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# An integrated approach for future mobile network architecture.

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**Abstract**—In this position paper, we identify the potential of an integrated deployment solution for energy efficient cellular networks combining the strengths of two very active research themes: software defined radio access networks (SD-RAN) [1] and decoupled signaling and data transmissions, or beyond cellular green generation (BCG<sup>2</sup>) architecture, for enhanced energy efficiency [2]. While SD-RAN envisions a decoupled centralized control plane and data forwarding plane for flexible control, the BCG<sup>2</sup> architecture calls for decoupling coverage from capacity and coverage is provided through always-on low-power signaling node for a larger geographical area; capacity is catered by various on-demand data nodes for maximum energy efficiency. In this paper, we identify that a combined approach bringing in both specifications together can, not only achieve greater benefits, but also facilitates the faster realization of both technologies. We propose the idea and design of a *signaling controller* which acts as a signaling node to provide always-on coverage, consuming low power, and at the same time also hosts the control plane functions for the SD-RAN through a general purpose processing platform. Phantom cell concept is also a similar idea where a normal macro cell provides interference control to densely deployed small cells [7], although, our initial results show that the integrated architecture has much greater potential of energy savings in comparison to phantom cells.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In today's world, mobile communication system is perceived very differently than before. Now, an essential part of modern infrastructure, it serves many other purposes than audio communication in contemporary pervasive computing environment. Although, this perception is mostly due to the smart hand-held devices. Fundamental mobile systems also witnessed growth from 2G to 3G to modern 4G systems but at a much slower pace, mainly due to inflexible and expensive equipment, complex control plane protocols, and vendor specific configuration interfaces [3]. Software defined networking (SDN) suggests hardware agnostic programmable platform for development of protocols, applications, etc., hiding all complexity of execution through separation of control and data plane. This decoupling will introduce unparalleled flexibility for innovation and future growth and will also reduce CAPEX and OPEX through ideas like network virtualization.

Moreover, with the growth in user data, more and more base stations (BSs), currently consuming over 80% of the total network energy [4], are added into the system substantially increasing the energy consumption and carbon footprint of cellular networks. The state-of-the-art energy management schemes exploit the redundant capacity during the low traffic

scenarios and put a fraction of the BSs in sleep mode. However, they might cause coverage holes and in order to achieve the real benefits of energy management, it is needed to separate capacity and coverage via logical decoupling of the data and control or signaling transmissions in the future systems, also known as BCG<sup>2</sup> or cell on-demand architecture [4]. The signaling nodes provide coverage and always-on connectivity and will be designed for low rate services, for system access and paging, consuming very small fraction of power; whereas the data nodes can only be used on-demand depending on the traffic. The decoupling is expected to provide 85-90% energy saving potential compared to the current systems [5].

Although, both of the approaches have different technical objectives, i.e., SDN focuses on inducing flexibility through programmable hardware and BCG<sup>2</sup> architecture tries to get linear relationship between energy consumption and user traffic. The end goal, however, has a lot in common in terms of physical realization. The centralized controller in the state-of-the-art proposals of SD-RAN, either resides in the core network [3] or in a centralized data centre [1], an idea migrated from Cloud RAN (Radio Access Network)[6]. We argue that the signaling node providing coverage and system access can also be a suitable host for the centralized controller, or virtual big BS of [1], in SD-RAN containing major functionalities of control plane, such as, coordination and resource allocation, for a number of BSs in a geographical area. In this paper, we present the idea of a *signaling controller* which provides always-on system access, contains control plane functionalities of interference management, resource allocation, etc. Since, the control plane can be implemented using general purpose processors, the signaling node does not need additional power consuming elements and can still conform to the low-power consumption attribute as required by the BCG<sup>2</sup> architecture. The signaling controller can use dedicated microwave links to connect to the BSs in its coverage area or fibre if cost-effective.

Moreover, SDN can also be viewed as the enabling technology for BCG<sup>2</sup> architecture. Such basic architectural change in contemporary cellular systems is very expensive to implement as it requires redesigning of several components and hardware; a major reason to delay the decoupling for later standards after a full feasibility investigation. A cellular SDN experimentation platform can, however, facilitates the performance evaluation and quick implementation of BCG<sup>2</sup> architecture. It is high time to re-think the basic architecture of the cellular systems and not only make it energy efficient but also make them flexible and amenable for future growth. These two areas are getting

huge interest of the research community and in our view their intersection also create a unique space with immense potential of performance improvement.

Our architecture is also very close to phantom cell concept [7] which was introduced for realizing true potential of dense deployment of small cells. In this idea, many small cells, called the phantom cells as they contain only LTE user plane, are overlaid with a normal macro cell which provides interference coordination. However, a macro cell consumes over 100 times more power than a pico/femto cell as described in the EU FP7 EARTH project [5] and keeping it on all the time would lead to severe power inefficiency. On the other hand, the proposed signaling controller is a low-rate signaling-only node consuming a small fraction of network energy. A signaling controller can also host a logically separated data node but it can be treated as any other data node in the area. Our simulation results show the exceptional potential of energy savings using our proposed architecture in comparison to phantom cell concept.

## II. BACKGROUND

### A. BCG<sup>2</sup> Architecture

The logical decoupling of data transmissions and control signaling paradigm is one of the key directions being explored by GreenTouch, a consortium of leading ICT industry and academic experts working towards 1000 times enhanced network energy efficiency compared to 2010, under the project Beyond Cellular Green Generation (BCG<sup>2</sup>) [4]. The signaling nodes are responsible for the coverage and are usually assumed to deliver low rate services, such as, random access and paging, over long ranges; whereas the data nodes can be activated and deactivated depending on the traffic demand and it is designed for high rate and small ranges. The decoupling is logical in nature and a single location can host both types of nodes. A preliminary study of BCG<sup>2</sup> architecture is presented in [4], where it is shown, through statistical modelling, that energy efficiency of current systems can be improved by more than 50 times depending on the daily load profile. A set of studies regarding the BCG<sup>2</sup> architecture is performed under the EU FP7 IP project EARTH [5]. The study shows that up to 85-90% saving potential is possible with this revolutionary changed architecture compared to the current systems. The results from these studies show the promise and potential of the BCG<sup>2</sup> architecture. Although, considering the transition cost involved in moving to a new cellular architecture, a comprehensive feasibility study is necessary to clearly identify the cost-benefit trade-offs.

### B. Software Defined Radio Access Network

While the definitions of SDN are still evolving, it mainly focuses towards decoupling of the software-based control plane from the hardware-based data plane (e.g., packets forwarding) of networking and switching pieces of equipment [1]. The logically centralized controllers contain the control logic to translate the application requirements down to the data plane and are responsible in providing an abstract network view to the application plane. The major issue is to create

appropriate mapping of the existing network functionalities to the decoupled control and forwarding planes. While a lot of the work is done for wired or optical networks, some proposals are also presented for cellular SDN architecture [1], [3].

For the radio access part of the mobile communication system, the major questions are: 1- How to decouple the control plane from the base stations and 2- where the control plane will be located? The centralized controller in the state-of-the-art proposals of SD-RAN, either resides in the core network [3] or in a centralized data centre [1]. The design in [3] tries to push all the control plane functionality into a centralized controller in the core network and proposes the use of local switch agents for scalability. The proposition in [1] is focused towards re-factoring the control plane into a virtualized big base station controller for a geographical area and local controllers within each base station for latency sensitive decision making. SoftRAN [1] observes that it is cost-effective to leave data plane functionality to the base stations along with some part of control plane for delay-sensitive decisions, but stressed on the coordination of closely-deployed BS in a dense network through a centralized virtual big base station. The idea of big BS or controller is very close to the signaling node in the BCG<sup>2</sup> architecture and motivates us to explore the integration of both approaches.

## III. THE INTEGRATED ARCHITECTURE

The evolution of contemporary LTE into the new integrated architecture is shown in Fig. 1. As depicted in [3], we also believe that the control plane of SDN based core network should contain some functional capabilities currently residing in S-GW (Serving Gateway) and P-GW (Packet Gateway), e.g., modification of routing rules, etc., along with the dedicated control nodes of EPC (Evolved Packet Core) shown with green dashed lines in Fig. 1. The functional decomposition of S-GW and P-GW is shown in Fig. 1 by means of control elements containing necessary APIs to EPC control nodes and also control logic required for data forwarding. These programmable control elements for routing modification etc., can be housed in control nodes in future architectures with specific APIs only in S-GW and P-GW. The interfaces between nodes in the core network, as shown in Fig. 1, are the same as EPC [8]; but in a programmable SDN domain, they most probably be realized as software APIs. The data forwarding pipe is shown with a solid blue line passing through both gateways into the internet.

The new radio access system includes signaling controller, shown with big towers in Fig. 1, for a larger geographical area containing several data BSs shown with smaller towers in the figure. The eNodeB functionalities will be split between signaling controller and data BSs. The data BS can only be used on-demand and if there is no call, the data BS will be put in sleep mode as also shown in Fig. 1. The control plane interfaces are shown with green dashed lines and the data paths are shown with blue solid lines in Fig. 1. We propose that only signaling controller requires to have an interface with MME (Mobility Management Entity), performing similar functions as S1-MME of EPC [8]. The data BS requires connections to

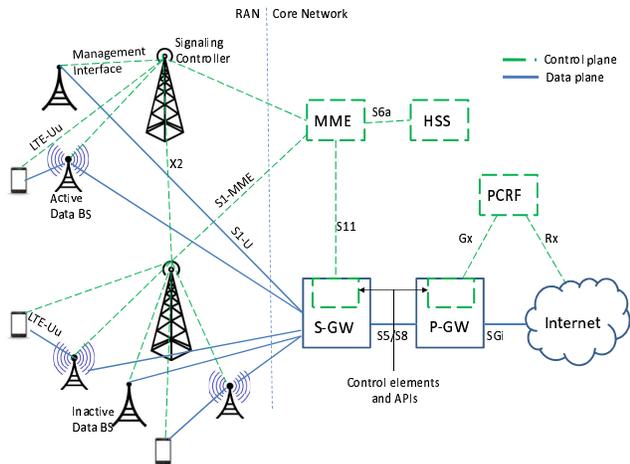


Fig. 1. The new integrated architecture.

S-GW for data forwarding with the interface similar to S1-U of EPC.

Moreover, when mobile user is crossing the signaling controller coverage boundaries, a coordinated handover can be realized through communication between two signaling controllers. The interface between two signaling controller is labeled as X2 in Fig. 1, as it requires almost similar specifications as the interface X2 between eNodeBs in LTE but excluding functions related to data transmission and tunneling. Within the coverage area of a signaling controller, the handoff between data BS will be managed by the single associated signaling controller. The UE (User Equipment), also requires interfaces to both signaling controller for system access and data BS for data transmissions. The interfaces are similar to LTE-Uu interface which is defined to both control and data traffic in LTE [8]. The only new interface in our architecture is the connection between signaling controller and the data BS, denoted as management interface in Fig. 1. This interface is similar to X3 interface in phantom cell concept [7] though implemented through software APIs. The management interface will be used for resource allocation by signaling controller and periodic updates from data BS for interference management. This connection can also be realized through dedicated wireless links or by any other wired technology if available.

#### A. Signaling Controller

The major component of our new integrated architecture is the signaling controller which performs the functions of a signaling node in BCG<sup>2</sup> architecture and also of the centralized controller for SDN based radio access network. The combined specifications for the signaling controller conforming to the SDN principles and BCG<sup>2</sup> architecture are given in Table I. Since control plane implementation will be done using general purpose processors, the power consumption of a signaling node is not expected to substantially increase because of additional controller functionalities.

1) *Resource Management and Assignment*: In the BCG<sup>2</sup> architecture, the possibility of sub-optimal channel allocation is one of the major concerns [5], for two reasons: 1) the

TABLE I  
COMBINED REQUIREMENTS FOR SIGNALING CONTROLLER.

SDN	
1	hosts control logic for RAN, i.e., interference management, resource management, coordinated handover, etc.
2	programmable on general purpose processors
3	provides APIs to BSs and also to core network
BCG <sup>2</sup>	
1	provides signaling for system access and paging
2	has interfaces to UE, data BSs, and core network
3	performs resource allocation
4	consumes low power

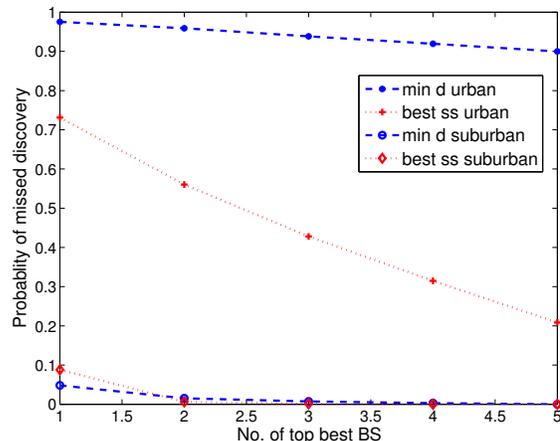


Fig. 2. Probability of missed discovery of best BS with minimum distance (d) and best signal strength (ss) methods for urban and suburban scenarios.

channel between data BS and the mobile terminal cannot be estimated before selection as done in the classical approach and more sophisticated mechanisms are required to predict and estimate the channel condition between the mobile terminal and any potential data BS, such as, location of the user, etc. 2) It is less costly to allocate an in-coming request to an already active BS rather than waking up an inactive one; although it might not have the best possible channel to the user. However, the signaling controller can, not only null the ill effects described above but can actually optimize system capacity and energy efficiency trade-off with efficient resource management and interference mitigation using periodic updates from data BSs under its coverage and re-allocation of resources if it improves the capacity/energy trade-off.

In order to predict channel between user and inactive BS, phantom cell concept proposes to save SNR (Signal-to-Noise Ratio) map with each phantom cell. In addition to the requirement of an initial training phase and excessive memory requirements, this method assumes constant transmission power and over-averaging of SNR values from UE which in fact can only measure SINR (Signal to Interference and Noise Ratio) instead. We evaluated the performance of two methods of BS selection, i.e., 1- with best signal strength and 2- with minimum distance to the user, using real data from a cellular networks in urban and suburban scenarios. We collected around 1000 observations with GPS location and signal strengths of nearby BSs. Although, the BSs were not small BSs but the data still provides insight into the performance of both methods. We remark that in dense deployments, it suffices



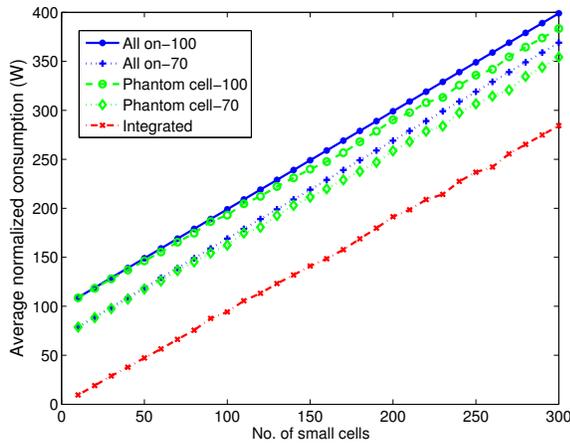


Fig. 5. Energy efficiency of the proposed architecture in comparison with all-nodes-on scenario and phantom cell concept.

without any user is assumed to be in sleep mode with zero energy consumption. A better resource allocation algorithm can be designed for both architectures to optimize the capacity/energy trade-off which should benefit both in the similar manner. Moreover, sleep mode also consumes small amount of energy [5] but it is ignored in this evaluation. The small BS consumption is normalized to 1 watt.

The average daily energy consumption of phantom cell and our architecture is shown in Fig. 5, where it is clear that the consumption of always-on macro cell in phantom cell concept offsets the energy savings of small cells in sleep mode. We also tried to estimate the average daily consumption when macro cell consumes 70% more power than small cells. The results are labeled as All on-70 and Phantom cell-70, whereas the results when macro cell's consumption was 100 times more, as described in [5], are labeled as All on-100 and Phantom cell-100. In both scenarios, phantom cells become really beneficial in very dense deployments of small cells. In our on-going work, we are estimating the energy requirements of a signaling-controller for clear identification of the margin of benefit. In Fig. 5, our proposed architecture is slightly favoured as the consumption of signaling controller is ignored, however, it will be much smaller than the consumption of a normal macro cell, still making our architecture the most energy efficient architecture for 5G which also comes with unprecedented ability of interference management to realize true benefits of dense deployments.

### B. Virtualization and RAN Sharing

Network function virtualization is one of the prime benefits of SDN where various virtual networks can use the same physical infrastructure. For example, the signaling controller can be shared by various operators. Each can control its radio resources with or without collaboration with other operators. RAN sharing has also been proposed and practised in 3GPP systems. In our on-going work, we are developing the idea of *opportunistic RAN sharing* with our proposed architecture. Opportunistic RAN sharing is a novel idea where infrastructure and radio resources are opportunistically shared among operators only if it improves the capacity/energy efficiency

trade-off which can then be mapped into proportional gains for sharing operators. Since all access requests will be coming to the signaling controller, it is much easier to design radio resource sharing algorithm with optimal performance over a finer time scale. As an example, we consider night scenario where around 15% of the traffic is expected compared to the peak load [4]. Two operators in an area, each individually serving 15% of its subscribed users, can provide service to all the clients with better utilization of the BSs and resource blocks providing better capacity/energy trade-off. The gains can be shared among the operators in proportion to their costs.

## V. CONCLUSION

We present an integrated approach combining SDN based RAN and BCG<sup>2</sup> architecture, by means of a *signaling controller* which provides always-on system access and contains control plane functionalities. The major takeaway message of this paper is that both visions carry more potential than the benefits they are aiming for; and a union of both sets of requirements and specifications will result in an even richer and more commercially viable design of mobile communication systems. Our architecture is also very close to the phantom cell concept, although, our architecture reduces energy consumption over multiple order of magnitude in comparison to phantom cells.

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