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Improving LoRa Network Capacity Using Multiple Spreading Factor Configurations

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Abstract—LoRa networks enable long range communications for Internet of Things (IoT) applications. The current LoRa technology provides a wide range of communication settings whereas many combination settings are orthogonal and, thus, they can be successfully decoded at the gateway when the signals are transmitted simultaneously. Previous simulation results showed that the LoRa network capacity can be improved when multiple communication parameters are applied. In this paper, we model a LoRa network consisting of nodes with different communication settings in terms of bandwidth and spreading factor. We compute the average success probability per configuration as a function of density taking into account both intra and inter-spreading factor collisions. We, also, formulate and solve an optimization problem to maximize the node capacity for a given deployment area and frequency by optimizing the number of nodes having different spreading factor configurations. We present numerical results and we show that solutions close to the optimal can increase the maximum number of nodes by more than 700% compared to case where equal number of users per spreading factor are considered.

I. INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade there has been essential interest in designing and deploying IoT applications, with business sectors ranging from smart building and city to smart metering and grid, where low cost and easily deployed IoT devices can provide significant benefits. The IoT technologies are viewed as a cheap and efficient mean for monitoring applications, such as infrastructure monitoring, air quality monitoring or parking in dense urban areas. A shared access network may be the key for new service deployment, where a common infrastructure may be used by different service providers to create new IoT services.

Low-Power Wide-Area Networks (LPWAN) are currently investigated worldwide to allow for low-power operation across a large geographic area. As a result, the interest of the industry, such as Long Range (LoRa) [1], Sigfox [2], RPMA [3] and Weightless [4], towards the LPWAN is gradually increasing. For instance, Sigfox, that operates both as LPWAN technology and as service provider, today covers fourteen countries of Europe1. A typical application is the collection of meter readings in a certain geographical area (e.g., city). LPWANs are employed to setup a start network where leaf devices transmit their measurements in 1-hop to a more powerful receiver (i.e., sink or gateway) which then relay the data over an a priori deployed infrastructure to a data collection center.

LoRa is a proprietary spread spectrum modulation technique made by Semtech [1] and is one of the most promising technologies of LPWAN. LoRa is a Layer 1 Network Protocol usually operating on sub-1 GHz spectrum, in 433 MHz, 866 MHz, 915 MHz frequency bands, while it is agnostic to the used frequency. These frequency bands are unlicensed, which makes the LoRa adoption very straightforward for cities or IoT operators. However, LPWAN’s based on LoRa technology still need to be better understood. Previous studies focused on understanding the capacity limits of LoRa networks [5], [6], [7]. Simulation results showed that the LoRa network capacity can be improved when dynamic communication parameters, in terms of bandwidth and spreading factors, are applied. Even if dynamic communication parameters require a centralized entity or a protocol to determine and maintain the nodes settings, a study of such LoRa networks can give some insights on the maximum capabilities of LoRa technology.

In this paper, we model LoRa networks consisting of nodes operating with different combination settings in terms of frequency and spreading factor. For each frequency and for a given deployment distance we are looking for the largest possible number of nodes we could serve with sufficient average success probability. To achieve this, we optimize the portion of nodes of each spreading factor so that the total number of nodes is maximized.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section II reviews the most pertinent related works from the literature. Section III provides some necessary background for LoRa technology. Section IV presents our model for networks with multiple configurations and the optimization model. In Section V we present numerical results obtained by solving the optimization model. Finally, Section VI concludes the paper and lists future perspectives.

II. RELATED WORK

Raza et al. [8] present the five key challenges for LPWAN and compare proprietary and standard technologies, including LoRa, Sigfox, 802.15.4g or Dash7 to cite a few. These challenges are ultra low-power operation and long range communication, since it is expected to cover wide areas for several years. To this aim, 1-hop networks and duty cycling are employed. Low cost is also another challenge for LPWAN. Finally, scalability and quality of service are also challenges given the expected number of connected objects, and the variety of expected services.

1http://www.sigfox.com/en/coverage
to find the optimal mix of nodes with different configurations that maximize the density and do not violate a minimum average success probability.

III. LoRa Preliminaries

A. LoRa Technology

LoRa is a long-range wireless communication technology, promoted by the LoRa Alliance. At its core, LoRa typically refers to the i) physical layer: using the Chirp Spread Spectrum (CSS) with integrated Forward Error Correction (FEC); and the ii) MAC layer: the LoRaWAN protocol which operates in a simple star topology and is currently the only available LoRa MAC protocol. A LoRa gateway (sink), such that of Semtech SX1301\(^2\), can receive 8 to 10 concurrent signals with the same carrier frequency as long as these signals are orthogonal (i.e. as they are using different spreading factor settings).

B. Configurable Transmission Parameters

A LoRa radio comes with five different configuration parameters: i) Transmission Power (TP): the TP on LoRa can be configured from $-4d\text{dBm}$ to $20d\text{dBm}$. Note that European regulations limit the TP to $14d\text{dBm}$ (except of the 869.4-869.65 band which has a 500 mW limit). ii) Carrier Frequency (CF): typically, LoRa may operate on sub-1GHz and, thus, can be set between 137MHz and 1020MHz, note that CF is the center frequency with steps of 61Hz. iii) Bandwidth (BW): in LoRa the frequencies width can be configured between 7.8kHz to 500kHz, however, the most popular options are 500kHz, 250kHz and 125kHz. Note that higher BW values allow higher data rates and, thus, shorter airtime. On the other hand, lower BW values allow higher sensitivity, but with lower data rate. Very low BWs (i.e., below 62.5kHz) require a temperature compensated crystal oscillator. iv) Coding Rate (CR): LoRa employs Forward Error Correction (FEC) to overcome the potential interferences, thus, the CR is the FEC rate (i.e., 4/5, 4/6, 4/7 and 4/8). The higher the CR, the more robust the transmission, at the cost of the increased air time. v) Spreading Factor (SF): SF defines the number of chirps per symbol. SF can be configured from 6 to 12. The higher the SF, the higher the receiver sensitivity which allows longer communication ranges but, also, higher packet airtime. The radio communications under different SF are orthogonal to each other and, thus, the network separation by employing different SF is possible [7], [5].

C. Conditions for obtaining a Collision

In LoRa networks, when two or more concurrent transmissions arrive at the receiver, we may observe a collision under certain conditions [5]. More specifically, the two transmissions: i) should overlap in arrival time, ii) should overlap in Carrier Frequency, otherwise the gateway may decode both transmissions (i.e., if it is listening at both carrier frequencies), iii) should overlap in Spreading Factors, since the SF are orthogonal in LoRa, the receiver may decode if it receives at

different SFs, iv) if the difference in received signal strength is negligible, then the receiver is not able to decode efficiently either transmission. v) Finally, in LoRa, we may observe the capture effect, when two transmissions arrive at the gateway and the weaker signal is suppressed by the stronger.

IV. LORA SCALABILITY MODEL

A. Preliminaries

Let us assume that $k$ packets are sent in a period of time $\tau$ and $T_{pktx}$ is the transmission time given by the following equation [13]:

$$T_{pktx} = (n_p + 4.25)\frac{s_f p}{BW} + \left(8 + \max(\text{ceil}(\frac{8PL-4SF^2+28+16.20H}{4SF-2DE})(CR + 4), 0)\right)\frac{s_f p}{BW},$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

where $n_p$ is the number of programmed preamble symbols, $PL$ is the packet payload, $H = 0$ when the header is enabled and $H = 1$ when no header is present. $DE = 1$ when the low data rate optimization is enabled and $DE = 0$ for disabled.

Moreover, a signal can be decoded at the gateway only when its power ($P_{rx}$) is higher than a transceiver sensitivity ($S_{SF,BW}$) as defined by the corresponding combination of spreading factor – bandwidth:

$$P_{rx} > S_{SF,BW},$$  \hspace{1cm} (2)

where $P_{rx}$ is given by the following formula:

$$P_{rx} = P_{tx} + G - L - L_{pl},$$  \hspace{1cm} (3)

$P_{tx}$ is the transmission power, $G$ is the antenna power gains and $L$ is the power losses at the transmitter. $L_{pl}$ describes the attenuation of the signal in relation with the distance $d$:

$$L_{pl} = L_{d_0} + 10\gamma \ln \frac{d}{d_0} - X_{\sigma},$$  \hspace{1cm} (4)

$L_{d_0}$ is the received power at reference distance $d_0$, $\gamma$ is the path-loss factor, and $X_{\sigma}$ is the variance.

B. Success probability

Our goal in this section is to express the maximum user density a gateway can cover with a given frequency, assuming that users are distributed uniformly over the disk of radius $d$ centered at the gateway. We consider that nodes with multiple SF (operating at the same frequency) may be placed in this disk. We take into account both intra and inter-SF eventual collisions caused by transmissions using the same SF or frequency. We model intra and inter-SF collisions using the following rules:

1) Intra-SF collisions: a collision occurs between two LoRa frames with the same SF and frequency. In this case, only the LoRa frame with the highest power can be decoded and its power at the gateway exceeds the other one minus 6dB.

2) Inter-SF collisions: a collision occurs between two LoRa frames with the same frequency and different SF. In this case, the first frame is demodulated if the received power of the first minus the received power of the second is higher than the Signal-to-Interference-plus-Noise Ratio (SINR) of the first one (see Table I).

We treat the LoRa layer as a protocol without retransmissions and we assume that the nodes emit packets independently of each other and of their location with an individual intensity $\theta = k/\tau$.

We denote by $D$ the density of nodes in the disk, so that, assuming $D$ large enough:

- the total number of nodes $N$ for the given frequency is $D\pi d^2$;
- the transmissions from nodes within a distance $\leq d$ from the gateway follow a Poisson distribution with rate $\theta D\pi d^2$.

In the rest of this section, we only consider a single SF/BW configuration. Now, let us consider a node at distance $x$ from the gateway, emitting a message. The emission is successful if no other node’s emission overlaps with the current emission and no intra or inter-SF collisions happen. Considering fixed environmental conditions and all nodes have the same transmission parameters, only the distance counts, so using Eq. (3, 4) the potential intra-SF interferers are those whose distance from the gateway is below $xR$ with $R := \sqrt{\frac{d^2}{\gamma}} > 1$. The number of potential interferers depends on the number of nodes with the same SF and BW. We denote with $\alpha_i$ the percentage of nodes in $N$ having SF equal to $SF_i$, $i \in [7, 12]$. It holds that $\sum_{i=7}^{12} \alpha_i = 1$. We, also, denote with $D_i$ the density of the nodes having SF equal to $SF_i$, with $D_i = \frac{\alpha_i}{\theta D\pi}$. We denote with $\epsilon$ the success probability.

On the other hand, the amount of nodes with the same SF, may interfere with nodes having different SF but transmitting in the same frequency. Following the second collision rule and using Eq. (3, 4) the potential inter-SF interferers are those whose distance from the gateway is below $xQ$ with $Q := \frac{1}{\theta D\pi}$, where $SINR_i$ is the corresponding SINR of transmissions conducted using $SF_i$.

Summarizing, the number of potential interferers is $D_i \pi (Rx)^2 + D\pi (Qx)^2$, and the probability of successful transmission $P_{success}(x)$ is therefore the probability that within a vulnerability period of duration $2T_{pktx}$, none of those potential interfering nodes starts a transmission. We, hence, have

$$P_{success}(x) := e^{-2T_{pktx} \theta(D_i \pi (Rx)^2 + D\pi (Qx)^2)}$$  \hspace{1cm} (5)

It is easy to observe that when $x \to 0$, $P_{success} \to 1$ (best case scenario), while the worst case scenario appears when $x \to d$.

Finally, we compute the average success probability among nodes. Note that some nodes will have a success probability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SF</th>
<th>Min SINR (dB)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>-11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>-16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>-19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
below the average, but we expect that because of a potential node mobility, that success probability will evolve over time so that the individual time-average equals the average among nodes. With a uniform distribution of nodes over the disk with density $D$, the infinitesimal number of users having a spreading factor $i$ within distance $[x, x + dx]$ from the gateway is $2\pi D \pi x^2 dx$, so that the average success probability among all nodes in the disk is given by the following equation:

$$P_{\text{avg}} := \frac{1}{D_\pi \pi d} \int_0^d 2\pi D \pi P_{\text{success}}(x) dx$$

$$= e^{-2T_p k \theta \pi d^2 (D, R^2 + DQ^2)} \left[ -2T_p k \theta \pi d^2 (D, R^2 + DQ^2) \right]$$

$$\text{(6)}$$

Given $\alpha_i$, finding the maximum density $D$ such that $P_{\text{avg}}$ is above a threshold looks intractable analytically, but can easily be done numerically.

C. Optimal capacity settings

In this subsection we formulate a capacity maximization problem for a given frequency (i.e., BW), deployment distance $d$, and packet rate (i.e., $\theta$) as a function of a minimum achievable average success probability $P_{\text{min}}$. The problem is transformed to a problem of finding the optimal percentage of nodes for each SF (i.e., $\alpha_i$) such that the density of the nodes having the same frequency is maximized.

$$\max N$$

$$\text{s.t.} \quad e^{-2T_p k \theta \pi d^2 (D, R^2 + DQ^2)} \left[ -2T_p k \theta \pi d^2 (D, R^2 + DQ^2) \right]$$

$$P_{\text{min}} \forall i \in [7, 12]$$

$$T_p k \theta$$ by Eq. (1),

$$R = \frac{n}{\pi d^2}$$

$$Q = \frac{\sin(n \pi \alpha_i)}{n \pi \alpha_i}, \forall i \in [7, 12]$$

$$D_i = \frac{\alpha_i N}{\pi d^2}$$

$$D = \frac{N}{\pi d^2}$$

$$\alpha_i \in [0, \chi, 2\chi, ..., 1], \forall i \in [7, 12]$$

$$0 \leq \chi \leq 1, \chi \in \mathcal{R}$$

$$\sum_{i=7}^{12} \alpha_i = 1.$$

Note that the optimal solution can be approximated by considering discrete values for all $\alpha_i$’s. The smaller the step $\chi$ between two concurrent values, the better the approximation.

V. PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

A. LoRa and network configuration

To evaluate the proposed model we used LoRa and network parameters as they appear in Table II [5]. We assume that all the nodes are placed within the given distance limits and are positioned around a single gateway. The evaluation was conducted using a set of Python scripts that implement Eq. (5) and (6). We also solve the optimization problem of (7) using exhaustive search and considering $\chi=0.01$ for all $\alpha$ values. A minimum success probability of 0.9 and a maximum deployment distance of 100m were also considered. This distance was chosen so that all the nodes regardless their SF settings will be able to reach the gateway.

B. Numerical results

Table III presents the best $\alpha$ values for different bandwidth frequencies and packet rates. The results show that for all the cases the capacity is maximized when the following combination of SF happens: $\alpha_1 = 0.77$, $\alpha_8 = 0.23$, and $\alpha_9 = \alpha_{10} = \alpha_{11} = \alpha_{12} = 0$. This means that only a mix of nodes having SF=7 and SF=8 provides the best result.

Figures 1, 2 and 3 illustrate the maximum number of users per BW and packet rate. An equal number of $\alpha$ was used in the first figure (thus equal numbers of users per SF), while in the second figure the algorithm includes only nodes with SF=7. Finally, the values of Table III were used in the second figure. The results show that considering close to optimal settings the potential number of users can be increased by up to 705% and up to 16% for the cases of Figure 1 and 2 respectively. Indeed, on one hand, by increasing the number of users having higher SFs, the time on air (i.e., $T_p k \theta$) increases significantly and, thus, there is a higher probability of intra and inter-SF collisions. On the other hand, the number of intra-SF collisions may be also high if a high number of nodes with the same SF is deployed.

VI. CONCLUSION & FUTURE WORK

In this paper we modeled a LoRa network comprised from nodes with variable spreading factor and frequency combinations. Considering both intra and inter-SF collisions, we modeled the packet generation process of each combination as a Poisson process and we computed the average packet success probability. We, also, formulated a capacity optimization problem for a given circular deployment area and a minimum allowed probability of successful packet delivery. We solved this problem with a good approximation taking into account different populations and maximum packet rate for each of the
available SF/BW configurations. Our numerical results showed that the number of LoRa users using close to optimal settings can be increased by more than 700% compared to the case where equal node populations per SF are considered or up to 16% compared to the case where only nodes with the minimum possible packet air time are deployed.

Part of our future work is to find optimal node distributions within each SF/BW configuration, discarding the current uniform node placement assumption. Optimizing the nodes’ density, their number in the system can be further maximized.

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