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Mark Allman
NASA GRC/BBN
Ethan Blanton
Ohio University
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A Conservative SACK-based Loss Recovery Algorithm for TCP

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Abstract

This document presents a conservative loss recovery algorithm for TCP that is based on the use of the selective acknowledgment TCP option. The algorithm presented in this document conforms to the spirit of the current congestion control specification, but allows TCP senders to recover more effectively when multiple segments are lost from a single flight of data.

1 Introduction

This document presents a conservative loss recovery algorithm for TCP that is based on the use of the selective acknowledgment TCP option. While the TCP selective acknowledgment (SACK) option [[RFC2018](#)] is being steadily deployed in the Internet [[ALLO0](#)] there is evidence that hosts are not using the SACK information when making retransmission and congestion control decisions [[PF00](#)]. The goal of this document is to outline one straightforward method for TCP implementations to use SACK information to increase performance.

[RFC2581] allows advanced loss recovery algorithms to be used by TCP [RFC793] provided that they follow the spirit of TCP's congestion control algorithms [RFC2581,RFC2914]. [RFC2582] outlines one such advanced recovery algorithm called NewReno. This document outlines

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a loss recovery algorithm that uses the selective acknowledgment (SACK) [RFC2018] TCP option to enhance TCP's loss recovery. The algorithm outlined in this document, heavily based on the algorithm detailed in [FF96], is a conservative replacement of the fast recovery algorithm [Jac90,RFC2581]. The algorithm specified in this document is a straightforward SACK-based loss recovery strategy that follows the guidelines set in [RFC2581] and can safely be used in TCP implementations. Alternate SACK-based loss recovery methods can be used in TCP as implementers see fit (as long as the alternate algorithms follow the guidelines provided in [RFC2581]).

2 Definitions

The reader is expected to be familiar with the definitions given in [RFC2581].

For the purposes of explaining the SACK-based loss recovery algorithm we define two variables that a TCP sender stores:

``HighACK'' is the sequence number of the highest cumulative ACK received at a given point.

``HighData'' is the highest sequence number transmitted at a given point.

For the purposes of this specification we define a ``duplicate acknowledgment'' as an acknowledgment (ACK) whose cumulative ACK number is equal to the current value of HighACK and also conveys new selective acknowledgment information for segment(s) above HighACK.

We define a variable ``DupThresh'' that holds the number of duplicate acknowledgments required to trigger a retransmission. Per [RFC2581] this threshold is defined to be 3 duplicate acknowledgments. However, implementers should consult any updates to [RFC2581] to determine the current value for DupThresh (or method for determining its value).

3 Keeping Track of SACK Information

For a TCP sender to implement the algorithm defined in the next section it must keep a data structure to store incoming selective acknowledgment information on a per connection basis. Such a data structure is commonly called the ``scoreboard''. For the purposes of the algorithm defined in this document the scoreboard MUST implement the following functions:

Update ():

Each octet that is cumulatively ACKed or SACKed should be marked accordingly in the scoreboard data structure, and the total number of octets SACKed should be recorded. For each octet that has not been cumulatively acknowledged, a ``DupSACK'' counter is kept indicating how many times an octet of greater sequence number has been SACKed.

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Note: SACK information is advisory and therefore SACKed data MUST NOT be removed from TCP's retransmission buffer until the data is cumulatively acknowledged [[RFC2018](#)].

MarkRetran ():

When a retransmission is sent, the scoreboard MUST be updated with this information so that data is not repeatedly retransmitted by the SACK-based algorithm outlined in this document. Note: If a retransmission is lost it will be repaired using TCP's retransmission timer.

NextSeg ():

This routine MUST return the sequence number range of the oldest segment that has not been cumulatively ACKed or SACKed and not been retransmitted, per the following rules:

- (1) Look for the lowest sequence number that is not ACKed or SACKed, but has a DupSACK counter of at least DupThresh. If such a sequence number ``S'' exists, this routine MUST return a sequence number range starting at octet S.
- (2) If we fail to find a segment per rule 1, but the connection has unsent data available to be transmitted, NextSeg () MUST return a sequence number range corresponding to one segment of this new data.

(3) If rules 1 and 2 fail, this routine MUST return a segment that has not been ACKed or SACKed but may not meet the DupThresh requirement in 1.

(4) Finally, if rules 1-3 fail, NextSeg () MUST indicate this and no data will be sent.

AmountSACKed ():

This routine MUST return the number of octets selectively acknowledged by the receiver.

LeftNetwork ():

This function MUST return the number of octets in the given sequence number range that have left the network. The algorithm checks each octet in the given range and separately keeps track of the number of retransmitted octets and the number of octets that are cumulatively ACKed but were not SACKed. Note: it is possible to have octets that fit both categories. In this case, the octets MUST be counted in both categories. After checking the sequence number range given this routine returns the sum of the two counters.

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Note: The SACK-based loss recovery algorithm outlined in this document requires more computational resources than previous TCP loss recovery strategies. However, we believe the scoreboard data structure can be implemented in a reasonably efficient manner (both in terms of computation complexity and memory usage) in most TCP implementations.

4 Algorithm Details

Upon the receipt of the first DupThresh - 1 duplicate ACKs, the scoreboard MUST be updated per the selective acknowledgment information contained in the ACK (via the Update () routine). Note: The first and second duplicate ACKs can also be used to trigger the transmission of previously unsent segments using the Limited Transmit mechanism [[ABF00](#)].

When a TCP sender receives the duplicate ACK corresponding to DupThresh ACKs, the scoreboard MUST be updated with the new SACK information (via Update ()) and a loss recovery phase SHOULD be

initiated, per the fast retransmit algorithm outlined in [[RFC2581](#)], and the following steps MUST be taken:

- (1) Set a ``pipe'' variable to the number of outstanding octets (i.e., octets that have been sent but not yet acknowledged), per the following equation:

$$\text{pipe} = \text{HighData} - \text{HighACK} - \text{AmountSACKed} ()$$

- (2) Set a ``RecoveryPoint'' variable to HighData. When the TCP sender receives a cumulative ACK for this data octet the loss recovery phase is terminated.
- (3) The congestion window (cwnd) is reduced to half its current value. The value of the slow start threshold (ssthresh) is set to the halved value of cwnd.
- (4) Retransmit the first data segment not covered by HighACK. Use the MarkRetran () function to mark the sequence number range as having been retransmitted in the scoreboard.

Once a TCP is in the loss recovery phase the following procedure MUST be used for each arriving ACK:

- (A) An incoming cumulative ACK for a sequence number greater than or equal to RecoveryPoint signals the end of loss recovery and the loss recovery phase MUST be terminated.
- (B) Upon receipt of a duplicate ACK the following actions MUST be taken:
 - (B.1) Use Update () to record the new SACK information conveyed by the incoming ACK.

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- (B.2) The pipe variable is decremented by the number of newly SACKed data octets conveyed in the incoming ACK, as that is the amount of new data that has left the network.
- (C) When a ``partial ACK'' (an ACK that increases the HighACK point, but does not terminate loss recovery) arrives, the following actions MUST be performed:
 - (C.1) Before updating HighACK based on the received cumulative

ACK, save HighACK as OldHighACK.

(C.2) The scoreboard MUST be updated based on the cumulative ACK and any new SACK information that is included in the ACK via the Update () routine.

(C.3) The value of pipe MUST be decremented by the number of octets returned by the LeftNetwork () routine when given the sequence number range OldHighACK-HighACK.

(D) While pipe is less than cwnd and the receiver's advertised window permits, the TCP sender SHOULD transmit one or more segments as follows:

(D.1) The scoreboard MUST be queried via NextSeg () for the sequence number range of the next segment to transmit, and the given segment is sent.

(D.2) The pipe variable MUST be incremented by the number of data octets sent in (D.1).

(D.3) If any of the data octets sent in (D.1) are below HighACK, they MUST be marked as retransmitted via Update ().

(D.4) If $cwnd - pipe$ is greater than 1 SMSS, return to (D.1)

5 Research

The algorithm specified in this document is analyzed in [FF96], which shows that the above algorithm is effective in reducing transfer time over standard TCP Reno [RFC2581] when multiple segments are dropped from a window of data (especially as the number of drops increases). [AHK097] shows that the algorithm defined in this document can greatly improve throughput in connections traversing satellite channels.

6 Security Considerations

The algorithm presented in this paper shares security considerations with [RFC2581]. A key difference is that an algorithm based on SACKs is more robust against attackers forging duplicate ACKs to force the TCP sender to reduce cwnd. With SACKs TCP senders have an additional check on whether the ACK is legitimate or not. While not fool-proof, SACK provides some amount of protection in this area.

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Author's Addresses:

Mark Allman
NASA Glenn Research Center/BBN Technologies
Lewis Field
21000 Brookpark Rd. MS 54-2
Cleveland, OH 44135
Phone: 216-433-6586
Fax: 216-433-8705
mallman@grc.nasa.gov
<http://roland.grc.nasa.gov/~mallman>

Ethan Blanton
Ohio University Internetworking Research Lab
Stocker Center
Athens, OH 45701
eblanton@cs.ohiou.edu

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