SCALAR CURVATURE AND $Q$-CURVATURE OF RANDOM METRICS

YAIZA CANZANI, DMITRY JAKOBSON AND IGOR WIGMAN

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Keith Worsley

Abstract. We study Gauss curvature for random Riemannian metrics on a compact surface, lying in a fixed conformal class; our questions are motivated by comparison geometry. We next consider analogous questions for the scalar curvature in dimension $n > 2$, and for the $Q$-curvature of random Riemannian metrics.

1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to initiate the study of standard questions in comparison geometry for random Riemannian metrics lying in the same conformal class.

Random metrics have long been considered in 2-dimensional conformal field theory and quantum gravity ([14, 27, 34]), random surface models and other fields, see e.g. [31]. In addition, random metrics are frequently considered in and cosmology (cf. [12, 24, 29]) and astrophysics, in the study of gravitational waves and cosmic microwave background radiation (cf. [4, 7, 10, 28, 41, 44]).

Random metrics lying in a fixed conformal class are easiest to treat analytically; in addition, many classical problems in differential geometry are naturally formulated and solved for metrics lying in a fixed conformal class (uniformization theorem for Gauss curvature in dimension 2, Yamabe problem and uniformization problem for $Q$-curvature in higher dimensions). Accordingly, it is natural to consider random metrics lying in a fixed conformal class.

The questions considered in this paper are motivated by comparison geometry. Since the 19th century, many results have been established comparing geometric and topological properties of manifolds where the (sectional or Ricci) curvature is bounded from above or from below, with similar properties of manifolds of constant curvature. Examples include Toponogov Theorem (comparing triangles); sphere
theorems of Myers and Berger-Klingenberg for positively-curved manifolds; volume of the ball comparison theorems of Gromov and Bishop; splitting theorem of Cheeger and Gromoll; Gromov’s pre-compactness theorem; theorems about geodesic flows and properties of fundamental group for negatively-curved manifolds; and numerous other results.

Many result in comparison geometry are proved assuming that the curvature is everywhere \textit{positive}, or everywhere \textit{negative}. When studying such questions for random Riemannian metrics, the first natural question is to estimate the probability of the metric satisfying these curvature bounds. The present paper addresses such questions for \textit{scalar curvature}, and also for Branson’s \textit{Q-curvature}. We study the behavior of scalar curvature for random Riemannian metrics in a fixed conformal class, where the conformal factor is a random function possessing certain smoothness properties; our random metrics are close to a “reference” metric that we denote \(g_0\). We later estimate the probability that curvature satisfies certain \(L^\infty\) bounds.

The paper addresses two main questions (our manifold \(M\) is always assumed to be compact and orientable):

**Question 1.1.** Assuming that the scalar curvature \(R_0\) of the reference metric \(g_0\) doesn’t vanish, what is the probability that the scalar curvature of the perturbed metric changes sign?

We remark that in each conformal class, there exists a \textit{Yamabe metric} with constant scalar curvature \(R_0(x) \equiv R_0\) \([45, 2, 36, 42]\); the sign of \(R_0\) is uniquely determined. Question 1.1 can be posed in each conformal class where \(R_0 \neq 0\) (e.g. in dimension two, for \(M \not\simeq \mathbb{T}^2\)).

Question 1.1 can also be posed for Branson’s \(Q\)-\textit{curvature}. It was shown in \([11, 13, 33]\) that in every conformal class satisfying certain \textit{generic} conditions, there exists a metric \(g_0\) with constant \(Q\)-curvature, \(Q_0(x) \equiv Q_0\). Question 1.1 can be posed in each conformal class where \(Q_0 \neq 0\).

**Question 1.2.** What is the probability that the curvature of the perturbed metric changes by more than \(u\) (where \(u\) is a positive real parameter, subject to some restrictions)?

We study Question 1.2 for Gauss curvature (equal to \(1/2\) the scalar curvature) in dimension 2, and for \(Q\)-curvature in higher dimensions. Our techniques are inspired by \([1, 5]\).

Numerous questions left unanswered in this paper are discussed in the Conclusion.

2. \textbf{Random metrics in a conformal class}

We consider a conformal class of metrics on a Riemannian manifold \(M\) of the form

\[
g_1 = e^{af} g_0, \tag{1}
\]

where \(g_0\) is a “reference” Riemannian metric on \(M\), \(a\) is a constant, and \(f = f(x)\) is a \(C^2\) function on \(M\).

Given a metric \(g_0\) on \(M\) and the corresponding Laplacian \(\Delta_0\), let \(\{\lambda_j, \phi_j\}\) denote an orthonormal basis of \(L^2(M)\) consisting of eigenfunctions of \(-\Delta_0\); we let \(\lambda_0 = \)
0, $\phi_0 = 1$. We define a random conformal multiple $f(x)$ by

$$f(x) = -\sum_{j=1}^{\infty} a_j c_j \phi_j(x),$$

where $a_j \sim \mathcal{N}(0,1)$ are i.i.d standard Gaussians, and $c_j$ are positive real numbers, and we use the minus sign for convenience purposes only. We assume that $c_j = F(\lambda_j)$, where $F(t)$ is an eventually monotone decreasing function of $t$, $F(t) \to 0$ as $t \to \infty$.

The random field $f(x)$ is a centered Gaussian field with covariance function

$$r_f(x,y) := \mathbb{E}[f(x)f(y)] = \sum_{j=1}^{\infty} c_j^2 \phi_j(x)\phi_j(y),$$

$x, y \in M$. In particular for every $x \in M$, $f(x)$ is mean zero Gaussian of variance

$$\sigma^2(x) = r_f(x,x) = \sum_{j=1}^{\infty} c_j^2 \phi_j(x)^2.$$

In the study of scalar curvature, it is convenient to work with the random centered Gaussian field

$$h(x) := \Delta_0 f(x) = \sum_{j=1}^{\infty} a_j c_j \lambda_j \phi_j(x)$$

having the covariance function

$$r_h(x,y) = \sum_{j=1}^{\infty} c_j^2 \lambda_j^2 \phi_j(x)\phi_j(y)$$

$x, y \in M$.

The smoothness of the Gaussian random field (2) is given by the following proposition, [5, Proposition 1]:

**Proposition 2.1.** If $\sum_{j=1}^{\infty} (\lambda_j + 1)c_j^2 < \infty$, then $f(x) \in H^r(M)$ a.s.

Choosing $c_j = F(\lambda_j) = \lambda_j^{-s}$ translates to $\sum_{j \geq 1} \lambda_j^{-2s} < \infty$. In dimension $n$, it follows from Weyl’s law that $\lambda_j \sim j^{2/n}$ as $j \to \infty$; we find that

$$\text{If } s > \frac{2r + n}{4}, \text{ then } f(x) \in H^r(M) \text{ a.s.}$$

By the Sobolev embedding theorem, $H^r \subset C^k$ for $k < r - n/2$. Substituting into the formula above, we find that

$$\text{If } c_j = O(\lambda_j^{-s}), s > \frac{n + k}{2}, \text{ then } f(x) \in C^k \text{ a.s.}$$

We will be mainly interested in $k = 0$ and $k = 2$. Accordingly, we formulate the following

**Corollary 2.2.** If $c_j = O(\lambda_j^{-s}), s > n/2$, then $f \in C^0$ a.s.; if $c_j = O(\lambda_j^{-s}), s > n/2 + 1$, then $f \in C^2$ a.s. Similarly, if $c_j = O(\lambda_j^{-s}), s > n/2 + 1$, then $\Delta_0 f \in C^0$ a.s.; if $c_j = O(\lambda_j^{-s}), s > n/2 + 2$, then $\Delta_0 f \in C^2$ a.s.
We next consider the volume of the random metric in (1). The volume element $dV_1$ corresponding to $g_1$ is given by
\begin{equation}
    dV_1 = e^{naf/2}dV_0,
\end{equation}
where $dV_0$ denotes the volume element corresponding to $g_0$.

Consider the random variable $V_1 = \text{vol}(M, g_1)$.

**Proposition 2.3.** Notation as above,
\begin{equation}
    \lim_{a \to 0} \mathbb{E}[V_1(a)] = V_0,
\end{equation}
where $V_0$ denotes the volume of $(M, g_0)$.

**Remark 2.4.** Multiplying the logarithm $f$ of the conformal multiple by a small constant $a \to 0$ relates questions about the curvature to estimating excursion probabilities of random fields, and allows us to apply the key estimates of [6, 43] and [1, p. 51]. Estimating excursion probabilities without assuming $a \to 0$ leads to difficult and interesting problems in the theory of random fields; we mention the corresponding questions about the curvature in the conclusion.

The constant $a$ can be regarded as the radius of a sphere (in a space $\mathcal{M}$ of Riemannian metrics on $M$), centered at $g_0$. Indeed, letting $a \to 0$ forces the induced (Gaussian) measure on the space of all metrics to concentrate near the reference metric $g_0$. The regime $a \to 0$ can thus be considered as studying local geometry of $M$.

It is well-known that the scalar curvature $R_1$ of the metric $g_1$ in (1) is related to the scalar curvature $R_0$ of the metric $g_0$ by the following formula ([3, §5.2, p. 146])
\begin{equation}
    R_1 = e^{-af}[R_0 - a(n-1)\Delta_0 f - a^2 (n-1)(n-2)|\nabla_0 f|^2/4],
\end{equation}
where $\Delta_0$ is the (negative definite) Laplacian for $g_0$, and $\nabla_0$ is the gradient corresponding to $g_0$. We observe that the last term vanishes when $n = 2$:
\begin{equation}
    R_1 = e^{-af}[R_0 - a\Delta_0 f].
\end{equation}

Substituting (2), we find that
\begin{equation}
    R_1(x)e^{af(x)} = R_0(x) - a \sum_{j=1}^{\infty} \lambda_j a_j c_j \phi_j(x).
\end{equation}

**Proposition 2.5.** If $R_0 \in C^0$ and $c_j = O(\lambda_j^{-s}), s > n/2 + 1$ then $R_1 \in C^0$ a.s. If $R_0 \in C^2$ and $c_j = O(\lambda_j^{-s}), s > n/2 + 2$ then $R_1 \in C^2$ a.s.

Consider the sign of the scalar curvature $R_1$ of the new metric. We make a remark that will be important later:

**Remark 2.6.** Note that the quantity $e^{-af}$ is positive so that the sign of $R_1$ satisfies
\begin{equation}
    \text{sgn}(R_1) = \text{sgn}[R_0 - a(n-1)\Delta_0 f - a^2 (n-1)(n-2)|\nabla_0 f|^2/4],
\end{equation}
in particular for $n = 2$, assuming that $R_0$ has constant sign, we find that
\begin{equation}
    \text{sgn}(R_1) = \text{sgn}(R_0 - a\Delta_0 f) = \text{sgn}(R_0 - ah) = \text{sgn}(R_0) \cdot \text{sgn}(1 - ah/R_0).$
\end{equation}
3. Studying Question 1.1

We denote by $M = M_\gamma$ a compact surface of genus $\gamma \neq 1$. We choose a reference metric $g_0$ so that $R_0$ has constant sign (positive if $M = S^2$, and negative if $M$ has genus $\geq 2$).

Define the random metric on $M_\gamma$ by $g_1 = e^{af}g_0$, (as in (1)) and $f$ is given by (2). Let $P_2(a)$ the probability

$$P_2(a) := \text{Prob}\{\exists x \in M : \text{sgn} R_1(g_1(a), x) \neq \text{sgn}(R_0)\},$$

i.e. the probability that the curvature $R_1$ of the random metric $g_1(a)$ changes sign somewhere on $M$. The probability of the complementary event $P_1(a) = 1 - P_2(a)$ is clearly $P_1(a) := \text{Prob}\{\forall x \in M : \text{sgn}(R_1(g_1(a), x)) = \text{sgn}(R_0)\}$, i.e. the probability that the curvature of the random metric $g_1(a)$ does not change sign.

By Remark 2.6, in dimension two $\text{sgn}(R_1) = \text{sgn}(R_0)\text{sgn}(1 - ah/R_0)$, where $h = \Delta_0 f$ was defined earlier in (3). We let $v$ denote the random field

$$v(x) = h(x)/R_0(x).$$

Note that

$$r_v(x, x) = r_h(x, x)/[R_0(x)]^2,$$

and let

$$\sigma_v^2 = \sup_{x \in M} r_v(x, x) = \sup_{x \in M} r_h(x, x)/[R_0(x)]^2.$$

For a random field $F : M \to \mathbb{R}$ that is a.s. bounded we introduce the random variable $\|F\|_M := \sup_{x \in M} F(x)$. It follows from Remark 2.6 that

$$P_2(a) = \text{Prob}\{\|v\|_M > 1/a\}.$$

We shall estimate $P_2(a)$ in the limit $a \to 0$. Geometrically, that means that $g_1(a) \to g_0$, so $P_2(a)$ should go to zero as $a \to 0$; below, we estimate the rate. To do that, we use a strong version of the Borell-TIS inequality, cf. [6, 43] or [1, p. 51].

From now on we shall assume that $R_0 \in C^0(M)$, and that $c_j = O(\lambda_j^{-s})$, $s > 2$. Then Proposition 2.5 implies that $h$ and $R_1$ are a.s. $C^0$ and hence bounded, since $M$ is compact.

**Theorem 3.1.** Let $M \neq T^2$ be a compact surface. Assume that $R_0 \in C^0(M)$ and that $c_j = O(\lambda_j^{-s})$, $s > 2$. Then there exist constants $C_1 > 0$ and $C_2$ such that the probability $P_2(a)$ satisfies

$$(C_1a)e^{-1/(2a^2\sigma_v^2)} \leq P_2(a) \leq e^{C_2/a-1/(2a^2\sigma_v^2)},$$

as $a \to 0$. In particular

$$\lim_{a \to 0} a^2 \ln P_2(a) = -\frac{1}{2\sigma_v^2}.$$

Let $M$ be a compact orientable surface, $M \neq T^2$. Consider random real-analytic conformal deformations; this corresponds to the case when the coefficients $c_j$ in (2) decay exponentially.

We fix a real parameter $T > 0$ and choose the coefficients $c_j$ in (2) to be equal to

$$c_j = e^{-\lambda_j T/2}/\lambda_j.$$
Here $T/2$ can be regarded as the radius of analyticity of $g_1$.

Then it follows from (4) that
\[ r_h(x, x) = e^*(x, x, T) = \sum_{j: \lambda_j > 0} e^{-\lambda_j T} \phi_j(x)^2, \]
where $e^*(x, x, T)$ denotes the heat kernel on $M$ without the constant term, evaluated at $x$ at time $T$.

**Proposition 3.2.** Let $n = 2$ and $M \neq T^2$. Assume that the coefficients $c_j$ are chosen as in (15). Then as $T \to 0^+$, $\sigma_v^2$ is asymptotic to
\[ \frac{1}{(4\pi T)^{n/2}} \inf_{x \in M}(R_0(x))^2. \]

Proposition 3.2 is next applied to prove a comparison theorem for $P(a, T, g)$ for small $T$.

**Theorem 3.3.** Let $g_0$ and $g_1$ be two distinct reference metrics on a surface $M \neq T^2$, normalized to have equal volume, such that $R_0$ and $R_1$ have constant sign, $R_0 \equiv \text{const}$ and $R_1 \not\equiv \text{const}$. Then there exists $a_0, T_0 > 0$ (that depend on $g_0, g_1$) such that for any $0 < a < a_0$ and for any $0 < t < T_0$, we have $P_2(a, T, g_1) > P_2(a, T, g_0)$.

**Proof.** It follows from Gauss-Bonnet’s theorem that
\[ \int_M R_0 dV_0 = \int_M R_1 dV_1. \]
Since $\text{vol}(M, g_0) = \text{vol}(M, g_1)$, and since by assumption $R_0 \equiv \text{const}$ and $R_1 \not\equiv \text{const}$, it follows that
\[ b_0 := \inf_{x \in M} (R_0(x))^2 > \inf_{x \in M} (R_1(x))^2 := b_1. \]

Accordingly, as $T \to 0^+$, we have
\[ \frac{\sigma_v^2(g_1, T)}{\sigma_v^2(g_0, T)} \asymp \frac{b_0}{b_1} > 1. \]

The result now follows from Theorem 3.1. \qed

It follows that in every conformal class, $P_2(a, T, g_0)$ is minimized in the limit $a \to 0, T \to 0^+$ for the metric $g_0$ of constant curvature.

Let $\lambda_1 = \lambda_1(g_0)$ denote the smallest nonzero eigenvalue of $\Delta_0$. Denote by $m = m(\lambda_1)$ the multiplicity of $\lambda_1$, and let
\[ F := \sup_{x \in M} \frac{\sum_{j=1}^m \phi_j(x)^2}{R_0(x)^2}. \]

**Proposition 3.4.** Let $n = 2, M \neq T^2$. Let the coefficients $c_j$ be as in (15). Denote by $\sigma_v^2(T)$ the corresponding supremum of the variance of $v$. Then
\[ \lim_{T \to \infty} \frac{\sigma_v^2(T)}{F e^{-\lambda_1 T}} = 1. \]

**Theorem 3.5.** Let $g_0$ and $g_1$ be two reference metrics (of equal area) on a compact surface $M$, such that $R_0$ and $R_1$ have constant sign, and such that $\lambda_1(g_0) > \lambda_1(g_1)$. Then there exist $a_0 > 0$ and $0 < T_0 < \infty$ (that depend on $g_0, g_1$), such that for all $a < a_0$ and $T > T_0$ we have $P_2(a, T; g_0) < P_2(a, T; g_1)$. 
It was proved by Hersch in [23] that for $M = S^2$, if we denote by $g_0$ the round metric on $S^2$, then $\lambda_1(g_0) > \lambda_1(g_1)$ for any other metric $g_1$ on $S^2$ of equal area. This immediately implies the following

**Corollary 3.6.** Let $g_0$ be the round metric on $S^2$, and let $g_1$ be any other metric of equal area. Then, there exist $a_0 > 0$ and $T_0 > 0$ (depending on $g_1$) such that for all $a < a_0$ and $T > T_0$ we have $P_2(a, T; g_0) < P_2(a, T; g_1)$.

It seems natural to conjecture ([32, 15]) that the round metric on $S^2$ will be extremal for $P_2(a, T)$ for all $T$, in the limit $a \to 0$.

For surfaces of genus $\gamma \geq 2$ the situation is different. It follows from [46] and standard results about extremal metrics for $\lambda_1$ that

**Proposition 3.7.** Let $g_0$ be a hyperbolic metric on a compact orientable surface $M$ of genus $\gamma \geq 2$. Then $g_0$ does not maximize $\lambda_1$ in its conformal class.

A metric that maximizes $\lambda_1$ for surfaces of genus 2 is a branched covering of the round 2-sphere, cf. [25]. Accordingly, we conclude that on surfaces of genus $\gamma \geq 2$, different metrics maximize $P_2(a, T)$ in the limit $a \to 0$, $T \to 0$ and in the limit $a \to 0$, $T \to \infty$, unlike the situation on $S^2$.

### 3.1. The round 2-sphere

The round 2-sphere is special in that the curvature perturbation is isotropic, so that in particular the variance of $h$ is constant; also, $R_0 \equiv \text{const}$. In this case a special theorem due to Adler-Taylor gives a precise asymptotics for the excursion probability.

For an integer $m$ let $\mathcal{E}_m$ be the space of spherical harmonics of degree $m$ of dimension $N_m = 2m + 1$ associated to the eigenvalue $E_m = m(m + 1)$, and for every $m$ fix an $L^2$ orthonormal basis $B_m = \{\eta_{m,k}\}_{k=1}^{N_m}$ of $\mathcal{E}_m$.

To treat the spectrum degeneracy it will be convenient to use a slightly different parametrization of the conformal factor than the usual one (2)

$$f(x) = -\sqrt{|S^2|} \sum_{m \geq 1, k} \frac{\sqrt{c_m}}{E_m \sqrt{N_m}} a_{m,k} \eta_{m,k}(x),$$

where $a_{m,k}$ are standard Gaussian i.i.d. and $c_m > 0$ are some (suitably decaying) constants. For extra convenience we will assume in addition that

$$\sum_{m=1}^{\infty} c_m = 1.$$  

**Lemma 3.8.** Given a sequence $c_m$ satisfying (19), we have $f(x) \in H_r(S^2)$ a.s. if and only if

$$\sum_{m=1}^{\infty} m^{2r-4} c_m < \infty.$$

In what follows we will always assume that

$$c_m = O\left(\frac{1}{m^s}\right)$$

for some $s > 0$.

Using the two-dimensional case of [1, Thm. 12.4.1], we show that
Theorem 3.9. Let $s > 7$, and the metric $g_1$ on $S^2$ be given by

$$g_1 = e^{af} g_0$$

where $f$ is given by (18). Also, let $c_m \neq 0$ for at least one odd $m$. Then as $a \to 0$, the probability that the curvature is negative somewhere is given by

$$P_2(a) = C_2 \exp \left( \frac{1}{2a^2} \right) + C_1 \Psi \left( \frac{1}{a} \right) + o \left( \exp \left( \frac{\alpha}{2a^2} \right) \right)$$

$$\sim \frac{C_2}{a} \exp \left( \frac{1}{2a^2} \right) + C_1 \sqrt{\frac{2}{\pi a}} \exp \left( -\frac{1}{2a^2} \right),$$

where $C_1 = 2$, $C_2 = \frac{1}{\sqrt{2\pi}} \sum_{m \geq 1} c_m E_m$ and $\alpha > 1$.

Here $\Psi(u)$ denotes the error function $\Psi(u) = \frac{1}{\sqrt{2\pi}} \int_u^\infty e^{-t^2/2} dt$.

4. $L^\infty$ CURVATURE BOUNDS

On the torus $T^2$, the Gauss-Bonnet theorem implies that the curvature has to change sign for every metric, so that question about the probability of the curvature changing sign is meaningless. We study another question instead, which can be formulated for arbitrary reference metric $g_0$ on any compact orientable surface: estimate the probability that $\|R_1 - R_0\|_\infty > u$, where $R_1$ denotes the curvature of the metric $g_1 = e^{af} g_0$, and $u > 0$ is a real parameter.

Recall that the random field $f$ was defined by (2) (with $\sigma_f^2 = \sup_{x \in M} r_f(x, x)$); $h = \Delta_0 f$ was defined in (3) (with $\sigma_h^2 = \sup_{x \in M} r_h(x, x)$).

Definition 4.1. Let $w = \Delta_0 f + R_0 f = h + R_0 f$. We denote its covariance function by $r_w(x, y)$, and we define $\sigma_w^2 = \sup_{x \in M} r_w(x, x)$.

Note that on flat $T^2$, $h = w$ and $\sigma_h = \sigma_w$. Note also that the random fields $f, h$ and $w$ have constant variance on round $S^2$; also $f$ and $h = w$ have constant variance on flat $T^2$.

We prove the following theorem:

Theorem 4.2. Let $M$ be a compact surface. Assume that the random metric is chosen so that the random fields $f, h, w$ are a.s. $C^0$. Let $a \to 0$ and $u \to 0$ so that

$$\frac{u}{a} \to \infty.$$

Then

$$\log \text{Prob}\{\|R_1 - R_0\|_\infty > u\} \sim -\frac{u^2}{2a^2 \sigma_w^2}.$$

5. DIMENSION $n > 2$

Let $(M, g_0)$ be a compact orientable $n$-dimensional Riemannian manifold, $n > 2$. Let $R_0 \in C^0(M)$ be the scalar curvature of $g_0$: we assume that $R_0$ has constant sign. Let $g_1 = e^{af} g_0$ with $f$ as in (2) be a conformal change of metric. The key difference between dimension 2 and dimension $n > 2$ in our calculations is the presence of the gradient term, cf. (7). We shall assume that $c_j = O(\lambda_j^{-s})$, $s > n/2 + 1$. Then $R_1 \in C^0(M)$ a.s. by Proposition 2.5. We let $P_2(a)$ denote the probability that the scalar curvature $R_1$ of $g_1$ will change sign.
Below, we shall consider a random field \( v = (\Delta_0f)/R_0 = h/R_0 \). As usual, we let
\[
\sigma^2_v = \sup_{x \in M} r_v(x, x).
\]
We shall also consider the quantity
\[
\sigma^2 = \sup_{x \in M} E[|\nabla_0 f(x)|^2]/R_0(x).
\]

**Proposition 5.1.** Let \((M,g_0)\) be a compact orientable \( n \)-dimensional Riemannian manifold, \( n > 2 \), such that the scalar curvature \( R_0 \in C^0(M) \) and \( R_0(x) \neq 0, \forall x \in M \). Assume that \( c_j = O(\lambda^{-s}) \), \( s > n/2 + 1 \), so that \( h, R_1 \in C^0(M) \).

1) Assume that \( \forall x \in M. R_0(x) < 0 \). Then there exists \( \alpha > 0 \) so that
\[
P_2(a) = O\left(\exp\left(\alpha - \frac{1}{2a^2(n-1)^2\sigma^2_v}\right)\right).
\]

2) Assume that \( \forall x \in M. R_0(x) > 0 \). Then there exists \( \beta > 0 \) so that
\[
P_2(a) = O\left(\exp\left(\beta - \frac{B}{a}\right)\right),
\]
where
\[
B = \frac{2 + \kappa - \sqrt{\kappa^2 + 4\kappa}}{\sigma_2n(n-1)(n-2)},
\]
and
\[
\kappa = \frac{4\sigma^2_v(n-1)}{\sigma_2n(n-2)}.
\]

The somewhat complicated constant \( B > 0 \) in the exponent is an artifact of a tradeoff which comes out of the proof. A simpler proof gives nicer, but worse, constants.

6. \( Q \)-Curvature

The \( Q \)-curvature was first studied by Branson and later by Gover, Orsted, Fefferman, Graham, Zworski, Chang, Yang, Djadli, Malchiodi and others. We refer to [9] for a detailed survey.

We start by discussing conformally covariant operators, first considered by Paneitz in dimension 4: the *Paneitz operator* is \( P_4 = \Delta^2 g + \delta(2/3)R_g g - 2|\text{Ric}_g|^2 \). Below we summarize the relevant results from [9]. Let \( M \) be a compact orientable manifold of dimension \( n \geq 3 \). Let \( m \) be even, and \( m \notin \{ n+2, n+4, \ldots \} \Rightarrow m-n \notin 2\mathbb{Z}^+ \). Then there exists on \( M \) a conformally covariant elliptic operator \( P_m \) of order \( 2m \) (GJMS operators of Graham-Jenne-Mason-Sparling, cf. [20]). We shall restrict ourselves to even \( n \), and to \( m = n \). We shall denote the corresponding operator \( P_n \) simply by \( P \).

It satisfies the following properties: \( P = \Delta^{n/2} + \text{lower order terms} \). \( P \) is formally self-adjoint (Graham-Zworski [21], Fefferman-Graham [16]). Under a conformal transformation of metric \( \tilde{g} = e^{2\omega} g \), the operator \( P \) changes as follows: \( \tilde{P} = e^{-n\omega} P \).

We next discuss \( Q \)-curvature and its key properties. In dimension 4, it was defined by Paneitz as follows:
\[
Q_g = -\frac{1}{12} (\Delta_g R_g - R_g^2 + 3|\text{Ric}_g|^2).
\]
In higher dimensions, $Q$-curvature is a local scalar invariant associated to the
operator $P$. It was introduced by T. Branson in [8]; alternative constructions were
provided in [16, 17] using the ambient metric construction.

$Q$-curvature is equal to $1/(2(n-1))\Delta^{n/2}R$ modulo nonlinear terms in curvature.
Under a conformal transformation of variables $\tilde{g} = e^{2\omega}g$ on $M^n$, the $Q$-curvature
transforms as follows [9, (4)]:

$$P\omega + Q = \tilde{Q} e^{n\omega}.$$  

Integral of the $Q$-curvature is conformally invariant.

A natural problem is the existence of metrics with constant $Q$-curvature in a
given conformal class. It was established by Chang and Yang, and Djadli and
Malchiodi in dimension 4, and by Ndiaye in arbitrary even dimension $n > 4$ [11,
13, 33], assuming that certain “generic” assumptions are satisfied.

To generalize our results for scalar curvature to $Q$-curvature, consider a manifold
$M$ with a “reference” metric $g_0$ such that $Q$-curvature $Q_0(x)$ has constant sign, and
a conformal perturbation $g_1 = e^{2\alpha f} g_0$; expand $f$ in a series of eigenfunctions of $P$,
and use formula (24) to study the induced curvature $Q_1$.

In the Fourier expansions considered below, we shall restrict our summation
to nonzero eigenvalues of $P$. Let $P$ have $k$ negative eigenvalues (counted with
multiplicity); denote the corresponding spectrum by $P\psi_j = -\mu_j \psi_j$, for $1 \leq j \leq k$,
where $0 > -\mu_1 \geq -\mu_2 \geq \ldots \geq -\mu_k$. The other nonzero eigenvalues are positive,
and the corresponding spectrum is denoted by $P\phi_j = \lambda_j \phi_j$, for $j \geq 1$, where
$0 < \lambda_1 \leq \lambda_2 \leq \ldots$

Consider the transformation of metric $g_1 = e^{2\alpha f} g_0$, where we let

$$f = \sum_{i=1}^{k} b_i \psi_i + \sum_{j=1}^{\infty} a_j \phi_j,$$

and where $b_i \sim \mathcal{N}(0, t_i^2)$ and $a_j \sim \mathcal{N}(0, c_j^2)$.

We define $h := -P f$, and substituting into (24), we find that

$$Q_1 e^{n\alpha f} = Q_0 - ah = Q_0 + a \left( \sum_{j=1}^{\infty} \tilde{a}_j \phi_j - \sum_{i=1}^{k} \tilde{b}_i \psi_i \right),$$

where $\tilde{a}_j \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \lambda_j^2 c_j^2)$ and $\tilde{b}_i \sim \mathcal{N}(0, t_i^2 \mu_i^2)$.

It is easy to see that the regularity of the random field in (25) is determined by
the principal symbol $\Delta^{n/2}$ of the GJMS operator $P$. The following Proposition
is then a straightforward extension of Proposition 2.1:

**Proposition 6.1.** Let $f$ be defined as in (25). If $c_j = O(\lambda_j^{-t})$ and $t > 1 + \frac{k}{n}$, then $f \in C^k$. Similarly, if $c_j = O(\lambda_j^{-t})$ and $t > 2 + \frac{k}{n}$ then $ Pf \in C^k$.

Let $f$ be as in equation (25) and such that $P f$ is a.s. $C^k$. We remark that it
follows from Proposition 6.1 that this happens if $c_j = O(\lambda_j^{-t})$ where $t > 2$.

Let $g_1 = e^{2\alpha f} g_0$. Denote the $Q$-curvature of $g_1$ by $Q_1$; then it follows from (24) that

$$\text{sgn}(Q_1) = \text{sgn}(Q_0) \text{sgn}(1 - ah/Q_0).$$

It follows that $Q_1$ changes sign iff $\sup_{x \in M} h(x)/Q_0(x) > 1/a$. 
We denote by \( v(x) \) the random field \( h(x)/Q_0(x) \). The covariance function of \( v(x) \) is equal to

\[
(28) \quad r_v(x,y) = \frac{1}{Q_0(x)Q_0(y)} \left( \sum_{i=1}^{k} t_i^2 \mu_i^2 \psi_i(x) \psi_i(y) + \sum_{j=1}^{\infty} \lambda_j^2 \sigma_j \phi_j(x) \phi_j(y) \right).
\]

We let

\[
(29) \quad \sigma_v^2 := \sup_{x \in M} r_v(x,x).
\]

As for the scalar curvature, we make the following

**Definition 6.2.** Denote by \( P_2(a) \) the probability that the \( Q \)-curvature \( Q_1 \) of the metric \( g_1 = g_1(a) \) changes sign.

We prove the following analogue of Theorem 3.1 for \( Q \)-curvature.

**Theorem 6.3.** Let \((M, g_0)\) be an \( n \)-dimensional compact orientable Riemannian manifold, with \( n \) even. Assume that \( Q_0 \in C^0(M) \) and that \( c_j = O(\lambda_j^{-t}) \), \( t > 2 \). Then there exist constants \( C_1 > 0 \) and \( C_2 \) such that the probability \( P_2(a) \) satisfies

\[
(C_1 a)^{-1/(2a^2 \sigma_v^2)} \leq P_2(a) \leq e^{C_2/a - 1/(2a^2 \sigma_v^2)},
\]

as \( a \to 0 \). In particular

\[
\lim_{a \to 0} a^2 \ln P_2(a) = -\frac{1}{2\sigma_v^2}.
\]

Next, we extend the results in section 4 to \( Q \)-curvature.

**Theorem 6.4.** Let \((M, g_0)\) be an \( n \)-dimensional compact orientable Riemannian manifold, with \( n \) even. Assume that \( Q_0 \in C^0(M) \), and that \( c_j = O(\lambda_j^{-t}) \), \( t > 2 \), so that by Proposition 6.1 the random fields \( f \) and \( h \) are a.s. \( C^2 \). Let \( w := h - n Q_0 f \), denote by \( r_w(x,y) \) its covariance function and set

\[
\sigma_w^2 := \sup_{x \in M} r_w(x,x).
\]

Let \( a \to 0 \) and \( u \to 0 \) so that

\[
\frac{u}{a} \to \infty.
\]

Then

\[
\log \text{Prob}\{\|Q_1 - Q_0\|_\infty > u\} \sim -\frac{u^2}{2a^2 \sigma_w^2}.
\]

7. Conclusion

There are numerous questions that were not addressed in the present paper. We concentrated on the study of local geometry of spaces of positively- or negatively-curved metrics (see Remark 2.4), but it seems extremely interesting to study global geometry of these spaces, [22, 26, 30, 35, 37, 38, 39, 40].

Another interesting question that seems tractable concerns the study of the nodal set of \( R \) i.e. its zero set. That set, like the sign of \( R_1 \), only depends on the quantity \( R_0 - a(n-1)\Delta_0 f - a^2(n-2)\Delta_0 f^2/4 \) (or \( R_0 - a \Delta_0 f \) in dimension two). It also seems interesting to study other characteristics of the curvature (whether it changes sign or not), such as its \( L^p \) norms, the structure of its nodal domains (if it changes sign), and of its sub- and super-level sets.
Also, it seems quite interesting to study related questions for Ricci and sectional curvatures in dimension \( n \geq 3 \). Another important question concerns an appropriate definition of measures on the space of Riemannian metrics not restricted to a single conformal class. A very important question concerns the study of metrics of lower regularity than in the present paper, appearing e.g. in 2-dimensional Liouville quantum gravity, cf. \([14]\). A very important question concerns the study of metrics of lower regularity than in the present paper, appearing e.g. in 2-dimensional quantum gravity, cf. \([14, 27, 34]\). While the smoothness assumptions in the present paper do not allow us to consider those metrics, the authors hope that further developing the techniques of the present paper will allow to study geometry and spectral theory of the metrics that arise in conformal field theory and quantum gravity.

In addition, it seems very interesting to study various questions about random metrics that are influenced by curvature, such as geometric invariants (girth, diameter, isoperimetric constants, etc); spectral invariants (small eigenvalues of \( \Delta \), determinants of Laplacians, estimates for the heat kernel, statistical properties of eigenvalues and of the spectral function, etc); as well as questions in ergodic theory of the geodesic and the frame flows on \( M \), such as existence of conjugate points, ergodicity, Lyapunov exponents and entropy, etc.

We plan to address these and other questions in subsequent papers.

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Department of Mathematics and Statistics, McGill University, 805 Sherbrooke Str. West, Montréal QC H3A 2K6, Canada
E-mail address: canzani@math.mcgill.ca

Department of Mathematics and Statistics, McGill University, 805 Sherbrooke Str. West, Montréal QC H3A 2K6, Canada
E-mail address: jakobson@math.mcgill.ca

Centre de recherches mathématiques (CRM), Université de Montréal C.P. 6128, succ. centre-ville Montréal, Québec H3C 3J7, Canada
Currently at
Institutionen för Matematik, Kungliga Tekniska högskolan (KTH), Lindstedtsvägen 25, 10044 Stockholm, Sweden
E-mail address: wigman@kth.se