

GNU Radio Implementation of MALIN: “Multi-Arm bandits Learning for Internet-of-things Networks”

Lilian Besson*, Rémi Bonnefoi*, and Christophe Moy†

*CentraleSupélec/IETR, CentraleSupélec Campus de Rennes, 35510 Cesson-Sévigné, France

Email: {lilian.besson, remi.bonnefoi}@centralesupelec.fr

†Univ Rennes, CNRS, IETR – UMR 6164, 35000 Rennes, France

Email: christophe.moy@univ-rennes1.fr

Abstract—We implement an IoT network the following way: one gateway, one or several intelligent (*i.e.*, learning) objects, embedding the proposed solution, and a traffic generator that emulates radio interferences from many other objects. Intelligent objects communicate with the gateway with a wireless ALOHA-based protocol, which does not require any specific overhead for the learning. We model the network access as a discrete sequential decision making problem, and using the framework and algorithms from Multi-Arm Bandit (MAB) learning, we show that intelligent objects can improve their access to the network by using low complexity and decentralized algorithms, such as UCB₁ and Thompson Sampling.

I. INTRODUCTION

The monitoring of large scale systems such as smart grids and smart cities requires the development of networks dedicated to Internet-of-Things (IoT) applications. As an example, Low Power Wide Area Networks (LPWAN) [1], such as the LoRaWAN and SigFox technologies, are nowadays deployed in unlicensed bands to handle a large number of objects transmitting a few packets. In order to reduce the energy consumption of end-devices, these networks rely on simple pure ALOHA-based Medium Access (MAC) protocols.

One of the challenges in the design of MAC solutions for the IoT is to design solutions which improve the performance of the network and reduce the Packet Loss Ratio (PLR) without reducing the end-devices battery life. In particular, many IoT standards operate in unlicensed bands, that is why we have to find solutions that do not increase the PLR due to the interference caused by other standards and networks which share the same band. As this interfering is generated by different standards and networks, it cannot be controlled and is not evenly distributed in channels.

Multi-Arm Bandit (MAB) algorithms [2] have been recently proposed as a solution to improve the performance of IoT networks and in particular in LPWAN [3], [4]. In this demonstration, we evaluate MAB algorithms [2], used in combination with a pure ALOHA-based protocol (such as the ones employed in

LPWAN). We consider the Upper-Confidence Bound (UCB₁) [5], and the Thompson Sampling (TS) algorithms [6]. Both algorithms have already been applied with success in the context of wireless decision making, both empirically for Opportunistic Spectrum Access [7], and more recently for multi-users Cognitive Radio problems [8] with a more theoretical approach.

This demonstration is the first implementation which aims at assessing the potential gain of MAB learning algorithms in IoT scenarios. Following our recent work [9], we propose to model this problem as Non-Stationary¹ MAB. We suggest to use low-cost algorithms, focusing on two well-known algorithms: a frequentist one (UCB₁) and a Bayesian one (TS). We use a TestBed designed in 2017 by our team SCEE [10], containing different USRP cards [11], controlled by a single laptop using GNU Radio [12], and where the intelligence of each object corresponds to a learning algorithm, implemented as a GNU Radio block [13] and written in Python or C++.

In our demo, we consider a simple wireless network, consisting of one gateway (radio access point), and a certain interfering background traffic, assumed to be stationary (*i.i.d.*), which is generated by end-devices communicating in other networks. Some dynamic intelligent objects (end-user or autonomous objects) try to communicate with the gateway, with a low-overhead protocol. This communication can be done in different channels which are also shared by devices using other networks. Once the base station receives a packet transmitted by a dynamic device in a channel, it transmits to him an acknowledgement in the same channel after a fixed-time delay, as it is done in the LoRaWAN standard. This acknowledgement allows the device to learn about the channel quality and thus, to use learning algorithms for the purpose of best channel selection.

¹ Note that non-stationarity only comes from the presence of more than one dynamic object, as the background traffic is assumed independent and identically distributed *i.i.d.*

In this demo, we can generate scenarios with different parameters (number of channels, interfering traffic) in order to evaluate the performance of learning with different parameters. Moreover, we compare the performance of learning with that of the random uniform access to channels. This allows to check that in case of uniform traffic, there is nothing to learn and the intelligent objects do not reduce their successful communication rate in comparison to the naive object, and in case of stationary non-uniform traffic, the MAB learning algorithms indeed help to increase the global efficiency of the network by improving the success rate of the intelligent objects.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. The system model is introduced in Section 2. In Section 3, we describe both the UCB₁ and the TS algorithms formally. Our implementation is presented in Section 4, some results are given in Section 5.

II. SYSTEM MODEL

We consider the system model of Figure 1 where a set of object sends uplink packets to the network gateway. The communication between IoT devices and this gateway is done through a simple pure ALOHA-based protocol where devices transmit uplink packets of fixed duration whenever they want. The devices can transmit their packets in $K \geq 1$ channels (*e.g.*, 4). In the case where the base station receives an uplink in one channel, it transmits an acknowledgement to the end-device in the same channel, after a fixed received delay (of 1 s).

These communications operate in unlicensed bands and, consequently, suffer from interference generated by neighboring networks. This interfering traffic is uncontrolled and can be unevenly distributed over the different channels.

We consider the network from the point of view of one end-user. Every times the end-user has to communicate with the gateway, it has to choose one channel (at each transmission $t \geq 1, t \in \mathbb{N}$), denoted as $A(t) = k \in \{1, \dots, K\}$. Then, the end-users starts waiting in this channel $A(t)$ for an acknowledgement sent by the gateway. Before sending another message (*i.e.*, at time $t + 1$), the end-user knows if it received or not this ACK message. For this reason, selecting arm k at time t yields a (random) feedback, called a *reward*, $r_k(t) \in \{0, 1\}$, being 0 if no ACK was received before the next message, or 1 if ACK was successfully received. The goal of the end-user is to minimize its packet loss ratio, or equivalently, it is to

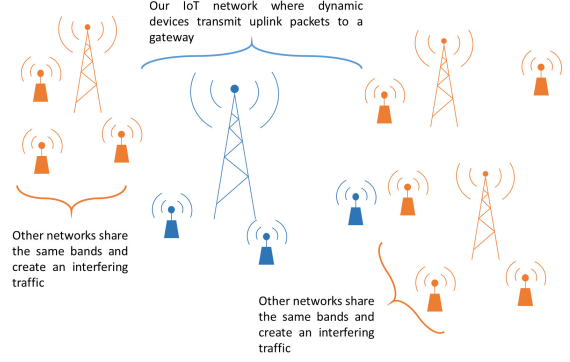


Fig. 1: The proposed system model where some dynamic devices transmit packets to a base station and suffer from the interference generated by neighboring networks.

maximize its cumulative rewards,

$$r_{1...T} := \sum_{t=1}^T r_{A(t)}(t),$$

as it is usually done in MAB problems [6], [14], [15].

This problem is a special case of the so-called “stochastic” MAB, where the sequence of rewards drawn from a given arm k is assumed to be *i.i.d.*, under some distribution ν_k , that has a mean μ_k . Several types of reward distributions have been considered in the literature, for example distributions that belong to a one-dimensional exponential family (*e.g.*, Gaussian, Exponential, Poisson or Bernoulli distributions).

Rewards are binary in our model, and so we consider only Bernoulli distributions, in which $r_k(t) \sim \text{Bern}(\mu_k)$, that is, $r_k(t) \in \{0, 1\}$ and $\mathbb{P}(r_k(t) = 1) = \mu_k \in [0, 1]$. Note that the reward $r_k(t)$ does *not* come from a sensing phase before sending the t -th message, as it would do for any “listen-before-talk” model, but comes from receiving an acknowledgement from the gateway, between the t -th and $t + 1$ -th messages.

The problem parameters μ_1, \dots, μ_K are of course unknown to the end-user, so to maximize its cumulated rewards, it must learn the distributions of the channels, to be able to progressively focus on the best arm (*i.e.*, the arm with largest mean). This requires to tackle the so-called *exploration-exploitation dilemma*: a player has to try all arms a sufficient number of times to get a robust estimate of their qualities, while not selecting the worst arms too many times.

III. MAB ALGORITHMS

Before discussing the relevance of a MAB model for our IoT application, we present mathematically two bandit algorithms, UCB₁ and Thompson Sampling,

which both strongly rely on the assumption that rewards are *i.i.d.*.

A. The UCB₁ Algorithm

A naive approach could be to use an empirical mean estimator of the rewards for each channel, and select the channel with highest estimated mean at each time; but this greedy approach is known to fail dramatically [15]. Indeed, with this policy, the selection of arms is highly dependent on the first draws: if the first transmission in one channel fails and the first one on other channels succeed, the end-user will *never* use the first channel again, even it is the best one (*i.e.*, the most available, in average).

Rather than relying on the empirical mean reward, Upper Confidence Bounds algorithms instead use a *confidence interval* on the unknown mean μ_k of each arm, which can be viewed as adding a “bonus” exploration to the empirical mean. They follow the “*optimism-in-face-of-uncertainty*” principle : at each step, they play according to the best model, as the statistically best possible arm (*i.e.*, the highest upper confidence bound) is selected.

More formally, for one end-user, let $N_k(t) = \sum_{\tau=1}^t \mathbb{1}(A(\tau) = k)$ be the number of times channel k was selected up-to time $t \geq 1$. The empirical mean estimator of channel k is defined as the mean reward obtained by selecting it up to time t , $\widehat{\mu}_k(t) = 1/N_k(t) \sum_{\tau=1}^t r_k(\tau) \mathbb{1}(A(\tau) = k)$. For UCB₁, the *confidence* term is $B_k(t) = \sqrt{\alpha \log(t)/N_k(t)}$, giving the upper confidence bound $U_k(t) = \widehat{\mu}_k(t) + B_k(t)$, which is used by the end-user to decide the channel for communicating at time step $t + 1$: $A(t + 1) = \arg \max_{1 \leq k \leq K} U_k(t)$. UCB₁ is called an *index policy*.

The UCB₁ algorithm uses a parameter $\alpha > 0$, originally α was set to 2 [5], but empirically $\alpha = 1/2$ is known to work better (uniformly across problems), and $\alpha > 1/2$ is advised by the theory [2]. In our model, every dynamic end-user implements its own UCB₁ algorithm, *independently*. For one end-user, the time t is the total number of sent messages from the beginning, as rewards are only obtained after a transmission.

B. Thompson Sampling

Thompson Sampling [6] was introduced early on, in 1933 as the very first bandit algorithm, in the context of clinical trials (in which each arm models the efficacy of one treatment across patients). Given a prior distribution on the mean of each arm, the algorithm selects the next arm to draw based on samples from the *conjugated* posterior distribution, which for Bernoulli rewards is a Beta distribution.

A Beta prior $\text{Beta}(a_k(0) = 1, b_k(0) = 1)$ (initially uniform) is assumed on $\mu_k \in [0, 1]$, and at time t the posterior is $\text{Beta}(a_k(t), b_k(t))$. After every channel selection, the posterior is updated to have $a_k(t)$ and $b_k(t)$ counting the number of successful and failed transmissions made on channel k . So if the *Ack* message is received, $a_k(t + 1) = a_k(t) + 1$, and $b_k(t + 1) = b_k(t)$, otherwise $a_k(t + 1) = a_k(t)$, and $b_k(t + 1) = b_k(t) + 1$. Then, the decision is done by *sampling* an *index* for each arm, at each time step t , from the arm posteriors: $X_k(t) \sim \text{Beta}(a_k(t), b_k(t))$, and the chosen channel is simply the channel $A(t + 1)$ with highest index $X_k(t)$. For this reason, Thompson Sampling is called a *randomized index policy*.

The TS algorithm, although being simple and easy to implement, is known to perform well for stochastic problems, for which it was proven to be asymptotically optimal [16], [17]. It is known to be empirically efficient, and for these reasons it has been used successfully in various applications, including on problems from Cognitive Radio [18], [19], and also in previous work on decentralized IoT-like networks [20].

IV. GNU RADIO IMPLEMENTATION

In this section, we present our implementation of MAB algorithms in a model of IoT network. We first describe the simplified physical layer of this demo, then we present our GNU Radio implementation.

A. Physical Layer and Protocol

In this paper, we implement a MAC layer solution in order to improve the performance of IoT communications in unlicensed bands. We could have used any physical layer and any ALOHA based protocol. We choose to implement our own physical layer and protocol, for both clarity and conciseness.

Regarding the physical layer, we consider a QPSK constellation. Moreover, we use simplified packets composed of two parts. The first part is the *preamble* which is used for the purpose of synchronization (phase correction). Then, we have the *index* of the user, which is a sequence of QPSK symbols. For example, this index can be a simple QPSK symbol ($\pm 1 \pm 1j$). Once the gateway receives an uplink packet, it detects this index and transmits an acknowledgement which has the same frame structure, but where the index is the conjugate of the index of the uplink packet (*e.g.*, $1 + j \mapsto 1 - j$). Thanks to this index, we can have several devices communicating with the same gateway.

In turn, the end-device that receives the acknowledgement demodulates it, and checks if the index is the conjugate of its own index. In this case, the ACK

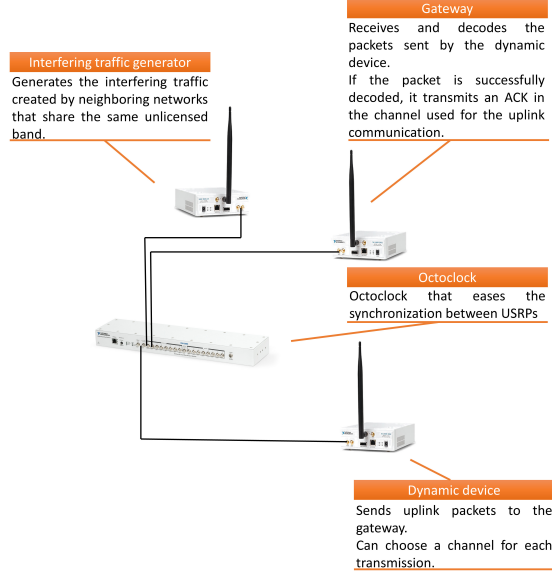


Fig. 2: Schematic of our implementation that presents the role of each USRP card.

was for him, and it knows that its packet has been received and decoded correctly by the gateway.

B. Equipment

We use USRP N210 cards [11], from Ettus Research (National Instrument), with version 4 of their FPGA system and version 5.1 of the RBX system. As illustrated in Figure 2, our implementation is composed of at least 3 USRP. The gateway, a USRP which emulates the interfering traffic and at least one dynamic device.

The cards have their own power supply, and are all connected to a local Ethernet switch, itself connected to a single laptop, running GNU/Linux and Ubuntu. To ease the synchronization in both time and frequency between the cards representing the dynamic objects and the gateway, we use an Octoclock [21], also by Ettus Research, and coaxial cables connecting every card to the Octoclock for time (PPS) and frequency synchronization.

C. Implementation

We used GNU Radio Companion (version 3.7, 2017), and for the demonstration the laptop runs one GRC design to configure and control each USRP card. As such, a single laptop can run in parallel the control program of any number of cards².

The GNU Radio application is a flow-graph, *i.e.*, a series of signal processing blocks connected together

² Even if in practice, maximum efficiency is kept as long as there is not more than one GRC design by CPU core.

to describe a data flow. For maximum efficiency, we wrote all of our blocks in C++. GNU Radio Companion is a graphical UI used to develop GNU Radio applications: when a flow-graph is compiled in GRC, a Python code is produced, which can be executed to connect to the USRP, create the desired GUI windows and widgets, and create and connect the blocks in the flow-graph.

D. User Interface

We have designed a user interface in order to visualize the results obtained with our experimental demonstration. This user interface is shown in Figure 3. We can see that it is made of three parts, one for each USRP, as highlighted in red:

(1) The first part is the interface of the IoT traffic generator, where we see the traffic generated by this USRP, presented in a waterfall view in the time vs frequency domain.

(2) The second part is the interface of the intelligent device which is made of four parts. At the top left, we observe the constellation of the transmitted packet (a). At the bottom left, we have a time/frequency view of the last packets transmitted by the object (b). We can see, in this view that the object transmitted its last 9 packets in the two best channels (channel #3 and #4). Then, at the top right of this interface (c), we can see the traffic observed by this device, where we have the interfering traffic (green), the uplink packets transmitted by this object (red) and the acknowledgements sent by the gateway (blue). Finally, at the bottom right (d), we have four histograms showing the performance indicators of the chosen MAB algorithm (number of transmissions, number of successful transmissions, UCB indexes and success rates, in each channel).

(3) The last part is the interface of the gateway, where we can see the traffic observed by the gateway (a) and the channels in which the last acknowledgements have been sent (b).

V. EXAMPLE OF RESULTS

We compare the two algorithms described in Section III-A against a uniform access algorithm, that uniformly selects its channel at random. Three objects are compared by their mean successful communication rates, on a horizon of 2000 communication slots, and were using three algorithms: uniform random access (in cyan), Thompson Sampling (in green) and UCB₁ (in red). Figure 4 shows the results averaged on 10 repetitions using the same conditions. As we are using real hardware, each experiment takes about a half day. Each object was learning to access 4 different channels, of same availability rates [15%, 10%, 2%, 1%]. They did



Fig. 3: User interface of our demonstration.

not overlap each other, as for simplicity we wanted to present the efficiency of the proposed learning method against a stationary environment. When facing the same stationary background traffic, we see that the learning objects are both very quickly more efficient than the naive uniform object, here with an improvement in terms of successful communication rate from 40% to about 60% in only 100 communications (about 16 min), and up-to 80% in only 400 communications. Such results are very encouraging, and illustrate well the many strong possibilities of MAB learning applied to IoT networks.

VI. CONCLUSION

We presented in this article our demonstration, showed in 2018 at the ICT conference, by specifying the system model and explaining the two MAB algorithms used in practice. We gave all the necessary details on both the PHY and the MAC layer, as well as details on the User Interface developed for the demo. Examples of results obtained in practice were discussed, to highlight the interest of using learning algorithms for radio online optimization problem, and especially multi-arm bandit learning algorithms. By using such low-cost algorithms, we demonstrated empirically that a dynamically reconfigurable object can learn on its own to favor a certain channel, if the environment traffic is not uniform between the K different channels.

Possible extensions of this work include: considering more dynamic objects, implementing a real-world

IoT communication protocol (like the LoRaWAN standard), and studying the interference in case of other gateways located nearby. We are also interested in studying the possible gain of using a learning step when the transmission model follows ALOHA-like retransmissions.

Availability of data and materials

The source code of our experimental demonstration is freely and fully available online at: bitbucket.org/scee_ietr/malin-multi-arm-bandit-learning-for-iot-networks-with-grc/, and open-sourced under GPLv3 license. It contains both the GNU Radio Companion flowcharts and the GNU Radio blocks, with ready-to-use Makefiles to easily compile, install and launch the demonstration.

A 6-minute video of this demonstration is also available at youtu.be/HospLNQhcMk.

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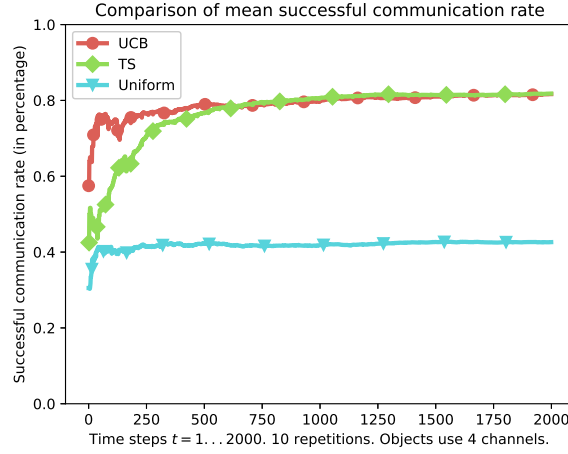


Fig. 4: Less than 400 communication slots (*i.e.*, less than 100 trials in each channels) suffice for the two learning objects to attain a successful communication rate close to 80%, **twice as much** as the non-learning (uniform) object, which stays around 40% of success. In stationary environments, both the TS and UCB₁ algorithms are very efficient and converge quickly, resulting in a very strong decrease in collisions and failed communication slots. UCB₁ is faster to learn but eventually TS gives a (slightly) better average performance.

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