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Label Distribution Using ARP
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Abstract

This document describes extensions to the Address Resolution Protocol to distribute MPLS labels for IP host addresses. Distribution of labels via ARP enables simple plug-and-play operation of MPLS, which is among the key goals of "MPLS Fabric" architecture.

Requirements Language

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in [RFC2119].

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1. Introduction

This document describes extensions to the Address Resolution Protocol (ARP) [RFC0826] to advertise label bindings for IP host addresses. While there are well-established protocols, such as LDP, RSVP and BGP, that provide robust mechanisms for label distribution, these protocols tend to be relatively complex, and often require detailed configuration for proper operation. There are situations where a simpler protocol may be more suitable from an operational standpoint. An example is where an MPLS Fabric is the underlay technology in a Data Centre; here, MPLS tunnels originate from host machines. The host thus needs a mechanism to acquire label bindings to participate in the MPLS Fabric, but in a simple, plug-and-play manner. Existing signaling/routing protocols do not always meet this need. Labeled ARP (L-ARP) is a proposal to fill that gap.

[TODO-MPLS-FABRIC] describes the motivation for using MPLS as the fabric technology.

1.1. Approach

ARP is a nearly ubiquitous protocol; every device with an Ethernet interface, from hand-helds to servers, have an implementation of ARP. ARP is plug-and-play; ARP clients do not need configuration to use ARP. That suggests that ARP may be a good fit for devices that want

to source and sink MPLS tunnels, but do so in a zero-config, plug-and-play manner, with minimal impact to their code.

The approach taken here is to create a minor variant of the ARP protocol, labeled ARP (L-ARP), which is distinguished by a new hardware type, MPLS-over-Ethernet. Regular (Ethernet) ARP (E-ARP) and L-ARP can coexist; a device, as an ARP client, can choose to send out an E-ARP or an L-ARP request, depending on whether it needs Ethernet or MPLS connectivity. Another device may choose to function as an E-ARP server and/or an L-ARP server, depending on its ability to provide an IP-to-Ethernet and/or IP-to-MPLS mapping.

2. Overview of Ethernet ARP

In the most straightforward mode of operation [RFC0826], ARP queries are sent to resolve "directly connected" IP addresses. The ARP query is broadcast, with the target-protocol-address field carrying the IP address of another node in the same subnet. All the nodes in the LAN receive this ARP query. All the nodes, except the node that owns the IP address, ignore the ARP query. The IP address owner learns the MAC address of the sender from the source-hardware-address field in the ARP request, and unicasts an ARP reply to the sender. The ARP reply carries the replying node's MAC address in the source-hardware-address field, thus enabling two-way communication between the two nodes.

A variation of this scheme, known as "proxy ARP" [RFC2002], allows a node to respond to an ARP request with its own MAC address, even when the responding node does not own the requested IP address. Generally, the proxy ARP response is generated by routers to attract traffic for prefixes they can forward packets to. This scheme requires the host to send ARP queries for the IP address the host is trying to reach, rather than the IP address of the router. When there is more than one router connected to a network, proxy ARP enables a host to automatically select an exit router without running any routing protocol to determine IP reachability. Unlike regular ARP, a proxy ARP request can elicit multiple responses, e.g., when more than one router has connectivity to the address being resolved. The sender must be prepared to select one of the responding routers.

Yet another variation of the ARP protocol, called 'Gratuitous ARP' [RFC2002], allows a node to update the ARP cache of other nodes in an unsolicited fashion. Gratuitous ARP is sent as either an ARP request or an ARP reply. In either case, the Source Protocol Address and Target Protocol Address contain the sender's address, and the Source Hardware Address is set to the sender's hardware address. In case of a gratuitous ARP reply, the Target Hardware Address is also set to the sender's address.

3. L-ARP Protocol Operation

The L-ARP protocol builds on the proxy ARP model, and also leverages gratuitous ARP model for asynchronous updates.

In this memo, we will refer to L-ARP clients (that make L-ARP requests) and L-ARP servers (that send L-ARP responses). In Figure 1, C1, C2 and C3 are L-ARP clients, and S1, S2 and S3 are L-ARP servers. T is a member of the MPLS Fabric that may not be an L-ARP server. Within the MPLS Fabric, the usual MPLS protocols (IGP, LDP, RSVP-TE) are run. Say C1, C2 and C3 want to establish MPLS tunnels to each other (for example, they are using BGP MPLS VPNs as the overlay virtual network technology). C1 might also want to talk to a member of the MPLS Fabric, say T.

```
                     . . . . . .
                    .           .
          C1 --- S1              T
             \   .     MPLS      .
              \  .               .
               \ .    Fabric     .
          C2 --- S2             S3 --- C3
                  .             .
                    . . . . . .
```

Figure 1

3.1. Basic Operation

A node (say C1) that needs an MPLS tunnel to a destination (say C3) broadcasts an L-ARP query with the Target Protocol Address set to C3. A node that has reachability to C3 (such as S1 or S2) sends an L-ARP reply with the Source Hardware Address set to a locally-allocated MPLS label plus its Ethernet MAC address. After receiving one or more L-ARP replies, C1 can select either S1 or S2 to send MPLS packets that are destined to C3. As described later, the L-ARP response may contain certain parameters that enable the client to make an informed choice of the routers.

As with standard ARP, the validity of the MPLS label obtained using L-ARP is time-bound. The client should periodically resend its L-ARP requests to obtain the latest information, and time out entries in its ARP cache if such an update is not forthcoming. Once an L-ARP server has advertised a label binding, it MUST NOT change the binding until expiry of the binding's validity time.

The mechanism defined here is simplistic; see Section 4.

3.2. Asynchronous operation

The preceding sections described a request-response based model. In some cases, the L-ARP server may want to asynchronously update its clients. L-ARP uses the gratuitous ARP model [RFC2002] to "push" such changes.

In a pure "push" model, a device may send out updates for all prefixes it knows about. This naive approach will not scale well. This memo specifies a mode of operation that is somewhere between "push" and "pull" model. An L-ARP server does not advertise any binding for a prefix until at least one L-ARP client expresses interest in that prefix (by initiating an L-ARP query). As long as the server has at least one interested client for a prefix, the server sends unsolicited (aka gratuitous, though the term is less appropriate in this context) L-ARP replies when a prefix's reachability changes. The server will deem the client's interest in a prefix to have ceased when it does not hear any L-ARP queries for some configured timeout period.

3.3. Applicability

L-ARP can be used between a server and its Top-of-Rack switch in a Data Center. L-ARP can also be used between a DSLAM and its aggregation switch going to the B-RAS. More generally, L-ARP can be used between an "access node" and its first hop MPLS-enabled device in the context of Seamless MPLS [reference]. In all these cases, L-ARP can handle the presence of multiple connections between the access device and its first hop devices.

ARP is not a routing protocol. The use of L-ARP should be limited to cases where the L-ARP client has a small number of one-hop connections to L-ARP servers. The presence of a complex topology between the L-ARP client and server suggests to use a different protocol.

4. For Future Study

The L-ARP specification is quite simple, and the goal is to keep it that way. However, inevitably, there will be questions and features that will be requested. Some of these are:

1. Keeping L-ARP clients and servers in sync. In particular, dealing with:

    A. client and/or server restart

    B. lost packets

    C. timeouts

2. Withdrawing a response.

3. Dealing with scale.

4. If there are many servers, which one to pick?

5. How can a client make best use of underlying ECMP paths?

6. and probably many more.

In all of these, it is important to realize that, whenever possible, a solution that places most of the burden on the server rather than on the client is preferable.

5. L-ARP Message Format

```
 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 1
+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+
|           ar$hrd              |           ar$pro              |
+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+
|     ar$hln    |    ar$pln     |           ar$op               |
+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+
//                      ar$sha (variable...)                   //
+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+
//                      ar$spa (variable...)                   //
+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+
//                      ar$tha (variable...)                   //
+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+
//                      ar$tpa (variable...)                   //
+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+
```

Figure 2: L-ARP Packet Format

ar$hrd Hardware Type: MPLS-over-Ethernet. The value of the field used here is [HTYPE-MPLS-TBD]. To start with, we will use the experimental value HW_EXP2 (256)

ar$pro Protocol Type: IP. The value of the field used here is 0x0800.

ar$hln Hardware Length: the value of the field used here is 12.

ar$pln Protocol Address Length: the value is 4.

ar$op   Operation Code: set to 1 for request, and 2 for reply.

ar$sha Source Hardware Address: In an L-ARP query message, Source Hardware Address is irrelevant, and set to all-zeroes. In an L-ARP reply message, the address follows the 'hardware address' format specified below.

ar$spa Source Protocol Address: In an L-ARP query message, this field carries the sender's IP address. In an L-ARP reply message, this field carries the target protocol address received in the corresponding query message.

ar$tha Target Hardware Address: This field is invalid in both request and reply messages.

ar$tpa Target Protocol Address: In an L-ARP query message, this field carries the IP address for which the client is seeking an MPLS label. In an L-ARP reply message, this field carries the Source Protocol Address received in the corresponding L-ARP query.

The following diagram describes the format of 'Hardware Address' carried in L-ARP.

```
 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 1
+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+
|                    MAC Address (6 octets) ...                 |
+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+
|    ... MAC Address (contd)    |           MPLS  Label ...     |
+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+
|  ...  |Z|Z|Z|Z|
+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+-+
```

Figure 3: MPLS Hardware Address Format

MAC Address This field contains the Ethernet hardware address that data packets should be directed to.

MPLS Label This field contains the MPLS label allocated by the server. This field is valid only in an L-ARP request message. This field is 20 bits wide, left-justified.

Z These bits are not used, and SHOULD be set to zero on sending and ignored on receipt.

If other parameters are deemed useful in the L-ARP reply, they will be added as needed.

6. Security Considerations

TODO

7. IANA Considerations

TODO

8. Acknowledgments

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9. Normative References

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