Escape routes, weak links, and desynchronization in fluctuation-driven networks

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(Rceived 29 November 2016; revised manuscript received 16 March 2017; published 9 June 2017)

Shifting our electricity generation from fossil fuel to renewable energy sources introduces large fluctuations to the power system. Here, we demonstrate how increased fluctuations, reduced damping, and reduced inertia may undermine the dynamical robustness of power grid networks. Focusing on fundamental noise models, we derive analytic insights into which factors limit the dynamic robustness and how fluctuations may induce a system escape from an operating state. Moreover, we identify weak links in the grid that make it particularly vulnerable to fluctuations. These results thereby not only contribute to a theoretical understanding of how fluctuations act on distributed network dynamics, they may also help designing future renewable energy systems to be more robust.

DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevE.95.060203

Introduction. The development of a sustainable energy supply is one of the major technical, economical, and societal challenges of the coming decades. To mitigate climate change, the majority of existing fossil-fuel power plants will be replaced by renewable energy sources, in particular wind and solar power [1,2]. This requires a comprehensive reengineering of the electric power grid as well as a better understanding of the operation, dynamics, and stability of complex networked systems [3–6].

The operation of wind turbines and photovoltaics is essentially determined by the weather such that the power generation fluctuates strongly on all time scales [7]. Large storage and backup infrastructures are needed to balance power generation and demand on time scales of hours to months [8]. In addition, the high-frequency fluctuations can be enormous, in particular due to the turbulent character of wind power [9,10]. At the same time, large fossil-fuel plants are closed down such that the effective inertia and damping decreases, making the power grid more vulnerable to instabilities by transients [11].

Here we analyze how high-frequency fluctuations threaten the dynamical robustness of electric power grids. The stable operation of a grid requires all generators and loads to remain phase locked. We analyze the robustness of this phase-locked state, mapping the grid dynamics to an escape problem in a high-dimensional stochastic dynamical system. This analysis reveals essential factors which limit the operability of future power grids. Furthermore, we uncover how the network topology determines the robustness of the grid and identify potential escape routes and vulnerable links in complex networks.

Synchronization and robustness of electric power grids. Consider first the dynamics of coupled synchronous generators and consumers \( j \in \{1, \ldots, N\} \). Each unit’s dynamics is described by the swing equation [12–14] for the mechanical rotor angle \( \delta_j \) and the phase velocity \( \omega_j \) relative to the grid reference frequency \( \Omega = 2\pi \times 50 \) (or 60) Hz,

\[
\dot{\delta}_j = \omega_j, \quad \Omega \frac{2H_j}{\omega_j} \dot{\omega}_j + 2\Omega D_j \omega_j = P_j - P_j^{(el)},
\]

where the right-hand side is the net power acting on the machine. The swing equation is made dimensionless by dividing all terms by the rated power of the machine, which is referred to as the “per unit system” in engineering [12]. The inertia constant \( H_j \) then gives the stored kinetic energy at synchronous speed which is proportional to the moment of inertia of the \( j \)th machine and \( D_j \) is a damping constant. If not mentioned otherwise, we assume a typical value of inertia \( H_j = H = 4 \) s and a damping constant of \( D_j = D = 4 \times 10^{-5} \text{s}^2 \) [15,16].

The input power \( P_j \) driving a machine can be subject to strong fluctuations on various time scales induced by renewable resources [9] or consumer behavior [17]. We thus analyze the robustness of the phase-locked state to stochastic fluctuations \( \xi_j(t) \), i.e., we set

\[
P_j(t) = \bar{P}_j + \xi_j(t).
\]

The electric power \( P_j^{(el)} \) exchanged over a transmission line is determined by the difference of the voltage phase angle of the two terminal nodes. For a common two-pole machine the voltage phase angle equals the mechanical phase angle such that the transmitted real power reads \( K_{ij} \sin(\delta_i - \delta_j) \). The capacity parameter \( K_{ij} \), describing the maximally transmittable power on the transmission line between nodes \( i \) and \( j \), is determined by the susceptance \( B_{ij} \) of the line and the voltage levels \( E_i \) and \( E_j \) at the two units as \( K_{ij} = B_{ij} E_i E_j \). We note that \( K \) gives the physical limit of the transmitted real
Power in the lossless case of our dynamical model. Ohmic losses can lead to an overheating of lines on longer time scales leading to the definition of thermal capacity, which includes a security limit by the grid operators [12,18].

In a complex network of lines and generators the total electric power transmitted from machine $j$ is thus given by $P_{j}^{(el)} = \sum K_{ij} \sin(\delta_i - \delta_j)$. Stable operation of the grid requires all units to be in a phase-locked state where $\delta_i - \delta_j$ is fixed. Otherwise, the transmitted electric power $P_{j}^{(el)}(t)$ would oscillate and average out over time [14,15,19–21]. Throughout this Rapid Communication we assume a heavily loaded grid, where phase differences are comparably large in the stable phase-locked state. Such a situation is yet uncommon, but will become increasingly likely in the future [22]. Heavily loaded lines are indeed very susceptible to losses can lead to an overheating of lines on longer time scales leading to the definition of thermal capacity, which includes a security limit by the grid operators [12,18].

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FIG. 2. Where does the system escape? (a) Exemplary escaping process of the basin of attraction in phase space. The state trajectory (thin black line) crosses the boundary of the basin of attraction (red line) in the vicinity of but not at the saddle point (red disk). The stable fixed point is indicated by a green disk. (b), (c) Probability distribution of exit points, i.e., the crossing points of the trajectory and the basin boundary. Numerical results (histogram) compared to the theoretical prediction, Eq. (6) (dashed black line). With increasing noise the distribution becomes broader, i.e., a crossing at some distance from the saddle point (red disk) becomes more probable. (Parameters: $K = 1$ and $P = 0.95$ as in Fig. 1.)

“above” the saddle point in the phase space portrait shown in Fig. 2). More precisely, the probability density of the trajectory on the basin boundary in phase space is given by a Weibull function [37]

$$p(\delta) = N \delta^\alpha \exp \left( \frac{\delta^2}{2\sigma^2} - \frac{2\Omega}{H} \frac{U''(f_{\text{max}})}{2\sigma^2} \right),$$

where $N$ is a normalization constant. This theoretical prediction is equally well confirmed by the numerical simulations as shown in Fig. 2 on the right. With increasing noise amplitude the distribution gets broader, i.e., the escape velocity increases.

Escape via the weakest link. To maintain a stable operation it is essential to know not only under which conditions, but also how power system operation may become unstable. We first consider a simple system of two identical generators coupled to a bulk power grid with transmission lines of different capacity, both subject to independent and identically distributed Gaussian white noise [see Fig. 3(a)]. Either of the two generators can become unstable, such that the grid can escape the basin of attraction of the stable phase-locked state. Numerical results (histogram) compared to the theoretical prediction, Eq. (6) (dashed black line). With increasing noise the distribution becomes broader, i.e., a crossing at some distance from the saddle point (red disk) becomes more probable. (Parameters: $K = 1$ and $P = 0.95$ as in Fig. 1.)

The easiest escape route determines the escape time $\bar{\tau}$. (a) Two identical generators are coupled to a third node representing the bulk grid via transmission lines with capacity $K_1 = 1$ (constant) and $K_2$ (variable), respectively. The transmitted power on both lines is $P_{1,2} = 0.95$. Power fluctuates on all nodes independently. (b) The mean escape time $\bar{\tau}$ as a function of the noise amplitude $\sigma$. Disks represent numerical values; the solid lines are fits to extract the scaling exponent. (c) In this scenario, the exponent in Kramer’s rate is determined by the lowest barrier $\Delta U$, Eq. (7) of the two-dimensional potential landscape, which is determined by $\min[K_1, K_2]$, i.e., the weaker of the two transmission line capacities. Thus it increases with $K_2$ as long as $K_2 \leq K_1$ but depends only on $K_1$ for $K_2 > K_1$. A comparison of numerical results obtained from exponential fits to the data (disks) and the analytical value of the potential barrier $\Delta U$ (with constant $c$) shows very good agreement. (d) Imbalance of the two escape routes: $p_2 - p_1$ with $p_{1,2}$ being the probability that link 1 or 2 is overloaded first, as a function of $K_2/K_1$ and the noise amplitude. For weak noise there is a sharp transition at $K_2/K_1 = 1$, which smears out for stronger noise. Panels (b)–(d) use a rescaled noise $\tilde{\sigma} = 40\sigma$.

In the limit of weak noise the escape problem is fully determined by the path with the smallest potential barrier $\Delta U$. To illustrate this we vary the capacity $K_2$ of the transmission line connecting generator 2 to the bulk grid while the capacity $K_1$ of the other line remains fixed. For $K_2 < K_1$ the robustness is dominated by generator 2, whose connection is weaker. The exponent in Kramer’s formula (5) then crucially depends on the value of $K_2$. Indeed, the exponent obtained from the numerical simulations again matches the theoretical predictions well in terms of the potential barrier $\Delta U$ [see Fig. 3(c)]. If we increase $K_2$ beyond $K_1$, the other transmission line becomes the Achilles’ heel of the grid. The potential barrier and hence the exponent in Kramer’s formula thus no longer depend on $K_2$. Yet, the nonexponential prefactor in the formula (5) increases by increasing $K_2$ further because the relative transmission line load of the overall system decreases. When the noise becomes stronger, the sharp transition between the two possible escape routes gradually blurs, such that the more strongly connected generator can become unstable too [see Fig. 3(d)].

Robustness of complex power grids. In power grids with a less simple structure, it is essential to understand how the topology determines robustness and to identify possible routes of instability. This enables a precise improvement of the grid and the elimination of weak links. Figure 4(a) shows the stable fixed point in a grid with four generator and eight consumer nodes. The consumer dynamics also follows Eq. (2), but with $P_j < 0$. A fluctuating input can lead to a loss of synchrony and eventually to a system-wide failure. But where does this
differences as in panel (a). The networks consist of four generators vulnerable lines identified in (b). The color scale shows the phase (darkest line in each plot) with |δi − δj| > π/2, corresponding to the vulnerable lines identified in (b). The color scale shows the phase differences as in panel (a). The networks consist of four generators (filled circles) and eight consumers (open circles). Shown is the phase difference δi − δj along the transmission lines. (b) Probability that a transmission line is overloaded first (|δi(t) − δj(t)| crosses π/2) when the grid becomes unstable due to a fluctuating power input. Four vulnerable transmission lines are identified. Bottom: The vulnerable transmission lines can be traced back to four different saddle points with comparably low potential barrier. All saddle points have exactly one transmission line (darkest line in each plot) where the phase difference exceeds π/2, corresponding to the vulnerable lines identified in (b). The color scale shows the phase differences as in panel (a). The networks consist of four generators (●, Pj = +2 P0) and eight consumers (○, Pj = −P0); all lines have capacity \( K = 24/19 \times P_0 \).

instability emerge and which of the transmission lines is most vulnerable?

We simulate the dynamics with all machines subject to independent and identically distributed white noise and record which transmission line becomes overloaded first, i.e., we record for which link \((i, j)\) the phase difference |δi − δj| first crosses π/2. In this way we identify four transmission lines which are vulnerable. Strikingly, these vulnerable lines are not necessarily the ones which are most heavily loaded in the first place. The loss of synchrony in a complex grid is a collective process, which cannot fully be understood from fundamental properties of single nodes or lines [38,39].

Instead, Kramer’s theory tells that the saddle points of the entire dynamical system are decisive: As above, the grid leaves the basin of attraction of the stable phase-locked state in the vicinity of the saddle points. In a complex network, many saddle points may exist. But for the application of Kramer’s theory we only need to consider those saddle points with the lowest potential barrier, as escape through all other saddle points is exponentially suppressed. For the system studied here, these saddle points are calculated systematically using a method introduced in [40]. This method classifies the saddle points by the number of links \((i, j)\) where the phase difference |δi − δj| exceeds π/2. Typically, the higher this number, the higher is the potential barrier.

For the sample network depicted in Fig. 4 for illustration, this method yields four saddle points with a comparably low potential barrier, all contributing to the escape process (four lower panels). All four saddles have exactly one line where the phase difference |δi − δj| exceeds π/2. The static analysis thus yields four vulnerable lines which exactly match the lines where overloads have been recorded in the numerical simulations. Even more, Kramer’s rate with the respective barrier heights again predicts the exit probabilities (not shown).

Conclusion. In this Rapid Communication we have analyzed how high-frequency fluctuations impact the dynamical robustness of electric power grids. Focusing on Gaussian white noise yielded analytical access, thereby providing deeper insights into the collective dynamics of fluctuation-driven networks. To characterize the robustness of this stochastic system, we derived the scaling of escape times as a function of the grid load, inertia, damping, and the noise amplitude. These analytic results are applicable in the dimensioning of future renewable power grids, where effective inertia and damping must be provided by power electronic devices. Remarkably, the inertia \( H \) enters the escape time only algebraically, whereas the damping enters exponentially. While the assumption of Gaussian white noise is common when investigating power grids under uncertainty, we go beyond the typical restriction to case studies [41] by providing analytical insight. Furthermore, we demonstrated how power networks may escape the regime of stable operation. The grid escapes in the vicinity of (saddle) fixed points with a low potential barrier. Interestingly, these can typically be assigned to a single overloaded link, thus revealing the weak links of the grid.

Complementary work on power grid fluctuations [25] addresses the impact of intermittent noise and incorporates features of real wind turbines. Such settings avert the analytic treatment in terms of Kramer’s escape theory. The analytic approach presented in this Rapid Communication reveals which factors limit the robustness of power grid operation to fluctuating inputs. The results may thus not only provide efficient methodology to analyze fluctuation-driven oscillatory systems but may also help planning grid extensions to assure dynamic stability and robustness in future highly renewable power systems.

Acknowledgments. We gratefully acknowledge support from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF Grant No. 03SF0472A-E), the Helmholtz Association (via the joint initiative “Energy System 2050—A Contribution of the Research Field Energy”) and Grant No. VH-NG-1025 to D.W.), the Göttingen Graduate School for Neurosciences and Molecular Biosciences (DFG Grant No. SFB 226/2 to B.S.), and the Max Planck Society (M.T.).

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