

# The Link Layer and LANs

In the previous two chapters, we learned that the network layer provides a communication service between *any* two network hosts. Between the two hosts, datagrams travel over a series of communication links, some wired and some wireless, starting at the source host, passing through a series of packet switches (switches and routers) and ending at the destination host. As we continue down the protocol stack, from the network layer to the link layer, we naturally wonder how packets are sent across the *individual links* that make up the end-to-end communication path. How are the network-layer datagrams encapsulated in the link-layer frames for transmission over a single link? Are different link-layer protocols used in the different links along the communication path? How are transmission conflicts in broadcast links resolved? Is there addressing at the link layer and, if so, how does the link-layer addressing operate with the network-layer addressing we learned about in Chapter 4? And what exactly is the difference between a switch and a router? We'll answer these and other important questions in this chapter.

In discussing the link layer, we'll see that there are two fundamentally different types of link-layer channels. The first type are broadcast channels, which connect multiple hosts in wireless LANs, in satellite networks, and in hybrid fiber-coaxial cable (HFC) access networks. Since many hosts are connected to the same broadcast communication channel, a so-called medium access protocol is needed to coordinate frame transmission. In some cases, a central controller may be used to coordinate

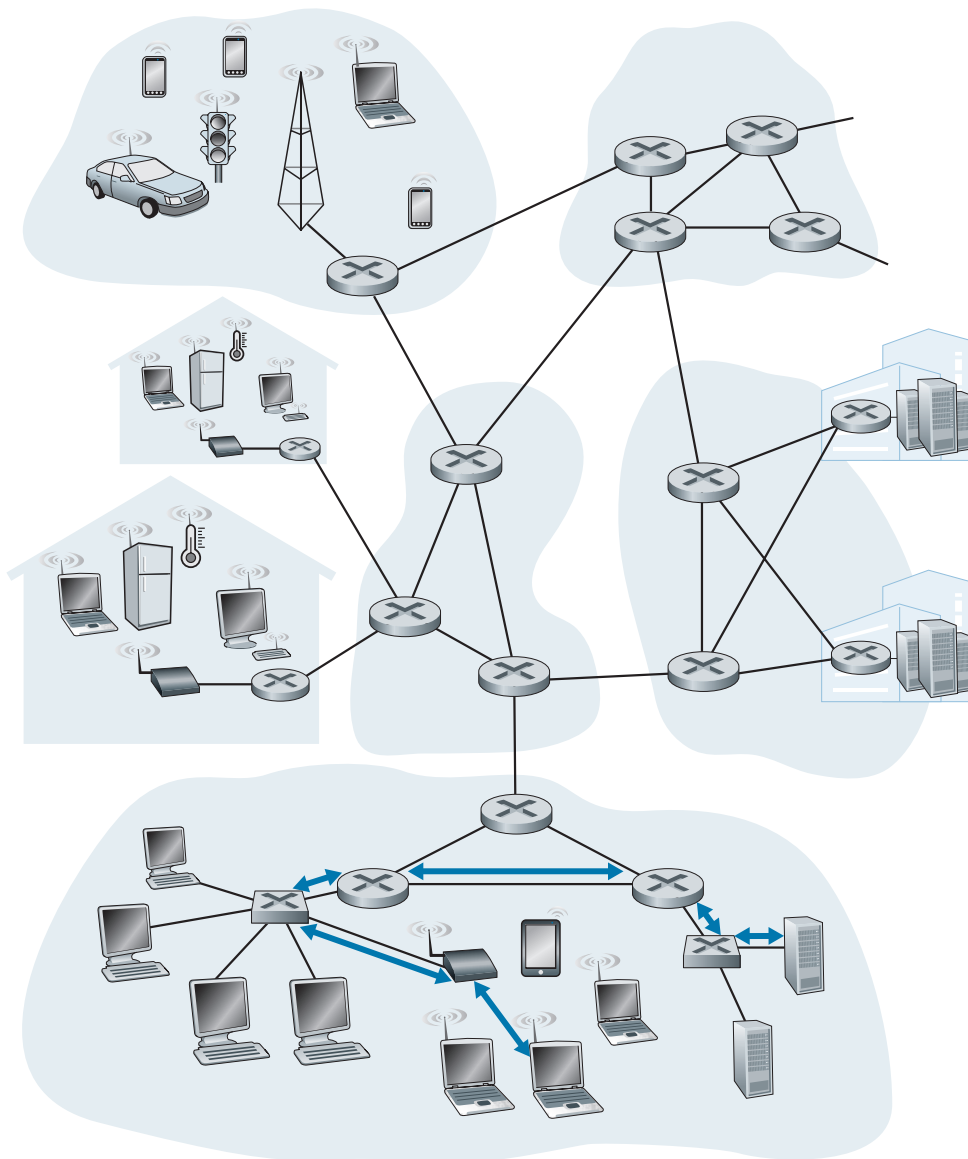
transmissions; in other cases, the hosts themselves coordinate transmissions. The second type of link-layer channel is the point-to-point communication link, such as that often found between two routers connected by a long-distance link, or between a user's office computer and the nearby Ethernet switch to which it is connected. Coordinating access to a point-to-point link is simpler; the reference material on this book's Web site has a detailed discussion of the Point-to-Point Protocol (PPP), which is used in settings ranging from dial-up service over a telephone line to high-speed point-to-point frame transport over fiber-optic links.

We'll explore several important link-layer concepts and technologies in this chapter. We'll dive deeper into error detection and correction, a topic we touched on briefly in Chapter 3. We'll consider multiple access networks and switched LANs, including Ethernet—by far the most prevalent wired LAN technology. We'll also look at virtual LANs, and data center networks. Although WiFi, and more generally wireless LANs, are link-layer topics, we'll postpone our study of these important topics until Chapter 7.

## 6.1 Introduction to the Link Layer

Let's begin with some important terminology. We'll find it convenient in this chapter to refer to any device that runs a link-layer (i.e., layer 2) protocol as a **node**. Nodes include hosts, routers, switches, and WiFi access points (discussed in Chapter 7). We will also refer to the communication channels that connect adjacent nodes along the communication path as **links**. In order for a datagram to be transferred from source host to destination host, it must be moved over each of the *individual links* in the end-to-end path. As an example, in the company network shown at the bottom of Figure 6.1, consider sending a datagram from one of the wireless hosts to one of the servers. This datagram will actually pass through six links: a WiFi link between sending host and WiFi access point, an Ethernet link between the access point and a link-layer switch; a link between the link-layer switch and the router, a link between the two routers; an Ethernet link between the router and a link-layer switch; and finally an Ethernet link between the switch and the server. Over a given link, a transmitting node encapsulates the datagram in a **link-layer frame** and transmits the frame into the link.

In order to gain further insight into the link layer and how it relates to the network layer, let's consider a transportation analogy. Consider a travel agent who is planning a trip for a tourist traveling from Princeton, New Jersey, to Lausanne, Switzerland. The travel agent decides that it is most convenient for the tourist to take a limousine from Princeton to JFK airport, then a plane from JFK airport to Geneva's airport, and finally a train from Geneva's airport to Lausanne's train station. Once



**Figure 6.1** ♦ Six link-layer hops between wireless host and server

the travel agent makes the three reservations, it is the responsibility of the Princeton limousine company to get the tourist from Princeton to JFK; it is the responsibility of the airline company to get the tourist from JFK to Geneva; and it is the responsibility of the Swiss train service to get the tourist from Geneva to Lausanne. Each of the three segments of the trip is “direct” between two “adjacent” locations. Note that the three transportation segments are managed by different companies and use entirely

different transportation modes (limousine, plane, and train). Although the transportation modes are different, they each provide the basic service of moving passengers from one location to an adjacent location. In this transportation analogy, the tourist is a datagram, each transportation segment is a link, the transportation mode is a link-layer protocol, and the travel agent is a routing protocol.

### 6.1.1 The Services Provided by the Link Layer

Although the basic service of any link layer is to move a datagram from one node to an adjacent node over a single communication link, the details of the provided service can vary from one link-layer protocol to the next. Possible services that can be offered by a link-layer protocol include:

- *Framing.* Almost all link-layer protocols encapsulate each network-layer datagram within a link-layer frame before transmission over the link. A frame consists of a data field, in which the network-layer datagram is inserted, and a number of header fields. The structure of the frame is specified by the link-layer protocol. We'll see several different frame formats when we examine specific link-layer protocols in the second half of this chapter.
- *Link access.* A medium access control (MAC) protocol specifies the rules by which a frame is transmitted onto the link. For point-to-point links that have a single sender at one end of the link and a single receiver at the other end of the link, the MAC protocol is simple (or nonexistent)—the sender can send a frame whenever the link is idle. The more interesting case is when multiple nodes share a single broadcast link—the so-called multiple access problem. Here, the MAC protocol serves to coordinate the frame transmissions of the many nodes.
- *Reliable delivery.* When a link-layer protocol provides reliable delivery service, it guarantees to move each network-layer datagram across the link without error. Recall that certain transport-layer protocols (such as TCP) also provide a reliable delivery service. Similar to a transport-layer reliable delivery service, a link-layer reliable delivery service can be achieved with acknowledgments and retransmissions (see Section 3.4). A link-layer reliable delivery service is often used for links that are prone to high error rates, such as a wireless link, with the goal of correcting an error locally—on the link where the error occurs—rather than forcing an end-to-end retransmission of the data by a transport- or application-layer protocol. However, link-layer reliable delivery can be considered an unnecessary overhead for low bit-error links, including fiber, coax, and many twisted-pair copper links. For this reason, many wired link-layer protocols do not provide a reliable delivery service.
- *Error detection and correction.* The link-layer hardware in a receiving node can incorrectly decide that a bit in a frame is zero when it was transmitted as

a one, and vice versa. Such bit errors are introduced by signal attenuation and electromagnetic noise. Because there is no need to forward a datagram that has an error, many link-layer protocols provide a mechanism to detect such bit errors. This is done by having the transmitting node include error-detection bits in the frame, and having the receiving node perform an error check. Recall from Chapters 3 and 4 that the Internet's transport layer and network layer also provide a limited form of error detection—the Internet checksum. Error detection in the link layer is usually more sophisticated and is implemented in hardware. Error correction is similar to error detection, except that a receiver not only detects when bit errors have occurred in the frame but also determines exactly where in the frame the errors have occurred (and then corrects these errors).

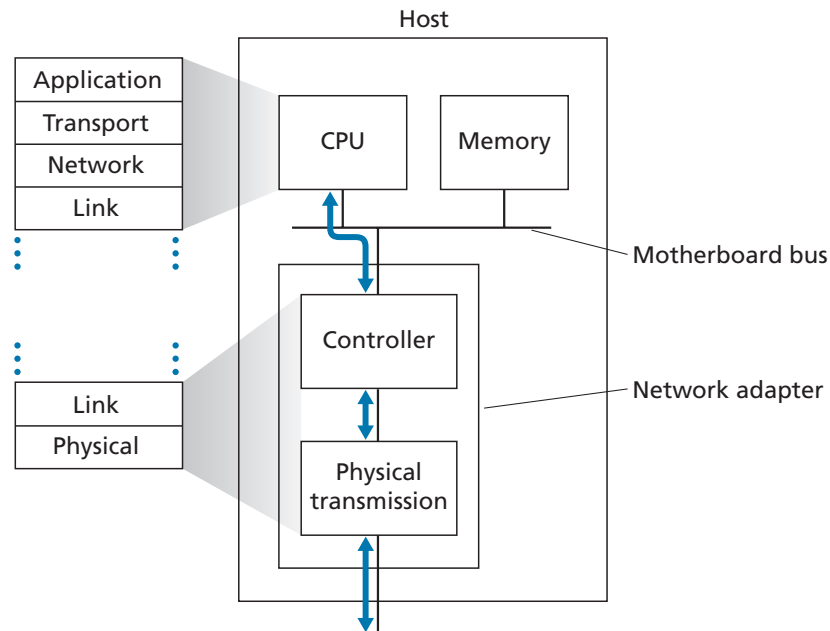
### 6.1.2 Where Is the Link Layer Implemented?

Before diving into our detailed study of the link layer, let's conclude this introduction by considering the question of where the link layer is implemented. Is a host's link layer implemented in hardware or software? Is it implemented on a separate card or chip, and how does it interface with the rest of a host's hardware and operating system components?

Figure 6.2 shows a typical host architecture. The Ethernet capabilities are either integrated into the motherboard chipset or implemented via a low-cost dedicated Ethernet chip. For the most part, the link layer is implemented on a chip called the **network adapter**, also sometimes known as a **network interface controller (NIC)**. The network adapter implements many link layer services including framing, link access, error detection, and so on. Thus, much of a link-layer controller's functionality is implemented in hardware. For example, Intel's 700 series adapters [Intel 2020] implements the Ethernet protocols we'll study in Section 6.5; the Atheros AR5006 [Atheros 2020] controller implements the 802.11 WiFi protocols we'll study in Chapter 7.

On the sending side, the controller takes a datagram that has been created and stored in host memory by the higher layers of the protocol stack, encapsulates the datagram in a link-layer frame (filling in the frame's various fields), and then transmits the frame into the communication link, following the link-access protocol. On the receiving side, a controller receives the entire frame, and extracts the network-layer datagram. If the link layer performs error detection, then it is the sending controller that sets the error-detection bits in the frame header and it is the receiving controller that performs error detection.

Figure 6.2 shows that while most of the link layer is implemented in hardware, part of the link layer is implemented in software that runs on the host's CPU. The software components of the link layer implement higher-level link-layer functionality such as assembling link-layer addressing information and activating the



**Figure 6.2** ♦ Network adapter: Its relationship to other host components and to protocol stack functionality

controller hardware. On the receiving side, link-layer software responds to controller interrupts (for example, due to the receipt of one or more frames), handling error conditions and passing a datagram up to the network layer. Thus, the link layer is a combination of hardware and software—the place in the protocol stack where software meets hardware. [Intel 2020] provides a readable overview (as well as a detailed description) of the XL710 controller from a software-programming point of view.

## 6.2 Error-Detection and -Correction Techniques

In the previous section, we noted that **bit-level error detection and correction**—detecting and correcting the corruption of bits in a link-layer frame sent from one node to another physically connected neighboring node—are two services often provided by the link layer. We saw in Chapter 3 that error-detection and -correction services are also often offered at the transport layer as well. In this section, we’ll examine a few of the simplest techniques that can be used to detect and, in some