

Massive Access for Future Wireless Communication Systems

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Abstract

Multiple access technology played an important role in wireless communication in the last decades: it increases the capacity of the channel and allows different users to access the system simultaneously. However, the conventional multiple access technology, as originally designed for current human-centric wireless networks, is not scalable for future machine-centric wireless networks.

Massive access (studied in the literature under such names as “massive-device multiple access”, “unsourced massive random access”, “massive connectivity”, “massive machine-type communication”, and “many-access channels”) exhibits a clean break with current networks by potentially supporting millions of devices in each cellular network. The tremendous growth in the number of connected devices requires a fundamental rethinking of the conventional multiple access technologies in favor of new schemes suited for massive random access. Among the many new challenges arising in this setting, the most relevant are: the fundamental limits of communication from a massive number of bursty devices transmitting simultaneously with short packets, the design of low complexity and energy-efficient massive access coding and communication schemes, efficient methods for the detection of a relatively small number of active users among a large number of potential user devices with sporadic transmission

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pattern, and the integration of massive access with massive MIMO and other important wireless communication technologies. This paper presents an overview of the concept of massive access wireless communication and of the contemporary research on this important topic.

I. BACKGROUND: MULTIPLE-ACCESS WITH SMALL NUMBER OF ACTIVE USERS

In wireless communication systems, multiple access is a technique to allow multiple users to obtain the access to the system simultaneously using a shared communication media. Multiple access technologies can be generally categorized into coordinated multiple access and uncoordinated multiple access (also known as random access).

Coordinated scheme refers to a scenario where the users (i.e., the transmitters) are coordinated by a central unit (typically an access point or a base station) prior to their transmissions. In contrast, uncoordinated access refer to scenarios where such coordination is absent. As we shall see, such a classification depends critically on how we define coordination. In this paper, we shall consider a multiple access communication scheme being coordinated if each of the transmitters has some unique signaling/signature that is can be used by the receiver to perform detection. We remark that, such a classification method is not perfect and sometimes can be subjective. However, even if they are inaccurate, such classifications are needed to determine the important factors for system modeling and for comparing different multiple access approaches.

A. *Coordinated Multiple Access*

Coordinated multiple access technology requires dedicated multiple access protocols to coordinate the communication of the accessible users in the systems. Typical coordinated multiple access technologies can be summarized as follows.

- 1) Frequency division multiple access (FDMA) divides the bandwidth of the channel into separate non-overlapping frequency subchannels, and assigns each subchannel to a separate user.
- 2) Time division multiple access (TDMA) uses non-overlapping time slots to serve different users.
- 3) Code division multiple access (CDMA) serves multiple users simultaneously over the same frequency band by using different codes. In CDMA, each user is allocated to the full available bandwidth instead of transmitting over separate frequency sub-band.

- 4) Space-division multiple access (SDMA) utilizes spatial beamforming technology to communicate with multiple users in the same time at the same frequency. The directional beamforming avoids interference among users.
- 5) Non-orthogonal multiple access (NOMA) allows more users communicating simultaneously via non-orthogonal resources. The fundamental principle behind NOMA technology is the classical multiuser information theory.

The above coordinated multiple access technologies in their conventional form have become mature, and have been incorporated into various wireless broadband standards. For example, the basic FDMA technology was implemented in the first generation (1G) cellular systems. The second generation (2G) cellular systems were based on a combination of TDMA and FDMA, and CDMA was the main access technology in the third generation (3G) cellular systems. An advanced form of FDMA, orthogonal frequency-division multiple access (OFDMA) scheme is used in both fourth generation (4G) and fifth generation (5G) cellular systems. Also, SDMA in the form of multiuser MIMO is expected to be at the center of the forthcoming 5G.

As the telecom industry started the standardization of 5G technology, several NOMA schemes were proposed to the 3rd Generation Partnership Project (3GPP) as candidates for multiple access and were thoroughly studied. However, the number of users per degree of freedom (d.o.f)¹ by current multiple access technologies is modest. For example, the typical overloading factors (the number of users per frequency domain) considered in the most recent 3GPP study are between 1.5 and 3, beyond which the system performance may suffer significant degradation.

B. Uncoordinated Multiple Access

Uncoordinated multiple access lets a set of users to transmit over a common wireless medium opportunistically and independently. In practice, the reason not to perform a sufficient coordination among the users trying to access the system might be various, e.g., the low latency requirement to restrict the coordination establishment, a lack of global scheduling information, or the bursty and random access pattern for the activity of the users. Uncoordinated multiple access technology has been widely used in

¹per d.o.f means per signal dimension in time-frequency-antenna domain

the initial access process of both cellular terrestrial and satellite communication networks [1, 2], where a random access mechanism is implemented.

It should be noted that uncoordinated multiple access in definition of this paper is not equivalent to “grant-free”. For coordinated multiple access, the traffic pattern of each user (i.e., the user activity) does not need to be deterministic. In other words, each user may communicate with the receiver randomly, and the active users in each communication duration may be unknown at the receiver *a priori*. This communication scenario is typically referred to as grant-free multiple access. However, the key difference between a coordinated grant-free multiple access and an uncoordinated multiple access is that, in the former scenario, each user is assigned with a dedicated pilot/signature sequence, which could be used by the receiver to identify its presence. In contrast, in uncoordinated multiple access, the users all share the same transmission protocol, no signature allocation/coordination is performed prior to each transmission. Thus, from the perspective of the receiver, the users are unsourced.

ALOHA is a classical solution for the unsourced random access [3], which follows a simple model in which all transmissions with overlapping d.o.f. (“collisions”) are treated as complete erasures, from which nothing can be recovered. Following a collision a retransmission is attempted (by each of the participants of the collision), and a lot of research went into ensuring that the resulting algorithms are stable (i.e., do not enter endless retransmission loops).

While very simple to implement, a crucial bottleneck of the ALOHA is that only $1/e \approx 37\%$ of the d.o.f. carry useful (uncollided) information. A recent approach to alleviate this limit is to use forward error correction (preventive packet retransmissions) and the successive interference cancelation (SIC) strategy to cancel replicas of successfully decoded packets. This idea, known as coded-slotted-ALOHA (CS-ALOHA) [4], allows one to achieve almost 100% efficiency.

In this paper, we focus on one-shot noninteractive multiple access scenarios, in which a user (i.e., the transmitter) can only transmit but can not receive. There is a large body of literature on random access with interaction or feedback (for example the carrier sensing multiple access (CSMA), in which a user can hear whether other nodes are transmitting after a very small prorogation delay relative to a packet transmission time). Interactive multiple access schemes are beyond the scope of this paper.

II. GOING LARGE: MASSIVE ACCESS

All technologies reviewed in the previous section mostly break down when we increase the number of users (per spectral d.o.f.). For example, for coordinated multiple access, the overhead of coordinating this many users overwhelms the system. The ALOHA results in too many collisions, effectively rendering communication impossible. The CS-ALOHA requires many packet retransmissions dramatically increasing the effective energy-per-bit.

Massive access is an emerging technology, that accommodates the number of users per transmission medium by possibly orders of magnitude higher compared to current state-of-the-art. With massive access, we refer to a scenario in which wireless networks simultaneously serve millions of infrequently communicating devices. This is driven by fast transition from Internet of Things (IoT) wireless networks towards future Internet of Everything (IoE) wireless networks, which includes the intelligent connection of people, process, data and things. A Cisco research report reveals that 99.4% of physical objects that can be part of the IoE concept are not currently interconnected [5]. Therefore, the number of accessible devices in the wireless networks will increase dramatically in future. Figure 1 provides the evolution of number of devices connected in the global communication systems from the past Internet of People (IoP, connecting people), to current IoT, and finally future interconnection of everything as the concept of IoE [6].

The difficulties with massive access can be summarized by the slogan: “Supporting 1M users at 10bps is much more difficult than 10 users at 1Mbps [7]”. This is because massive access has several significantly different properties. The unique features of the massive access research are as follows:

- 1) The number of active users in each d.o.f. are orders of magnitude larger than the traditional model (i.e., massive). When the number of users goes to infinity, a positive rate as in the classical multiple access channel setup is not achievable [8]. This is one of the main reasons why SIC cannot guarantee an arbitrarily small error decoding probability for massive access channel.
- 2) The flow for each device in massive access is often expected to be a relatively small quantity of information to transmit (e.g., several hundred bits). Explicit characterizations for the fundamental limits of massive access communication with finite blocklength and finite payload size are still unknown. However, various upper and lower bounds are obtained in the literature. These bounds

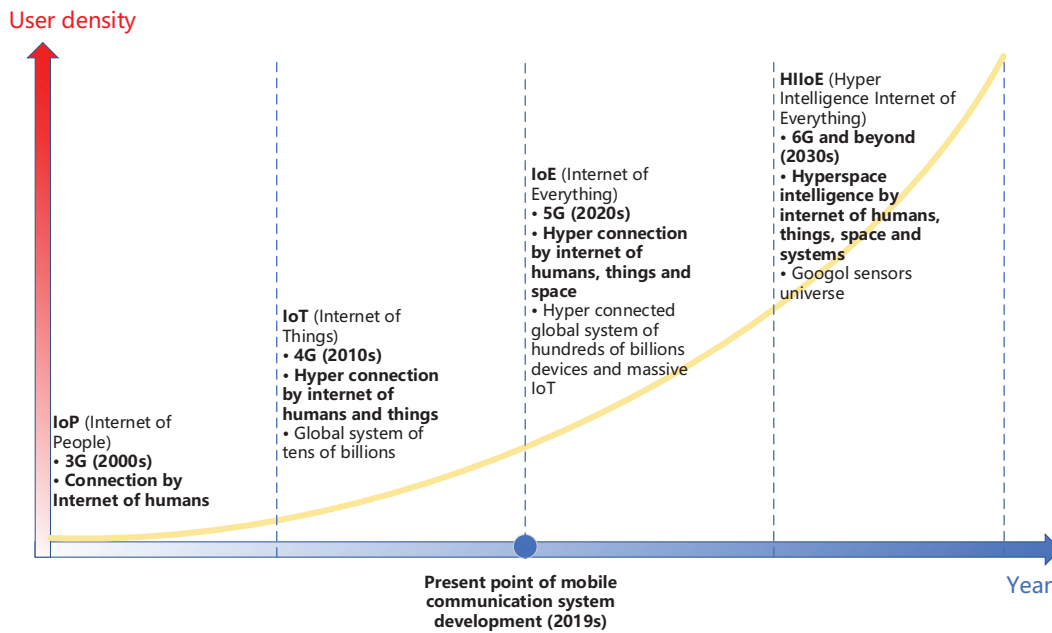


Fig. 1: Evolution of number of devices connected in the global communication systems.

indicate that the fundamental limits of massive access communication are drastically different from traditional Shannon-type results, which we will review in this paper.

- 3) To approach the fundamental limits, new (and rather non-traditional) architectures are required. We will review these new architectures in this paper.
- 4) For massive access in wireless fading channels, it is unreasonable to assume that the receiver knows the exact channel state information (CSI) of the active users in advance, even for the statistical CSI [9]. There are two reasons for this point. First, for a massive number of devices, assigning a dedicated pilot to each device for channel estimation is difficult. More importantly, the knowledge of the CSI for all potential devices requires that each device's channel is calibrated and the attenuation due to the propagation pathloss is stored in memory at the time of deployment. Such calibration procedure must be repeated over time since the propagation conditions change. For millions of sensor devices, maintaining such calibration is extremely intractable. Even the statistical knowledge of channel coefficients is hard to obtain in practice. Extracting the statistical CSI requires collecting a large sample of the received signal energy from each device in the network. This is tantamount to establish a combined histogram for millions of sensor devices. Similar to the calibration, this needs

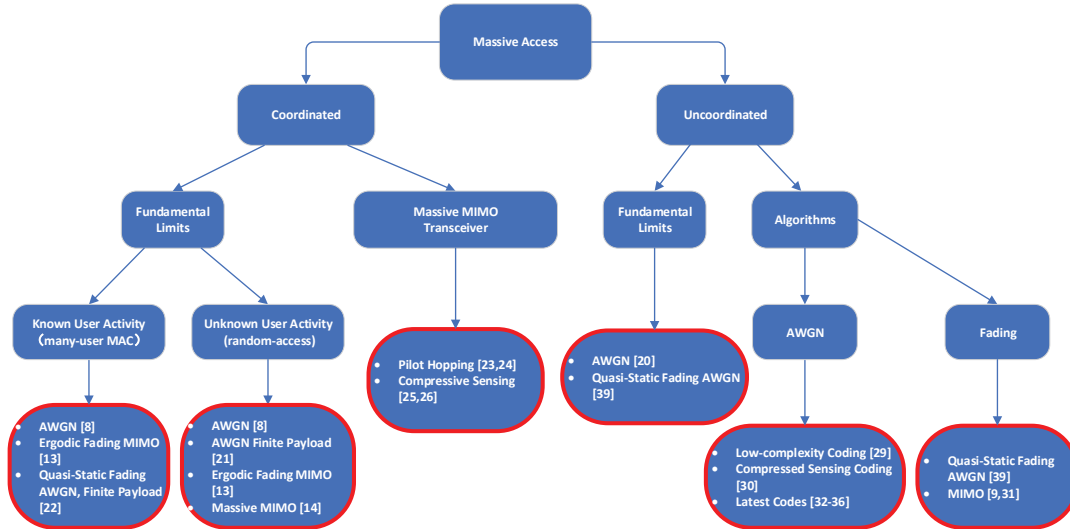


Fig. 2: The general framework for the recent typical work on massive access research.

a large amount of data exchange which is difficult to implement in practice.

To investigate massive access wireless communication, the above-mentioned features have to be taken into consideration jointly. A summary of the recent work on this topic is sketched in Figure 2. In general, the massive access research can be categorized into two separate parts: coordinated massive access and uncoordinated massive access. In the following, we discuss the details of these work.

In this paper, we will discuss the fundamental limits of massive access in both asymptotic and non-asymptotic regime. The asymptotic regime is defined as $K_a \rightarrow \infty$, or $n \rightarrow \infty$, or $N_r \rightarrow \infty$, where K_a , n and N_r are the number of active users, the block length and the number of receive antennas, respectively. The non-asymptotic regime is defined as that K_a , n and N_r are finite. The non-asymptotic regime is more relevant from a practical point of view, but a good understanding of the fundamental limit in the asymptotic regime may provide good insights into the behavior of complicated bounds and codes. There are some previous review papers discussing conventional machine-to-machine communications where the overloading factor is less than 1 and orthogonal scheme is used [10–12]. In contrast, this paper focuses on future massive machine type communications where overloading factor is much larger and non-orthogonal scheme is used.

III. FUNDAMENTAL LIMITS FOR COORDINATED MASSIVE ACCESS

A. The Infinite E_b/N_0 Regime

Classical multiuser information theory establishes the capacity region of conventional MAC with a fixed number of users comparing to the asymptotically infinity coding blocklength. However, when the number of active users goes to infinity, there is a lot of multiuser interference (MUI). As a result, the conventional information rate of Gaussian MAC defined by information bit per channel use for each user approaches zero (i.e., $\frac{1}{K_a} \log(1 + K_a P) \xrightarrow{K_a \rightarrow \infty} 0$) for coordinated massive access communication.

To address this issue, Chen *et al.* propose a concept of symmetric message-length capacity for massive access communication over additive white gaussian noise (AWGN) channels [8]. The message-length capacity is defined under three important assumptions: 1) Each user is assigned an individual codebook; 2) The number of user and the blocklength grow to infinite at a given speed; 3) The average error probability is defined as the probability that the decoder mistakenly estimate the message for any of the users. Message-length capacity calculates the information bit transmitted along the entire blocklength. Thus, although the conventional notion of information bit per channel use for each user goes to zero, we can still send a total amount of information that is arbitrarily large. In general, the message-length capacity is still an asymptotic analysis which assumes infinite blocklength and infinite E_b/N_0 [7].

The model in [8] comes with two simplifications: 1) the gains from each user are the same; 2) the message-length rate for each user are the same as well. These simplifications are relaxed in [13], where the authors consider multiple-input multiple-output (MIMO) with non-symmetric rate. The message-length capacity region of the non-symmetric MIMO massive access channel is derived in [13]. Two important observations are made: 1) When the number of receive antenna is finite, similar to the AWGN case, the authors show that the conventional notion of capacity region is not meaningful. Instead, they reveal that message-length capacity region of MIMO massive access channel is dominated by sum rate constraint only, and the individual user rate is determined by a specific factor that corresponds to the allocation of the sum rate. Moreover, it is shown that asymptotically, there is no benefit of having multiple antenna at the transmitters for the individual rate and what matters is the number of antennas at the receiver; 2) When the number of receive antennas grow to infinity, SIC is able to work and the capacity region reduces to that of the conventional MIMO MAC. The basic intuition behind this result is that the receive

power per degree of freedom goes to infinity when the number of receive antenna grows unbounded. As a result, the error probability of each user decays exponentially and a positive per channel use rate can be achieved.

By considering a single cell communication system with k_n users randomly deployed within the cellular network, Figure 3 shows the impact of receive antenna numbers N_r on the capacity of MIMO massive access communication. Both the asymptotic and the exact sum-rate expressions are given in [13]. Each user has a transmit power P_k generated uniformly within the interval $[5, 15]$. The channel of each user conforms to i.i.d. Rayleigh fading. To meet the massive connectivity requirement, the number of users is set to $k_n = n/2$, which grows linearly with the codelength n . Each user is equipped with $N_t = 4$ transmit antennas. We observe from Figure 3 that given different codelength n , the capacities all grow linearly with an increasing number of N_r . This is because the number of degrees of freedom of a MIMO system is limited by the minimum of the number of transmit antenna and the number of receive antenna. For massive access communication, the ratio of the sum signal power to noise power is high². Therefore, we have $N_{\text{DOF}} = \min\{N_r, k_n N_t\} = N_r$. As a result, the capacity of MIMO massive access grows linearly with the number of receive antenna as shown in Figure 3.

Finally, as discussed in Section II and illustrated in Figure 2, user identification is an important step in coordinated massive access communication. The authors in [8] further investigate the model where only an unknown subset of users send data. These active users utilize unique signatures to enable their identification by the receiver. The capacity penalty due to this user activity uncertainty is obtained as a form of the identified signature length. One important message from [8] is that, asymptotically when number of users and blocklength grow to infinity with a fixed rate, and the payload of each user grows to infinity logarithmically with the number of active user, it is asymptotically optimal to do a two-step approach: a step of active user detection, and a communication stage (see also [13] for a generalization to the MIMO case). When the payload of each user is finite, using a partial resource to perform activity detection separately can be suboptimal. However, the optimal communication scheme is still unknown. For MIMO case when $K_a/N_r = o(1)$, another observation for active user detection is that we can identify the activity of $K_a = O(D_c^2/\log^2(K/K_a))$ active users [14], where D_c and K represents a coherence

²The sum capacity depends only on the sum signal power.

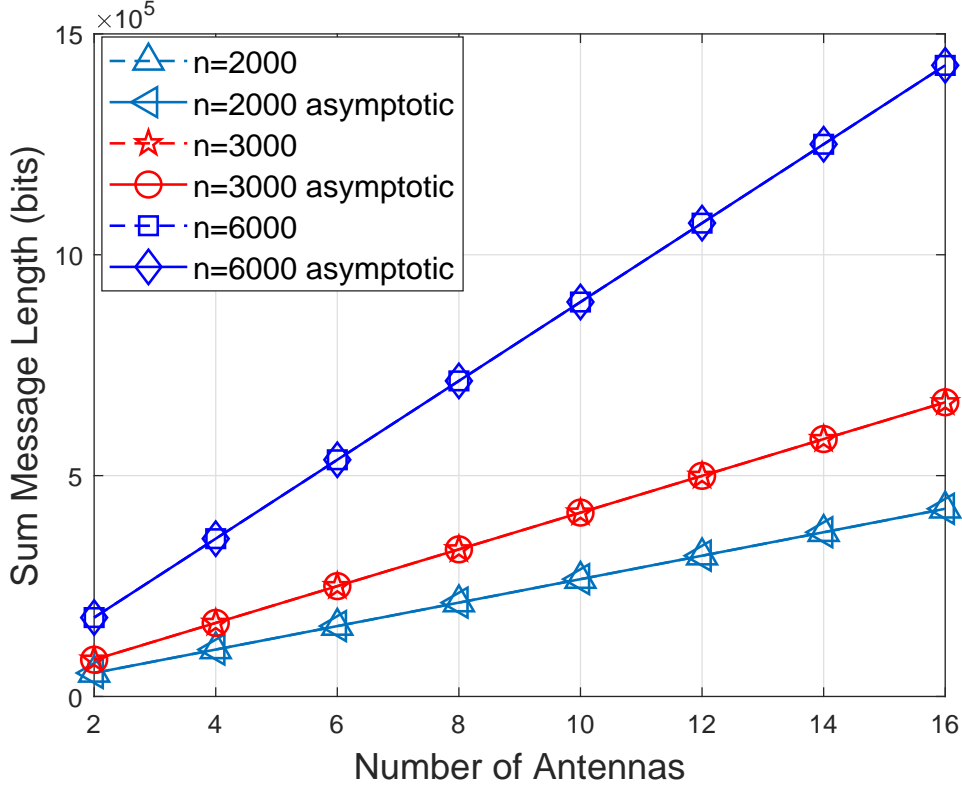


Fig. 3: The capacity of MIMO massive access versus growing receive antennas.

block length and the total number of users, respectively. This is much larger than the previous bound $K_a = O(D_c/\log(K/K_a))$ obtained via traditional compressed sensing techniques [15].

B. The Finite E_b/N_0 Regime

For practice, the infinite packet-size/infinite E_b/N_0 asymptotics are not very relevant. In order to fix this problem, we need to abandon the traditional joint probability of error criterion (dominant in the multiuser information theory literature since the days of Liao, Ahslwede, Cover and Wyner [16–19]) and introduce per-user probability of error (PUPE) [20]. More specifically, PUPE is defined as the average (over the active users) fraction of the transmitted messages that are not decoded correctly.

Under PUPE [20] and most recently [21] showed progressively tighter bounds on the fundamental energy-per-bit required for reliable massive access communication. More exactly, those work consider the regime where the number of bits transmitted by each user (“payload”) is fixed, and the number of users grows to infinity linearly with the blocklength (so that the density of users per d.o.f., and hence the spectral efficiency, is held constant). The two key observations of [20,21] are the following:

- 1) There exist coded-access architectures which exhibit perfect multi-user interference cancellation at low spectral efficiencies. For example, for payload of 100 bits and spectral efficiencies below 1 bps/Hz, it is possible to arrange communication of arbitrarily large number of users so that each one's energy-per-bit is almost exactly the same as if he was communicating alone (without any MUI). We call this a perfect MUI-cancellation property.
- 2) The orthogonal massive access (TDMA, FDMA, CDMA) do not have the perfect MUI-cancellation property. In other words, even in the coordinated massive access setting, orthogonalizing access is severely suboptimal from the energy-efficiency point of view.

Kowshik and Polyanskiy study the same regime, but consider the effects of Rayleigh fading [22]. Same behavior is observed (at low user density regime, perfect MUI cancellation is possible). Also, it is observed that a larger energy-per-bit is required for reliable massive access over the quasi-static Rayleigh fading channel compared to the AWGN case to overcome the randomness in the fading gains, especially when CSI is not known at the receiver. However, this randomness is shown to be helpful for the decoder to differentiate users.

IV. COORDINATED MASSIVE ACCESS MEETS MASSIVE MIMO

Massive MIMO technology, which utilizes a very large number of antennas at the BS with simple signal processing to provide services for a comparatively small (compared to the number of antennas) number of active devices, is regarded as a key technology for future wireless communication systems. By providing spatial resolution within the same time/frequency resource, massive MIMO system can support massive access communication in a better way.

Carvalho *et al.* propose a joint pilot assignment and data transmission protocol for crowded massive MIMO system, where each user selects a pilot signal in each time slot based on a pseudo-random pilot hopping pattern known at the BS [23]. Therefore, over an asymptotically long time horizon, the BS can detect the active users based on the specific pilot hopping pattern. Moreover, the effects of pilot signals collision can be averaged out to enable a reliable rate for transmission. Gao *et al.* extended the pseudo-random pilot hopping scheme to practical spatially correlated massive MIMO channels [24].

A key characteristic of the massive access in future wireless network lies in the sporadic traffic of users, i.e., only a small number of users are activated to access the network in any given time interval. By exploiting this sporadic traffic, a compressive sensing-based scheme is proposed to detect user activity and estimate the channels for massive access in massive MIMO systems [25]. The proposed scheme is based on the classical AMP framework from compressed sensing. It is proved in [25] that by utilizing AMP technique to exploit sporadic traffic property of massive access, the missed user detection probability and the false alarm probability for activity detection can be suppressed to zero in the asymptotic antenna dimension regime.

Ke *et al.* propose several compressive sensing-based adaptive active user detection and channel estimation schemes by exploiting the virtual angular domain sparsity of more practical massive MIMO channels [26]. Here we provide some simulation results for the massive access in massive MIMO systems in [26]. In the simulations, the BS employs uniform linear array of $M = 64$ antennas, $K = 500$ potential users are randomly distributed in the cell with radius 1 km, and $K_a = 50$ ($K_a \ll K$) users are active. The results here are obtained by averaging over $N_{\text{sim}} = 1000$ numerical simulations. The system adopts OFDM for the massive access in enhanced mobile broadband scenario, where $N = 2048$ subcarriers and the cyclic prefix of the length $N_{\text{CP}} = 64$ are considered. The length of pilot signals is set to be the same with the length of cyclic prefix for the estimation of the maximum multipath delay N_{CP} . For each user's massive MIMO channel, we consider the one-ring channel model. Each user is with the limited angle spread seen from the BS, so that each user's massive MIMO channel exhibits clustered sparsity in virtual angular domain. We assume this effective angular-domain sparsity level S_a varies from 4 to 10.

Three schemes are evaluated for the above-mentioned massive-access setup [26]:

- **Scheme 1:** The spatial-frequency structured sparsity is exploited, where both channel gain-based activity detector (CG-AD) and belief indicator-based activity detector (BI-AD) are used.
- **Scheme 2:** Both spatial-frequency and angular-frequency structured sparsity are simultaneously exploited, where both CG-AD and BI-AD are used.
- **Scheme 3:** Apply Turbo-structure, and where spatial-frequency and angular-frequency structured sparsity are alternately exploited, where only BI-AD can be used.

Scheme 1, Scheme 2, and Scheme 3 are described in details in [26, Section III-B-1)], [26, Section

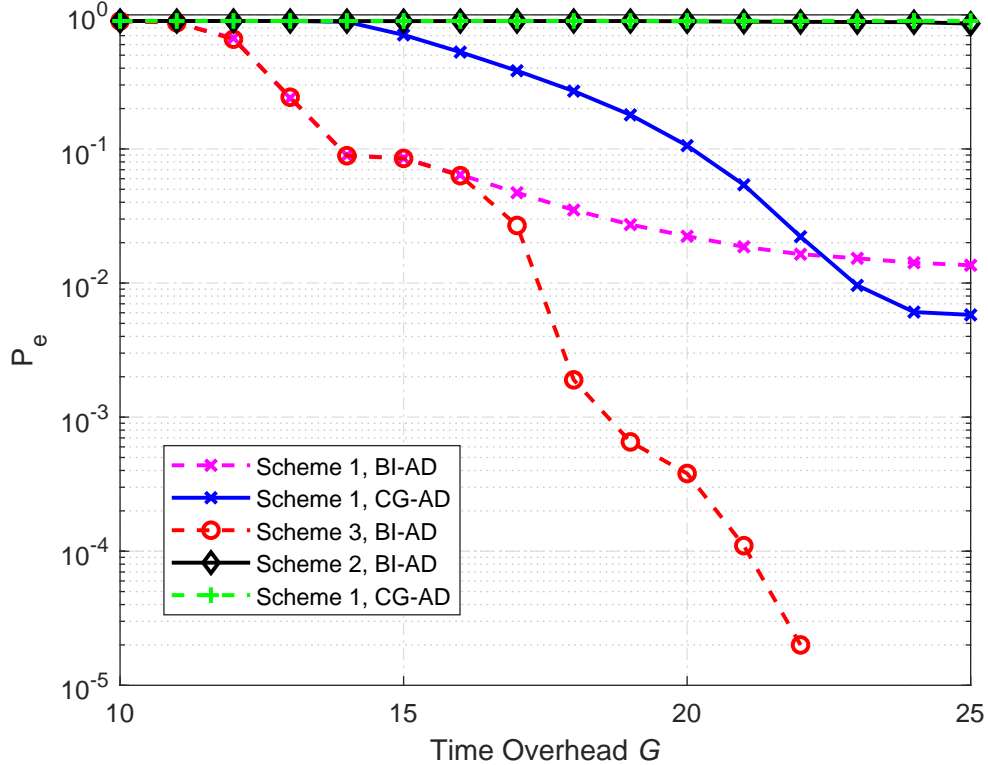


Fig. 4: Comparison of error detection probability of Schemes 1–3 as functions of G .

III-B-2)], and [26, Section III-C-1)], respectively.

We observe from Figure 4 that *Scheme 3* using the iteration structure can achieve much better active user detection and channel estimation performance³ than *Scheme 1* and *Scheme 2* even for the very low training overhead $G \ll K_a$, which shows its superiority in the considerable reduction of access latency.

V. UNCOORDINATED MASSIVE ACCESS

Unsourced random access mechanism is implemented for the initial access in both cellular terrestrial and satellite communication networks [1, 2]. In contrast to coordinated multiple access protocols, a number of uncoordinated users who share a common channel (codebook) send their data opportunistically and retransmit when collision occurs. Several multiple access coding schemes are proposed in the literature to address the unsourced random access problem, such as slotted ALOHA [4, 27] and TIN [20]. However, for massive random access when the set of active users become large, these schemes are not able to work efficiently anymore [20].

³For error detection probability in Figure 4, we count an error if any user is mis-detected or false alarmed.

R. Gallager appeals to “a coding technology that is applicable for a large set of transmitters of which a small, but variable, subset simultaneously use the channel” more than 30 years ago [28]. To the best of our knowledge, this coding scheme has not been perfectly designed so far. To shed light on the fundamental limitations of this problem, Y. Polyanskiy proposed a novel formulation for massive random access [20, 29]. Comparing to the conventional coding schemes for coordinated massive access, Polyanskiy’s framework is developed under three key assumptions: 1) All the users share a common codebook; under the common codebook assumption, the decoder only needs to decode a list of messages transmitted from the active users, but the identities of the set of users do not need to be recovered⁴. 2) The error probability is defined as the average fraction of mis-decoded messages over the number of active users, which is referred to as PUPE. This is also a more reasonable performance evaluation metric since the requirement of correctly decoding for every user’s message as in the classical multiuser information theory is intractable when there are “infinity many” users in the system. Moreover, from a practical perspective, a user typically does not care about whether other users’ messages are correctly decoded or not. 3) Each user transmits a fixed small amount of information bits within a finite code length n . The analysis under finite blocklength and finite payload assumption in [20] indicate that the minimal energy per bit required for a given error probability has a certain “inertia”: as the user density μ increases from zero, initially the energy-per-bit stays the same as in the single-user case. This implies that the optimal multiuser access architectures should be able to perfectly cancel all multiuser interference and achieve an essentially single-user performance for each user as long as the user density is below a critical threshold⁵. Note that this is significantly different from traditional Shannon-type multiuser results based on asymptotic analysis.

The above-mentioned three aspects formulate a new information theory framework for massive access communication. Under Polyanskiy’s massive unsourced random access framework, it is revealed in [20] that existing schemes such as “treat noise as interference” (TIN) and ALOHA are very far from the

⁴In some applications, the identity of the source may be needed by the receiver. For example, specific sensors need to update their status periodically. To apply this framework to these applications, each user could embed its identity inside its payload. However, we remark that the user identity is recovered at the higher layers of the communication protocol (by interpreting the content of the payload) rather than the physical layer.

⁵Interestingly, the same effect is observed for coordinated massive access scenarios in Section III, and for both AWGN and fading channels (see also [7, 21, 22]).

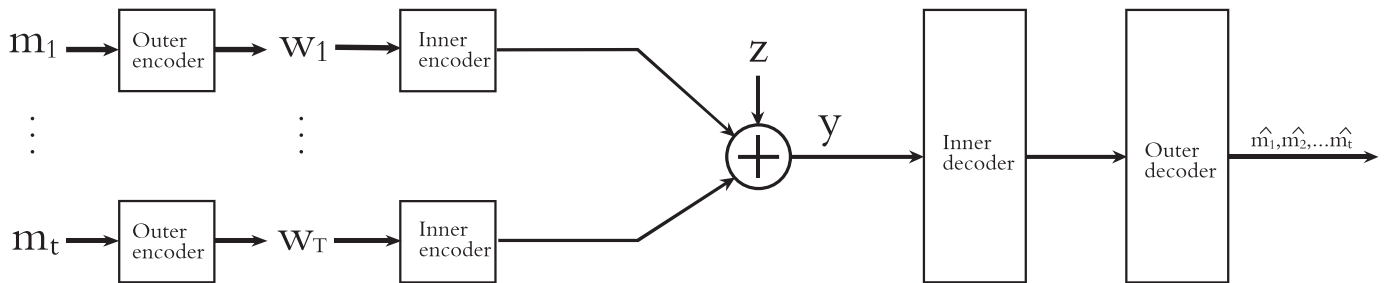


Fig. 5: Concatenation coding structure under Polyanskiy’s massive unsourced random access framework.

analytical random coding bounds. To improve the performance, a T -fold ALOHA approach is proposed in [29], where the n channel uses are divided into V sub-blocks (i.e., slots), and each active user randomly select one sub-block. If the number of users in each sub-block is no more than T , then the decoder try to decode all corresponding messages; otherwise, nothing is decoded. To implement T -fold ALOHA in practice, a low complexity coding scheme for the random access channel with T active users is also proposed in [29]. In the proposed scheme, each user encodes its message based on a common concatenation code, as illustrated in Figure 5. The inner code is a linear code, which converts T -user Gaussian MAC into a mod p (noiseless) adder MAC⁶. The outer code encodes the individual message for each user that embedded in the mod p sum.

Another principal discovery of [20] is the following. The main practical goal is to study finite-blocklength performance bounds (for example, minimal E_b/N_0 for a fixed number of degrees of freedom n , fixed PUPE ϵ , fixed payload k and variable number of active users K_a). However, the resulting bounds are quite cumbersome and do not admit easy analytical interpretation. Fortunately, the finite blocklength questions at relevant values of (n, k, K_a) seem to be closely approximated by the asymptotic question where $n \rightarrow \infty$, $K_a = \mu n$ and the payload of each user is set to $M = 2^k K_a$. The effective E_b/N_0 should be defined as energy of the codeword normalized by $2k$ (instead of $2 \log_2 M$). Studying asymptotics in this regime appears to closely resemble behavior of the fundamental limits at finite n .

Following Polyanskiy’s massive unsourced random access framework, Amalladinne *et al.* propose a CS-based coding scheme for AWGN channel by using a CS code and a tree code as the inner code and outer code in Figure 5, respectively [30]. Each user’s message is divided into smaller sub-message

⁶For the coding scheme given in [29], $p = 2$. Therefore, the sum rate of the scheme in [29] is less than 1 bit/channel use.

and encoded by one column of a given coding matrix. Parity bits are added to individual sub-messages using a systematic linear block code. The main purpose of the redundancy in [30] is to allow the receiver to stitch together all the sub-messages into a single long message. Therefore, the parity bits are like cyclic redundancy check bits that verify the connection between messages in two subsequent blocks. The decoder first identifies which columns of the coding matrix have been transmitted from the received noisy superposition. This is a classical “sparse support identification” CS problem and can be efficiently solved based on standard algorithms. Then, the decoder pieces together the individual segments of the original messages where each sub-message sequence represents a valid path in the tree.

Fengler *et al.* extend Polyanskiy’s framework to multiple-antenna channel [9]. A key difference between the AWGN channel and the multiple-antenna fading channel is whether channel estimation is required for detection. For AWGN channel, the channel coefficients of all users are regarded as 1 and the detection is implicitly coherent by default. For multiple-antenna fading channel, it may be unreasonable to assume that all users’ channel knowledge are known a priori. In standard multiuser MIMO communication systems, dedicated pilot signal is allocated to each user to allow the BS receiver estimate its channel knowledge and perform a coherent detection. Apparently, assigning a dedicated pilot to each user does not conform to the single common codebook framework. Moreover, estimating the channel knowledge of all users for massive access communication is difficult. Based on the concatenated code structure, Fengler *et al.* propose a non-Bayesian inter code to perform activity detection by treating the users’ large-scale pathloss coefficients as a deterministic unknown sparse non-negative vector. Then an outer tree code as in [30] is used to decode individual message for each active user. Surprisingly, simulation results indicate that the proposed scheme in [9] outperforms the Bayesian vector approximated message passing (AMP) even when complete instantaneous CSI of each user is available at the receiver. Ding *et al.* incorporate active user identification, channel estimation, and data decoding in a single phase [31]. To further improve the performance, a turbo AMP structure is proposed, where the overall graphical model of the detection problem is divided into two subgraphs: one represents the bilinear constraints of the channel model, and another represents the structured sparsity of the user signals. The two subgraphs exchange information iteratively until convergence.

Polyanskiy’s framework has attracted a wide research interest from different aspects recently. For AWGN

channel, Calderbank et al. [32], Fengler et al. [33], Pradhan et al. [34], and and Marshakov et al. [35,36] use binary chirp code, sparse regression code, short blocklength LDPC code, and Polar code as inter code in Figure 5 to obtain additional coding gains, respectively. Effros et al. develop an identity-blind decoding receiver architecture when the receiver does not know the number of active user [37]. Inan et al. study the active user detection problem by exploiting a novel sparse group testing method [38]. Kowshik et al. extend Polyanskiys framework into quasi-static fading AWGN channel [39]. It is revealed in [39] that by leveraging the inherent randomization introduced by the channel allows for an easier user separation and even low-complexity schemes can closely approach optimality.

Figure 6 plots the E_b/N_0 required by Ordentlich-Polyanskiy scheme [29], sparse regression code scheme [33], CS-based coding scheme [34], and relevant benchmarks for $k = 100$ bits per user, $n = 30000$ channel uses, $P_e = 0.05$ error probability, and different number of active users K_a . We observe from Figure 6 that the TIN scheme and the traditional ALOHA scheme result in very poor energy efficiency in the massive access regime whereas Ordentlich-Polyanskiy scheme is still effective when $K_a = 300$. However, we also observe from Figure 6 that Ordentlich-Polyanskiy scheme, CS-based coding scheme, and sparse regression code scheme still have obvious gap comparing to an achievable theoretical bound at $K_a = 300$. Therefore, the coding scheme has substantial space to be improved.

To summarize, current coding schemes for massive unsourced random access mainly revolve around two ingredients: 1) exploit sparsity among user codewords to reduce collisions and interferences, where ALOHA or coded slotted ALOHA technologies can be employed, 2) chunk the set of information bits into smaller-sized messages, and use dedicated approach to decode each of the smaller-sized messages (e.g., compressive sensing [30]).

VI. MASSIVE ACCESS: PROMISING RESEARCH POTENTIAL

Massive access reveals many entirely new problems in communication theory which needs research:

- **Communication Scheme for Common Codebook:** Massive access results in vast amounts of active users that need to be served simultaneously. A simple access protocol is vital. Therefore, communication scheme for common codebook without additional coordination is important. The capacity-achieving coding for massive access communication under the common codebook assumption is missing. The current coding scheme still has an obvious gap comparing to the theoretical bound. A

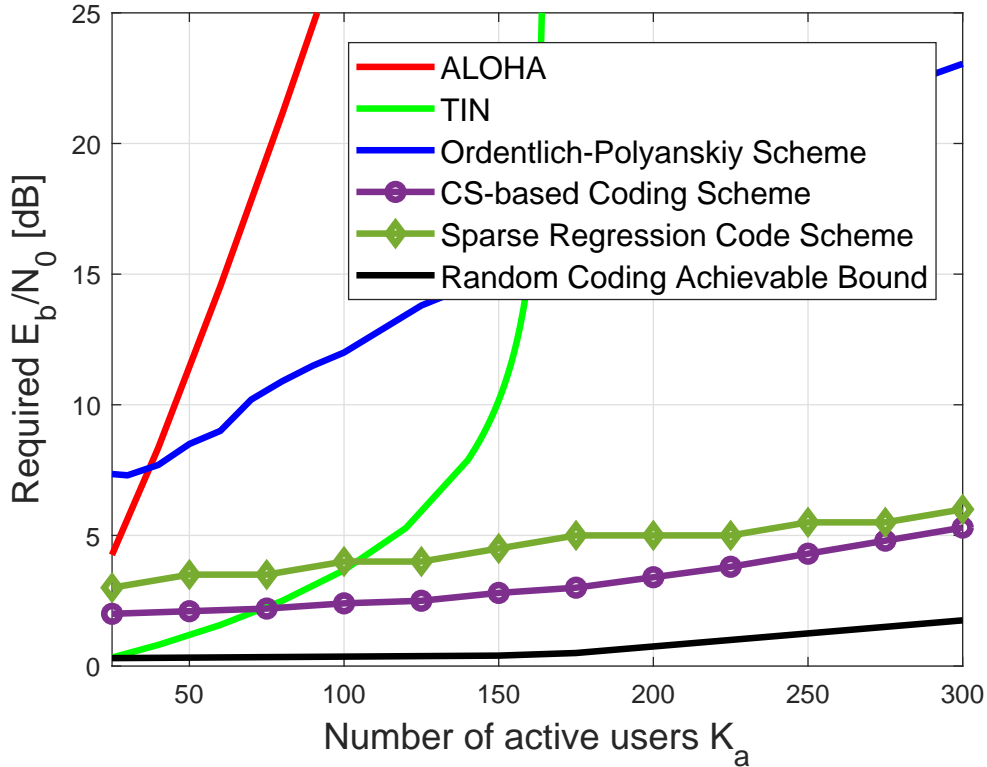


Fig. 6: Comparison between the E_b/N_0 required by various schemes for $k = 100$ bits per user, $n = 30000$ channel uses, $P_e = 0.05$ error probability, and different number of active users K_a

sparse source coding compression and recovery approach might be helpful for further improving the performance.

- User Identification:** A key characteristic of the massive access is that there are a massive number of infrequently communicating users. In any given instant, only a fraction number of users (still large) are active and the activity pattern is unknown at the receiver and needs to be identified. Therefore, user identification poses an important role in massive access communication. The receiver has to process a large amount of data from massive users in real time. Some technologies from compressive sensing might be helpful. Still, there are many issues to be further studied, e.g., user identification method in practice massive MIMO channels, low processing complexity (linear or nearly linear) algorithms, asynchronous user identification schemes, and non-Bayesian user identification methods, etc.
- Imperfect CSI assumption:** For massive access in multiple antenna systems, acquiring the exact

instantaneous/statistical CSI of all users is difficult and may cause a huge overhead. As a result, imperfect CSI at the transmitters and the receiver is a more reasonable assumption for practice massive access systems. Robust design based on imperfect CSI should be investigated. This will result in new optimization problems and there is enormous potential for the design of optimized algorithms.

- **Short-packet Communication:** For massive access communication, each user sends a fixed number of bit to the receiver due to finite energy-per-bit and low latency requirement. The short packet communication will cause a finite-blocklength effect. For a large number of users, this will result in a significant different transmission strategy. As a result, finite-blocklength analysis is important for massive access communication. New system performance limits should be derived via finite-blocklength information theory and new communication schemes should be designed based on finite-blocklength information rate.
- **Energy-efficiency and Cost-efficiency:** Massive access is a wireless technology to provide connectivity to a massive number of low-power, low-cost, low-complexity devices. Therefore, energy-efficiency and low-complexity signal processing algorithms and hardware structures are essential for massive access systems. To realize finite energy-per-bit requires total power constraint over the entire blocklength, finite payload of each user, and PUPE constraint. The fundamental analysis for these models reveal many new theoretical results which are significant different from conventional Shannon-type results. To approach the fundamental limits, new architectures with low implementation complexity are necessary. Artificial intelligence aided communication might be helpful.
- **Privacy and Security:** Small payloads, low-latency constraints, and limited computational capabilities of the devices make it hard to employ current cryptographic methods in massive access wireless communication. Novel security and privacy protocols need to be developed. Physical layer security has recently been recognized as a promising mechanism to achieve confidentiality by exploiting the inherent randomness of wireless channels at the physical layer. In particular, physical layer security can enable secure communication over the wireless medium without the aid of an encryption key. This advantage makes physical layer security particularly suitable for implementation in networks with massive devices and heterogeneous subsystems. As per requirements on physical layer security,

no limitations are imposed on the eavesdroppers in terms of their computational capabilities. This indicates that secure communications can still be achieved even if the eavesdroppers in futuristic networks are powerful and computational devices. Therefore, physical layer security, operating essentially independently of higher layers, is expected to augment the existing security mechanisms for safeguarding future massive communication systems.

- **Heterogeneity:** One challenge in developing general massive access solutions is that the massive number of devices might be extremely different in terms of computational capabilities, cost, energy consumption, and transmission power. As a result, technologies which can address this heterogeneity should be developed, which require high efficiency resource allocation, user scheduling, and interference management schemes.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have highlighted the significance of massive access as a key enabling technology for future beyond 5G wireless networks. However, there are still fundamental challenges ahead for the practical implementation of massive access wireless communication, e.g., when it comes to common codebook coding, realization of low complexity processing algorithms, sporadic and small payload traffic of users, and synchronization protocols. This provides researchers both in academia and industry a promising research potential and many new research problems are revealed.

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