
Creating Advanced Functions on Network Processors: Experience and Perspectives

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Abstract

In this article we present five case studies of advanced networking functions that detail how a network processor can provide high performance and also the necessary flexibility compared with ASICs. We first review the basic NP system architectures, and describe the IBM PowerNP architecture from the data plane as well as the control plane point of view. We introduce models for the programmer's views of NPs that facilitate a global understanding of NP software programming. Then, for each case study, we present results from prototypes as well as general considerations that apply to a wider range of system architectures. Specifically, we investigate the suitability of NPs for QoS (active queue management and traffic engineering), header processing (GPRS tunneling protocol), intelligent forwarding (load balancing without flow disruption), payload processing (code interpretation and just-in-time compilation in active networks), and protocol stack termination (SCTP). Finally, we summarize the key features as revealed by each case study, and conclude with remarks on the future of NPs.

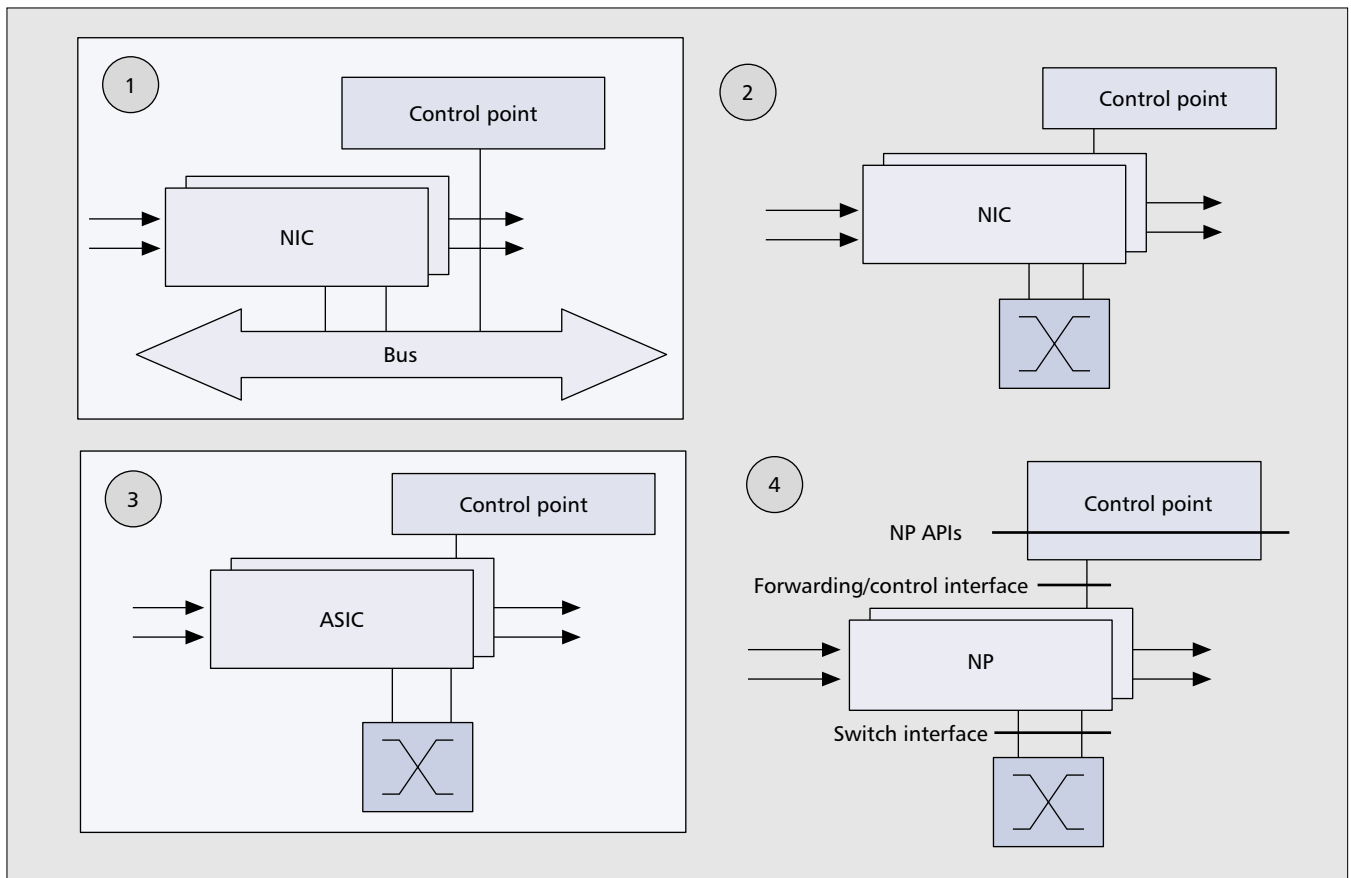
The advent of network processors (NPs) was driven by an increasing demand for high throughput combined with flexibility in packet routers. As a first step in the evolution from software-based routers to NPs (Fig. 1), the bus connecting network interface cards with the central control processor (control point, CP) was replaced by a switch fabric. As demand grew for even greater bandwidth, simple network interface cards were replaced by intelligent application-specific integrated circuits (ASICs), which relieved the CP of most forwarding tasks. ASIC-based routers, however, turned out not to be as flexible as necessary in the fast and diverse network equipment market. Also, hardware development cycles tended to be too slow to accommodate the continuous demand for new features and support for additional protocols. The need for adaptability, differentiation, and short time to market brought about the idea of using application-specific instruction-set processors (ASIPs). These NPs can be programmed easily and quickly according to specific products and deployment needs. In particular, a set of application programming interfaces (APIs) and protocols are currently being standardized by bodies such as the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) ForCES working group and the Network Processor Forum.¹ This finally enables users to exploit the full range of NP capabilities: the powerful combination of performance and flexibility that allows efficient development of

advanced networking functions.

Today, a wide variety of NPs exist, each providing a different combination of flexibility, price, and performance [1]. Despite this variety, NPs share many features, such as the capability to simplify and accelerate the development of advanced networking functions. Even though this article will focus on our experience with the IBM PowerNP [4], it provides insight into a much wider selection of existing and forthcoming products, as the concepts discussed apply to most other NPs as well.

This article provides insight into many of the enabling factors we found necessary during the implementation of a wide selection of functions, ranging from features of increasing significance such as header processing and quality of service (QoS) enforcement to traffic engineered packet processing. Furthermore, we worked on functions that are less widely considered for use in NPs, such as code compilation, intelligent forwarding, and protocol termination. Based on our firsthand experience, we are thus able to explain how NPs simplify and help accelerate the development of this broad spectrum of functions, and describe the lessons learned. The article is structured as follows. We introduce a small taxonomy of NP architectures and describe a sample NP architecture in sufficient detail for the following five case studies. We state the seven goals of QoS and explain how to achieve them using active queue management and traffic engineering. We then present our experience implementing the General Packet Radio Service (GPRS) Tunneling Protocol used for mobile Internet access. We introduce advanced server load balancing

¹ Online at <http://www.ietf.org/html.charters/forces-charters.html> and <http://www.npforum.org/>, respectively.



■ Figure 1. *The advent of network processors.*

techniques and their efficient implementation supported by NP-specific functionality. We outline the high flexibility of NPs by discussing just-in-time (JIT) compilation of active networking code and its performance gains. We describe experiences gained from the implementation of the Stream Control Transport Protocol (SCTP), which over the next few years is expected to be widely adopted for diverse applications. We finally conclude by summarizing and comparing the individual features that were major enabling factors for each of the case studies.

Network Processor Architecture

The challenge in NP design is to provide fast and flexible processing capabilities that enable a variety of functions on the data path, yet retain simplicity of programming similar to that of a general-purpose processor. NP systems are composed of multiple processors (*cores*) whose organization can be classified into a serial (or pipeline) model or a parallel model (Fig. 2).

In the parallel model, each thread in an NP core receives a different packet and executes the entire data path code for this packet. In the serial model, the packet is pipelined through a subset of NP cores, in each of which a different portion of the data path code is applied.

From a programming point of view, the serial model requires that the code be partitioned such that the work is evenly distributed, as the performance of the NP equals that of its most heavily loaded NP core. In the parallel model, given that the same code can be performed by any NP core and packets are assigned to the next available thread in any NP core, the work inherently is evenly distributed. To maintain comparable performance under all conditions of realistic fluctuating traffic mixes, the serial model would require

dynamic repartitioning of the code, whereas in the parallel model no partitioning is necessary.

While most NPs are able to operate in both parallel and serial models, architectural decisions often favor one over the other, and thus need to be considered in software design and benchmarking, to avoid unnecessary bottlenecks and processor stalls waiting for coprocessors, to name just a few issues. For example, larger applications on the Intel IXP [3] may exceed the per-core instruction memory and need serialization, distributing the code among more cores. The IBM PowerNP [4] is designed based on the parallel model. Preferences for either model may be given by state interdependence between packets (e.g., in stateful protocol termination, as shown for SCTP later) or through the use of powerful semi-autonomous coprocessors such as in the Motorola C-5 or IBM PowerNP.

The PowerNP consists of 16 concurrent NP cores that are scaled-down RISC processors running at 133 MHz, with a PowerPC-resembling instruction set, each supporting two independent threads. Multithreading keeps an NP core busy, even when one thread waits for coprocessor results. A thread entirely processes a packet; that is, threads are in *run to completion* mode unless the thread explicitly interrupts processing.

To accelerate common tasks from their execution in pico-code (i.e., a program in a NP core), each pair of NP cores is assisted by eight dedicated coprocessors. They perform asynchronous functions such as longest prefix lookup, full match lookup, packet classification, hashing (all done by the two tree search engines, TSEs), data copying, checksum computation, counter management, semaphores, policing, and packet memory access. In addition, the TSEs provide access to the control store consisting of several memories with different characteristics. Some of the coprocessors are shown in the lower right of Fig. 3. Furthermore, a number of hardware assists acceler-

Flow label	Type	Minimum	Maximum	Priority (strict)
Flow0	Real-time	10	30	0 (highest)
Flow1	Non-real-time	20	40	1
Flow2	Non-real-time	0	100	2
Flow3	Non-real-time	0	100	3 (lowest)

■ Table 1. An example of flows for bandwidth allocation.

ate tasks such as frame alternation² and header parsing.

Packet processing is divided into two stages. Ingress processing directs packets from the link to the switch, egress processing vice versa. The threads can perform either task and dynamically balance the load. Along with the packet, additional context information (e.g., output-port identifier obtained by the IP forwarding lookup) can be transported from ingress to egress. Note that no switch is required, and the ingress and egress NP can be the same.

NPs and CPs do not strictly map to data plane and control plane. In fact, complex data plane operations can be shared between NP and CP. Several of our case studies also showed the converse (i.e., NPs perform control plane functions).

Available functions programmed in picocode and the rest of the NP hardware are driven by higher-level APIs from the CP. The communication between the two takes place using control messages processed by a special thread in the NP. These CP APIs control logical components, a subset of which are represented by rounded rectangles along the ingress and egress data paths in Fig. 3.

QoS Provisioning

Good QoS design differentiates both real-time and non-real-time traffic into classes of service, and meets the following criteria:

- Despite any physically possible level of data congestion, real-time premium traffic such as IP voice that arrives at a rate under its contractual limit must not be dropped or unduly delayed.
- Premium data that conforms to its bandwidth guarantees should not be dropped, and its queuing delay must be short regardless of congestion due to *best effort* (BE) data traffic.

² Hardware-assisted frame alteration can, for example, update the TTL field in an IP header, generate frame cyclic redundancy check (CRC), or overlay an existing layer 2 wrapper with a new one.

- During steady congestion conditions, all queues should be low, ensuring a low queuing latency of the backlog. Exceptional bursts should fill the buffer, however.
- Utilization should be high. If excess bandwidth remains after premium traffic has been served, it should be used by BE.
- Bandwidth allocation should be fair and predictable.
- As congestion conditions change, the response of the NP should be fast convergence to a new equilibrium.
- Last but not least, all of the above should be autonomous and easy to administer.

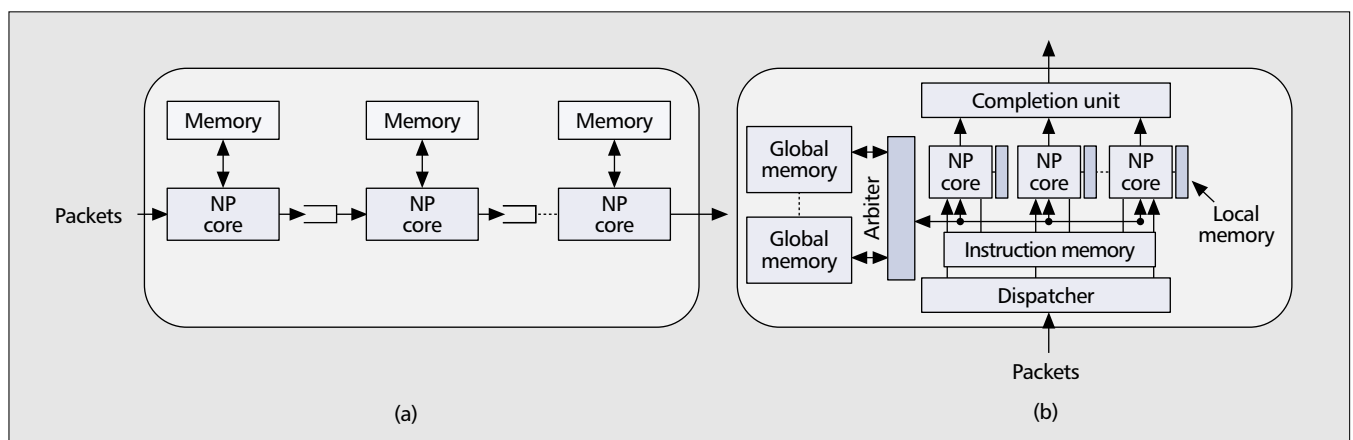
Typically, latency and loss are minimal and nearly constant, up to a certain offered load, and increase abruptly at the onset of congestion. Further considerations include finite packet life, finite storage, priority, and unpredictable duration of bursts. *Active queue management* (AQM) should address these issues in routers by actively dropping packets before queues overflow. The next subsection describes the implementation of an AQM system called *Bandwidth Allocation Technology* (BAT).

BAT makes use of the following NP hardware support:

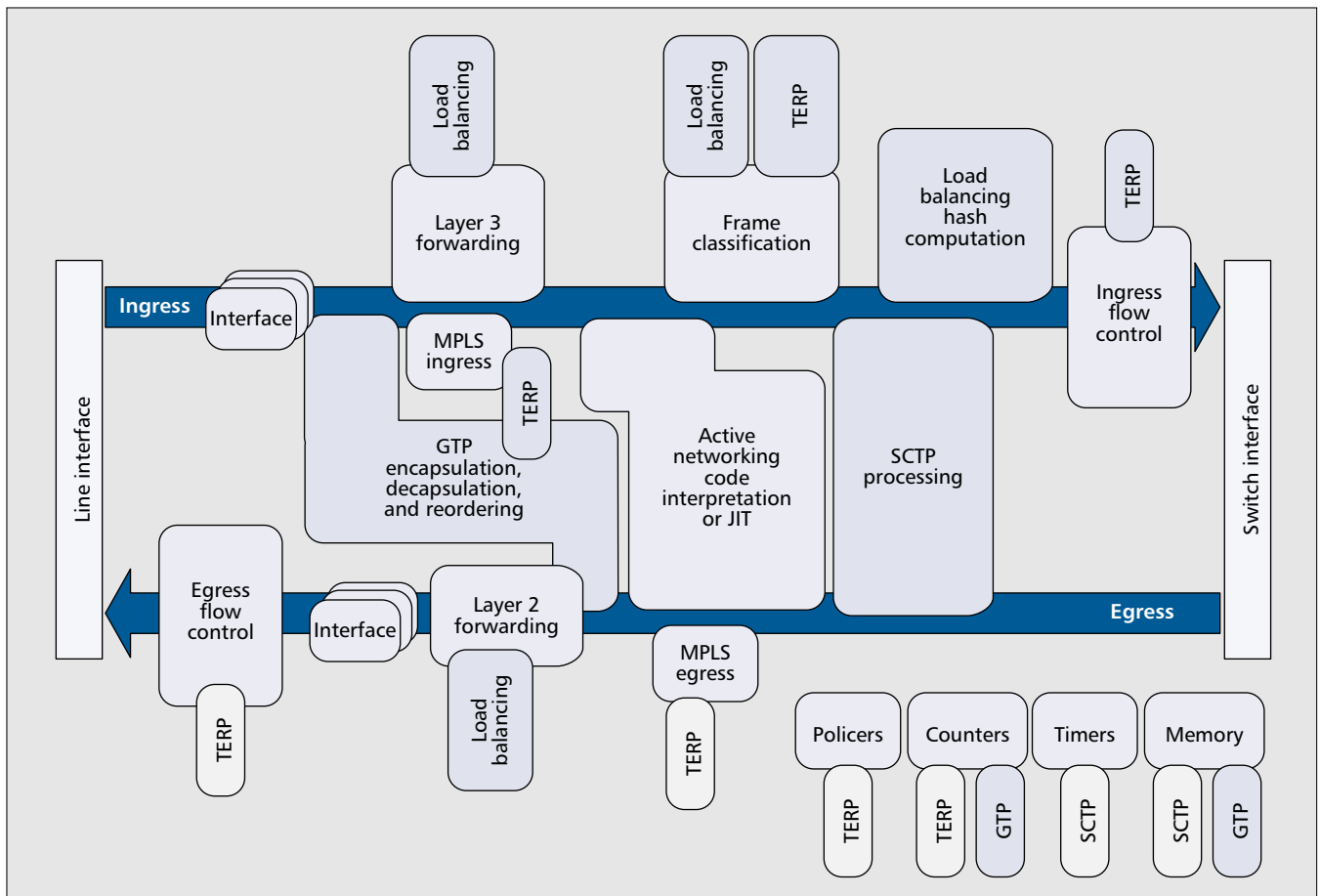
- BAT is invoked when a packet is enqueued in ingress and egress. The transmit probabilities used for flow control are taken from a table stored in fast access memory, the *transmit probability table*, relieving the NP cores from individual drop decisions.
- The key indexing the transmit probability table is composed of packet header bits (e.g., a differentiated services, Diff-Serv, code point). Access to these header bits is supported by a *header parser hardware assist*, capable of recognizing packet attributes such as priority or TCP SYN flags.
- Furthermore, detailed flow accounting information about individual offered loads is provided via *hardware counters*. Such counters as well as *queue occupancy* and *queue depletion indicators* at various locations in an NP can be used by a control theory algorithm to update transmit probabilities.

Traditional AQM schemes such as *Random Early Detection* (RED) and its variants use average queue occupancy to determine transmit probabilities. However, RED itself utilizes hand-tuned thresholds and therefore does not easily meet the above QoS criteria, especially the last one.

BAT allows organization of traffic into pipes at each processing bottleneck. (Fig. 3) [5]. A pipe is a local (per bottleneck) aggregation of traffic of one traffic class. As network end-to-end paths with guarantees are added or deleted, network control is responsible for ensuring the guarantees of the



■ Figure 2. NP concurrency models: a) serial model; b) parallel model.



■ Figure 3. A PowerNP programmer's view of the five case studies.

minima at each NP in the network and fairly distributing any available excess bandwidth, which is a complex task of network control.

BAT uses control theory to adapt transmit probabilities to current offered loads. A binary signal defines the existence of excess bandwidth. This signal can incorporate flow measurements, queue occupancy, rate of change of queue occupancy, or other factors such as network congestion signals. If there is excess bandwidth, flows that are not already at their *max*s are allowed to increase their bandwidth share linearly. Otherwise, the rates allocated to flows not already below their *mins* must decrease exponentially.

For example, let us suppose that four flows in egress are all destined to the same 100 Mb/s target port, as shown in Table 1. All bandwidth units are in megabits per second. If the four flows offer rates of 15, 50, 15, and 100 (sum is 180), then, noting the max of Flow1, the correct allocation should be 15 of Flow0, 40 of Flow1, 15 of Flow2, and 30 of Flow3. The correct transmit probabilities are therefore 1, 0.8, 1, 0.3. Moreover, the above allocation should be reached quickly and with low queue occupancy. We emphasize the first, second, and third QoS criteria: queuing latency during steady congestion must remain low.

By contrast, suppose the flow control were conventional taildrop (i.e., packet drop only occurs when the queue occupancy becomes full) and the egress data store were 128 Mb. BE packets forwarded to a 100 Mb/s link arriving at 101 Mb/s would fill up the egress data store, causing an unacceptable queuing latency of 1.28 s. However, setting a low taildrop threshold would result in an unacceptable shaving of bursts. Thus, QoS with taildrop may fail the final criterion.

BAT meets all seven criteria, achieving high utilization,

fast convergence, fairness, and administrative simplicity [5]. The latter advantage is by virtue of the fact that the AQM system is configured with minimum and maximum flow rates, and priorities rather than queue levels.

The implementation of BAT in the data plane of the PowerNP is straightforward because the header parser hardware assist and hardware flow control support can be configured according to the new scheme. No additional processing is needed in the data plane. The execution cost in the control plane is less than 2 μ s (< 267 cycles) to update a single transmit probability value. This update is triggered every 80 ms in ingress and every 8 μ s in egress. Therefore even running 32 ingress pipes and 2000 egress pipes would occupy only about 8 percent of the computational power of all NP cores.

Traffic Engineering Reference Platform

We now highlight how the NP is used in the context of traffic engineering (TE), from both the data plane and control plane points of view. Our implementation of TE relies on Resource Reservation Protocol (RSVP)-TE to set up multiprotocol label switching (MPLS) label-switched paths (LSPs) through the network and on DiffServ to provide QoS. An Open Shortest Path First (OSPF) routing mechanism with specific TE extensions is used to collect QoS usage information throughout the network. Our own route server component computes paths on request from RSVP. TE permits Internet service providers (ISPs) to start offering value-added commercial-grade services. Each MPLS node is composed of one or more NPs, interconnected with a switching fabric and attached to a CP: these NPs and the CP together act as a single MPLS node.

In the data plane, TE nodes perform traffic classification,

policing, shaping, marking, dropping, and forwarding. The logical components described in Fig. 3 are configured by the CP using a label and resource manager (LRM) process: ingress MPLS nodes perform traffic classification, policing, and DiffServ marking; transit nodes perform MPLS forwarding (MPLS label swapping); and egress MPLS nodes perform IP forwarding. All nodes can be configured to use Weighted RED (WRED) or BAT AQM for bandwidth allocation.

In the control plane, the CP runs the RSVP signaling, OSPF routing, and possibly the router server processes. As shown in Fig. 4, each NP Ethernet port (*eth1-eth39*) is mirrored in the CP as a normal interface (*reth1-reth39*): CP processes can therefore send and receive packets (protocol messages) as if the MPLS node were built as a centralized software-based router. In addition, the CP kernel's IP routing table is mirrored automatically into the NPs. OSPF routing therefore operates completely transparent from the underlying NP architecture; it uses the Linux Netlink API to insert

routes into the table. These route updates are reported to the CP-APIs-wrapper process that creates the appropriate control messages to automatically insert these routes into the NP. RSVP interfaces with the LRM to perform resource reservation (i.e., to reserve, commit, and release resources as needed in each node). The LRM performs CP API calls that are then translated into control messages destined for the NP.

All these features allow seamless integration of off-the-shelf control plane software into the CP.

Header Processing: GTP

GPRS is a set of protocols for converging mobile data with IP packet data. GPRS requires a new infrastructure in the form of GPRS support nodes (GSNs) to process packets at a very high rate but maintain flexibility, because GPRS deployment is still in process.

Aside from common functions performed by any IP router, such as routing table lookup and packet forwarding, a GSN has to encapsulate or decapsulate IP packets according to the GPRS tunneling protocol (GTP) that associates a specific GTP tunnel with each mobile terminal and performs traffic volume recording for billing and flow mirroring for legal interception.

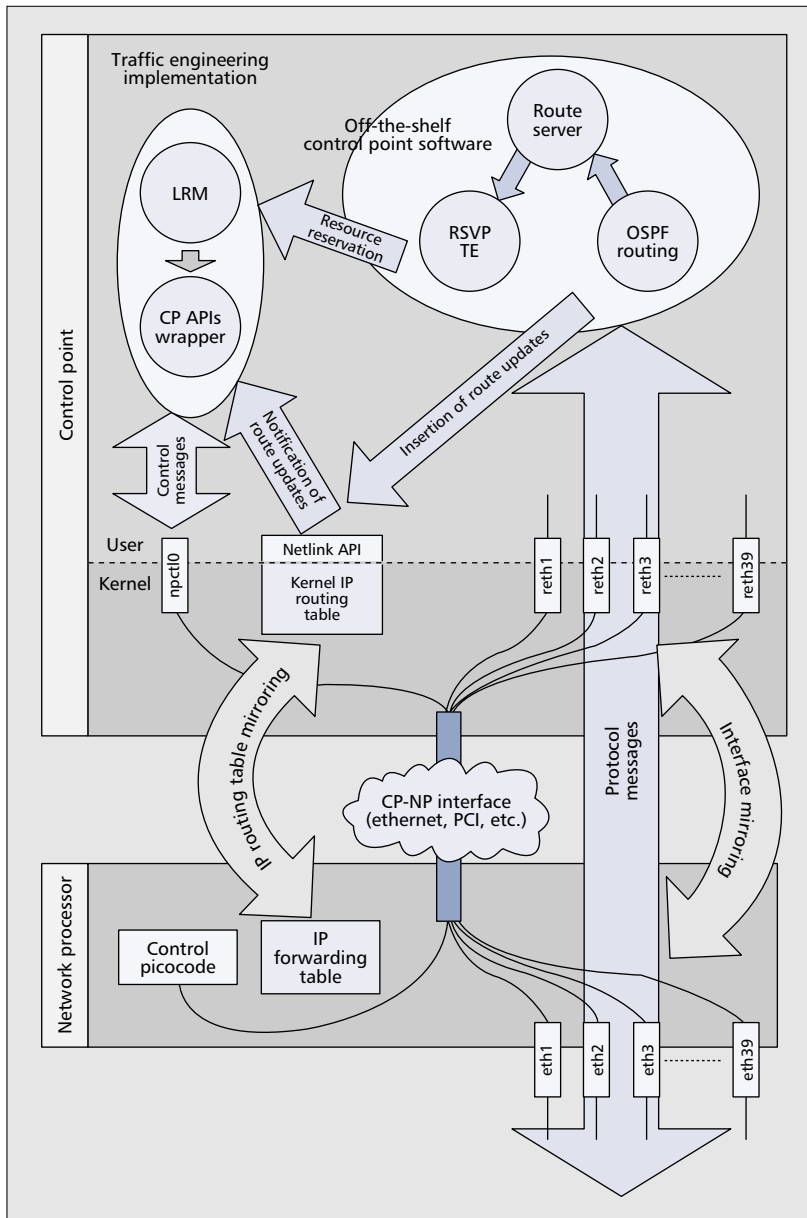
The design of our early prototype supports one million GTP tunnels. The increase in processing complexity required by GTP encapsulation and decapsulation results in a processing capability of roughly 2.2 million packets per second (Mpps) per NP.

The encapsulation process requires the retrieval of a GTP context (i.e., a mapping to a GTP tunnel) based on the IP address of the packet being encapsulated and the construction of the GTP header using information contained in the context. A header chain composed of the GTP, UDP, and IP headers is then prepended to the packet. The decapsulation process requires the retrieval of the GTP context from the IP address of the inner IP header. The outer header chain is stripped at the destination GSN, and normal IP forwarding is applied to the decapsulated packet. In encapsulation and decapsulation, traffic counters associated with the context are asynchronously incremented to account for the data transmission.

As shown in Fig. 5, the implementation of the GPRS extensions to the NP consists of the following:

- Design of the GPRS service APIs
- Design of the data structures for storing the GTP contexts, counters, and tree lookup
- Extension of the control code library on the CP to provide new GPRS CP APIs
- Extension of the control picocode on the NP to implement the CP APIs
- Extension of the picocode on the data path to perform the GTP tunneling function

For tree, table, memory block, and counter management, generic CP APIs can be used that simplify the management of the GTP lookup tree, GTP context table, and GTP counter tables. The design makes extensive use of the NP coprocessors: GTP contexts are



■ Figure 4. TERP control point architecture.

organized as a tree, and the TSE coprocessor is used to retrieve the GTP context associated with an incoming packet. Counters for traffic accounting are incremented asynchronously using the counter management coprocessor. Header prepending and stripping use the flexible frame alteration hardware assists of the NP.

Table 2 shows the number of cycles a frame spends in ingress and egress processing for the tunneling tasks, including stall cycles spent waiting for coprocessor results or memory and instruction accesses. The processing includes layer 2, layer 3, and GTP encapsulation or decapsulation.

	Instruction cycles	Coprocessor stall cycles	Other stall cycles	Total cycles
Encapsulation	402	170	190	762
Decapsulation	455	240	207	902

■ Table 2. Performance of GTP tunneling.

Intelligent Forwarding: Adaptive Load Balancing

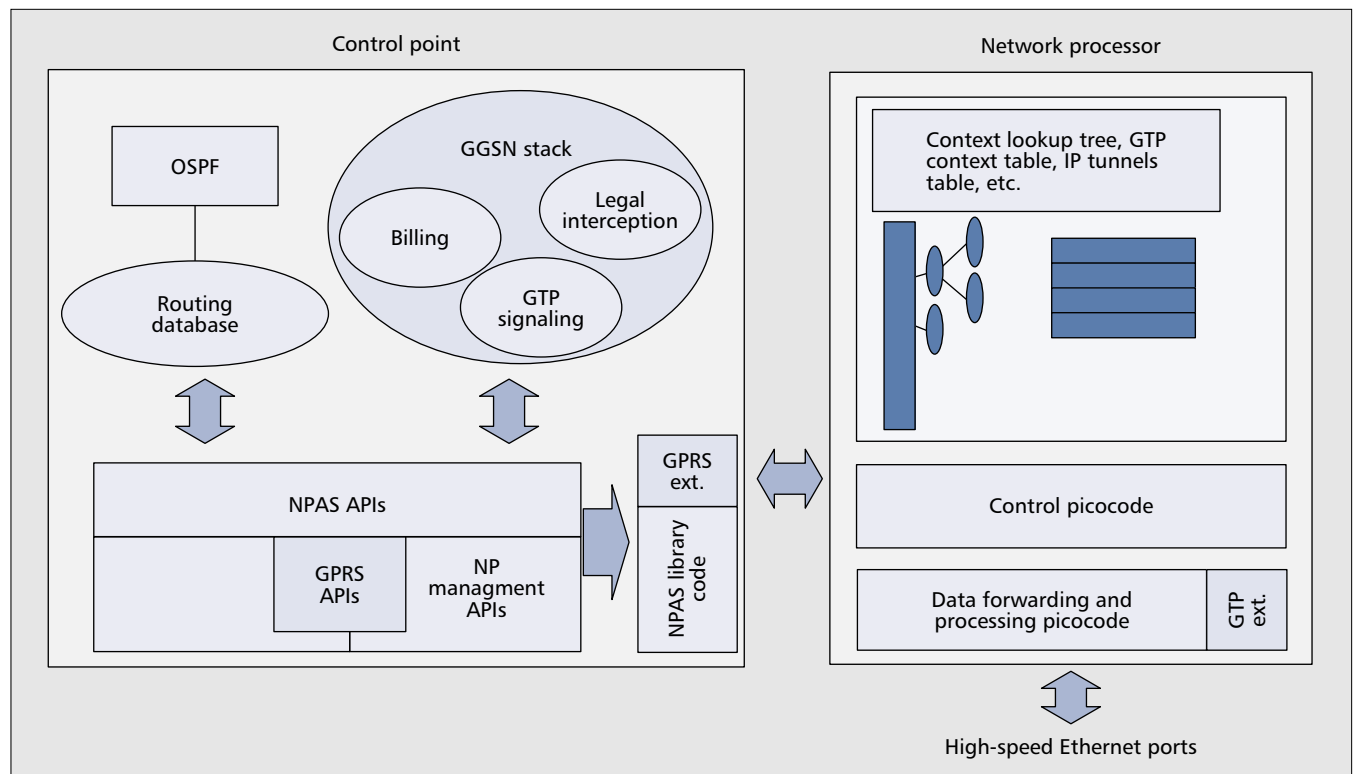
Many networking applications, such as Web server farms, benefit from distributing the data processing tasks among multiple servers or processing units. The task of adaptively balancing the load among multiple servers is nontrivial because of the high volume and unknown characteristics of the traffic, and the need to maintain connectivity of active packet flows between hosts. To balance a large number of flows simultaneously, it is necessary to minimize the amount of state information stored.

The adaptive load balancing method (Fig. 6) uses a hardware-based hash function to determine the destination server. The hash function is based on the robust hash routing algorithm [5], which supports arbitrary processing capacities of the balanced servers, and on its adaptive extension [6] that minimizes the disruption of the flow-to-processor mapping. The hash is performed on a portion of the packet that is constant for the duration of a flow, such as the source address. The method alternates between the stable state, in which only one hash function is computed, and a transient state with two hash calculations.

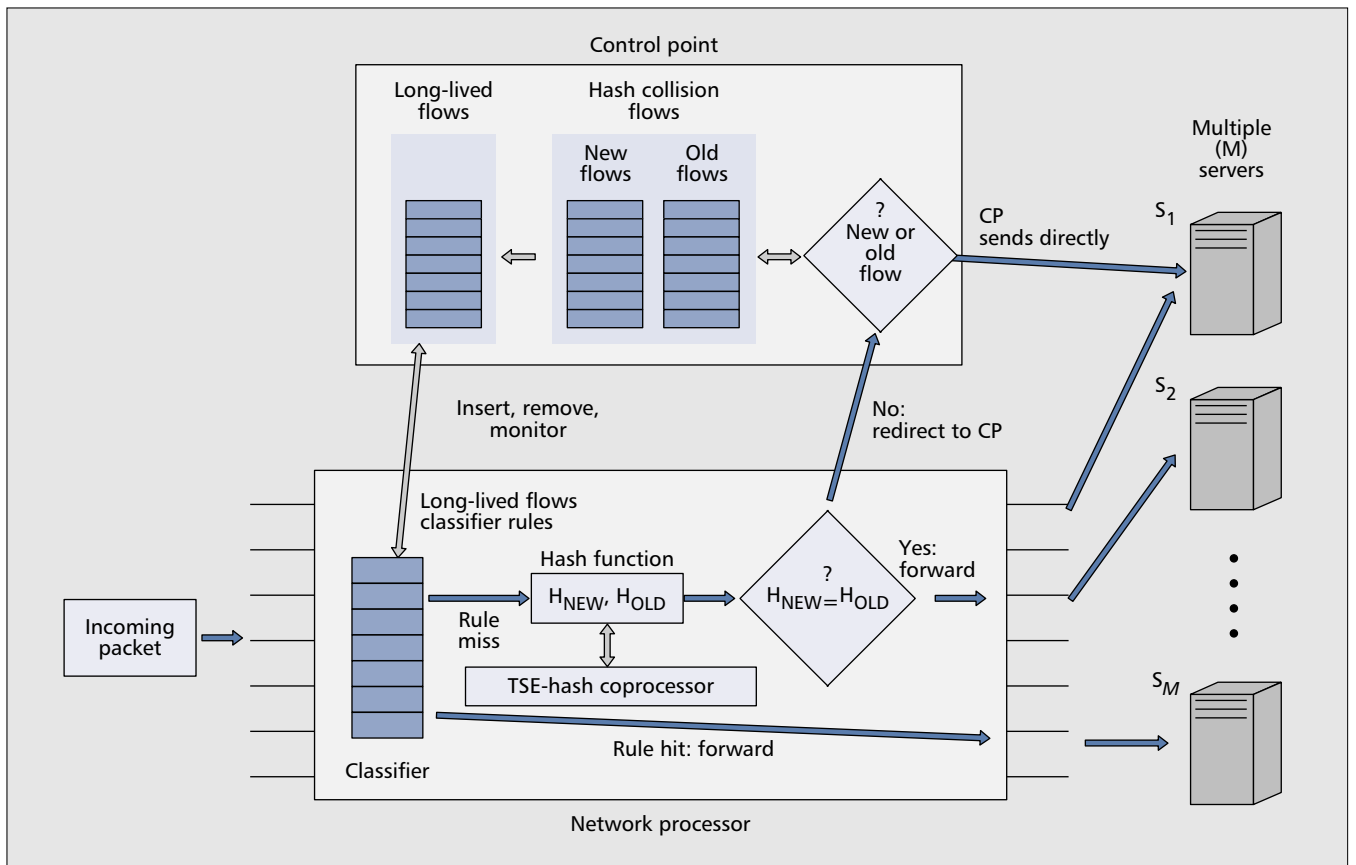
Initially, a single hash function is configured based on the resources available on the servers. During operation, if some servers become overloaded while others still have capacities, hashing is adapted to distribute network traffic optimally based on the statistics gathered.

During this transition, both the old (H_{old}) and the new (H_{new}) hash functions are computed on each packet simultaneously. Packets in the intersection of the two hash functions ($H_{new} = H_{old}$) continue to be routed to the resulting server. Packets that do not fall in the intersection of the two hash functions ($H_{new} \neq H_{old}$) are redirected to the CP for routing. The CP determines and keeps track of whether the flow is old or new, and routes according to the appropriate hash function. After a configured period of time, multifield classification rules are installed for the remaining (*long-lived*) flows in the state table until the flows terminate or time out. The rules avoid breaking the flow in future transitions and allow the return to a single hash function. The method continually alternates between the one- and two-hash states, thus adapting to current traffic conditions. Advantages of this approach include the following:

- No flows in progress are ever moved between servers, ensuring uninterrupted flow connectivity.
- State information is only maintained for flows that are not in the intersection of the two hash functions, thus minimizing memory and processing needs.
- The intersection of the two hash functions is mathematically maximized, minimizing the state kept.
- Part of the routing is performed in hardware, using hashes



■ Figure 5. GTP extensions to the NP software.



■ Figure 6. Server load balancer on the NP: data path diagram.

performed by the TSE coprocessor in the NP, thus exploiting the high data rate of the device.

A number of software and hardware components of the PowerNP have been used in prototyping the load-balancer application; among them are standard layer 2, layer 3, and layer 4 (multi-field classification) forwarding elements, as well as the hash function of the TSE coprocessor. The availability of these ready-made components reduced the data path programming on the NP to the relatively modest work of implementing the hash routing method, its managing API, and the CP redirection. The speed and good spreading properties of the hash function built into the TSE coprocessor eliminated

the need to implement a hash function.

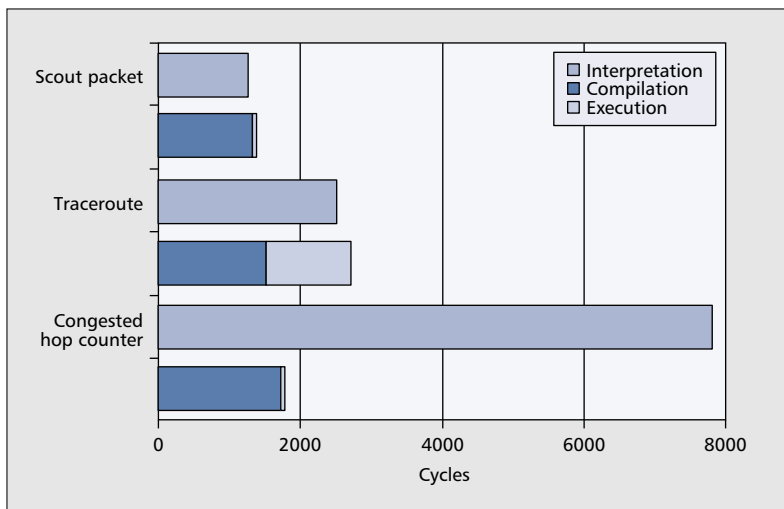
The number of processor instructions required to execute the hash routing method on each packet depends on the number of balanced servers, m . The instructions are primarily dedicated to reading and executing operations on the per-server weights, while calling the TSE coprocessor in parallel. For $m \leq 8$, the prototype implementation executes $20m + 75$ instructions. For $m > 8$, the number of instructions executed grows logarithmically with m , as the weights table is then organized into a tree structure.

Payload Processing: Active Networking

Two main approaches dominate active networking (AN) research. The *capsule approach* embeds active code into data packets that is executed on each node along the path. The *programmable switch* approach maintains the existing packet format. Programmability is provided through dynamic downloading of programs, which are then executed upon arrival of packets matching a filter.

Combining the capsule approach with a byte-code language possessing intrinsic safety properties [7] leads to an architecture-neutral compact code suited for both parallel and serial NP models. The execution environment provides a virtual machine that can be implemented in the data plane of NPs.

The resulting framework provides the flexibility and safety required in active networks. Although the approach is application-neutral, our AN work is motivated by the fact that no



■ Figure 7. Execution cycles for active code on an NP.

end-to-end QoS guarantees can be given in IP networks today. AN shifts the traditional view of networking, where programmability is given by the definition of protocols, and hence is limited to their functionalities, toward a world where packets can carry active code that is being executed on the fly in networking nodes. Protocols, unlike active code, are not powerful enough to provide translation between existing QoS frameworks.

The bottleneck of byte-code interpretation can be overcome by just-in-time (JIT) compilation of active code [8]. Our work on the IBM PowerNP showed that native execution is more than an order of magnitude more efficient than interpretation. We also observed that the compilation speed almost matched interpretation. Accordingly, already small amounts of reuse quickly result in performance gains. Reuse comes as loops or function calls, but also by caching compiled code either at routers or inside the packet, as a service to subsequent NPs.

We implemented and tested a general active network setup based on a dialect of the SNAP active networking language [7] on the PowerNP. Results show that JIT compilation is not only feasible in an active router because the compiler is sufficiently small and fast to run in the data plane's NP cores, but also leads to significant performance improvements. Figure 7 compares three different types of active packets.

The *scout* active packet discovers the list of active routers between the source and destination and is 22 byte-code instructions long, including bounds checks. Although compilation and execution do not outperform interpretation, the remarkable cycle cost of execution readily shows the potential of native code caching techniques.

The *traceroute* active packet sends a new active packet containing the IP address of the current traversed router back to the source. The traceroute packet consisting of 26 byte-code instructions; no bounds checking is needed, as information is sent back immediately. The execution time becomes visible as a result of the high cost of packet creation.

The third active packet is a *congested hop counter* in 28 byte-code instructions. The program collects information on the number of congested queues in active routers along a path through the network. In contrast to the programs described above, this one uses a loop to accumulate the data, resulting in a fourfold speedup.

Critical for the generic applicability of JIT compilation in active networks are unrestrained write access to the instruction memory and a sufficiently large instruction memory to hold the compiler and the JIT-compiled active code; some NPs fail these requirements.

Protocol Termination: SCTP

Offloading of transport-level protocol processing from the end system host CPU is a technique receiving increasing attention. On the one hand, this off-CPU protocol termination helps to relieve overloaded end systems such as servers from processor-cycle-consuming protocol processing, especially at emerging multigigabit line rates. A typical example of this technique is the development of TCP offloading engines (TOEs) located on intelligent network interface cards that perform TCP processing on dedicated hardware.

On the other hand, moving protocol processing further into the network allows the realization of applications such as stateful firewalls, application-level server load balancers, or even transport-layer protocol gateways. Available solutions are often based on off-the-shelf end host networking stacks, which typically lead to significant performance limitations. To overcome these limitations, the integration of a wire-speed

Case	Key features and accelerators
BAT	Probability operations Many per-flow queues Timers
TERP	Policing, flow control, scheduling, and layer 3/4 classification Packet forwarding to CP State synchronization NP ↔ CP
GTP	Millions of exact-match classifier rules Concurrent counters Frame size alteration (pre-/appending) Large packet storage for reordering
Load balancing	Collaboration NP ↔ CP Fast hash of disjoint header fields Uniformly spreading hash function Multifield classification for exceptions Fast update of MF classification rules
Active networks	Direct write to instruction memory Access to forwarding information Programmable per-packet forwarding Program-controlled multicast Payload processing
SCTP	Collaboration NP ↔ CP Fast CRC Frame size alteration (pre-/appending) Large packet storage for reassembly and reordering Mutual exclusion Scalable per-flow timer support Payload processing

■ Table 3. *Feature requirements.*

protocol termination into an NP-based intermediate system was envisioned. The termination of a typical stateful reliable transport protocol such as TCP poses the following challenges:

- A per-connection state context must be maintained efficiently.
- A timer service for protocol timers must be offered.
- Segmentation and reassembly (SAR) and retransmission services need per-context intermediate packet buffering.
- The often limited instruction memory size conflicts with the extensive functionality of some protocols.
- The protocol termination environment should provide a clean API to allow seamless and efficient integration of applications such as a firewall or a load balancer.

A challenging example is the termination of SCTP on the PowerNP. SCTP was chosen because it combines advanced protocol features such as multihoming, multistreaming, partial message ordering, and cookie-based association establishment with traditional reliability and robustness requirements.

A first prototype on the PowerNP implements full SCTP termination and already includes multistreaming and multihoming. It offers a socket-like API to link to the envisioned applications at the picocode level. The implementation provides sufficient headroom in available code space to integrate with such applications.

Although it is still too early to give performance numbers, it can be stated that the termination of several hundred thousands of SCTP flows on this type of NP is possible. Given the model of several parallel run-to-completion threads, each operating on a specific SCTP context at a time, the use of a semaphore-based context-locking mechanism is required. The run-to-completion model, on the other hand, allows the

implementation of a natural, event-based code path. Possible events are incoming packets, timer expiry, and application downcalls.

Except incoming packet checksum verification, the entire SCTP code operates on packets in the egress data store of the NP. This provides the proper amount of packet memory required to store data for send and receive windows, SAR, and packet retransmission. Preservation of data sequence within a stream requires packets to be stored until all prerequisite packets have been received. Even though the PowerNP favors the run-to-completion model, our implementations of SCTP and GTP show that waiting for missing data can easily and efficiently be achieved without blocking any threads.

Although the NP-based SCTP stack was designed to extend the functionality of an intermediate system, it can also be employed within an intelligent network adapter to provide host CPU protocol offloading.

Conclusion

The case studies presented here help us visualize and understand several driving factors behind NPs. Fig. 3 summarizes the configurations of existing logical blocks and/or new logical blocks with their own CP APIs for each case study.

The case studies first provide insight into the functions that can be performed on NPs, how they can be implemented, and how they fit into applications. Second, we examined the NP features required by different applications. Some of these requirements have been summarized in Table 3. Third, these different requirements also help explain why current NPs cover such a wide range of the design space. Depending on the applications envisioned by the designers, different decisions and compromises had to be implemented.

One of the open issues in the NP space remains software durability, which NPs share with many other specialized, embedded systems. The processor families offer various programming paradigms, abstraction layers, and coprocessors and/or hardware assists. Therefore, it is currently nearly impossible to write code that would easily port to a different family. But it is also difficult to foresee what improvements and new features future members of a family will support, thus making it advisable to revisit and reoptimize the code whenever new family members appear.

Fortunately, this situation is changing for the better. For code running in the data plane, the use of a smart optimizing compiler permits relatively architecture-independent code to be written. With appropriate evolving libraries, key subfunctions can be transferred progressively and seamlessly from software implementation to hardware, maintaining backward compatibility. In the control plane, standard interfaces are being developed and joined with capabilities for dynamic NP feature discovery to allow NP-independent code. Working groups such as IETF ForCES and NP Forum are developing the relevant protocols and semantics, allowing key performance functions to easily be offloaded from the CP onto the NP.

The implementation of only a subset of the examples presented in this article on an ASIC would critically delay time to market as well as significantly reduce the ability to adapt to future changes in network patterns or protocols. Offloading them to an embedded general-purpose processor or even the CP would radically reduce the performance achievable. Thanks to their high speed combined with extensibility and modularity, NPs speed up the development of both control and data path thanks to higher-level interfaces and pre-existing reusable building blocks.

Taking a step back to see the big picture, we can conclude

that versatility is probably the strongest NP characteristic. With comparatively little effort, it is possible to implement new features to dramatically increase the value offered by a network device, and to offer new and powerful functions, often combined from a wide variety of existing building blocks. We believe that in the networking world, this makes NPs a strong competitor to ASICs for all but the highest-performance network devices, and thus expect their use to grow dramatically in the near future. This will open the door to ever more versatile networks, which can adapt themselves and provide new, fast routing concepts [9], and in turn will call for new methods to achieve efficient deployment of services in such networks [10]. The unique combination of flexibility and power of NPs already now can help pave the way towards the versatile and fast evolving networks of the future.

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