APEX STANDARDS

From 4G to 5G to 6G: The Evolution of Green Network Strategies

Tech Report C20003170
Unclassified

2 Jan 2024

Green strategies in the telecommunications sector are driving a shift toward energy efficiency and sustainability, from the evolution of 4G to the advent of 5G and the anticipation of 6G. This pivot involves implementing advanced network architectures, deploying small cells, and utilizing massive MIMO antennas to boost spectral efficiency while reducing power consumption. In the 5G landscape, software breakthroughs like network slicing are central to energy management, enabling energy use tailored to fluctuating network demands and allowing for adaptive scaling during periods of low traffic.

Renewable energy initiatives, particularly solar and wind-powered solutions for base stations, demonstrate the industry's resolve to diminish carbon emissions, reflecting a broader ethos that pairs innovation with environmental stewardship. Energy-efficient network equipment with sophisticated sleep modes and the strategic employment of network slicing represent critical advances in mitigating the energy challenges faced by telecommunication networks. Concurrently, beamforming and Massive MIMO technologies are optimizing signal transmission, thus preserving energy.

The role of artificial intelligence in network performance is becoming increasingly prominent, with machine learning algorithms poised to forecast traffic and allocate network resources dynamically, minimizing unnecessary energy use. The integration of renewable energy into network infrastructures is recognized not only for its carbon-reducing potential but also as a step toward greater energy independence, especially for base stations in isolated locales.

Looking forward, 6G networks are expected to build on these technological advancements by exploring sub-terahertz frequencies for more efficient data transmission and investigating the use of Intelligent Reflecting Surfaces to facilitate low-power signal propagation. Energy harvesting research aims to empower network components and devices to self-generate power from environmental sources, marking a significant innovation in network energy sustainability.

The movement towards distributed and collaborative networks, where user devices contribute to the infrastructure, portends a significant shift in network design, potentially diminishing the reliance on traditional base stations and substantially reducing the network's energy footprint.

Sustainable manufacturing and the lifecycle management of network components indicates a deep-seated industry commitment to environmental impact reduction, encompassing the entire lifespan of these components. These initiatives showcase a concerted effort to reconcile the escalating demand for advanced connectivity with the imperatives of sustainability.

The vision for 6G is to establish unprecedented standards for energy efficiency. Anticipated to utilize AI and machine learning, 6G aims to refine network load management and optimize energy utilization. Advances in energy-harvesting technologies could lead to devices and sensors capable of sourcing power from their surroundings, underscoring the sector's innovative trajectory.

Even as 4G networks remain foundational in many areas, ongoing upgrades with energy-efficient solutions exemplify proactive strides toward energy reduction, not merely awaiting new generations of technology but refining existing networks.

Generation	Technique/Proposal	Description	First introduced in a TDoc,
4G	Remote Radio Heads (RRH)	Reduce power consumption by moving the radio closer to the antenna, minimizing feeder loss.	RAN1-49 (Kobe, JP, May 7-11, 2007): **R1-072361 (Alcatel-Lucent)**
	Carrier Aggregation	Improves spectrum efficiency and reduces energy per bit by combining multiple carriers.	RAN-38 (Cancun, MX, Nov 27-30, 2007): **RP-071043 (Qualcomm)**
	Coordinated Multipoint (CoMP)	Reduces interference and improves energy efficiency by coordinating signal transmission from multiple base stations.	RAN1-54 (Jeju, KR, Aug 18-22, 2008): **R1-083069 (Ericsson)**
	Heterogeneous Networks (HetNets)	Incorporates a mix of macrocells, picocells, and femtocells to improve coverage and capacity with better energy distribution.	CT-34 (Budapest, HU, Nov 29-Dec 1, 2006): **CP-060689 (MCC)**
	LTE-Advanced Features	Includes features that improve spectral efficiency and reduce energy usage per data transfer.	RAN3-42 (Montréal, CA, May 10-14, 2004): **R3-040684 (MCC)**
5G	Energy-Efficient Network Equipment	Uses less power components and energy-saving features like advanced sleep modes.	RAN1-60 (San Francisco, CA, US, Feb 22-26, 2010): **R1-101043 (Huawei)**
	Network Slicing	Creates multiple virtual networks on a single infrastructure, optimizing resources and power allocation.	SA2-110 (Dubrovnik, HR, Jul 6-10, 2015): **S2-152363 (ZTE)**
	Advanced Sleep Modes	Improves base stations' ability to enter low power states during low demand periods.	RAN-75 (Dubrovnik, HR, Mar 6-9, 2017): **RP-170690 (MCC)**
	Beamforming and Massive MIMO	Focuses signal transmission directly to devices to increase efficiency and reduce power waste.	RAN-58 (Barcelona, ES, Dec 4-7, 2012): **RP-121413 (Nokia)**
	AI and Machine Learning	Utilizes algorithms to predict traffic and adjust network resources, reducing energy consumption.	RAN3-103 (Athens, GR, Feb 25-Mar 1, 2019): **R3-190835 (Ericsson)**
	Renewable Energy Sources	Integrates renewable energy for powering base stations, reducing the carbon footprint.	SA-65 (Edinburgh, UK, Sep 15-17, 2014): **SP-140406 (ITU-R)**
6G	Sub-Thz Frequencies	Uses higher frequency bands for potentially more efficient transmission and lower energy consumption.	RAN4-94 (Online, Feb 24-28, 2020): **R4-2005179 (Huawei)**
	Intelligent Reflecting Surfaces (IRS)	Reflects signals with minimal energy, reducing the need for power-hungry transmitters.	RAN1-104 (Online, Jan 25-Feb 5, 2021): **R1-2101252 (Huawei)**
	Energy Harvesting	Enables devices to capture ambient energy to power themselves.	SA1-80 (Reno, NV, US, Nov 27-Dec 1, 2017): **S1-174183 (ESA)**
	Distributed and Collaborative Networks	User devices become part of the network, sharing resources and leading to energy savings.	SA5-144 (Online, Jun 27-Jul 1, 2022): **S5-224335 (ITU-T SG 12)**
	Green Protocols	Develops new communication protocols that are inherently energy-efficient.	CT-50 (Istanbul, TR, Dec 8-10, 2010): **CP-100568 (MCC, IMS Stage-3 IETF Protocol Alignment)**
	Holographic Beamforming	Uses metamaterials for more efficient shaping and directing of radio waves.	RAN-89 (Online, Sep 14-18, 2020): **RP-201425 (ITU-T SG13)**
	Zero-Energy Devices	Develops devices that require minimal to no energy for certain operations.	RAN-84 (Newport Beach, CA, US, Jun 3-6, 2019): **RP-191364 (InterDigital)**
	Sustainable Manufacturing	Focuses on reducing the carbon footprint in the production of network equipment.	RAN-70 (Sitges, ES, Dec 7-10, 2015): **RP-151668 (European Commission and NGMN Liaison Statement to 3GPP)**
	Lifecycle Management	Involves the entire lifecycle of components and devices, from manufacturing to disposal and recycling.	SA-88 (Online, Jun 30-Jul 3, 2020): **CP-201308 (ITU-T SG13)**; CT-88 (Online, Jun 28-Jul 1, 2020): **SP-200317 (ITU-T SG13)**

TABLE illustrates the progressive shift in telecommunications: from power optimization in 4G, AI integration in 5G, to pursuing zero-energy networks in 6G. Initially, Green Protocols, emerging in the 4G-LTE era, were overshadowed by 5G-NR advancements but have resurfaced in 6G, propelled by 5G's higher data rates and energy demands. This revival is largely influenced by standardization bodies like 3GPP and ITU. Uniquely, the European Space Agency (ESA) has contributed to discussions on energy-efficient space and satellite communications, emphasizing long-lasting, low-maintenance asset trackers powered by sustainable sources like solar panels. Additionally, the European Commission and NGMN advocate for sustainable manufacturing practices in telecommunications, focusing on non-time-critical optimizations for eco-sustainability and operational efficiency in challenging industrial environments. This reflects a broad and cross-sectoral commitment to enhancing energy efficiency in communication technologies.

A holistic strategy encompassing business model innovation and circular economy adoption is essential for a sustainable supply chain. This approach is critical for managing data effectively and aligning Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) objectives with operational and supplier sustainability strategies, demanding new considerations in supply chain management, product development, and network operations.

As regulatory expectations for sustainability reporting rise, the industry's dedication to environmental stewardship is not only a compliance measure but also a strategic necessity, recognizing the deep connection between the sector's sustainability and its lasting impact on the environment. ∎