A Perspective on IoT: Utilizations, Obstacles, and Prospects Through a Chinese Lens

Sourabh D. Khanaj[1], Smita Darbastwar[2]

PG Scholar[1], Assistant Professor[2]

[1,2]*DKTE Society's Textile & Engineering Institute (An Empowered Autonomous Institute), Ichalkaranji*

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Abstract - This paper delves into the realm of the Internet of Things (IoT), which envisions a vast network encompassing billions or even trillions of interconnected "Things" communicating with one another. It addresses the array of technical and application hurdles confronting this burgeoning field. Specifically, it presents an overview of IoT development in China, encompassing governmental policies, research and development initiatives, practical applications, and standardization efforts. From the Chinese perspective, the paper outlines challenges related to technology, application implementation, and standardization, proposing an inclusive and adaptable IoT architecture comprising three platforms to tackle these challenges. Furthermore, it discusses the potential and prospects of IoT.

Index terms - Internet of Things (IoT), IoT applications, IoT architecture, IoT challenges, and IoT standardization.

I. Introduction:

The Internet of Things (IoT) represents a significant technological and economic phenomenon in the global information industry, following in the footsteps of the Internet. IoT constitutes an intelligent network that interlinks various entities with the Internet, facilitating the exchange of information and communication through information-sensing devices operating under agreed protocols. Its objective is to enable intelligent identification, localization, tracking, monitoring, and management of entities. Essentially, IoT extends and broadens the scope of Internet-based networks, expanding communication channels from human-to-human and human-to-things to encompass interactions between things themselves. Within the IoT paradigm, numerous objects in our surroundings will be connected in diverse configurations, with technologies such as RF identification (RFID), sensor technology, and other smart technologies integrated into various applications.

II. Opportunity, Status, and Capability of IoT

A. Potential of IoT

The advent of the Internet of Things (IoT) promises to establish an extensive network linking billions or even trillions of interconnected "Things" engaged in communication. Unlike a disruptive revolution, IoT represents the comprehensive utilization of existing technologies, fostering the creation of novel communication paradigms. It amalgamates the virtual and physical realms by integrating diverse concepts and technical components, including pervasive networks, device miniaturization, mobile communication, and new ecosystems. In IoT, various elements such as applications, services, middleware components, networks, and end nodes will undergo structural reorganization, enabling entirely new modes of utilization. IoT provides a lens to explore intricate processes and relationships, facilitating a symbiotic interaction between the real/physical and the digital/virtual worlds. Physical entities acquire digital counterparts and virtual representations, becoming context-aware and capable of sensing, communicating, interacting, and exchanging data, information, and knowledge. This convergence presents new avenues for addressing business requirements and spawning real-time physical world-based services. Essentially, IoT envisions a connected environment where everything, whether physical or virtual, can potentially be linked. The connectivity among entities should be universally accessible at low cost and may not be confined to private entities. For IoT to flourish, essential requirements include intelligent learning, swift deployment, robust information comprehension and interpretation, protection against fraud and malicious attacks, and privacy safeguards.

B. Current Status of IoT

IoT represents an extension of existing interactions between individuals and applications through the integration of a new dimension of "Things" for communication and integration. The developmental trajectory of IoT is characterized by a complex, large-scale technological innovation process. It is transitioning from vertical applications to polymeric applications, where domain-specific applications initially drive development. These applications, tailored to specific industries, integrate various enterprise management services with industry production and business processes. Polymeric applications, on the other hand, are cross-industry applications facilitated by public information service platforms. These applications cater to both home and industrial users and are promoted by communication operators and solution providers on a large scale. For instance, vehicles equipped with sensor networks, GPS, and radio communication technology can offer comprehensive detection, navigation, entertainment, and information services. By leveraging public service platforms, stakeholders such as consumers, original equipment manufacturers, maintenance providers, and vehicle management agencies can share information and services to enhance vehicle design and fabrication processes throughout the vehicle lifecycle management.

C. Capability of IoT

In essence, IoT applications should possess the following capabilities:

1. Location Sensing and Sharing: IoT systems can collect location information from terminals and end nodes, enabling service provision based on this data. Location information encompasses geographical coordinates obtained from GPS, CellID, RFID, etc., as well as absolute or relative position information between entities. Typical applications include mobile asset tracking, fleet management, and traffic information systems.
2. Environment Sensing: IoT systems collect and process various environmental parameters such as temperature, humidity, noise, and pollution through locally or widely deployed terminals. Applications range from environmental and ecological monitoring to remote medical monitoring.
3. Remote Controlling: IoT systems can control terminals and execute functions based on application commands and collected information. Applications include appliance control and disaster recovery.
4. Ad Hoc Networking: IoT systems possess self-organizing networking capabilities to interoperate with the network/service layer, facilitating related services.
5. Secure Communication: IoT systems establish secure data transmission channels between application or service platforms and IoT terminals based on service requirements.

These capabilities enable a diverse range of IoT applications tailored to specific service requirements.

III. IoT in China

A. China's Drive for IoT Development

IoT research commenced in China in 1999, with IoT being recognized as a strategic emerging industry in the government's work report in March 2010. The state council's decision in November 2010 emphasized the promotion of IoT research and application demonstrations. In 2012, the Ministry of Industry and Information of China outlined the national 12th Five-Year Plan for IoT development (2011–2015), detailing development goals and strategies. To address emerging challenges and ensure long-term development, the State Council issued guidance on promoting IoT development in February 2013. This directive outlined development goals and strategies, leading to the establishment of a joint meeting and Expert Advisory Committee on IoT development. Subsequently, the 10 Special Development Action Plans for IoT were issued, covering areas such as top-layer design, standards development, technology development, and personnel training. As part of these action plans, a strategic alliance for industrial technology innovations of IoT was formed in October 2013.

B. Research and Development Plans

In China, the central government has allocated special funds for both demonstration and research projects to bolster the advancement of IoT. Around RMB 500 million was invested in IoT-related fields in 2011 alone, with two-thirds of these funds directed towards research and development as well as practical applications. Since 2011, these funds have supported 381 companies. Additionally, the Chinese government has initiated 22 major national IoT application demonstration projects since 2011, with an announcement from the China

National Development and Reform Commission in October 2013 outlining plans for national IoT pilot major application demonstrations from 2014 to 2016 in specific regions.

Regarding research and development, the China Ministry of Industry and Information Technology has launched numerous key technical research projects focusing on architectures and applications such as intelligent transport systems (ITS) and e-health as part of the "a new generation of mobile broadband project." Moreover, the China Ministry of Science and Technology has initiated various fundamental research projects for IoT under the framework of the 973 project (National Key Fundamental Research and Development Plan). Enterprises, universities, research institutions, and standard organizations all play crucial roles in the national-level R&D landscape of IoT in China, with enterprises focusing on operation and system development, universities and research institutions delving into key technology research, and standard organizations overseeing standardization efforts.

Presently, the IoT-related industry in China has achieved a basic formation, primarily concentrated in regions such as the Bohai Bay area, the Yangtze River Delta, the Pearl River Delta, and central and western regions.

C. Standardization

The IoT standard system encompasses various aspects including architecture, application requirements, communication protocols, identification, security, application data, information processing, and public service platforms. In China, standardization efforts began in 2010, led by organizations such as the China Communications Standards Association (CCSA) and the China Standardization Working Group on Sensor Networks (WGSN), among others. These organizations are driving the standardization process in China's IoT landscape.As part of the Special IoT Action Plans, standardization actions include building a comprehensive standard system, developing common standards, key technical standards, and urgent industry standards, actively participating in international standardization processes, conducting standard validations and services, and enhancing organizational structures. Additionally, many Chinese research institutions and enterprises are participating in international standardization efforts, such as in the M2M domain of the International Organization for Standardization/International Electrotechnical Commission (ISO/IEC), ITU Telecommunication Standardization Sector (ITU-T), and the 3rd Generation Partnership Project (3GPP). China holds a prominent position in various international standardization bodies related to IoT, contributing significantly to the development of global standards.

IV. OPEN AND GENERAL IOT ARCHITECTURE

A. Motivation and General Description

The prevailing IoT applications in China have often been domain-specific or application-specific, resulting in fragmented architectures unable to integrate data across different silos. These isolated solutions, employing private protocols, pose challenges in information sharing, technology integration, network management, and upgrades, thus impeding IoT development. To address this, an open and generic IoT architecture with open interfaces and resources is proposed to integrate multiple functions and resources into a larger system. Such an architecture aims to reduce total IoT costs and facilitate information sharing, featuring standard interfaces and protocols, open operating capabilities, scalability, and flexibility.

B. Open and General IoT Architecture

The China Communications Standards Association (CCSA) has introduced a reference model for IoT, comprising sensing, network, business, and application layers. Aligned with this model, an open and flexible architecture has been proposed, organized into three functional platforms: Sensing and Gateway Platform, Resource and Administration Platform, and Open Application Platform. These platforms facilitate modularization, interoperability, and flexibility, offering common capabilities for data processing, storage, security management, and application support. The architecture supports modular design, common interfaces, and open APIs, enabling easy deployment, distribution, and management of IoT applications.

V. TYPICAL APPLICATIONS AND DEPLOYMENT IN CHINA

A. Main Application Fields

IoT applications in China span nine fields, including domain-specific industries, smart agriculture, logistics, transportation, grid management, environmental protection, safety, healthcare, and smart homes. Major telecom operators, China Mobile, China Telecom, and China Unicom, have announced IoT development plans, emphasizing the importance of IoT in their strategies. These plans involve establishing IoT platforms, developing open cooperation platforms, and providing specific hardware communication modules. Moreover, the government plans to allocate special phone numbers dedicated to M2M communication, supporting the proliferation of IoT applications.

B. Deployment of Typical Applications

1) Smart City: The concept of smart cities, leveraging IoT, cloud computing, and big data analytics, aims to enhance information sharing and coordination within urban systems. Smart city development involves three stages: infrastructure construction, data-processing facility establishment, and service platform construction. Numerous smart city projects across China present significant opportunities for various industry players, including telecom OEMs, systems integrators, and data analytics/service providers.

2) Intelligent Transportation: With increasing traffic congestion in urban areas, China is investing heavily in intelligent transportation systems (ITS) to address these challenges. The Ministry of Transport aims to deploy ITS nationwide by 2020, with substantial investments projected over the next decade. IoT infrastructures play a crucial role in ITS, supporting technologies such as connected vehicles and vehicular networks to improve road safety and efficiency.

C. Deployment of Typical Industry Applications

1) Intelligent Coal Mine: Chinese regulations mandated the implementation of comprehensive safety systems in coal mines by 2013, incorporating pervasive sensing and IoT technologies. IoT applications in coal mines enable real-time monitoring of various parameters, enhancing safety and efficiency. Typical underground IoT systems integrate sensors, devices, and networks to improve operational effectiveness and decision-making.

2) Intelligent Oil Field: Intelligent oil fields leverage distributed systems and IoT technologies to enhance oil and gas production. These systems collect, analyze, and act upon real-time data to optimize operations, reduce costs, and increase yields. IoT subsystems support automatic data collection, remote monitoring, and predictive maintenance, contributing to improved production processes and decision-making.

VI. CHALLENGE AND PROSPECT OF IOT

A. Challenge of IoT

Despite its vast potential, IoT faces numerous challenges, including architectural complexity, technical heterogeneity, hardware limitations, privacy and security concerns, standardization issues, and business model uncertainties. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts across various stakeholders to develop flexible, interoperable, and secure IoT solutions.

B. Prospect of IoT

The future of IoT holds promise for interoperability, intelligence, and energy sustainability, driven by advancements in technology, standardization, and application experiences. Interoperability will enable seamless information exchange across diverse devices, industries, and regions, fostering global IoT ecosystems. Intelligent systems will leverage context awareness and interconnectivity to enhance business and social networking capabilities. Moreover, energy-efficient and self-sustainable IoT systems will play a crucial role in reducing environmental impact and ensuring long-term sustainability.

VII. CONCLUSION

IoT represents a convergence of technologies aimed at creating a smarter, interconnected world. Despite facing various challenges, the development of IoT continues to progress, driven by ongoing research, industry initiatives, and government support. By addressing architectural, technical, and operational challenges, and leveraging standards and collaborative efforts, IoT holds the potential to revolutionize industries and transform daily life, ultimately contributing to the advancement of information society and knowledge economy.

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