Self-Organisation in Future Mobile Communication Networks

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Abstract: A vision is presented regarding the use of self-organisation methods (self-optimisation, self-configuration, self-healing) as a promising opportunity to automate wireless access network planning and optimisation. Key objectives are a substantial reduction of the operational expenditure and an enhancement of network coverage, resource utilisation and service quality. The fundamental drivers for the deployment of self-organisation methods are discussed, considering both the technology and the market perspective. The distinction and interactions between the different components of self-organisation are outlined and the expected gains are discussed. An overview of the current state of the art in this field is followed by a formulation of the main challenges in the development of effective and reliable methods for self-organisation.

Keywords: Self-organisation, self-management, self-optimisation, self-configuration, self-healing, future cellular networks, network planning, radio resource management.

1. Introduction

Future wireless access networks will exhibit a significant degree of self-organisation, as also recognised by standardisation body 3rd Generation Partnership Project (3GPP) [1] and operators lobby Next Generation Mobile Networks (NGMN) [2]. The principal objectives of introducing self-organisation into wireless access networks are *(i)* to achieve substantial operational and capital expenditure (O/CAPEX) reductions by diminishing human involvement in network operational tasks; and *(ii)* to optimise network capacity, coverage and service quality. The general idea is to integrate network planning, configuration, and optimisation into a single, mostly automated process requiring minimal manual intervention.

The goal of this paper is to present a vision regarding the use of self-organisation methods, comprising self-optimisation, self-configuration and self-healing, as a promising opportunity to automate wireless access network planning and operation. In general, self-organisation of wireless access networks requires involvement of different elements in a mobile communications network. The wireless access network itself is where the functionality to be self-organised is located, while the network management system manages the operations and maintenance of a network [23]. In this paper, the focus is on the wireless access network.

In the next section, we discuss the key drivers for the development of self-organisation methods, covering both the technological and market perspectives. Subsequently, in Section 3 we formulate a vision about future self-organising wireless access networks and describe the relations between the self-optimisation, self-configuration and self-healing components. Section 4 then describes and illustrates the expected gains in terms of O/CAPEX reductions and performance enhancement. An overview of the state of the art is given in Section 5, followed by a discussion of the key challenges in the development of methods for self-organisation in Section 6. The paper ends with some concluding remarks.

2. Drivers

The need for self-organisation and hence the on-going developments in this field within e.g. 3GPP, NGMN, and several (inter)national R&D projects, are driven by a number of technological and market developments.

On the *technological* side, the complexity of large scale contemporary/future radio access technologies imposes significant operational challenges, primarily due to the multitude of tuneable parameters and the intricate dependencies among them. Although this complexity is unavoidable when providing the desired potential and flexibility to offer diverse services with enhanced resource efficiency and quality, it aggravates the network operations. The great multitude of sites/cells required to provide coverage with future high-frequency technologies, and the coexistence and coordinated exploitation of (cooperative) multiple heterogeneous access networks complicate this task even more. Due to these technological complexities, currently the key operational tasks of radio network planning and optimisation are largely separated tasks. Intrinsic shortcomings of methodologies currently applied for these tasks include *(i)* the 'over-abstraction' of access technologies for network planning purposes; *(ii)* the consideration of performance indicators that are of limited relevance to the end user's service perception; *(iii)* the time-intensive experiments with limited operational scope (confined to a limited area and/or a subset of radio parameters/mechanisms); and *(iv)* delayed, manual and poor handling of cell/site failures. As such, the current approaches can certainly benefit from advanced solutions that reduce labour-intensity (operational expenditure) and enhance network performance as well. At the same time, the increasing technical capabilities of both base stations and user terminals to perform, store, process, and act upon measurements increases sharply. This is a key enabler to support self-organisation objectives.

On the *market* side, the ever increasing demand for and diversity of offered services, each with their own traffic characteristics and high service quality requirements, and the need to reduce the time to market of innovative services, further add to the operational complexity. A final market-oriented driver is the pressure to remain competitive by effectuating cost reductions, eventually enabling lower prices.

As a bottom line, the introduction of self-organisation in the wireless access network, offers a great potential for network operators to reduce operational (and hardware) costs and enhance resource efficiency, for users to experience high quality services with enhanced availability and at lower prices, and for service providers to introduce new services more swiftly and with fewer operational hurdles.

3. Vision

In our vision, which is in line with the views of 3GPP [1] and the NGMN group [2], future networks will require minimal human involvement in the network planning and optimisation tasks. Newly added base stations are self-configured in a 'plug-and-play' fashion, while existing base stations continuously self-optimise their operational algorithms and parameters in response to changes in network, traffic and environmental conditions. The adaptations are performed in order to provide the targeted service availability and quality as efficiently as possible. In the event of a cell or site failure, self-healing methods are triggered to resolve the resulting coverage/capacity gap to the extent possible. The envisioned operational process applied in self-organising radio access networks and the distinct components of self-organisation are illustrated by Figure 1.

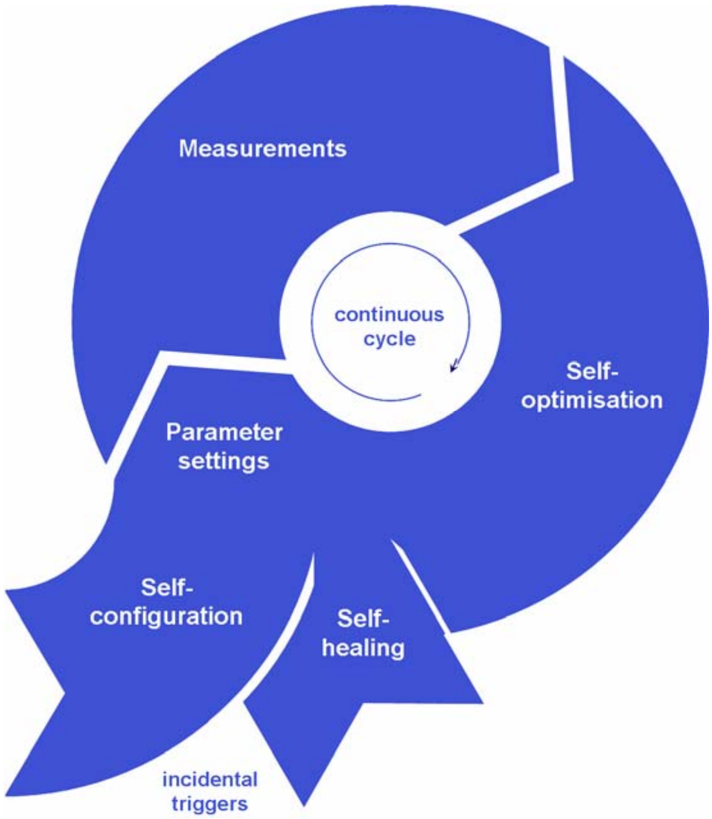

Figure 1: Self-organisation in future radio access networks.

Let us consider a fully configured and operational radio access network and, somewhat arbitrarily, start at the depicted *'measurements'* phase. This phase indicates a continuous activity where a multitude of measurements are collected via various sources, including network counters and probes. These raw measurements of e.g. radio channel characteristics, traffic and user mobility aspects, are processed in order to provide relevant information for the various related self-optimisation tasks. The required format, accuracy and periodicity of the delivered information depend on the specific mechanism that is to be self-optimised. In the *'self-optimisation'* phase intelligent methods apply the processed measurements to derive an updated set of radio (resource management) parameters, including e.g. antenna parameters (tilt, azimuth), power settings (incl. pilot, control and traffic channels), neighbour lists (cell IDs and associated weights), and a range of radio resource management parameters (admission/congestion/handover control and packet scheduling). In case the self-optimisation methods appear to be incapable to meet the performance objectives, capacity expansion is indispensable and timely triggers with accompanying suggestions for human intervention are delivered, e.g. in terms of a recommended location for a new site.

The *'self-configuration'* phase, depicted as an external arm reaching into the continuous self-optimisation cycle, is triggered by 'incidental events' of an 'intentional nature'. Examples are the addition of a new site and the introduction of a service or a new network feature. These upgrades generally require an initial (re)configuration of a number of radio parameters or resource management algorithms, e.g. pilot powers and neighbour lists. These have to be set prior to operations and before they can be optimised as part of the continuous self-optimisation process. Triggered by 'incidental events' of a 'non-intentional nature', such as the failure of a cell or site, *'self-healing'* methods aim to resolve the loss of coverage/capacity induced by such events to the extent possible. This is done by appropriately adjusting the parameters and algorithms in surrounding cells. Once the actual failure has been repaired, all parameters are restored to their original settings.

The degree of self-organisation that is deployed determines the residual tasks that remain for network operators. In an ideal case, the operator merely needs to feed the self-organisation methods with a number of policy aspects, e.g. its desired balance in the apparent trade-offs that exist between the conflicting coverage, capacity, quality and cost targets. The self-organisation methods then feed the operator with *(i)* timely triggers for capacity expansion in the form of new sites, intelligently suggesting a good location, or other hardware issues e.g. new channel boards, a more powerful amplifier, a change in mechanical tilt (note that electrical tilt can be done automatically); and *(ii)* immediate alarms in case of network element failures. Until (if ever) such an ideal setting is achieved, we foresee a gradual introduction of self-organisation in radio access networks, characterised by different incremental upgrades which are implemented and monitored. This way, the implemented measures can be adequately assessed; the impact of potential 'teething troubles' can be limited and the operators' confidence to hand over its control to automated algorithms increases.

4. Expected Gains

The key operational gains from employing self-organisation in wireless access networks are in the form of O/CAPEX reductions and performance enhancements.

The primary anticipated *OPEX reductions* are expected by reducing human involvement in the areas of drive testing, network planning, monitoring and optimisation. For example, drive tests are currently performed to check the performance of the network. This labour-intensive task can be replaced by measurements from user terminals and base stations. Using measurements from user terminals also has the advantage that measurements are obtained from additional locations, such as inside buildings. The manual effort involved in network planning, configuration, monitoring and optimisation is currently very large, also considering the network size and interrelationships between different network types and generations that need to be considered. The application of self-organisation methods can reduce this effort significantly. The foreseen large-scale deployment of femto-cells to move substantial amounts of traffic away from the expensive macro-cellular network layer, results in a far greater number of nodes introduced in future networks and requires that some key integration issues with the macro layer are resolved, e.g. by means of self-organisation [3]. With regard to network monitoring, if a network or cell is not performing as desired, considerable manual effort is invested to identify the problem.

To give an indication of the potential for OPEX savings, it was recently noted in [4] that as much as 25% of OPEX is related to costs for network operations and maintenance (with remainder spent e.g. on marketing & sales, customer care and interconnection/roaming). For an operator such as Vodafone UK, this amounts to about €1250 million [5].

Besides these key advantages related to OPEX reductions, the application of self-organisation also enhances *network performance* and the experienced *service quality*, by better and faster adapting to specific characteristics and requirements. As will be illustrated, such performance enhancements may be exploited to achieve *CAPEX reductions* (even if the self-organising network elements themselves may be more costly). Associated improvements can be expected in different areas. For instance, by optimally tuning radio (resource management) parameters to the actual traffic, mobility and propagation conditions, the network capacity is maximised and an optimal number of sessions can be served at the desired service quality level. Regarding coverage provisioning, it is noted to be traditionally hard for network operators to provide adequate coverage for high data rate applications at indoor locations such as home and offices. Furthermore, the use of self-configuration techniques enable operators to install new (femto/micro/macro-)sites and technological features swiftly with near-immediate operation, which speeds up upgrades and extensions, while still ensuring network reliability.

Figure 2 (top) illustrates the performance enhancement that is due to self-optimisation: as the traffic load grows over time, a network applying self-optimisation techniques manages to deliver better service quality than a network not utilising self-optimisation. Given a minimum target on the experienced service quality, the use of self-optimisation consequently allows for a delayed investment for additional network capacity (e.g. additional sites), which effectively is a CAPEX reduction. Figure 2 (bottom) illustrates the performance gains from self-healing: in case of e.g. a site failure, surrounding sites quickly identify this failure and adjust their radio parameters in order to limit the locally experienced performance degradation. At the same time, a trigger is automatically generated to request manual repairs.

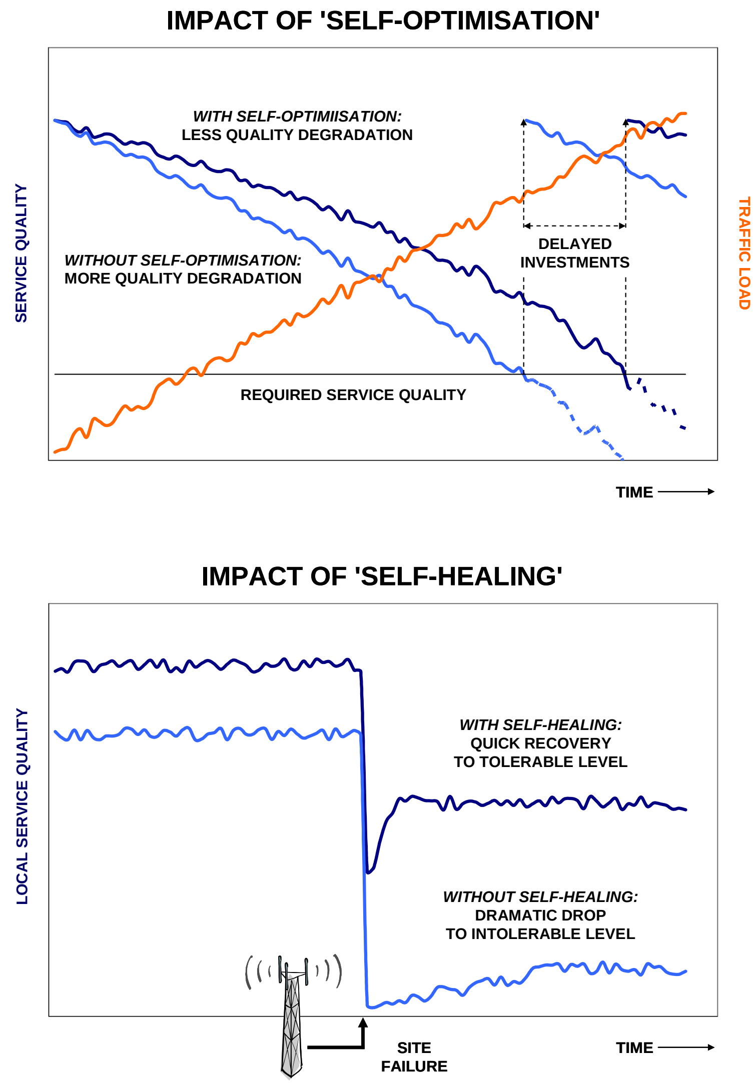

Figure 2: Network investments may be postponed as a result of self-optimisation (top figure). A quick recovery to the tolerable service level is achieved when using self-healing (bottom figure)."

5. State of the Art

The challenging topic of self-organisation in mobile communication networks is addressed in various publications (see e.g. [6]), projects (see e.g. [7][11][21]) and forums (e.g. NGMN and 3GPP). Based on these activities, the state of the art of network operations and the use of self-organisation methods will be reviewed in this section.

Optimisation in current networks consists of tool-based planning (see e.g. [9][10]), deployment and optimisation using live measurements. Current approaches in optimisation have a number of limitations and drawbacks. A major drawback is that a high degree of manual interaction is required. Further, current network optimisation is based on a longer time scale, e.g. weeks or months, which is not sufficient to adequately support the traffic growth and the diversity of services in future networks. Finally, current automatic optimisation tools generally focus on a small number of radio parameters. There are several publications on optimisation in UMTS, e.g., capacity and coverage balancing [14][15], code planning for UMTS [16][17], base station location [18], and admission control [19]. For a general treatment of planning and optimisation in UMTS refer to [20]. It is noted, however, that these sources do not address (self-)optimisation in 3GPP's evolved UTRAN (E-UTRAN), which is the access network technology where self-optimisation is anticipated to be most effective and feasible.

Self-configuration and *self-healing* are relatively new topics in mobile networks, with little state of the art to report on. A few papers study self-configuration of neighbour cell lists, e.g. [12] and [13], while the self-configuration of other radio parameters such as transmit powers, antenna tilts and radio resource management parameters is still largely unaddressed. Self-healing in contemporary networks has few capabilities to recover from faults and more sophisticated approaches are required to provide continuous service to users despite faults.

Within the European research and development programme Celtic, the Gandalf project (2005-2007) explored the potential of automating common management tasks in mobile networks (mostly GSM, UMTS and WLAN) [11]. The project Monotas developed techniques and algorithms allowing radio networks to rapidly adapt their parameters (e.g., pilot power) to changes in traffic load and service usage [21]. Other projects related to self-organisation include ANA [7] (self-organisation of Internet) and BIONETS (pervasive networking) [22]. Future research needs to take advantage of previous results and adapt the findings to the challenges of self-organisation in E-UTRAN networks.

Standardisation is addressed in *3GPP* with the goal of ensuring that the standards will support self-organisation [1], concentrating on measurements, interfaces, architectural and protocol aspects. Examples of self-organisation efforts carried out within 3GPP include interference coordination [24], hand over parameter optimisation [25], load balancing [26], and cell outage compensation [27]. The work in 3GPP is, however, in an initial stage and further efforts are needed to provide self-organization functionality in future networks. A list of requirements and objectives that telecommunication management systems must satisfy as well as an architecture reference model for management systems has been defined by *3GPP* [23]. Any self-organisation method for E-UTRAN should as such adhere to this reference model. The actual location of the self-organisation algorithms depends on the nature of the algorithm, e.g., whether it can be executed locally on the base station, executed in a central node, or executed using a distributed approach. The overall objective of *NGMN*, a co-operation among world-leading mobile operators, is to collect and promote operator requirements and recommendations on e.g. self-organisation [2]. The work on self-organisation in these forums, however, mainly has a rather qualitative character and does *not* consider the development and quantitative assessment of *actual algorithms and methods*.

6. Challenges

Self-organisation in future mobile radio networks is a challenging topic. Such networks are highly complex systems with a multitude of tuneable control mechanisms and parameters acting at time scales varying from milliseconds to days. Moreover, there are intricate interdependencies among the control mechanisms and parameters as well as limitations on measurements, signalling and processing. Understanding and mastering these complexities poses a number of major challenges for the design of effective and dependable self-organisation functionalities:

- *Devise techniques for measuring and probing as a basis for self-organisation* — Generally speaking, measuring and probing are the foundations of automatic online control. To this end, it is necessary to determine what data is needed and should be collected, involving a trade-off between optimality of the self-organisation methods and the signalling cost associated with the data collection. A related research challenge is to optimise the frequency with which the various data is collected from the various sources, which may depend on the urgency of an observed performance issue.
- *Design methods for inference of network status* — Wireless networks are intricate systems making the inference of the up-to-date network status very challenging. The appropriate processing of the collected measurements as well as efficient handling of erroneous/malicious measurement reports are key to reliably estimate the current network status.
- *Devise methodologies to deal with incomplete, delayed and faulty feedback* — The feedback from the network upon control decisions is not immediate, i.e. there are unknown delays from actuation to observation. This unknown delay may affect the efficiency of the self-optimisation process and, as such, there is a need to take this delay into consideration when designing algorithms. In this light it is also necessary to distinguish the effects of the control decisions from those caused by natural variations in e.g. traffic, mobility and propagation characteristics.
- *Effectiveness of self-organisation methods* — The design of effective self-optimisation/healing methods introduces several challenges, such as multivariable control (i.e., controlling several variables simultaneously), optimisation of the frequency and size of control steps. With regard to the intricate dependencies of the different radio (resource management) parameters that are to be tuned, not only the frequency but also the mutual timing of parameter adjustments needs to be considered in order to prevent undesirable oscillations in the delivered service quality. Furthermore, the level in the network where control decisions are taken must be determined (centralised versus distributed control).
- *Reliability of self-organisation methods* — Control decisions must be reliable due to the lack of human expert sanity checking and (possibly) revising the decisions. As such, we are faced with new requirements for methods, algorithms, and quality of models.
- *Shape the network architecture* — Self-organisation algorithms will eventually have to be incorporated into existing and future systems. This affects protocols and interfaces as well as the architecture of networks.

Several initiatives are on-going to address these challenges in current and future mobile access networks. An example is the recently started research project SOCRATES (Self-Optimisation and self-ConfiguRATion in wirelESs networks) in which two large vendors (Ericsson, Nokia Siemens Networks), a leading mobile network operator (Vodafone) and several European research and consultancy institutes (Atesio, IBBT, Technical University of Braunschweig, TNO ICT) are involved. This project is funded by the European Union in the 7th Framework Program and will run until December 2010. The main goals are the development, evaluation and demonstration of methods and algorithms for self-configuration, self-optimisation and self-healing, where the 3GPP E-UTRAN has been selected as the radio access technology of focus. In addition, the impact on standardisation, network operations and service provisioning is investigated. With respect to 3GPP standardisation and NGMN activities, SOCRATES aims to present use cases on self-organisation algorithms, give input to 3GPP on potential solutions and technologies, and discuss impact on interfaces and protocols for the E-UTRAN and management nodes involved. Besides dissemination towards 3GPP and NGMN, results of the self-organisation activities within SOCRATES are expected to be disseminated at major conferences, workshops (including two workshops organised by the SOCRATES project) and COST 2100 meetings, and in journals and magazines.

7. Concluding Remarks

Self-organisation of mobile networks is regarded as a key approach in order to reduce O/CAPEX and enable cost-effective support of a range of high-quality mobile communication services and applications for acceptable prices. Although the topic has gained more and more attention in the research community and standardisation bodies during the last years, there is still a long way to go. Many challenges remain and have to be overcome in order to achieve the ultimate goal of integrating network planning, optimisation, (re)configuration and healing in a single autonomous process requiring minimal human intervention. We foresee a gradual, step-wise introduction, where the impact on network behaviour and service quality is well studied before the next step is taken. That way, the (potentially severe) effects of possible 'growing pains' of deploying self-organisation methods can be limited; the operators will gain confidence and be willing to delegate the control to the network itself.

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