
Coverage in Wireless Sensor Networks with additional operating time constraints: efficient algorithms

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ABSTRACT

Le reti di sensori wireless, o wireless sensor networks, hanno beneficiato, negli ultimi anni, di un interesse considerevole da parte della ricerca scientifica e rappresentano una delle più importanti tecnologie del 21st secolo [12]. Una wireless sensor network (WSN) è essenzialmente una rete costituita da un gran numero di dispositivi elettronici, definiti *sensori*, il cui scopo è rilevare fenomeni fisici come calore, luce, umidità, inquinamento atmosferico, pressione, etc. Rispetto alle reti cablate, le WSN consentono una più semplice installazione ed inoltre, i dispositivi sensore di cui esse sono costituite, offrono una grande eterogeneità di funzioni e flessibilità

d'uso. Nell'ambito dell'Internet of Things [14][20], le WSN costituiscono la tecnologia abilitante che consente di raccogliere informazioni sull'ambiente in cui le persone vivono. Le numerose aree di applicazione in contesti quali il monitoraggio ambientale, l'automazione, la sanità, i trasporti, le infrastrutture, i servizi assicurativi e la domotica, per citarne alcune, hanno spinto il mercato delle WSN verso livelli considerevoli. Tale mercato è infatti stato valutato, per l'anno 2019, in 46,76 miliardi di dollari statunitensi e si prevede che raggiungerà i 123,93 miliardi di dollari entro il 2025 [15] [21]. Oltre all'eterogeneità delle applicazioni delle WSN, l'incremento del mercato è stato determinato dalla crescente adozione di tecnologie wireless, nonché dal minor costo e maggiore disponibilità dei sensori. Infatti, al giorno d'oggi si è praticamente circondati da sensori, il cui costo è in continua discesa, che vanno da sensori più semplici come quelli a bordo di uno smartphone, fino a sensori più specializzati come quelli che rilevano la qualità dell'aria, la posizione dei veicoli, il battito cardiaco delle persone, etc.

In generale, l'obiettivo principale di una WSN è acquisire conoscenza dall'ambiente in cui la WSN stessa è installata. I dispositivi sensore che costituiscono la WSN, cooperano per raccogliere informazioni relative a *target* che, ubicati in un'area di interesse (*area under monitoring*), rappresentano l'oggetto del monitoraggio. Ogni sensore è in grado di rilevare informazioni o misurare grandezze fisiche per una parte dell'area sottoposta a monitoraggio, ovvero per una parte dello spazio che lo circonda (*sensing area* o *sensing range*) e, di conseguenza, un sensore è in grado di monitorare i target ubicati nella sua area di rilevamento. Le informazioni relative ai target, acquisite dai sensori, possono essere utilizzate, ad esempio, per studiare meglio l'impatto che i fenomeni naturali e antropici possono avere sull'ambiente, compresi gli effetti sul clima, l'inquinamento, la sicurezza e molti altri aspetti. Esistono anche contesti in cui l'utilizzo di una WSN per acquisire informazioni è necessario perché l'accesso umano non è possibile a causa dell'ostilità dell'ambiente stesso. È il caso, ad esempio, di disastri naturali come inondazioni, terremoti e così via, in cui i sensori possono essere dispiegati e controllati da droni volanti [10][13].

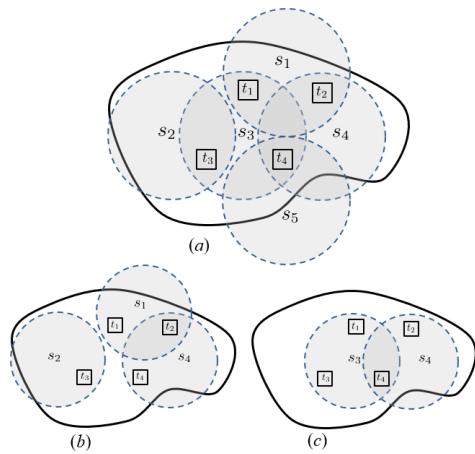


Figure 1: Le figure mostrano una WSN installata in un'area irregolare. La sottofigura (a) mostra una WSN costituita dai sensori s_1, \dots, s_5 , la cui sensing area è rappresentata da cerchi, e dai targets t_1, \dots, t_4 . Il sensore s_1 copre i targets t_1 an t_2 , il sensore s_2 copre t_3 , e così via. Le sottofigure (b) e (c) mostrano, rispettivamente, le covers $\{s_1, s_2, s_4\}$ and $\{s_3, s_4\}$.

Il rapido sviluppo tecnologico dei sensori ha reso le WSN una tecnologia consolidata. Tuttavia, la gestione delle limitate risorse energetiche dei sensori rappresenta ancora un tema aperto per il quale è necessario individuare soluzioni per prolungare il più possibile il funzionamento dei sensori stessi, e quindi della WSN. I sensori infatti sono solitamente alimentati da batterie e, pertanto, godono di una risorsa energetica limitata che, se esaurita, li rende generalmente inoperativi in quanto è difficile, e in alcuni casi impossibile, sostituirli o ricaricarne le loro batterie. Poiché il progresso tecnologico delle batterie negli ultimi anni non ha mostrato cambiamenti significativi, nonostante esistano sistemi che consentono di acquisire parte dell'energia dall'ambiente [11][22], un uso coordinato ed intelligente delle risorse energetiche dei sensori costituisce tuttora un aspetto da affrontare nella progettazione di una WSN in quanto ha un impatto diretto sul tempo di funzionamento della rete.

Il tempo di funzionamento della rete, ovvero il tempo per il quale la rete è in grado di svolgere l'attività di monitoraggio per la quale è stata progettata, è solitamente indicato come *network lifetime*. L'estensione del network lifetime rappresenta un problema molto rilevante, noto in letteratura come Maximum Lifetime Problem (MLP), che è stato affrontato con successo con diversi approcci negli ultimi anni. Esso consiste essenzialmente nel trovare uno scheduling ottimale delle attività dei sensori della WSN con l'obiettivo di massimizzare il tempo totale durante il quale la WSN è in grado di svolgere il proprio compito di monitoraggio. Il MLP può essere affrontato progettando *algoritmi di copertura* efficienti che sfruttino la *ridondanza* dei sensori. Infatti, nelle applicazioni di WSN che coinvolgono un numero elevato di sensori, alcuni dei nodi sensore possono risultare ridondanti, nel senso che un target può essere coperto da più di un sensore in quanto ubicato in sensing area di sensori diversi. Questa ridondanza permette di identificare *covers*, ovvero sottoinsiemi di sensori in grado di coprire tutti i target e quindi svolgere, autonomamente, il compito di monitoraggio per il quale la WSN è stata progettata. In un dato istante, sono attivi solo i sensori appartenenti ad una cover, il che consente di evitare di sprecare l'energia dei sensori che, se attivati, sarebbero inutili in quanto coprirebbero target di fatto già coperti. Il massimo lifetime può essere ottenuto ricercando tali cover e

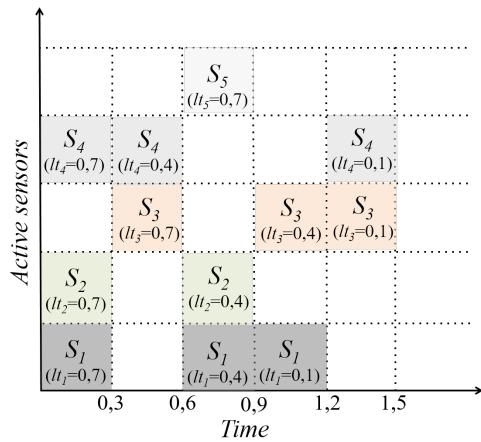


Figure 2: Esempio di schedulazione delle attività dei sensori per la WSN in Figura 1, considerando un time slot di 0.3 unità di tempo. La figura mostra l’attivazione dei sensori in ogni time slot ed accanto all’etichetta di ogni sencore è mostrato il suo lifetime residuo, (lt_i), considerando un lifetime iniziale normalizzato ad una unità.

attivandole, una alla volta, per un tempo di attivazione adeguato. L’identificazione di questi sottoinsiemi permette di pianificare le attività dei sensori per garantire il più possibile l’operatività della WSN [4][5][6][7][8][19][24].

In letteratura sono numerosi i risultati sul MLP e relative varianti che tengono conto di problemi tecnici classici come, ad esempio la connettività e la tolleranza ai guasti, mentre pochi sforzi di ricerca sono stati dedicati nell’indagare su specifici requisiti operativi dei sensori. In questa tesi ci concentriamo su un nuovo scenario nel quale, per svolgere l’attività di monitoraggio, ciascun sensore della WSN deve essere attivo per un periodo di tempo predefinito, noto come *operating time slot*. Questo contesto caratterizza le *applicazioni di rilevamento periodico* in cui la WSN monitora il fenomeno di interesse secondo un ciclo di rilevamento che si ripete periodicamente. Un ciclo di rilevamento è costituito da un intervallo di tempo di attività predefinito (*time slot*), durante il quale i sensori raccolgono informazioni sui target, seguito da un periodo di inattività. Il periodo di inattività è configurabile e dipende dall’applicazione. La durata del time slot di attività, invece, è fissata a priori ed è determinata dal principio di funzionamento dei sensori. Esempi di applicazioni di rilevamento periodico con tempi di attivazione fissi possono essere trovati in diversi campi come nel monitoraggio della salute strutturale degli edifici [3][17][23], nel monitoraggio ambientale [16], nel monitoraggio dell’inquinamento atmosferico [1][2], e nel rilevamento in ambito agricolo [18].

Nel nostro lavoro di ricerca, definiamo formalmente questo problema come Maximum Lifetime Problem con Time Slots (MLPTS). Per questo nuovo scenario deriviamo un limite superiore al lifetime raggiungibile per una data WSN e proponiamo un algoritmo genetico per trovare una schedulazione quasi ottimale delle attività dei sensori. L’efficacia dell’approccio proposto è dimostrata dalla valutazione dei risultati ottenuti considerando numerose istanze di benchmark. In seguito, generalizziamo il MLPTS tenendo conto della possibilità di trascurare la copertura di una piccola percentuale dell’intero insieme di target poiché, in alcune applicazioni, lo stato del fenomeno sotto osservazione può essere stimato o dedotto monitorando anche solo un sottoinsieme di tutti i target. Definiamo questo nuovo problema come α_c -MLPTS,

dove α_c definisce la percentuale di target che la WSN deve monitorare in ogni time slot. Per questo nuovo scenario proponiamo tre approcci: un algoritmo greedy classico, una versione modificata dell'algoritmo genetico già proposto per il MLPTS e un algoritmo Carousel Greedy. Il Carousel Greedy [9] è un paradigma generalizzato che può essere utilizzato per migliorare le prestazioni di un algoritmo standard greedy in termini di qualità della soluzione. Il confronto dei tre approcci è stato effettuato attraverso una intensa fase sperimentale. I risultati computazionali mostrano che il Carousel Greedy fornisce il miglior trade-off tra qualità delle soluzioni e tempi di elaborazione, e confermano che il lifetime della WSN, anche in presenza di vincoli operativi relativi ai sensori, può essere notevolmente migliorato omettendo la copertura di una modesta percentuale dei target.

CCS CONCEPTS

- Networks → Wireless Sensor networks;
- Computer systems organization → Embedded and cyber-physical systems;
- Theory of computation → Evolutionary algorithms; Optimization with greedy search heuristics.

KEYWORDS

Wireless sensor networks, Coverage, Maximum network lifetime, Time slot, Greedy, Carousel greedy, Genetic algorithm

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays there is a growing interest in wireless sensor networks, one of the most significant technologies of the 21st century [12]. A wireless sensor network (WSN) is essentially composed by a large number of electronic devices, defined sensors, whose aim is to detect physical phenomena such as heat, light, humidity, air pollution, pressure, etc. Compared to wired networks, WSNs offer simpler deployment and great flexibility of devices. In the context of the Internet of Things [14][20], WSNs are the enabling technology that allows to collect information about the environment in which people live. The numerous application areas in environmental monitoring,

automation, healthcare, oil and gas, transportation, infrastructure, insurance services and smart home, among others, have driven the market of WSNs to a staggering scale. Indeed the WSNs market was valued at USD 46.76 billion in 2019 and it is expected to reach USD 123.93 billion by 2025 [15][21]. In addition to the heterogeneity of the WSN applications, the market growth has been driven by the increasing adoption of wireless technologies and, also, by the reduced cost and the great availability of the sensor nodes. Indeed nowadays we are practically surrounded by sensors, ranging from those aboard a simple smartphone to the most specialized sensors such as those that detect air quality, vehicles position, persons heartbeat.

Generally speaking, the main goal of a WSN is to acquire knowledge from the environment. The sensor devices of which the WSN is composed, cooperate to collect information related to *targets* which, located in an area of interest (or *area under monitoring*), represent the object of the monitoring activity. Each sensor is able to detect information or can measure physical quantities for a part of the area under monitoring, thus for a part of the space that surrounds it (*sensing area* or *sensing range*) and, consequently, a sensor can monitor targets located in its sensing area. The information related to the targets and acquired by the sensors can be used, for example, to better study the impact that natural and man-made phenomena can have on the environment, including effects on climate, pollution, safety and many other aspects. There are also contexts where the use of a WSN to acquire information is necessary because the human access is not possible due to the hostility of the environment itself. This is the case, for example, to natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes and so on, where sensors can be deployed and controlled by flying drones [10][13].

While the rapid technological development of sensors has made the WSNs a consolidated technology, the management of the limited energy resources available to the sensors still represent an open topic for which it is necessary to identify solutions to prolong as much as possible the sensors operation. The sensors, indeed, are usually powered by batteries and thus they are equipped with a limited energy resource which, if exhausted, generally makes the sensors unoperational since it is

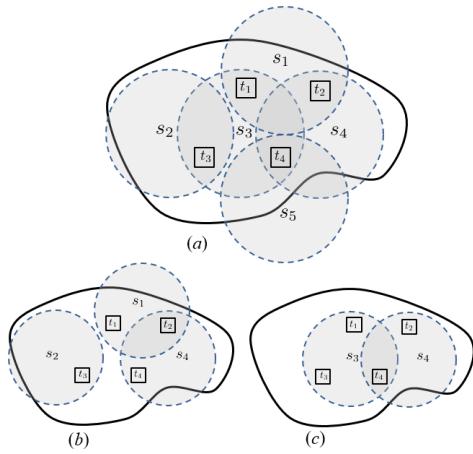


Figure 1: The figures shown a WSN deployed in an irregular area. The subfigure (a) shows a WSN composed of the sensors s_1, \dots, s_5 , whose sensing area is represented by circles, and of the targets t_1, \dots, t_4 . The sensor s_1 covers the targets t_1 and t_2 , the sensor s_2 covers t_3 , and so on. Subfigure (b) and (c) show, respectively, the covers $\{s_1, s_2, s_4\}$ and $\{s_3, s_4\}$.

difficult, and in some cases impossible, replace or recharge their batteries. Since the progress of batteries technology in recent years has not shown significant changes, although there are systems that make it possible to acquire part of the energy from the environment [11][22], a coordinated and intelligent use of energy resources is still actually a theme to face in the design of a WSN, because it has a direct impact on the network operating time.

The network operating time, i. e. the time for which the network is able to perform the monitoring activity for which it was designed, is usually defined as *network lifetime*. Extending the network lifetime represents a very relevant issue. This problem, generally known as Maximum Lifetime Problem (MLP), is a well known and challenging optimization problem which has been addressed successfully with several approaches in the last years. It essentially consists in finding an optimal schedule for sensors activities in a WSN aiming at maximizing the total amount of time during which the WSN is able to perform its monitoring task. The MLP problem can be faced by designing efficient *coverage algorithms* that exploit the sensor *redundancy*. Indeed, in WSNs applications involving a huge number of sensors, some of the sensor nodes may result to be redundant in the sense that a target is covered by more than one sensor since it is located in the sensing area of different sensors. This redundancy makes it possible to identify *covers*, that is subsets of sensors that are able to autonomously perform the monitoring task for which the WSN has been designed. At any given time, only the sensors belonging to a cover are active, heading off wasting the energy of useless sensors. The maximum lifetime can be obtained by searching such covers and activating them one at a time for an adequate activation time. The identification of these subsets allows to plan the activities of the sensors to ensure the operation of the WSN as much as possible [4][5][6][7][8][19][24].

As can be seen from the literature, a lot of results can be found on the MLP and variants considering classical technical issues (as connectivity and multi-role issues among others) while few research effort has been devoted to investigate specific operational requirements of the sensors. In this thesis we focus on such scenario in which, in order to perform the monitoring activity, each sensor must be active for a

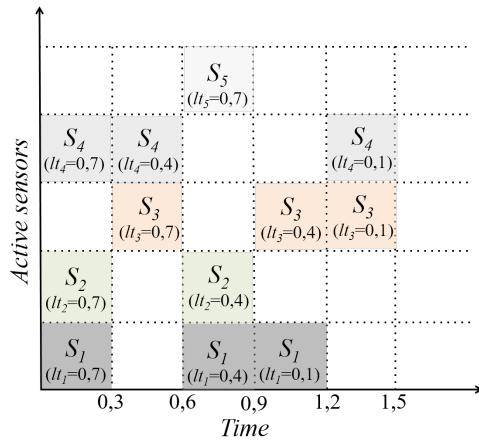


Figure 2: Sensor scheduling example for the WSN instance in Figure 1, considering a time slot of 0.3 time units. The figure shows the activation of the sensors in each time slot and next to each sensor label is shown its remaining lifetime (lt_i), considering an initial lifetime normalized to 1 unit.

predefined period of time defined as *operating time slot*. This context characterizes the *periodic sensing applications* in which the WSN monitors the phenomenon under observation according to a sensitivity cycle which is repeated periodically. A sensitivity cycle consists of a predefined activity time slot, during which the sensors collect information about the targets, followed by an idle period. The idle period is configurable and depends on the application. The activity time slot duration, on the other hand, is fixed a priori and is determined by the sensors operating principle. Examples of periodic sensing applications with fixed activation times can be found in different fields as in structural health monitoring [3][17][23], environmental monitoring [16], air pollution monitoring [1][2], agriculture sensing [18].

We formally define this problem as Maximum Lifetime Problem with Time Slots (MLPTS). For this new scenario we derive an upper bound on the maximum achievable lifetime and propose a genetic algorithm for finding a near-optimal node activity schedule. The performance evaluation results obtained on numerous benchmark instances, show the effectiveness of the proposed approach. Further, we generalize MLPTS by taking into account the possibility to neglect the coverage of a small percentage of the whole set of targets since, in some applications, the status of the phenomenon under observation, can be estimated or inferred by monitoring even only a subset of all targets. We define such new problem as α_c -MLPTS, where α_c defines the percentage of targets that the WSN has to monitor in each time slot. For this new scenario we propose three approaches: a classical greedy algorithm, a modified version of the genetic algorithm already proposed for MLPTS and a Carousel Greedy algorithm. The Carousel Greedy is a generalized paradigm that can be used to improve the performances of a standard greedy algorithm in terms of solution quality that has been presented for the first time in [9]. The comparison of the three approaches is carried out through extensive computational experiments. The computational results show that the Carousel Greedy represents the best trade-off between solutions quality and computational times, and confirm that the network lifetime, also in the case of sensors with operational time constraints, can be considerably improved by omitting the coverage of a modestly percentage of the targets.

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