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A Taxonomy of Session Initiation Protocol (SIP)
Back-to-Back User Agents
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There are numerous types of SIP Back-to-Back User Agents (B2BUAs), performing different roles in different ways. This document identifies several common B2BUA roles, in order to provide taxonomy other documents can use and reference.

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1. Terminology

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 RFC 2119. The terminology in this document conforms to RFC 2828, "Internet Security Glossary".

B2BUA: a SIP Back-to-Back User Agent, which is the logical combination of a User Agent Server (UAS) and User Agent Client (UAC).

UAS: a SIP User Agent Server.

UAC: a SIP User Agent Client.

2. Introduction

In many SIP deployments, SIP entities exist in the SIP signaling path between the originating UAC and final terminating UAS, which go beyond the definition of a Proxy, performing functions not defined in standards-track RFCs. The only term for such devices provided in [RFC3261] is for a Back-to-Back User Agent (B2BUA), which is defined as the logical concatenation of a User Agent Server (UAS) and User Agent Client (UAC).

In practice, there are numerous forms of B2BUAs, operating at various layers of the protocol stack, and for various purposes, and with widely varying behavior from a SIP protocol perspective. Some act as pure SIP Proxies and only change to the role of B2BUA in order to generate BYEs to terminate dead sessions. Some are full User Agent stacks with only high-level event and application logic binding the UAS and UAC sides. Some B2BUAs operate only in the SIP signaling plane, while others participate in the media plane as well.

As more and more SIP domains get deployed and interconnect, the odds of a SIP session crossing such media-plane B2BUAs increases, as well as the number of such B2BUAs any given SIP session may go through. In other words, any given SIP session may cross any number of B2BUAs both in the SIP signaling plane as well as media-plane.

This document provides a taxonomy of several common B2BUA roles, so that other documents may refer to them using their given names without re-defining them in each document.

3. B2BUA Role Types

Within the context of this document, the terms refer to a B2BUA role, not a particular system type. A given system type may change its role in the middle of a SIP session, for example when a Stateful Proxy tears-down a session by generating BYEs; or for example when an SBC performs transcoding or REFER termination.

Furthermore, this document defines 'B2BUA' following the definition provided in [RFC3261], which is the logical concatenation of a UAS and UAC. A typical centralized conference server, for example, is not a B2BUA because it is the target UAS of multiple UACs, whereby the UACs individually and independently initiate separate SIP sessions to the central conference server. Likewise, a one-armed third-party call control transcoder as described in section 3.1 of

[RFC5369] is not a B2BUA; whereas an inline transcoder based on [RFC5370] is a B2BUA.

3.1. Signaling-plane B2BUA Roles

A Signaling-plane B2BUA is one that operates only on the SIP message protocol layer, and only with SIP messages and headers but not the media itself in any way. This implies it does not modify SDP bodies, although it may save them and/or operate on other MIME body types. This category is further subdivided into specific roles as described in this section.

3.1.1 Proxy-B2BUA

A Proxy-B2BUA is one that appears, from a SIP protocol perspective, to be a SIP Proxy based on [RFC3261] and its extensions, except that it maintains sufficient dialog state to generate in-dialog SIP messages on its own and does so in specific cases. The most common example of this is a SIP Proxy which can generate BYE requests to tear-down a dead session. Another example would be a Proxy which can generate UPDATE requests to test the liveness of a session.

A Proxy-B2BUA does not modify the received header fields such as the To, From, or Contact, and only modifies the Via and Record-Route header fields following the rules in [RFC3261] and its extensions. A Proxy-B2BUA neither modifies nor inspects MIME bodies (including SDP), does not have any awareness of media, will forward any Method type, etc.

3.1.2 Signaling-only

A Signaling-only B2BUA is one that operates at the SIP layer but in ways beyond those of [RFC3261] Proxies, even for normally forwarded requests. Such a B2BUA may or may not replace the Contact URI, modify or remove all Via and Record-Route headers, modify the To and From header fields, modify or inspect specific MIME bodies, etc. No SIP header field is guaranteed to be copied from the received request on the UAS side to the generated request on the UAC side.

An example of such a B2BUA would be some forms of Application Servers and PBXs, such as a server which locally processes REFER requests and generates new INVITEs on behalf of the REFER's target. Another example would be an [RFC3323] Privacy Service Proxy performing the 'header' privacy function.

3.2. Media-plane B2BUA Roles

A Media-plane B2BUA is one that operates at both the SIP and media planes, not only on SIP messages but also SDP and potentially

RTP/RTCP or other media. Such a B2BUA may or may not replace the Contact URI, modify or remove all Via and Record-Route headers, modify the To and From header fields, etc. No SIP header field is guaranteed to be copied from the received request on the UAS side to the generated request on the UAC side, and SDP will also be modified.

An example of such a B2BUA would be a Session Border Controller performing the functions defined in [RFC5853], a B2BUA transcoder as defined in [RFC5370], a rich-ringtone Application Server, or a recording system. Another example would be an [RFC3323] Privacy Service Proxy performing the 'session' privacy function.

Note that a Media-plane B2BUA need not be instantiated in a single physical system, but may be decomposed into separate signaling and media functions.

The Media-plane B2BUA category is further subdivided into specific roles as described in this section.

3.2.1 Media-relay

A B2BUA which performs a media-relay role is one that terminates the media plane at the IP and UDP/TCP layers on its UAS and UAC sides, but neither modifies nor restricts which forms of UDP or TCP payload are carried within the UDP or TCP packets. Such a role may only support UDP or only TCP or both, as well as other transport types or not. Such a role may involve policing the IP packets to fit within a bandwidth limit, or converting from IPv4 to IPV6 or vice-versa. This is typically similar to a NAT behavior, except a NAT operating in both directions on both the source and destination information; it is often found as the default behavior in SBCs.

3.2.2 Media-aware

A B2BUA which performs a media-aware role is similar to a media-relay except that it inspects and potentially modifies the payload carried in UDP or TCP, such as RTP or RTCP, but not at a codec or higher layer. An example of such a role is an SRTP terminator, which does not need to care about the RTP payload but does care about the RTP header; or a device which monitors RTCP for QoS information; or a device which muxes/de-muxes RTP and RTCP packets on the same 5-tuple.

3.2.3 Media-termination

A B2BUA which performs a media-termination role is one that operates at the media payload layer, such as RTP/RTCP codec or MSRP message layer and higher. Such a role may only terminate/generate specific

RTP media, such as [RFC4733] DTMF packets, or it may convert between media codecs, or act as a Back-To-Back MSRP agent. This is the role performed by transcoders, conference servers, etc.

4. Mapping SIP Device Types to B2BUA Roles

Although the B2BUA role types defined previously do not define a system type, as discussed in section 3, some discussion of what common system types perform which defined roles may be appropriate. This section provides such a 'mapping' for general cases, to aid in understanding of the roles.

4.1. SIP PBXs and Softswitches

SIP-enabled Private Branch eXchanges (SIP PBXs) and Softswitches are market category terms, and not specified in any standard. In general they can perform every role described in this document at any given time, based on their architecture or local policy. Some are based on architectures that make them the equivalent of a SIP UAS and UAC connected with a logical PRI loopback; others are built as a SIP Proxy core with optional modules to "do more".

4.2. Application Servers

Application Servers are a broad marketing term, and not specified in any standard in general, although 3GPP and other organizations specify some specific Application Server functions and behaviors. Common examples of Application Servers functions are message-waiting indication, find-me-follow-me services, privacy services, call-center ACD services, call screening, and VCC services. Some only operate in the signaling plane in either Proxy-B2BUA or Signaling-only B2BUA roles; others operate as full Media-termination B2BUAs, such as when providing IVR, rich-ringtone or integrated voicemail services.

4.3. Session Border Controllers

Session Border Controllers (SBCs) are a market category term, and not specified in any standard. Some of the common functions performed by SBCs are described in [RFC5853], but in general they can perform every role described in this document at any given time, based on local policy. By default, most SBCs are either Media-relay or Media-aware B2BUAs, and replace the Contact URI, remove the Via and Record-Route headers, modify the Call-ID, To, From, and various other headers, and modify SDP. Some SBCs remove all headers, all bodies, and reject all Method types unless explicitly allowed by local policy; other SBCs pass all such elements through unless explicitly forbidden by local policy.

Transcoders perform the function of transcoding one audio or video media codec type to another, such as G.711 to G.729. As such they perform the Media-termination role, although they may only terminate media in specific cases of codec mismatch between the two ends. Although [RFC5369] and [RFC5370] define two types of SIP Transcoders, in practice a popular variant of the [RFC5370] inline model is to behave as a SIP B2BUA without using the resource-list mechanism, but rather simply route a normal INVITE request through an inline transcoder. SIP Transcoders architectures are based on everything from SIP media servers, to SBCs, to looped-back TDM gateways, and thus run the gamut from replacing only specific headers/bodies and SDP content needed to perform their function, to replacing almost all SIP headers and SDP content. Some transcoders save and remove SDP offers in INVITES form the UAC, and wait for an offer in the response from the UAS, similar to a 3PCC model; others just insert additional codecs in SDP offers and only transcode if the inserted codec(s) are selected in the answer.

4.5. Conference Servers

In general Conference Servers do not fall under the term 'B2BUA' as defined by this document, since typically they involve multiple SIP UACs initiating independent SIP sessions to the single conference server UAS. However, a conference server supporting [RFC5366], whereby the received INVITE triggers the conference focus UAS to initiate multiple INVITES as a UAC, would be in a Media-termination B2BUA role when performing that function.

4.6. P-CSCF and IBCF Functions

Proxy-CSCFs and IBCFs are functions defined by 3GPP IMS standards, and when coupled with the IMS media-plane gateways (IMS AGW, TrGW, etc.) typically form a logical Media-relay or Media-aware B2BUA role.

4.7. S-CSCF Function

S-CSCF is a function defined by 3GPP IMS standards, and typically follows a Proxy-B2BUA role.

5. Security Considerations

There are no security implications for this document, as it is only a taxonomy.

6. IANA Considerations

This document makes no request of IANA.

7. Acknowledgments

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