys to peers. Given that each peer has an integer identifier and that each key is also an integer in the same range, a natural approach is to assign each (key, value) pair to the peer whose identifier is the *closest* to the key. To implement such a scheme, we'll need to define what is meant by "closest," for which many conventions are possible. For convenience, let's define the

closest peer as the *closest successor of the key*. To gain some insight here, let's take a look at a specific example. Suppose $n = 4$ so that all the peer and key identifiers are in the range [0, 15]. Further suppose that there are eight peers in the system with identifiers 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 12, and 15. Finally, suppose we want to store the (key, value) pair (11, Johnny Wu) in one of the eight peers. But in which peer? Using our closest convention, since peer 12 is the closest successor for key 11, we therefore store the pair (11, Johnny Wu) in the peer 12. [To complete our definition of closest, if the key is exactly equal to one of the peer identifiers, we store the (key, value) pair in that matching peer; and if the key is larger than all the peer identifiers, we use a modulo-2^n convention, storing the (key, value) pair in the peer with the smallest identifier.]

Now suppose a peer, Alice, wants to insert a (key, value) pair into the DHT. Conceptually, this is straightforward: She first determines the peer whose identifier is closest to the key; she then sends a message to that peer, instructing it to store the (key, value) pair. But how does Alice determine the peer that is closest to the key? If Alice were to keep track of all the peers in the system (peer IDs and corresponding IP addresses), she could locally determine the closest peer. But such an approach requires e*ach* peer to keep track of *all* other peers in the DHT—which is completely impractical for a large-scale system with millions of peers.

Circular DHT

To address this problem of scale, let's now consider organizing the peers into a circle. In this circular arrangement, each peer only keeps track of its immediate successor and immediate predecessor (modulo 2^n). An example of such a circle is shown in Figure 2.27(a). In this example, n is again 4 and there are the same eight

a.   **b.**
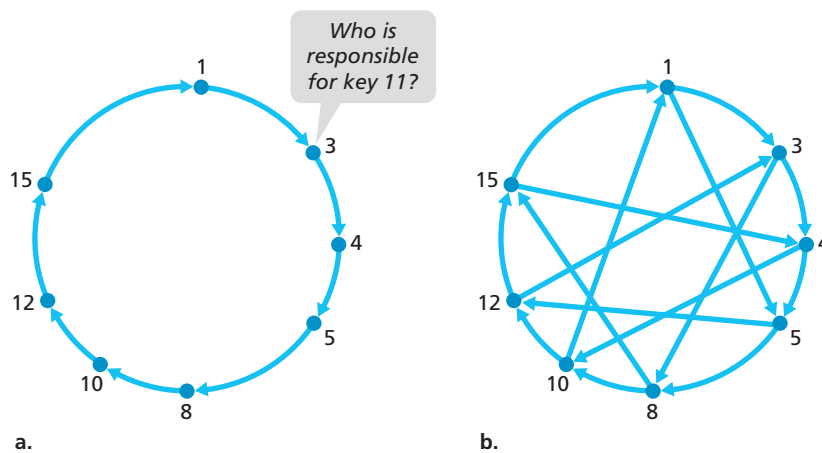
Figure 2.27 ♦ (a) A circular DHT. Peer 3 wants to determine who is responsible for key 11. (b) A circular DHT with shortcuts

peers from the previous example. Each peer is only aware of its immediate successor and predecessor; for example, peer 5 knows the IP address and identifier for peers 8 and 4 but does not necessarily know anything about any other peers that may be in the DHT. This circular arrangement of the peers is a special case of an **overlay network**. In an overlay network, the peers form an abstract logical network which resides above the "underlay" computer network consisting of physical links, routers, and hosts. The links in an overlay network are not physical links, but are simply virtual liaisons between pairs of peers. In the overlay in Figure 2.27(a), there are eight peers and eight overlay links; in the overlay in Figure 2.27(b) there are eight peers and 16 overlay links. A single overlay link typically uses many physical links and physical routers in the underlay network.

Using the circular overlay in Figure 2.27(a), now suppose that peer 3 wants to determine which peer in the DHT is responsible for key 11. Using the circular overlay, the origin peer (peer 3) creates a message saying "Who is responsible for key 11?" and sends this message clockwise around the circle. Whenever a peer receives such a message, because it knows the identifier of its successor and predecessor, it can determine whether it is responsible for (that is, closest to) the key in question. If a peer is not responsible for the key, it simply sends the message to its successor. So, for example, when peer 4 receives the message asking about key 11, it determines that it is not responsible for the key (because its successor is closer to the key), so it just passes the message along to peer 5. This process continues until the message arrives at peer 12, who determines that it is the closest peer to key 11. At this point, peer 12 can send a message back to the querying peer, peer 3, indicating that it is responsible for key 11.

The circular DHT provides a very elegant solution for reducing the amount of overlay information each peer must manage. In particular, each peer needs only to be aware of two peers, its immediate successor and its immediate predecessor. But this solution introduces yet a new problem. Although each peer is only aware of two neighboring peers, to find the node responsible for a key (in the worst case), all N nodes in the DHT will have to forward a message around the circle; $N/2$ messages are sent on average.

Thus, in designing a DHT, there is tradeoff between the number of neighbors each peer has to track and the number of messages that the DHT needs to send to resolve a single query. On one hand, if each peer tracks all other peers (mesh overlay), then only one message is sent per query, but each peer has to keep track of N peers. On the other hand, with a circular DHT, each peer is only aware of two peers, but $N/2$ messages are sent on average for each query. Fortunately, we can refine our designs of DHTs so that the number of neighbors per peer as well as the number of messages per query is kept to an acceptable size. One such refinement is to use the circular overlay as a foundation, but add "shortcuts" so that each peer not only keeps track of its immediate successor and predecessor, but also of a relatively small number of shortcut peers scattered about the circle. An example of such a circular DHT with some shortcuts is shown in Figure 2.27(b). Shortcuts are used to expedite the routing of query messages. Specifically, when a peer receives a message that is querying for a key, it forwards the

message to the neighbor (successor neighbor or one of the shortcut neighbors) which is the closet to the key. Thus, in Figure 2.27(b), when peer 4 receives the message asking about key 11, it determines that the closet peer to the key (among its neighbors) is its shortcut neighbor 10 and then forwards the message directly to peer 10. Clearly, shortcuts can significantly reduce the number of messages used to process a query.

The next natural question is "How many shortcut neighbors should a peer have, and which peers should be these shortcut neighbors? This question has received significant attention in the research community [Balakrishnan 2003; Androutsellis-Theotokis 2004]. Importantly, it has been shown that the DHT can be designed so that both the number of neighbors per peer as well as the number of messages per query is O(log N), where N is the number of peers. Such designs strike a satisfactory compromise between the extreme solutions of using mesh and circular overlay topologies.

Peer Churn

In P2P systems, a peer can come or go without warning. Thus, when designing a DHT, we also must be concerned about maintaining the DHT overlay in the presence of such peer churn. To get a big-picture understanding of how this could be accomplished, let's once again consider the circular DHT in Figure 2.27(a). To handle peer churn, we will now require each peer to track (that is, know the IP address of) its first and second successors; for example, peer 4 now tracks both peer 5 and peer 8. We also require each peer to periodically verify that its two successors are alive (for example, by periodically sending ping messages to them and asking for responses). Let's now consider how the DHT is maintained when a peer abruptly leaves. For example, suppose peer 5 in Figure 2.27(a) abruptly leaves. In this case, the two peers preceding the departed peer (4 and 3) learn that 5 has departed, since it no longer responds to ping messages. Peers 4 and 3 thus need to update their successor state information. Let's consider how peer 4 updates its state:

1. Peer 4 replaces its first successor (peer 5) with its second successor (peer 8).
2. Peer 4 then asks its new first successor (peer 8) for the identifier and IP address of its immediate successor (peer 10). Peer 4 then makes peer 10 its second successor.

In the homework problems, you will be asked to determine how peer 3 updates its overlay routing information.

Having briefly addressed what has to be done when a peer leaves, let's now consider what happens when a peer wants to join the DHT. Let's say a peer with identifier 13 wants to join the DHT, and at the time of joining, it only knows about peer 1's existence in the DHT. Peer 13 would first send peer 1 a message, saying "what will be 13's predecessor and successor?" This message gets forwarded through the DHT until it reaches peer 12, who realizes that it will be 13's predecessor and that its current successor, peer 15, will become 13's successor. Next, peer 12 sends this predecessor and successor information to peer 13. Peer 13 can now join

the DHT by making peer 15 its successor and by notifying peer 12 that it should change its immediate successor to 13.

DHTs have been finding widespread use in practice. For example, BitTorrent uses the Kademlia DHT to create a distributed tracker. In the BitTorrent, the key is the torrent identifier and the value is the IP addresses of all the peers currently participating in the torrent [Falkner 2007, Neglia 2007]. In this manner, by querying the DHT with a torrent identifier, a newly arriving BitTorrent peer can determine the peer that is responsible for the identifier (that is, for tracking the peers in the torrent). After having found that peer, the arriving peer can query it for a list of other peers in the torrent.