

Electric grid tokyo

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Japan's leading utility, TEPCO has been quietly installing cutting-edge technologies in its energy grids as the world moves towards the new levels of interconnectedness. This essay looks at the energy grid as a supply chain network, and analyses the impact digitization as a major force of disruption.

Thomas Edison launched world's first commercial power grid in 1882 at the Pearl Street Station in lower Manhattan, where 100-volt steam generator connected few hundred lamps in the neighbourhood [1]. From here, energy usage spread across the world through the replication of these self-contained grid systems. Who would have thought, more than a century later, we would be looking back at this model.

Figure 1: Pearl Street Station: source [2]

Modern electricity supply chain network can be mapped as below: electricity is generated at power plants, distributed via energy grid and delivered to customers with different voltage requirements.

Figure 2: supply chain network

One of the fundamental challenges is that the storage capacity is limited due to technological difficulties, exposing the utilities to large fluctuations in demand, requiring them to be equipped with sufficient supply capacities to accommodate peak-hour demand, while also to withstand severe under-utilization during off-peak hours.

Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) is Japan's largest utility, operating 195 power-plants with total generation capacity of 62GW [3]. TEPCO had long been under government protection, however the company is now facing three exogenous impacts that could challenge the company's business model:

(2.1) Deregulation

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