Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Electrical Power and Energy Systems

Short Communication

Cascading blackout overall structure and some implications for sampling and mitigation

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ABSTRACT

Cascading blackouts can be thought of as initiating events followed by propagating events that progressively weaken the power system. We briefly discuss the implications for assessing cascading risk by proper sampling from the various sources of uncertainty and for mitigating cascading risk by reducing both the initiating events and their propagation.

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1. Introduction

Cascading failure can be defined as a sequence of dependent events that successively weakens or degrades the power system [1]. The events are often individual power system components being outaged or damaged or misoperating, but can also include a device functioning as designed but nevertheless contributing to the cascade, or adverse actions by software, automatic controls, or operators [2–6]. This short paper describes the overall structure of cascading and the various sources of uncertainty in order to foster more comprehensive modeling and mitigation of cascading blackouts.

As shown in Fig. 1, cascading failure starts with a primary or "trigger" event and proceeds with further secondary events. All the events interact with the system state as the cascade proceeds. The occurrence of each event depends on the system state, the system state is affected by every event that has already occurred, and the system state degrades throughout the cascade. The progressive weakening or degradation of the system as the cascade propagates is characteristic of cascading failure [2,3,6,7]. The system state includes such factors as which components are in service, component loadings, which control modes and operational schemes are active, generation margin, hidden failures, and situational awareness.

Substantial cascading events are rare because the initial system state is usually robust enough that it withstands the first few events and the cascade stops. But in an unfavorable initial system state, a trigger event can lead to many further events that become a substantial cascade and blackout. The progressive degradation of the system as the cascading events progress make it much more likely in each stage of the cascade that there are further cascading events than if the events were independent [8–10].[1] There is a small but significant probability of a long series of cascading events, and the probability distribution of observed cascading size has a "heavy tail" or "power law region" that implies a substantial risk of occasional large blackouts [11–14].

2. Overall cascade structure

It is useful to divide the cascading events into initiating and propagating events:

cascading = initiating events then propagation

The trigger event may immediately cause further events, which, together with the trigger event itself, form the initiating events (for example, see the protection control groups in [15]). The propagating events are any events following the initiating events. It is convenient to think of any series of events as a cascade [16].[2] Many

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[1] Not all events during cascades are dependent on the previous events; unrelated outages can occur and can have either substantial or minimal effects on the subsequent cascading. Data analysis in [10] estimates that about 6% of propagating outages in cascades are unrelated.

[2] For assessing cascading probability, it is just as important to consider the events that do not cascade further as the events that do cascade further. Focusing only on the multiple cascading events would strongly skew any statistics towards unreliability.
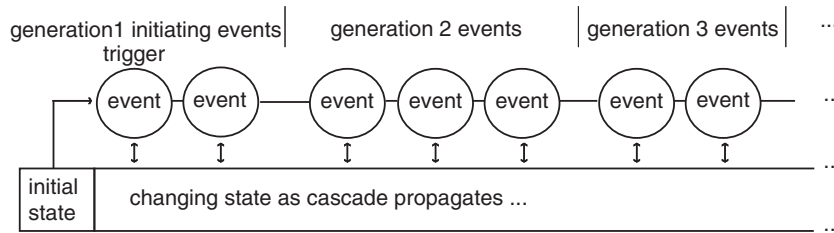
Fig. 1. Overall structure of cascading failure in which events are grouped into successive generations. A trigger event followed by immediate protection actions forms an initiating generation of events. Subsequent generations of cascading events can follow, and the system state changes and weakens as the cascading events propagate.

cascades stop quickly so that there are no propagating events [10]. Examples of trigger events include short circuits due to lightning or tree contacts or animals, severe weather, earthquakes, operational or planning errors, equipment failure, or vandalism.

Making the distinction between triggering events and propagating events is useful because they have different mechanisms and analyses. The triggers are random failures often occurring at random times with no preceding cause within the power system, whereas the propagating events arise jointly from the preceding events and the changing power system state. The statistics of the trigger events[3] follow from standard risk analysis [17], whereas the propagating events are much more complicated and probability models for their analysis are only starting to emerge [7,16,9].

It is sometimes useful to group the events into generations. For example, if the timing of events is available, then events following each other within the fast timescale of automatic protection actions or that cannot be distinguished from simultaneous events due to the time discretization can be grouped into the same generation [16]. Another example is that simulations often produce multiple events in each "pass" of the simulation that can be grouped together [19]. The first generation of the cascade is the initiating events, and the subsequent generations are groupings of the propagating events. In many observed blackouts the events happen more quickly later in the cascade [20] and some researchers suggest dividing the cascading into slow cascading followed by fast cascading [21].

Some evidence for the overall cascading structure asserted in this section is provided by the validation with real blackout data of models that include this structure [16,22].

3. Implications of cascade structure

This section shows how the cascade structure determines how cascading simulations should sample from uncertainty and how cascades can be mitigated. Sampling from the uncertainties in each of the initial state, the trigger event, and the progress of the cascade is indicated. Mitigation of cascading should not only address the initiating events and the small blackouts, but also the cascade propagation and large blackouts. In the longer term, complex system considerations shape the effects of mitigation as the power system evolves.

3.1. Sampling in cascading simulations

The structure of cascading and the various sources of uncertainty affect how simulations should sample or select the cases to be run in order to assess cascading risk. Each cascade is strongly and jointly influenced by the initial system state and the trigger event. For example, a given trigger event may lead to further cascading events in only a few of the plausible initial system states.

And different system states are either invulnerable to cascading or vulnerable to cascading with different triggers. Another example is that a given cascade might stop at the fourth event when the cascade starts from some initial system state and continues past the fourth event when the cascade starts from another initial system state because of differences that affect the threshold condition for the fifth event. It follows that trigger events and initial system states must be jointly sampled for each simulated cascade.

The threshold conditions for further outages are typically complicated functions of the previous events and the state, and it is often useful to model probabilistically the condition for a further outage of a given component and the progress of the cascade. Indeed, similar initiating events under similar conditions can propagate differently on different occasions in the real power system. The simulation should sample from the uncertainties in the system state, the trigger events, and the progress of the cascade. These comments also apply to selecting the initial system states and trigger events of simulations that model the cascade evolution deterministically. It is unrealistic to simulate the same cascade very many times, and the sampling from the uncertainties provides a realistic variety of cascades. Moreover, the uncertainties should be sampled in an unbiased way across the full ranges of uncertainties in order to properly estimate the probabilities and risks of cascading.

A significant exception to the sampling requirements is using simulation to reproduce a particular blackout that has already occurred. In this case, the initial state and trigger events are known, and the simulation thresholds and models can be skillfully tuned to reproduce the observed sequence of events [23]. The benefit is understanding that particular blackout, and no probabilistic conclusions are or can be sought. Indeed, statistics cannot be derived from only one sample [24].

3.2. Mitigation of cascading

The structure of cascading affects the mitigation strategies for triggers and for propagation. The initiating events can be associated with the cause of the trigger events and the immediately following actions of the protection system. For mitigating the initiating events, the different trigger causes need to be analyzed separately, and there is considerable risk analysis and experience that supports this analysis [17].

Establishing chains of causation in an instance of cascading is useful, but, beyond observing that there are multiple dependencies contributing to cascade propagation, there is currently no clear way to attribute causes for complicated cascades. Cascading events are often classified by their root cause, which is the cause of the triggering event. This is useful in mitigating the triggers associated with cascading but root cause analysis does not address the causes or mitigation of propagation. However, it is becoming feasible to relate candidate mitigations such as line upgrades to reductions in propagation or large blackout risk [25–27].

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[3] The initiating events that are not trigger events arise in various ways with amenability to known risk analysis as described in [18].