

Techniques for data hiding

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Data hiding, a form of steganography, embeds data into digital media for the purpose of identification, annotation, and copyright. Several constraints affect this process: the quantity of data to be hidden, the need for invariance of these data under conditions where a "host" signal is subject to distortions, e.g., lossy compression, and the degree to which the data must be immune to interception, modification, or removal by a third party. We explore both traditional and novel techniques for addressing the data-hiding process and evaluate these techniques in light of three applications: copyright protection, tamper-proofing, and augmentation data embedding.

Digital representation of media facilitates access and potentially improves the portability, efficiency, and accuracy of the information presented. Undesirable effects of facile data access include an increased opportunity for violation of copyright and tampering with or modification of content. The motivation for this work includes the provision of protection of intellectual property rights, an indication of content manipulation, and a means of annotation. Data hiding represents a class of processes used to embed data, such as copyright information, into various forms of media such as image, audio, or text with a minimum amount of perceivable degradation to the "host" signal; i.e., the embedded data should be invisible and inaudible to a human observer. Note that data hiding, while similar to compression, is distinct from encryption. Its goal is not to restrict or regulate access to the host signal, but rather to ensure that embedded data remain inviolate and recoverable.

Two important uses of data hiding in digital media are to provide proof of the copyright, and assurance of content integrity. Therefore, the data should stay hidden in a host signal, even if that signal is subjected to manipulation as degrading as filtering, resampling, cropping, or lossy data compression. Other applications of data hiding, such as the inclusion of augmentation data, need not be invariant to detection or removal, since these data are there for the benefit of both the author and the content consumer. Thus, the techniques used for data hiding vary depending on the quantity of data being hidden and the required invariance of those data to manipulation. Since no one method is capable of achieving all these goals, a class of processes is needed to span the range of possible applications.

The technical challenges of data hiding are formidable. Any "holes" to fill with data in a host signal, either statistical or perceptual, are likely targets for removal by lossy signal compression. The key to successful data hiding is the finding of holes that are not suitable for exploitation by compression algorithms. A further challenge is to fill these holes with data in a way that remains invariant to a large class of host signal transformations.

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Features and applications

Data-hiding techniques should be capable of embedding data in a host signal with the following restrictions and features:

1. The host signal should be nonobjectively degraded and the embedded data should be minimally perceptible. (The goal is for the data to remain *hidden*. As any magician will tell you, it is possible for something to be hidden while it remains in plain sight; you merely keep the person from looking at it. We will use the words *hidden*, *inaudible*, *imperceptible*, and *invisible* to mean that an observer does not notice the presence of the data, even if they are perceptible.)
2. The embedded data should be directly encoded into the media, rather than into a header or wrapper, so that the data remain intact across varying data file formats.
3. The embedded data should be immune to modifications ranging from intentional and intelligent attempts at removal to anticipated manipulations, e.g., channel noise, filtering, resampling, cropping, encoding, lossy compressing, printing and scanning, digital-to-analog (D/A) conversion, and analog-to-digital (A/D) conversion, etc.
4. Asymmetrical coding of the embedded data is desirable, since the purpose of data hiding is to keep the data in the host signal, but not necessarily to make the data difficult to access.
5. Error correction coding¹ should be used to ensure data integrity. It is inevitable that there will be some degradation to the embedded data when the host signal is modified.
6. The embedded data should be self-clocking or arbitrarily re-entrant. This ensures that the embedded data can be recovered when only fragments of the host signal are available, e.g., if a sound bite is extracted from an interview, data embedded in the audio segment can be recovered. This feature also facilitates automatic decoding of the hidden data, since there is no need to refer to the original host signal.

Applications. Trade-offs exist between the quantity of embedded data and the degree of immunity to host signal modification. By constraining the degree of host signal degradation, a data-hiding method can operate with either high embedded data rate, or high resistance to modification, but not both. As one increases, the other must decrease. While this can be shown mathematically for some data-hiding systems

such as a spread spectrum, it seems to hold true for all data-hiding systems. In any system, you can trade bandwidth for robustness by exploiting redundancy. The quantity of embedded data and the degree of host signal modification vary from application to application. Consequently, different techniques are employed for different applications. Several prospective applications of data hiding are discussed in this section.

An application that requires a minimal amount of embedded data is the placement of a digital watermark. The embedded data are used to place an indication of ownership in the host signal, serving the same purpose as an author's signature or a company logo.

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modification.**

Since the information is of a critical nature and the signal may face intelligent and intentional attempts to destroy or remove it, the coding techniques used must be immune to a wide variety of possible modifications.

A second application for data hiding is tamper-proofing. It is used to indicate that the host signal has been modified from its authored state. Modification to the embedded data indicates that the host signal has been changed in some way.

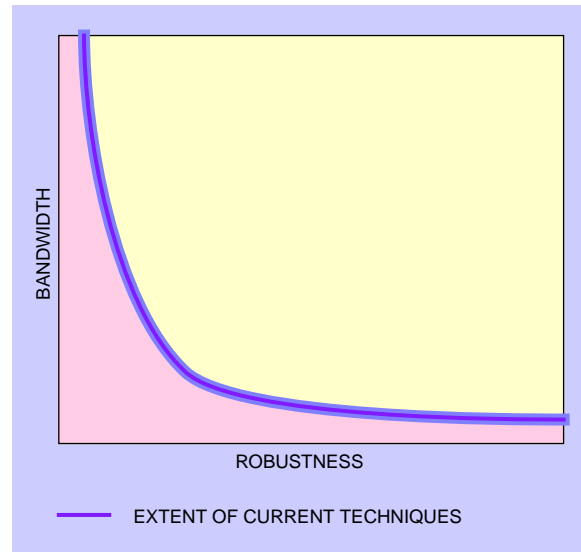
A third application, feature location, requires more data to be embedded. In this application, the embedded data are hidden in specific locations within an image. It enables one to identify individual content features, e.g., the name of the person on the left versus the right side of an image. Typically, feature location data are not subject to intentional removal. However, it is expected that the host signal might be subjected to a certain degree of modification, e.g., images are routinely modified by scaling, cropping, and tone-scale enhancement. As a result, feature location data-hiding techniques must be immune to geometrical and nongeometrical modifications of a host signal.

Image and audio captions (or annotations) may require a large amount of data. Annotations often travel separately from the host signal, thus requiring additional channels and storage. Annotations stored in file headers or resource sections are often lost if the file format is changed, e.g., the annotations created in a Tagged Image File Format (TIFF) may not be present when the image is transformed to a Graphic Interchange Format (GIF). These problems are resolved by embedding annotations directly into the data structure of a host signal.

Prior work. Adelson² describes a method of data hiding that exploits the human visual system's varying sensitivity to contrast versus spatial frequency. Adelson substitutes high-spatial frequency image data for *hidden* data in a pyramid-encoded still image. While he is able to encode a large amount of data efficiently, there is no provision to make the data immune to detection or removal by typical manipulations such as filtering and rescaling. Stego,³ one of several widely available software packages, simply encodes data in the least-significant bit of the host signal. This technique suffers from all of the same problems as Adelson's method but creates an additional problem of degrading image or audio quality. Bender⁴ modifies Adelson's technique by using *chaos* as a means to encrypt the embedded data, deterring detection, but providing no improvement to immunity to host signal manipulation. Lippman⁵ hides data in the chrominance channel of the National Television Standards Committee (NTSC) television signal by exploiting the temporal over-sampling of color in such signals. Typical of Enhanced Definition Television Systems, this method encodes a large amount of data, but the data are lost to most recording, compression, and transcoding processes. Other techniques, such as Hecht's Data-Glyph,⁶ which adds a *bar code* to images, are engineered in light of a predetermined set of geometric modifications.⁷ Spread-spectrum,⁸⁻¹¹ a promising technology for data hiding, is difficult to intercept and remove but often introduces perceivable distortion into the host signal.

Problem space. Each application of data hiding requires a different level of resistance to modification and a different embedded data rate. These form the theoretical data-hiding problem space (see Figure 1). There is an inherent trade-off between bandwidth and "robustness," or the degree to which the data are immune to attack or transformations that occur to the host signal through normal usage, e.g., compression, resampling, etc. The more data to be hidden, e.g., a

Figure 1 Conceptual data-hiding problem space



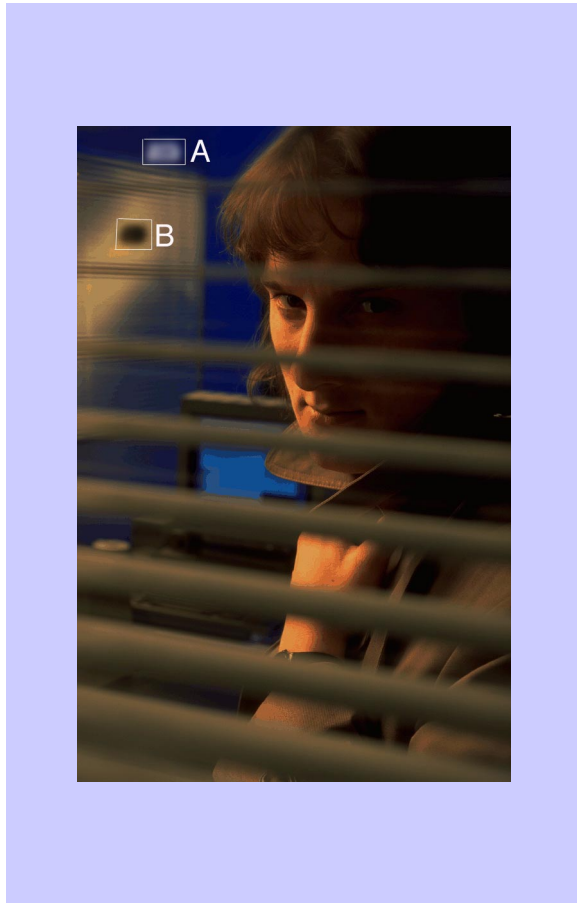
caption for a photograph, the less secure the encoding. The less data to be hidden, e.g., a watermark, the more secure the encoding.

Data hiding in still images

Data hiding in still images presents a variety of challenges that arise due to the way the human visual system (HVS) works and the typical modifications that images undergo. Additionally, still images provide a relatively small host signal in which to hide data. A fairly typical 8-bit picture of 200×200 pixels provides approximately 40 kilobytes (kB) of data space in which to work. This is equivalent to only around 5 seconds of telephone-quality audio or less than a single frame of NTSC television. Also, it is reasonable to expect that still images will be subject to operations ranging from simple affine transforms to nonlinear transforms such as cropping, blurring, filtering, and lossy compression. Practical data-hiding techniques need to be resistant to as many of these transformations as possible.

Despite these challenges, still images are likely candidates for data hiding. There are many attributes of the HVS that are potential candidates for exploitation in a data-hiding system, including our varying sensitivity to contrast as a function of spatial frequency and the masking effect of edges (both in luminance and

Figure 2 A single iteration in the Patchwork method (photograph courtesy of Webb Chapel)



chrominance). The HVS has low sensitivity to small changes in luminance, being able to perceive changes of no less than one part in 30 for random patterns. However, in uniform regions of an image, the HVS is more sensitive to the change of the luminance, approximately one part in 240. A typical CRT (cathode ray tube) display or printer has a limited dynamic range. In an image representation of one part in 256, e.g., 8-bit gray levels, there is potentially room to hide data as pseudorandom changes to picture brightness. Another HVS “hole” is our relative insensitivity to very low spatial frequencies such as continuous changes in brightness across an image, i.e., vignetting. An additional advantage of working with still images is that they are noncausal. Data-hiding techniques can have access to any pixel or block of pixels at random.

Using these observations, we have developed a variety of techniques for placing data in still images. Some techniques are more suited to dealing with small amounts of data, while others to large amounts. Some techniques are highly resistant to geometric modifications, while others are more resistant to nongeometric modifications, e.g., filtering. We present methods that explore both of these areas, as well as their combination.

Low bit-rate data hiding

With low bit-rate encoding, we expect a high level of robustness in return for low bandwidth. The emphasis is on resistance to attempts of data removal by a third party. Both a statistical and a perceptual technique are discussed in the next sections on Patchwork, texture, and applications.

Patchwork: A statistical approach

The statistical approach, which we refer to as *Patchwork*, is based on a pseudorandom, statistical process. Patchwork invisibly embeds in a host image a specific statistic, one that has a Gaussian distribution. Figure 2 shows a single iteration in the Patchwork method. Two patches are chosen pseudorandomly, the first A, the second B. The image data in patch A are lightened while the data in patch B are darkened (exaggerated for purposes of this illustration). This unique statistic indicates the presence or absence of a signature. Patchwork is independent of the contents of the host image. It shows reasonably high resistance to most nongeometric image modifications.

For the following analysis, we make the following simplifying assumptions (these assumptions are not limiting, as is shown later): We are operating in a 256 level, linearly quantized system starting at 0; all brightness levels are equally likely; all samples are independent of all other samples.

The Patchwork algorithm proceeds as follows: take any two points, *A* and *B*, chosen at random in an image. Let *a* equal the brightness at point *A* and *b* the brightness at point *B*. Now, let

$$S = a - b \quad (1)$$

The *expected* value of *S* is 0, i.e., the average value of *S* after repeating this procedure a large number of times is *expected* to be 0.

Although the *expected* value is 0, this does not tell us much about what S will be for a specific case. This is because the variance is quite high for this procedure. The variance of S , σ_s is a measure of how tightly samples of S will cluster around the expected value of 0. To compute this, we make the following observation: Since $S = a - b$ and a and b are assumed independent, σ_s^2 can be computed as follows (this, and all other probability equations are from Drake¹²):

$$\sigma_s^2 = \sigma_a^2 + \sigma_b^2 \quad (2)$$

where σ_a^2 for a uniform S is:

$$\sigma_a^2 \approx 5418 \quad (3)$$

Now, $\sigma_a^2 = \sigma_b^2$ since a and b are samples from the same set, taken with replacement. Thus:

$$\sigma_s^2 = 2 \times \sigma_a^2 \approx 2 \times \frac{(255 - 0)^2}{12} \approx 10836 \quad (4)$$

which yields a standard deviation $\sigma_s \approx 104$. This means that more than half the time, S will be greater than 43 or less than -43 . Assuming a Gaussian clustering, a single iteration does not tell us much. However, this is not the case if we perform the procedure many times.

Let us repeat this procedure n times, letting a_i and b_i be the values a and b take on during the i th iteration, S_i . Now let S_n be defined as:

$$S_n = \sum_{i=1}^n S_i = \sum_{i=1}^n a_i - b_i \quad (5)$$

The *expected* value of S_n is:

$$S_n = n \times S = n \times 0 = 0 \quad (6)$$

This makes intuitive sense, since the number of times a_i is greater than b_i should be offset by the number of times the reverse is true. Now the variance is:

$$\sigma_{S_n}^2 = n \times \sigma_s^2 \quad (7)$$

And the standard deviation is:

$$\sigma_{S_n} = \sqrt{n} \times \sigma_s \approx \sqrt{n} \times 104 \quad (8)$$

Table 1 Degree of certainty of encoding given deviation from that expected in a Gaussian distribution ($\delta = 2$)

Standard Deviations Away	Certainty	n
0	50.00%	0
1	84.13%	679
2	97.87%	2713
3	99.87%	6104

Now, we can compute S_{10000} for a picture, and if it varies by more than a few standard deviations, we can be fairly certain that this did not happen by chance. In fact, since as we will show later S'_n for large n has a Gaussian distribution, a deviation of even a few σ_s 's indicates to a high degree of certainty the presence of encoding (see Table 1).

The Patchwork method artificially modifies S for a given picture, such that S'_n is many deviations away from expected. To encode a picture, we:

1. Use a specific key for a known pseudorandom number generator to choose (a_i, b_i) . This is important, because the encoder needs to visit the same points during decoding.
2. Raise the brightness in the patch a_i by an amount δ , typically in the range of 1 to 5 parts in 256.
3. Lower the brightness in b_i by this same amount δ (the amounts do not have to be the same, as long as they are in opposite directions).
4. Repeat this for n steps (n typically $\sim 10\,000$).

Now, when decoded, S'_n will be:

$$S'_n = \sum_{i=1}^n (a_i + \delta) - (b_i - \delta) \quad (9)$$

or:

$$S'_n = 2\delta n + \sum_{i=1}^n (a_i - b_i) \quad (10)$$

So each step of the way we accumulate an expectation of $2 \times \delta$. Thus after n repetitions, we expect S'_n to be:

Figure 3 As δ or n increases, the distribution of S'_n shifts further to the right.

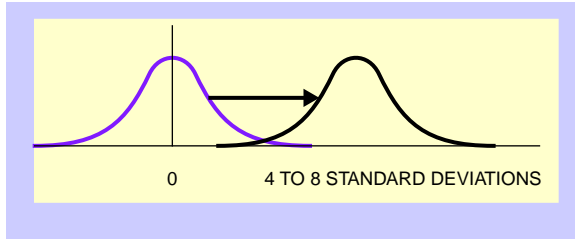


Figure 4 The contour of a patch largely determines which frequencies will be modified by the application of Patchwork.

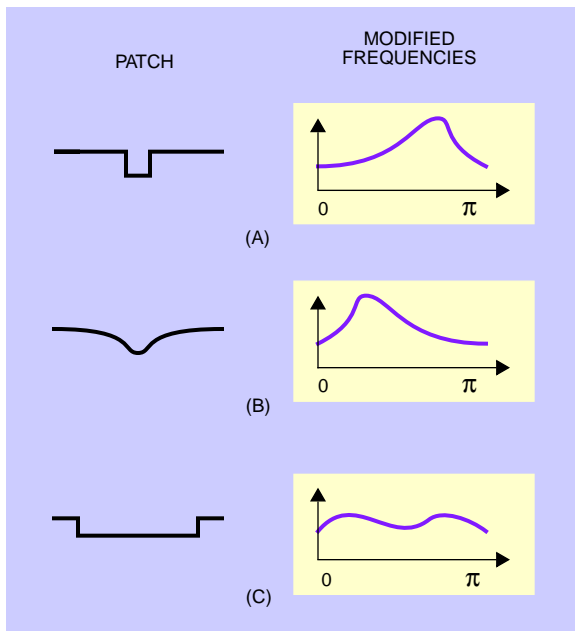
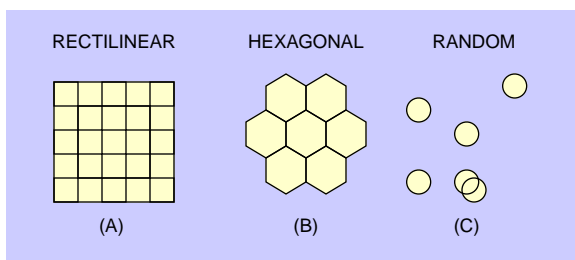


Figure 5 Patch placement affects patch visibility.



$$\frac{2\delta n}{\sigma_{S'_n}} \approx 0.028\delta\sqrt{n} \quad (11)$$

As n or δ increases, the distribution of S'_n shifts over to the right (Figure 3 and Table 1). In Figure 3, as δ or n increases, the distribution of S'_n shifts further to the right. If we shift it far enough, any point that is likely to fall into one distribution is highly unlikely to be near the center of the other distribution.

While this basic method works well by itself, we have made a number of modifications to improve performance including:

1. Treating *patches* of several points rather than single points. This has the effect of shifting the noise introduced by Patchwork into the lower spatial frequencies, where it is less likely to be removed by lossy compression and typical Finite Impulse Response (FIR) filters.
2. Making Patchwork more robust by using a combination with either affine coding (described later) or some heuristic based upon feature recognition (e.g., alignment using the interocular line of a face). Patchwork decoding is sensitive to affine transformations of the host image. If the points in the picture visited during encoding are offset by translation, rotation, or scaling before decoding, the code is lost.
3. Taking advantage of the fact that Patchwork is fairly resistant to cropping. By disregarding points outside of the known picture area, Patchwork degrades in accuracy approximately as the log of the picture size. Patchwork is also resistant to gamma and tone scale correction since values of comparable luminance move roughly the same way under such modifications.

Patch shape. The shape of the patches deserves some comment. Figure 4 shows three possible one-dimensional patch shapes, and next to them a very approximate spectrum of what a line with these patches dropped onto it pseudorandomly would look like. In Figure 4A, the patch is very small, with sharp edges. This results in the majority of the energy of the patch being concentrated in the high frequency portion of the image spectrum. This makes the distortion hard to see, but also makes it a likely candidate for removal by lossy compressors. If one goes to the other extreme, as in Figure 4B, the majority of the information is contained in the low-frequency spectrum. The

last choice, Figure 4C shows a wide, sharp-edged patch, which tends to distribute the energy around the entire frequency spectrum.

The optimal choice of patch shape is dependent upon the expected image modifications. If JPEG (Joint Photographic Experts Group) encoding is likely, then a patch that places its energy in the low frequencies is preferable. If contrast enhancement is to be done, placing energy in higher frequencies would be better. If the potential image modifications are unknown, then spreading the patch energy across the spectrum would make sense.

The arrangement of patches has an impact on patch visibility. For illustration, three possibilities are considered (Figure 5). The simplest method is shown in Figure 5A, a simple rectilinear lattice. While simple, this arrangement is often a poor choice if a high n is to be used. As the grid is filled in, continuous edges of gradient are formed. The HVS is very sensitive to such edges. A second choice, Figure 5B breaks this symmetry by using hexagons for the patch shape. A preferred solution, shown in Figure 5C, is a completely random placement of patches. An intelligent selection of patch shape in both the horizontal and vertical dimensions will enhance the effectiveness of patchwork for a given picture.

Uniformity. A simplifying assumption of a uniform luminance histogram was made above, but this is not a requirement of Patchwork. The only assumption Patchwork makes is that the *expected* value of $S_i = a_i - b_i$ is zero.

It can be shown that this condition is always met through the following argument:

1. Let a_r be the time reversed series of a .
2. $A_r = A^*$ by definition (A^* is the complex conjugate of A).
3. $F(a*a_r) = AA^*$ (F is the Fourier transform).
4. AA^* is everywhere real by definition of the complex conjugate.
5. $F^{-1}(AA^*)$ is even by definition.
6. Even sequences are symmetric around zero by definition.

An image histogram (Figure 6, top) is a somewhat random distribution. The result of taking the complex conjugate (Figure 6, bottom) is symmetric around zero.

Figure 6 A histogram of Figure 2 and its autocorrelation

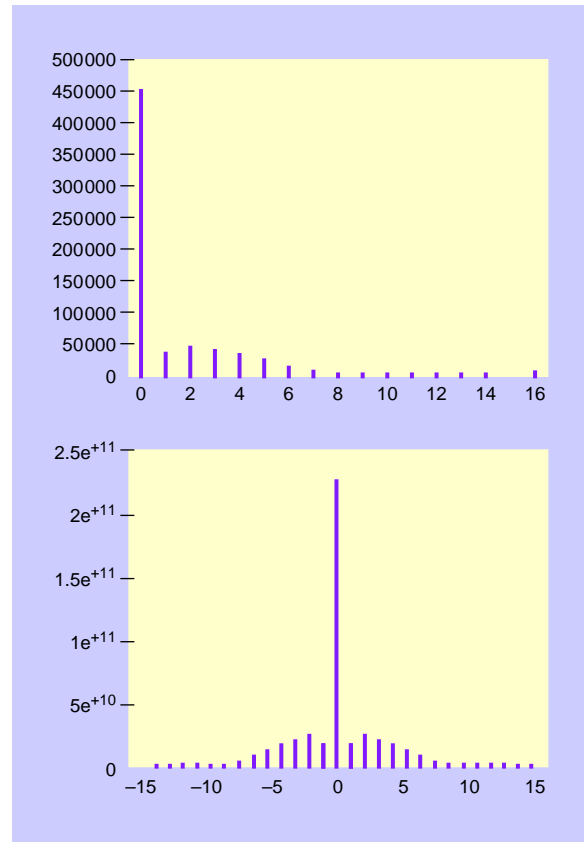


Figure 7 A histogram of the variance of the luminance of 365 Associated Press photos from March 1996

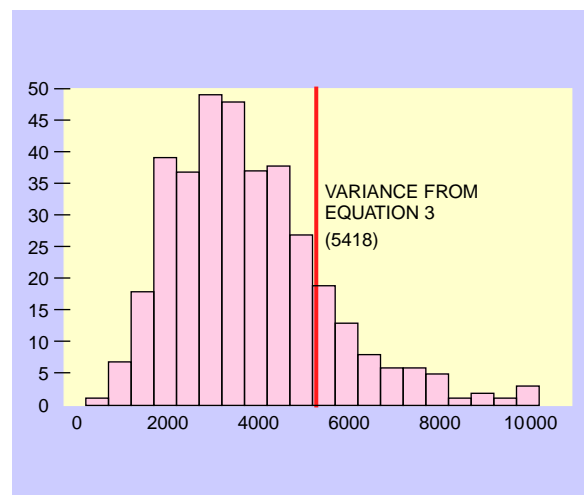
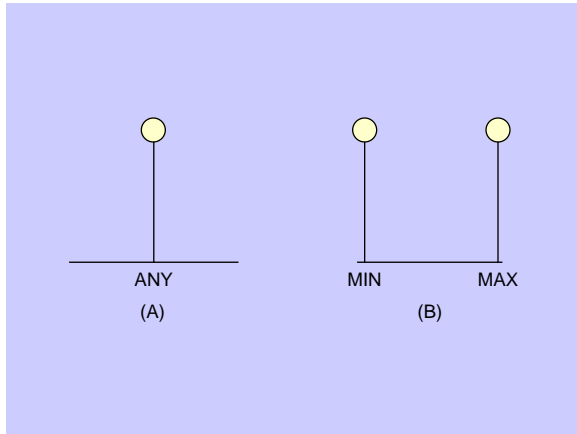


Figure 8 Histograms of pictures with minimum (A) and maximum (B) variance



Variance. When searching through a large number of images with data embedded using the Patchwork method, such as when a robot is looking for copyright violations on the Internet World Wide Web (www), the use of a generic estimation of variance is desirable. This avoids the necessity of calculating the variance of every image. Suspect images can then be examined thoroughly.

When, in the analysis above, the number of points needed in Equation 3 was computed, the variance of the luminance was assumed to be 5418. This assumption turns out to be higher than the average observed values (see Figure 7). The question is, then, what value should be used.

An examination of the variance of 365 Associated Press photos from March 1996 yielded an average value of 3877.4 and a distribution that can be seen in Figure 7. While some pictures do have variances as high as two-thirds of the maximum, most are clustered around the lower variance values. Thus, 5418, the estimate derived from the uniformity assumption, is a conservative but reasonable value to use for a generic picture.

A minimum value is that for a solid color picture (Figure 8A). This has a variance of 0, a standard deviation of 0, and thus works very well for Patchwork, since any modification is evident. The other extreme is that of a two-color, black and white picture. For these, the variance is:

$$\frac{(0 - 127)^2}{2} + \frac{(255 - 127.5)^2}{2} \approx 16256 \quad (12)$$

These two values, 0 and 16256, define the extremes of the variance to consider when calculating the likelihood that a picture is encoded. What is the correct assumption to use for a given picture? The actual variance of the picture being examined is a sensible choice, since in most cases Patchwork will increase the variance only slightly. (This depends on the size and depth of the patch, the number of patches, and the histogram of the original image.) However, if a large number of pictures are to be examined, a generic value is a practical choice.

Summary. There are several limitations inherent to the Patchwork technique. The first is the extremely low embedded data rate it yields, usually a one-bit signature per image. This limits its usefulness to low bit-rate applications such as the digital watermark. Second, it is necessary to *register* where the pixels in the image lie. While a number of methods have been investigated, it is still somewhat difficult to decode the image in the presence of severe affine transformations. These disadvantages aside, without the key for the pseudorandom number generator, it is extremely difficult to remove the Patchwork coding without degrading the picture beyond recognition.

The Patchwork method is subject to cryptographic attack if it is used to encode a large number of identically sized images using the same key. If the images are averaged together, the *patches* will show up as lighter or darker than average regions. This weakness is a common one in cryptography, and points to the truism that for a static key, as the amount of traffic increases, it becomes easier to “crack” the encryption. One solution is to use multiple pseudorandom patterns for the patches. Even the use of just two keys, while increasing decoding time, will make Patchwork much more robust to attack. Another solution is to use the same pattern, but to reverse the polarity of the patches. Both solutions deter cryptographic attack by averaging.

Texture Block Coding: A visual approach

A second method for low bit-rate data hiding in images is *Texture Block Coding*. This method hides data within the continuous random texture patterns of a picture. The Texture Block Coding technique is

Figure 9 Texture Block Coding example (photograph courtesy of Webb Chapel)



implemented by copying a region from a random texture pattern found in a picture to an area that has similar texture. This results in a pair of identically textured regions in the image (see Figure 9).

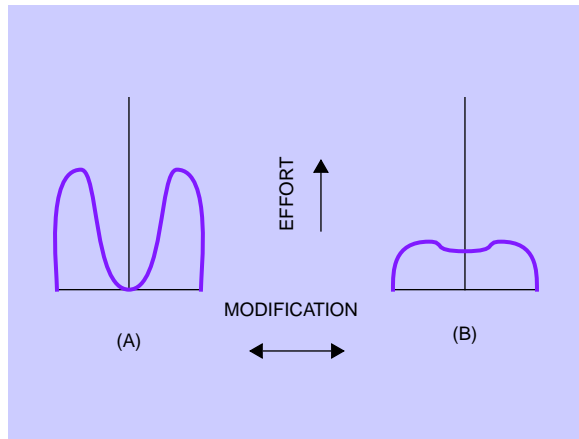
These regions can be detected as follows:

1. Autocorrelate the image with itself. This will produce peaks at every point in the autocorrelation where identical regions of the image overlap. If large enough areas of an image are copied, this will produce an additional large autocorrelation peak at the correct alignment for decoding.
2. Shift the image as indicated by the peaks in Step 1. Now subtract the image from its shifted copy, padding the edges with zeros as needed.
3. Square the result and threshold it to recover only those values quite close to zero. The copied region will be visible as these values.

Since the two regions are identical, they are modified in the same way if the picture is uniformly transformed. By making the regions reasonably large, the inner part of the block changes identically under most nongeometric transformations. In our experiments, coded 16×16 pixel blocks can be decoded when the picture is subjected to a combination of filtering, compression, and rotation.

Texture Block Coding is not without its disadvantages. Currently it requires a human operator to choose the source and destination regions, and to evaluate the visual impact of the modifications on the image. It should be possible to automate this process by allowing a computer to identify possible texture regions in the image to copy from and paste to. However, this technique will not work on images that lack moderately large areas of continuous texture from which to draw.

Figure 10 Characterizing the difference between tamper-proofing and other data-hiding techniques



Future research in this area includes the possibility of cutting and pasting blocks from only part of the image frequency spectrum (this would allow less noticeable blocks to be moved around, and a final encoding that is considerably more robust to various image compression algorithms) along with automatic texture region selection and analysis of perceivability of the final result.

High bit-rate coding

High bit-rate methods can be designed to have minimal impact upon the perception of the host signal, but they do not tend to be immune to image modifications. In return, there is an expectation that a relatively large amount of data are able to be encoded. The most common form of high bit-rate encoding is the replacement of the least significant luminance bit of image data with the embedded data. Other techniques include the introduction of high-frequency, low-amplitude noise and the use of direct sequence spread spectrum coding. All high bit-rate methods can be made more robust through the use of error-correction coding, at the expense of data rate. High bit-rate codes are only appropriate where it is reasonable to expect that a great deal of control will be maintained over the images.

Individually, none of the known techniques for data hiding are resistant to all possible transforms or combinations of transforms. In combination, often one

technique can supplement another. Supplementary techniques are particularly important for recovery from geometric modifications such as affine transformations, and maintaining synchronization for spread-spectrum encoding.

Affine coding. Some of the data-hiding techniques, such as Patchwork, are vulnerable to affine transforms. It makes sense to develop methods that can be used to facilitate the recovery of embedded data after affine application. *Affine coding* is one such method: A predefined reference pattern is embedded into a host image using any of the high bit-rate coding techniques. Estimation of geometric transformation of the image is achieved by comparing the original shape, size, and orientation of the reference pattern to that found in the transformed image. Since affine transforms are linear, the inverse transform can be applied to recover the original image. Once this is done, the image is ready for further extraction of embedded data.

Applications

Placing data in images is useful in a variety of applications. We highlight below four applications that differ in the quantity of data to be embedded and the type of transforms to which the data are likely to be subjected.

Digital watermark. The objective of a digital watermark is to place an indelible mark on an image. Usually, this means encoding only a handful of bits, sometimes as few as one. This “signature” could be used as a means of tracing the distribution of images for an on-line news service and for photographers who are selling their work for digital publication. One could build a digital camera that places a watermark on every photograph it takes. Theoretically, this would allow photographers to employ a “web-searching agent” to locate sites where their photographs appear.

It can be expected that if information about legal ownership is to be included in an image, it is likely that someone might want to remove it. A requirement of a digital watermark is that it must be difficult to remove. Both the Patchwork and Texture Block Coding techniques show promise as digital watermarks. Patchwork, being the more secure of the two, answers the question “Is this my picture?” Texture Block Coding, which can be made readily accessible to the public, answers the question “Whose picture is this?”

Tamper-proofing. The objective of tamper-proofing is to answer the question, “Has this image been modified?” Tamper-proofing techniques are related, but distinct from the other data-hiding technologies. What differentiates them is the degree to which information is secured from the host signal. In Figure 10, the difference between tamper-proofing and other data-hiding techniques is characterized. Figure 10A illustrates that data hiding requires a deep *information well* that is resilient to large displacements. Figure 10B illustrates that tamper-proofing requires a shallow well that is only resilient to small displacements, but is triggered by large displacements. Most data-hiding techniques attempt to secure data in the face of all modifications. Tamper-proofing techniques must be resilient to small modifications (e.g., cropping, tone-scale or gamma correction for images or balance or equalization for sounds) but not to large modifications (e.g., removing or inserting people from an image or taking words out of context in an audio recording).

There are several ways to implement tamper-proofing. The easiest way is to encode a check-sum of the image within the image. However, this method is triggered by small changes in the image. This suggests an approach involving a pattern overlaid on the image. The key to a successful overlay is to find a pattern resilient to simple modifications such as filtering and gamma correction, yet is not easily removed. The search for such patterns and other methods of detecting tampering remains an active area of research.

Feature tagging. Another application of data hiding is tagging the location of features within an image. Using data hiding it is possible for an editor (or machine) to encode descriptive information, such as the location and identification of features of interest, directly into specific regions of an image. This enables retrieval of the descriptive information whenever the image goes. Since the embedded information is spatially located in the image, it is not removed unless the feature of interest is removed. It also translates, scales, and rotates exactly as the feature of interest does.

This application does not have the same requirements for robustness as the digital watermark. It can be assumed that, since feature location is providing a service, it is unlikely someone will maliciously try to remove the encoded information.

Embedded captions. Typical news photograph captions contain one kB of data. Thus embedded captions

is a relatively high bit-rate application for data hiding. As with feature tagging, caption data are usually not subject to malicious removal.

While captions are useful by themselves, they become even more useful when combined with feature location. It is then possible for portions of the caption to directly reference items in the picture. Captions can become self-editing once this is done. If an item referenced in the caption is cropped out of the picture, then the reference to that item in the caption can be removed automatically.

Data hiding in audio

Data hiding in audio signals is especially challenging, because the human auditory system (HAS) operates over a wide dynamic range. The HAS perceives over a range of power greater than one billion to one and a range of frequencies greater than one thousand to one. Sensitivity to additive random noise is also acute. The perturbations in a sound file can be detected as low as one part in ten million (80 dB below ambient level). However, there are some “holes” available. While the HAS has a large dynamic range, it has a fairly small differential range. As a result, loud sounds tend to mask out quiet sounds. Additionally, the HAS is unable to perceive absolute phase, only relative phase. Finally, there are some environmental distortions so common as to be ignored by the listener in most cases.

We exploit many of these traits in the methods we discuss next, while being careful to bear in mind the extreme sensitivities of the HAS.

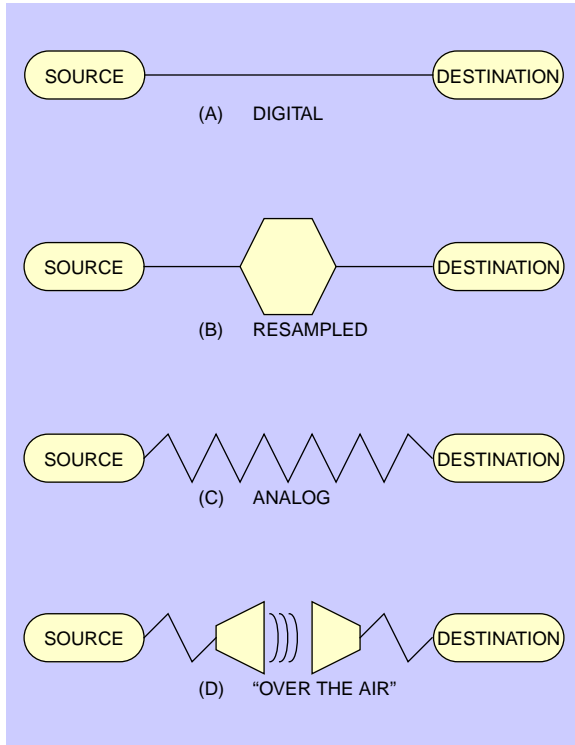
Audio environments

When developing a data-hiding method for audio, one of the first considerations is the likely environments the sound signal will travel between encoding and decoding. There are two main areas of modification which we will consider. First, the storage environment, or digital representation of the signal that will be used, and second the transmission pathway the signal might travel.

Digital representation. There are two critical parameters to most digital audio representations: sample quantization method and temporal sampling rate.

The most popular format for representing samples of high-quality digital audio is a 16-bit linear quantiza-

Figure 11 Transmission environments



tion, e.g., Windows Audio-Visual (WAV) and Audio Interchange File Format (AIFF). Another popular format for lower quality audio is the logarithmically scaled 8-bit μ -law. These quantization methods introduce some signal distortion, somewhat more evident in the case of 8-bit μ -law.

Popular temporal sampling rates for audio include 8 kHz (kilohertz), 9.6 kHz, 10 kHz, 12 kHz, 16 kHz, 22.05 kHz, and 44.1 kHz. Sampling rate impacts data hiding in that it puts an upper bound on the usable portion of the frequency spectrum (if a signal is sampled at ~ 8 kHz, you cannot introduce modifications that have frequency components above ~ 4 kHz). For most data-hiding techniques we have developed, usable data space increases at least linearly with increased sampling rate.

A last representation to consider is that produced by lossy, perceptual compression algorithms, such as the International Standards Organization Motion Pictures Expert Group—Audio (ISO MPEG-AUDIO) perceptual

encoding standard. These representations drastically change the statistics of the signal; they preserve only the characteristics that a listener perceives (i.e., it will sound similar to the original, even if the signal is completely different in a *least squares* sense).

Transmission environment. There are many different transmission environments that a signal might experience on its way from encoder to decoder. We consider four general classes for illustrative purposes (see Figure 11). The first is the digital end-to-end environment (Figure 11A). This is the environment of a sound file that is copied from machine to machine, but never modified in any way. As a result, the sampling is exactly the same at the encoder and decoder. This class puts the least constraints on data-hiding methods.

The next consideration is when a signal is resampled to a higher or lower sampling rate, but remains digital throughout (Figure 11B). This transform preserves the absolute magnitude and phase of most of the signal, but changes the temporal characteristics of the signal.

The third case is when a signal is “played” into an analog state, transmitted on a reasonably clean analog line and resampled (Figure 11C). Absolute signal magnitude, sample quantization, and temporal sampling rate are not preserved. In general, phase will be preserved.

The last case is when the signal is “played into the air” and “resampled with a microphone” (Figure 11D). The signal will be subjected to possibly unknown nonlinear modifications resulting in phase changes, amplitude changes, drift of different frequency components, echoes, etc.

Signal representation and transmission pathway must be considered when choosing a data-hiding method. Data rate is very dependent on the sampling rate and the type of sound being encoded. A typical value is 16 bps, but the number can range from 2 bps to 128 bps.

Low-bit coding

Low-bit coding is the simplest way to embed data into other data structures. By replacing the least significant bit of each sampling point by a coded binary string, we can encode a large amount of data in an audio signal. Ideally, the channel capacity is 1 kb per second (kbps) per 1 kilohertz (kHz), e.g., in a noiseless chan-

nel, the bit rate will be 8 kbps in an 8 kHz sampled sequence and 44 kbps in a 44 kHz sampled sequence. In return for this large channel capacity, audible noise is introduced. The impact of this noise is a direct function of the content of the host signal, e.g., crowd noise during a live sports event would mask low-bit encoding noise that would be audible in a string quartet performance. Adaptive data attenuation has been used to compensate this variation.

The major disadvantage of this method is its poor immunity to manipulation. Encoded information can be destroyed by channel noise, resampling, etc., unless it is encoded using redundancy techniques. In order to be robust, these techniques reduce the data rate, often by one to two orders of magnitude. In practice, this method is useful only in closed, digital-to-digital environments.

Phase coding

The phase coding method works by substituting the phase of an initial audio segment with a reference phase that represents the data. The phase of subsequent segments is adjusted in order to preserve the relative phase between segments.

Phase coding, when it can be used, is one of the most effective coding methods in terms of the signal-to-perceived noise ratio. When the phase relation between each frequency component is dramatically changed, a noticeable phase dispersion will occur. However, as long as the modification of the phase is sufficiently small (sufficiently small depends on the observer; professionals in broadcast radio can detect modifications that are imperceivable to an average observer), an *inaudible* coding can be achieved.

Procedure. The procedure for phase coding is as follows:

1. Break the sound sequence $s[i]$, ($0 \leq i \leq I - 1$), into a series of N short segments, $s_n[i]$ where ($0 \leq n \leq N - 1$) (Figure 12A, 12B).
2. Apply a K -points discrete Fourier transform (DFT)¹³ to n -th segment, $s_n[i]$, where ($K = I/N$), and create a matrix of the phase, $\phi_n(\omega_k)$, and magnitude, $A_n(\omega_k)$ for ($0 \leq k \leq K - 1$) (Figure 12C).
3. Store the phase difference between each adjacent segment for ($0 \leq n \leq N - 1$) (Figure 12D):

$$\Delta\phi_{n+1}(\omega_k) = \phi_{n+1}(\omega_k) - \phi_n(\omega_k) \quad (13)$$

Figure 12 Phase coding schematic

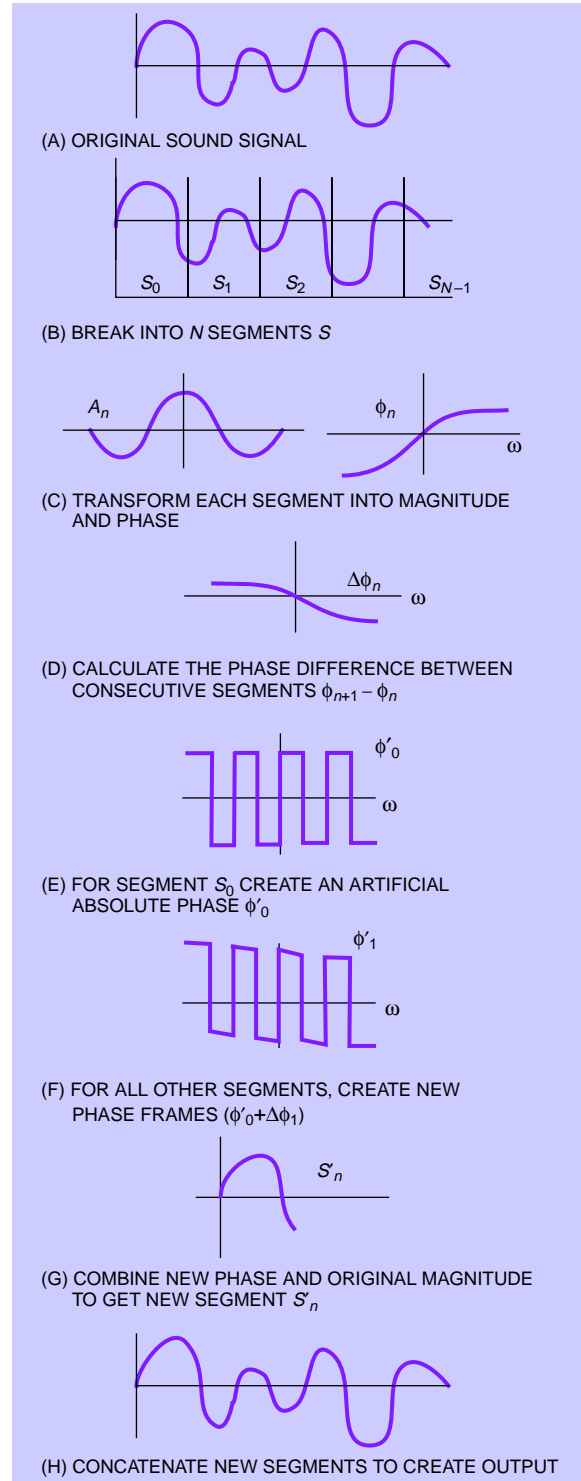
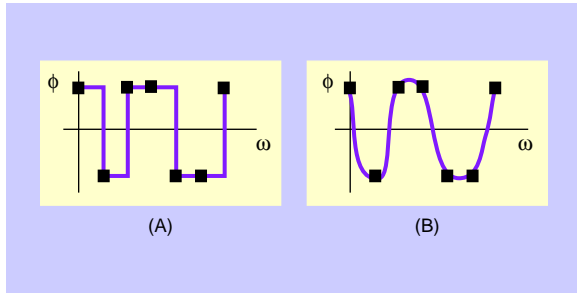


Figure 13 Sharp versus smooth transition



4. A binary set of data is represented as a $\phi_{data} = \pi/2$ or $-\pi/2$ representing 0 or 1 (Figure 12E):

$$\phi'_0 = \phi'_{data} \quad (14)$$

5. Re-create phase matrixes for $n > 0$ by using the phase difference (Figure 12F):

$$\left[\begin{array}{l} (\phi'_1(\omega_k) = \phi'_0(\omega_k) + \Delta\phi_1(\omega_k)) \\ \dots \\ (\phi'_n(\omega_k) = \phi'_{n-1}(\omega_k) + \Delta\phi_n(\omega_k)) \\ \dots \\ (\phi'_N(\omega_k) = \phi'_{N-1}(\omega_k) + \Delta\phi_N(\omega_k)) \end{array} \right] \quad (15)$$

6. Use the modified phase matrix $\phi'_n(\omega_k)$ and the original magnitude matrix $A_n(\omega_k)$ to reconstruct the sound signal by applying the inverse DFT (Figure 12G, 12H).

For the decoding process, the synchronization of the sequence is done before the decoding. The length of the segment, the DFT points, and the data interval must be known at the receiver. The value of the underlying phase of the first segment is detected as a 0 or 1, which represents the coded binary string.

Since $\phi'_0(\omega_k)$ is modified, the absolute phases of the following segments are modified respectively. However, the relative phase difference of each adjacent frame is preserved. It is this relative difference in phase that the ear is most sensitive to.

Evaluation. Phase dispersion is a distortion caused by a break in the relationship of the phases between each of the frequency components. Minimizing phase dis-

person constrains the data rate of phase coding. One cause of phase dispersion is the substitution of phase $\phi'_0(\omega_k)$ with the binary code. The magnitude of the phase modifier needs to be close to the original value in order to minimize distortion. The difference between phase modifier states should be maximized in order to minimize the susceptibility of the encoding to noise. In our modified phase representation, a 0-bit is $-\pi/2$ and a 1-bit is $+\pi/2$.

Another source of distortion is the rate of change of the phase modifier. If distortion is applied to every bin of the DFT it is likely to break the phase relationship of the adjacent frequency components, resulting in a beat pattern. By changing the phase more slowly and transitioning between phase changes, the audible distortion is greatly reduced. In Figure 13, a sharp versus smooth transition is illustrated. In Figure 13A, the edges of the phase transitions are sharp, causing noticeable distortion. In Figure 13B, they are smooth, reducing this. Note that in each case, the data points appear in the same place. This smooth variation has the disadvantage of causing a reduction in bandwidth, as space has to be left between each data point to allow for smooth transition.

Results. In our experiments, the phase coding channel capacity typically varied from 8 bps to 32 bps, depending on the sound context. A channel capacity of ~ 8 bps can be achieved by allocating 128 frequency slots per bit under conditions of little background noise. Capacities of 16 bps to 32 bps can be achieved by allocating 32 to 64 frequency slots per slot when there is a noisy background.

Spread spectrum

In a normal communication channel, it is often desirable to concentrate the information in as narrow a region of the frequency spectrum as possible in order to conserve available bandwidth and to reduce power. The basic spread spectrum technique, on the other hand, is designed to encode a stream of information by spreading the encoded data across as much of the frequency spectrum as possible. This allows the signal reception, even if there is interference on some frequencies.

While there are many variations on spread spectrum communication, we concentrated on Direct Sequence Spread Spectrum encoding (DSSS). The DSSS method spreads the signal by multiplying it by a *chip*, a maximal length pseudorandom sequence modulated at a

known rate. Since the host signals are in discrete-time format, we can use the sampling rate as the *chip rate* for coding. The result is that the most difficult problem in DSSS receiving, that of establishing the correct start and end of the chip quanta for phase locking purposes, is taken care of by the discrete nature of the signal. Consequently, a much higher chip rate, and therefore a higher associated data rate, is possible. Without this, a variety of signal locking algorithms may be used, but these are computationally expensive.

Procedure. In DSSS, a *key* is needed to encode the information and the same key is needed to decode it. The key is pseudorandom noise that ideally has flat frequency response over the frequency range, i.e., white noise. The key is applied to the coded information to modulate the sequence into a spread spectrum sequence.

The DSSS method is as follows:^{8,9} The code is multiplied by the carrier wave and the pseudorandom noise sequence, which has a wide frequency spectrum. As a consequence, the spectrum of the data is spread over the available band. Then, the spread data sequence is attenuated and added to the original file as additive random noise (see Figure 14). DSSS employs bi-phase shift keying since the phase of the signal alternates each time the modulated code alternates (see Figure 15). For decoding, phase values ϕ_0 and $\phi_0 + \pi$ are interpreted as a “0” or a “1,” which is a coded binary string.

In the decoding stage, the following is assumed:

1. The pseudorandom key is maximal (it has as many combinations as possible and does not repeat for as long as possible). Consequently it has a relatively flat frequency spectrum.
2. The key stream for the encoding is known by the receiver. Signal synchronization is done, and the start/stop point of the spread data are known.
3. The following parameters are known by the receiver: chip rate, data rate, and carrier frequency.

Results. Unlike phase coding, DSSS introduces additive random noise to the sound. To keep the noise level low and inaudible, the spread code is attenuated (without adaptation) to roughly 0.5 percent of the dynamic range of the host sound file. The combination of simple repetition technique and error correction coding ensure the integrity of the code. A short segment of the binary code string is concatenated and added to the host signal so that transient noise can be

Figure 14 Spread spectrum encoding

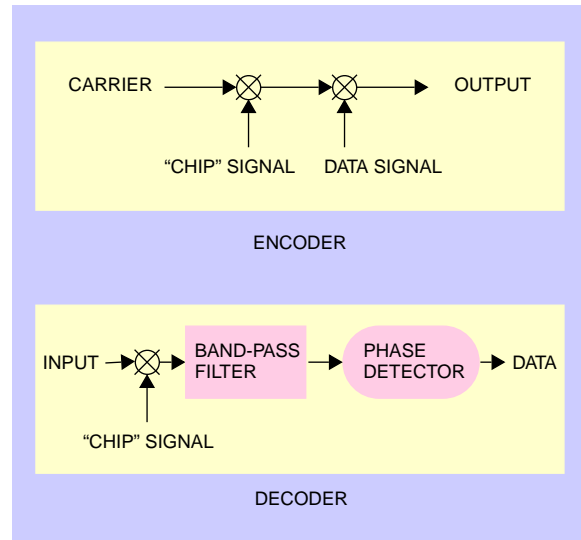
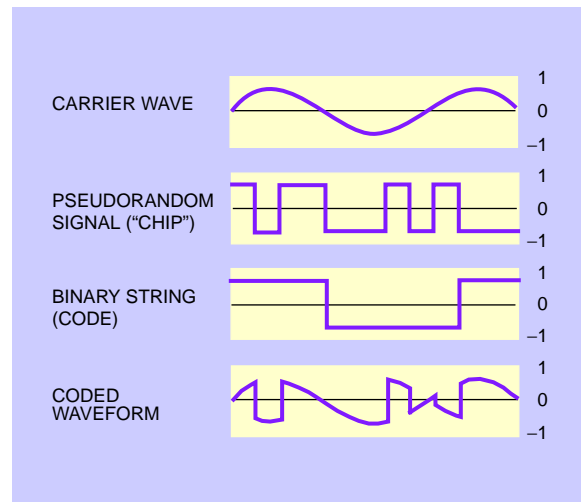


Figure 15 Synthesized spread spectrum information encoded by the direct sequence method



reduced by averaging over the segment in the decoding stage. The resulting data rate of the DSSS experiments is 4 bps.

Echo data hiding

Echo data hiding embeds data into a host audio signal by introducing an *echo*. The data are hidden by varying three parameters of the echo: initial amplitude, decay rate, and offset (see Figure 16). As the offset (or

Figure 16 Adjustable parameters

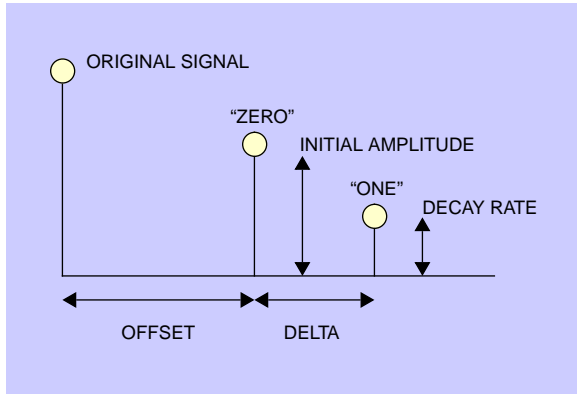


Figure 17 Discrete time exponential

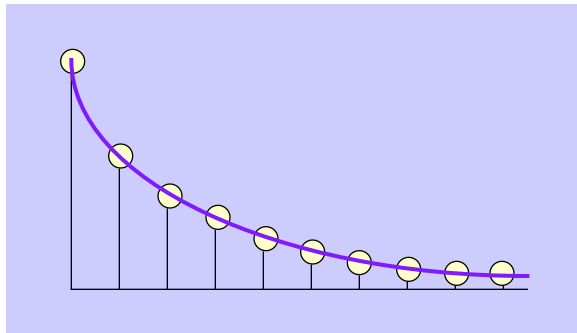
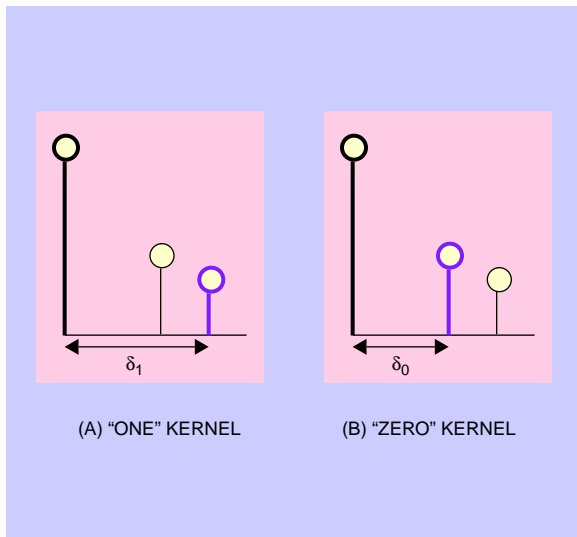


Figure 18 Echo kernels



delay) between the original and the echo decreases, the two signals blend. At a certain point, the human ear cannot distinguish between the two signals. The echo is perceived as added resonance. (This point is hard to determine exactly. It depends on the quality of the original recording, the type of sound being echoed, and the listener. In general, we find that this fusion occurs around 1/1000 of a second for most sounds and most listeners.)

The coder uses two delay times, one to represent a binary one (offset) and another to represent a binary zero (offset + delta). Both delay times are below the threshold at which the human ear can resolve the echo. In addition to decreasing the delay time, we can also ensure that the information is not perceivable by setting the initial amplitude and the decay rate below the audible threshold of the human ear.

Encoding. The encoding process can be represented as a system that has one of two possible system functions. In the time domain, the system functions are discrete time exponentials (see Figure 17) differing only in the delay between impulses.

For simplicity, we chose an example with only two impulses (one to copy the original signal and one to create an echo). Increasing the number of impulses is what increases the number of echoes.

We let the kernel shown in Figure 18A represent the system function for encoding a binary one and we use the system function defined in Figure 18B to encode a zero. Processing a signal through either Figures 18A or 18B will result in an encoded signal (see Figure 19).

The delay (δ_b) between the original signal and the echo is dependent on which kernel or system function we use in Figure 19. The “one” kernel (Figure 18A) is created with a delay of (δ_1) seconds while the “zero” kernel (Figure 18B) has a (δ_0) second delay.

In order to encode more than one bit, the original signal is divided into smaller portions. Each individual portion can then be echoed with the desired bit by considering each as an independent signal. The final encoded signal (containing several bits) is the recombination of all independently encoded signal portions.

In Figure 20, the example signal has been divided into seven equal portions labeled a, b, c, d, e, f, and g. We want portions a, c, d, and g to contain a one. There-

fore, we use the “one” kernel (Figure 18A) as the system function for each of these portions. Each portion is individually convolved with the system function. The zeros encoded into sections b, e, and f are encoded in a similar manner using the “zero” kernel (Figure 18B). Once each section has been individually convolved with the appropriate system function, the results are recombined. To achieve a less noticeable mix, we create a “one” echo signal by echoing the original signal using the “one” kernel. The “zero” kernel is used to create the “zero” echo signal. The resulting signals are shown in Figure 21.

The “one” echo signal and the “zero” echo signal contain only ones and zeros, respectively. In order to combine the two signals, two mixer signals (see Figure 22) are created. The mixer signals are either one or zero depending on the bit we would like to hide in that portion of the original signal.

The “one” mixer signal is multiplied by the “one” echo signal while the “zero” mixer signal is multiplied by “zero” echo signal. In other words, the echo signals are scaled by either 1 or 0 throughout the signal depending on what bit any particular portion is supposed to contain. Then the two results are added. Note that the “zero” mixer signal is the complement of the “one” mixer signal and that the transitions within each signal are ramps. The sum of the two mixer signals is always one. This gives us a smooth transition between portions encoded with different bits and prevents abrupt changes in the resonance of the final (mixed) signal.

A block diagram representing the entire encoding process is illustrated in Figure 23.

Decoding. Information is embedded into a signal by echoing the original signal with one of two delay kernels. A binary one is represented by an echo kernel with a (δ_1) second delay. A binary zero is represented by a (δ_0) second delay. Extraction of the embedded information involves the detection of spacing between the echoes. In order to do this, we examine the magnitude (at two locations) of the autocorrelation of the encoded signal’s cepstrum:¹⁴

$$F^{-1}(\ln_{\text{complex}}(F(x))^2) \quad (16)$$

The following procedure is an example of the decoding process. We begin with a sample signal that is a series of impulses such that the impulses are separated by a set interval and have exponentially decaying

Figure 19 Echoing example

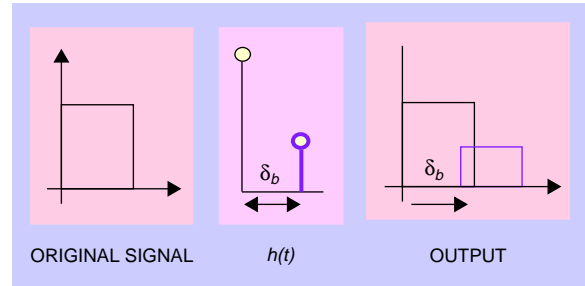


Figure 20 Divide the original signal into smaller portions to encode information

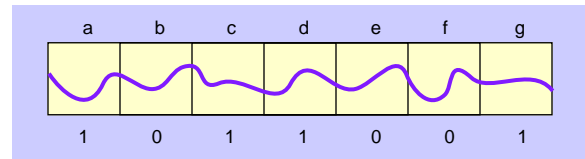


Figure 21 The first step in encoding process is to create a “one” and a “zero” echo signal (purple line is the echoed signal)

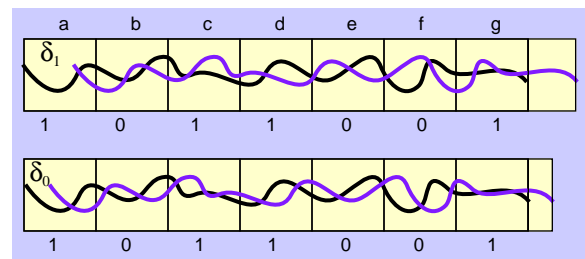


Figure 22 Mixer signals

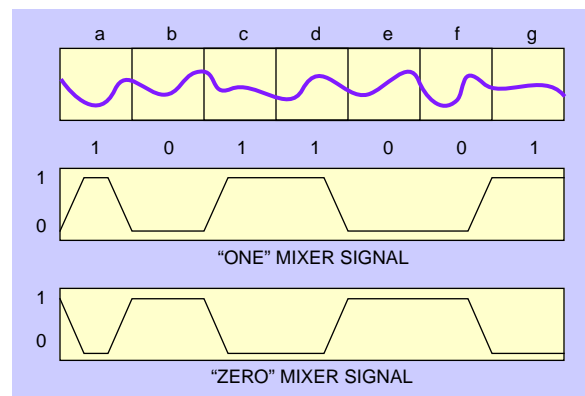


Figure 23 Encoding process

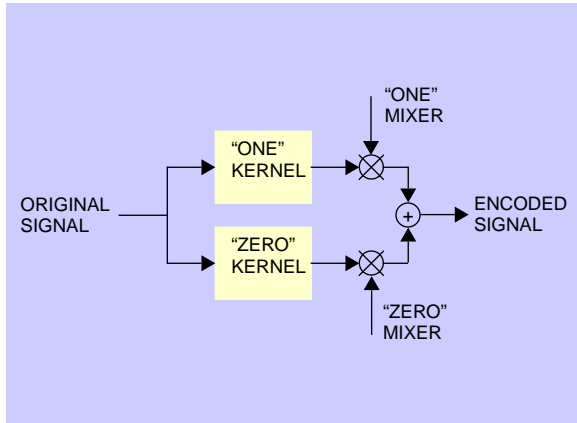
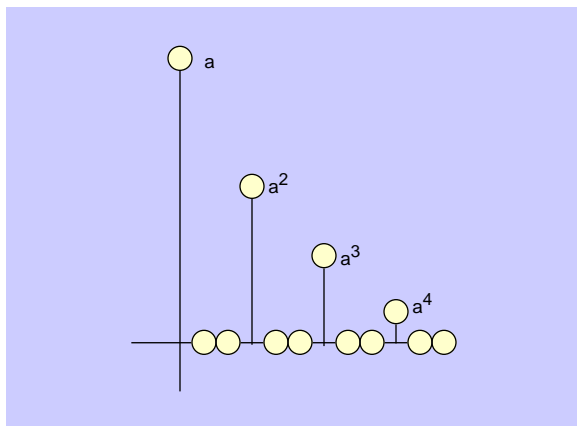


Figure 24 Example signal: $x[n] = a^n u[n]$; ($0 < a < 1$)

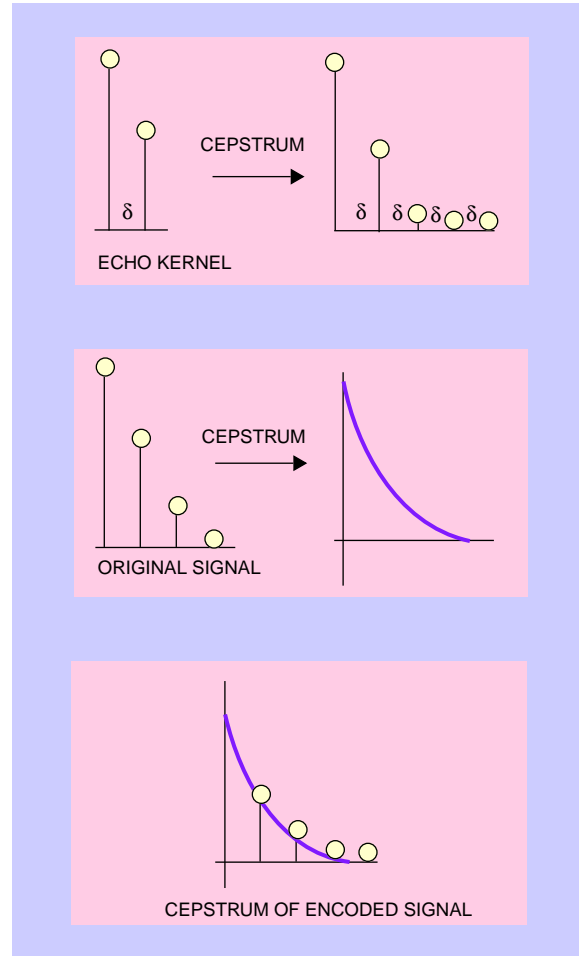


amplitudes. The signal is zero elsewhere (see Figure 24).

The next step is to find the cepstrum¹⁴ of the echoed version. The result of taking the cepstrum makes the spacing between the echo and the original signal a little clearer.

Unfortunately, the result of the cepstrum also duplicates the echo every (δ) seconds. In Figure 25, this is illustrated by the impulse train in the output. Furthermore, the magnitude of the impulses representing the echoes are small relative to the original signal. As such, they are difficult to detect. The solution to this problem is to take the autocorrelation of the cepstrum.

Figure 25 Cepstrum of the echo-encoded signal



We echo the signal once with delay (δ) using the kernel depicted in Figure 26. The result is illustrated in Figure 27.

Only the first impulse is significantly amplified as it is reinforced by subsequent impulses. Therefore, we get a *spike* in the position of the first impulse. Like the first impulse, the spike is either (δ_1) or (δ_0) seconds after the original signal. The remainder of the impulses approach zero. Conveniently, random noise suffers the same fate as all the impulses after the first.

The rule for deciding on a one or a zero is based on the time delay between the original signal and the delay (δ) before the spike in the autocorrelation.

Recall that a one was encoded by placing an echo (δ_1) seconds after the original and a zero was placed (δ_0) seconds after the original. When decoding, we assign a one if the magnitude of the autocorrelation function is greater at (δ_1) seconds than it is at (δ_0) seconds. A zero is assigned if the reverse is true. This is the same as deciding which kernel we used utilizing the fact that the “one” and “zero” kernel differ only in the delay before the echo (Figure 18).

Results. Using the methods described, it is indeed possible to encode and decode information in the form of binary digits into a media stream with minimal alteration to the original signal at approximately 16 bps (see Figure 28). By minimal alteration, we mean that the output of the encoding process is changed in such a way so that the average human cannot hear any significant difference between the altered and the original signal. There is little, if any, degradation of the original signal. Instead, the addition of resonance simply gives the signal a slightly richer sound. While the addition of resonance may be problematic in some music applications, studio engineers may be able to fine-tune the echo hiding parameters during the mastering process, enabling its use.

Supplemental techniques

Three supplemental techniques are discussed next.

Adaptive data attenuation. The optimum attenuation factor varies as the noise level of the host sound changes. By adapting the attenuation to the short-term changes of the sound or noise level, we can keep the coded noise extremely low during the silent segments and increase the coded noise during the noisy segments. In our experiments, the quantized magnitude envelope of the host sound wave is used as a reference value for the adaptive attenuation; and the maximum noise level is set to 2 percent of the dynamic range of the host signal.

Redundancy and error correction coding. In order to compensate for errors due to channel noise and host signal modification, it is useful to apply error-correction coding (ECC)¹ to the data to be embedded. While there exist some efficient methods of ECC, its application always results in a trade-off between robustness and data rate.

Sound context analysis. The detectability of white noise inserted into a host audio signal is linearly dependent upon the original noise level of the host

Figure 26 Echo kernel used in example

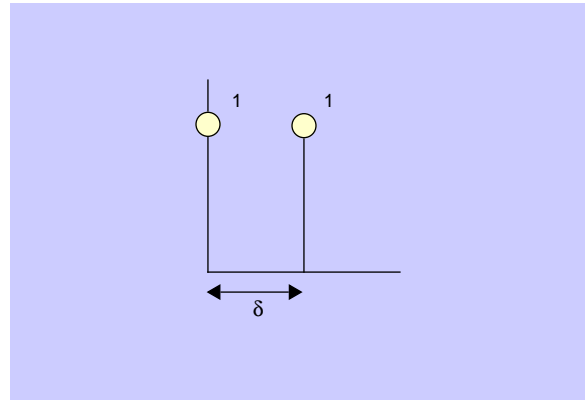


Figure 27 Echoed version of the example signal

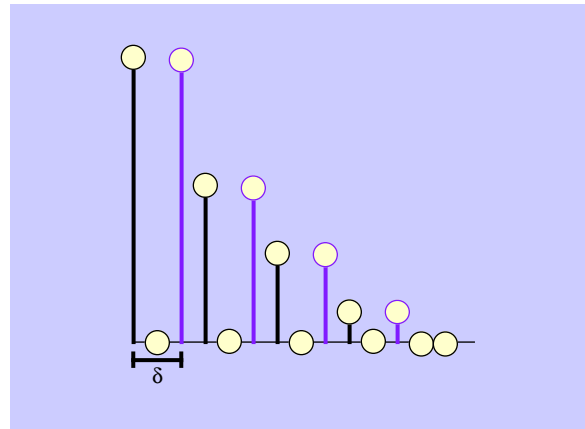


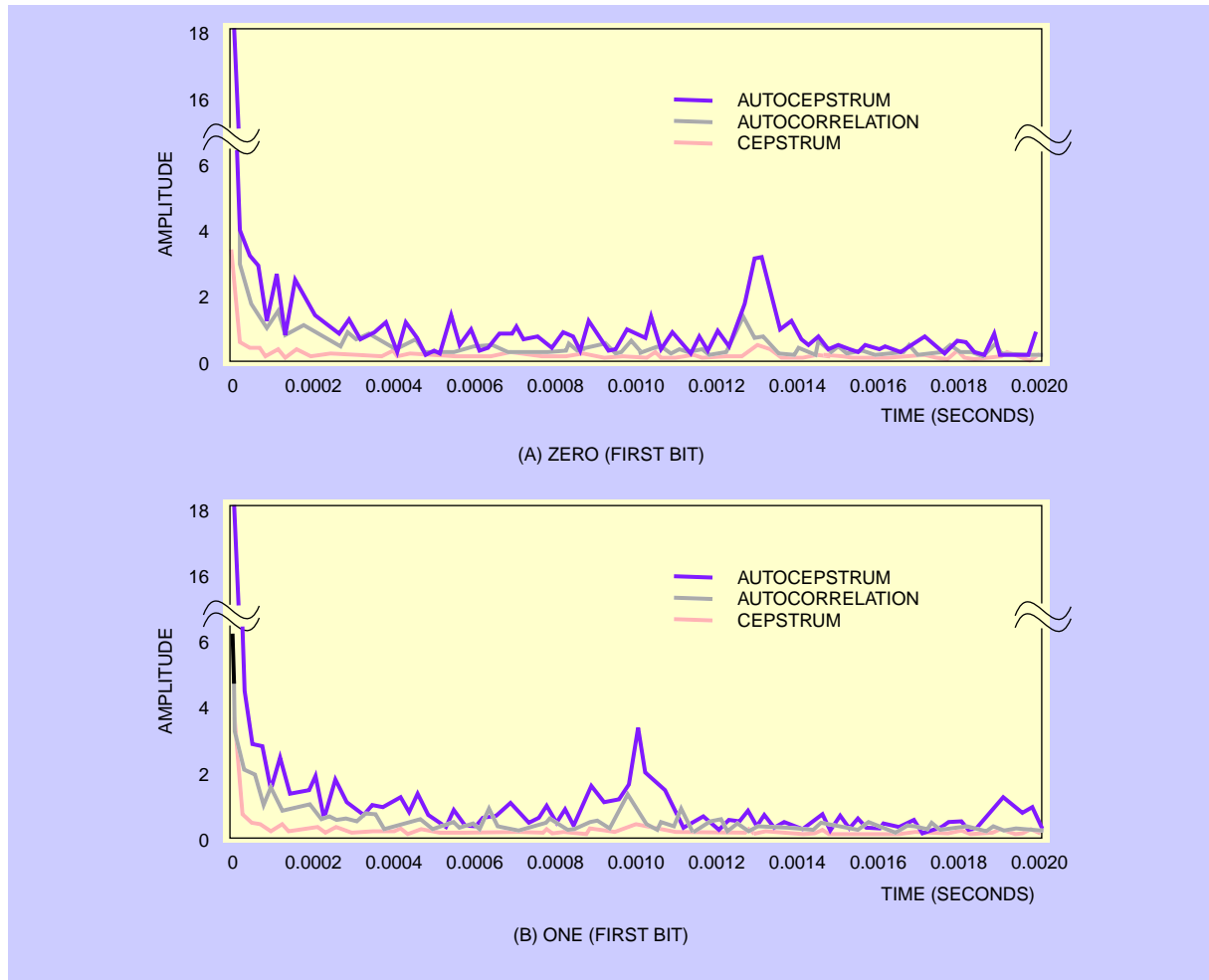
Table 2 Audio noise level analysis

σ_{local}^2	Quality
< 0.005	Studio
> 0.01	Crowd noise

signal. To maximize the quantity of embedded data, while ensuring the data are unnoticed, it is useful to express the noise level quantitatively. The noise level is characterized by computing the magnitude of change in adjacent samples of the host signal:

$$\sigma_{local}^2 = \frac{1}{|S_{max}|} \times \frac{1}{N} \times \sum_{n=1}^{N-1} [s(n+1) - s(n)]^2 \quad (17)$$

Figure 28 Result of autocepstrum and autocorrelation for (A) "zero" and (B) "one" bits



where N is the number of sample points in the sequence and S_{max} is the maximum magnitude in the sequence. We use this measure to categorize host audio signals by noise level (see Table 2).

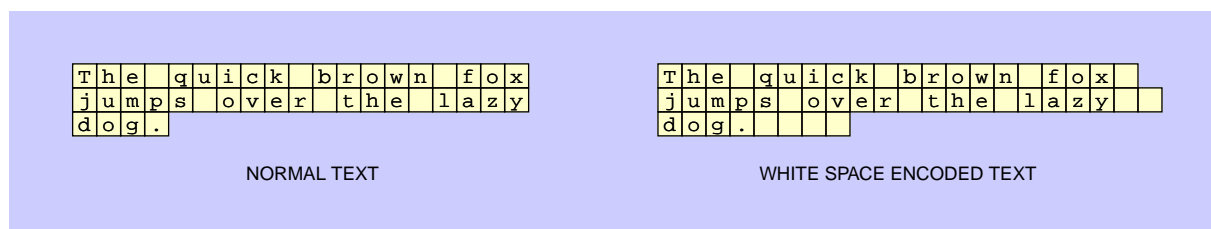
Data hiding in text

Soft-copy text is in many ways the most difficult place to hide data. (Hard-copy text can be treated as a highly structured image and is readily amenable to a variety of techniques such as slight variations in letter forms, kerning, baseline, etc.) This is due largely to the relative lack of redundant information in a text file as compared with a picture or a sound bite. While it is often possible to make imperceptible modifications to

a picture, even an extra letter or period in text may be noticed by a casual reader. Data hiding in text is an exercise in the discovery of modifications that are not noticed by readers. We considered three major methods of encoding data: open space methods that encode through manipulation of white space (unused space on the printed page), syntactic methods that utilize punctuation, and semantic methods that encode using manipulation of the words themselves.

Open space methods. There are two reasons why the manipulation of white space in particular yields useful results. First, changing the number of trailing spaces has little chance of changing the meaning of a phrase or sentence. Second, a casual reader is unlikely to take

Figure 29 Example of data hidden using white space



notice of slight modifications to white space. We describe three methods of using white space to encode data. The methods exploit inter-sentence spacing, end-of-line spaces, and inter-word spacing in justified text.

The first method encodes a binary message into a text by placing either one or two spaces after each terminating character, e.g., a period for English prose, a semicolon for C-code, etc. A single space encodes a “0,” while two spaces encode a “1.” This method has a number of inherent problems. It is inefficient, requiring a great deal of text to encode a very few bits. (One bit per sentence equates to a data rate of approximately one bit per 160 bytes assuming sentences are on average two 80-character lines of text.) Its ability to encode depends on the structure of the text. (Some text, such as free-verse poetry, lacks consistent or well-defined termination characters.) Many word processors automatically set the number of spaces after periods to one or two characters. Finally, inconsistent use of white space is not transparent.

A second method of exploiting white space to encode data is to insert spaces at the end of lines. The data are encoded allowing for a predetermined number of spaces at the end of each line (see Figure 29). Two spaces encode one bit per line, four encode two, eight encode three, etc., dramatically increasing the amount of information we can encode over the previous method. In Figure 29, the text has been selectively justified, and has then had spaces added to the end of lines to encode more data. Rules have been added to reveal the white space at the end of lines. Additional advantages of this method are that it can be done with any text, and it will go unnoticed by readers, since this additional white space is peripheral to the text. As with the previous method, some programs, e.g., “sendmail,” may inadvertently remove the extra space characters. A problem unique to this method is that the hidden data cannot be retrieved from hard copy.

A third method of using white space to encode data involves right-justification of text. Data are encoded by controlling where the extra spaces are placed. One space between words is interpreted as a “0.” Two spaces are interpreted as a “1.” This method results in several bits encoded on each line (see Figure 30). Because of constraints upon justification, not every inter-word space can be used as data. In order to determine which of the inter-word spaces represent hidden data bits and which are part of the original text, we have employed a Manchester-like encoding method. Manchester encoding groups bits in sets of two, interpreting “01” as a “1” and “10” as a “0.” The bit strings “00” and “11” are null. For example, the encoded message “1000101101” is reduced to “001,” while “110011” is a null string.

Open space methods are useful as long as the text remains in an ASCII (American Standard Character Interchange) format. As mentioned above, some data may be lost when the text is printed. Printed documents present opportunities for data hiding far beyond the capability of an ASCII text file. Data hiding in hard copy is accomplished by making slight variations in word and letter spacing, changes to the baseline position of letters or punctuation, changes to the letter forms themselves, etc. Also, image data-hiding techniques such as those used by Patchwork can be modified to work with printed text.

Syntactic methods. That white space is considered arbitrary is both its strength and its weakness where data hiding is concerned. While the reader may not notice its manipulation, a word processor may inadvertently change the number of spaces, destroying the hidden data. Robustness, in light of document reformatting, is one reason to look for other methods of data hiding in text. In addition, the use of syntactic and semantic methods generally does not interfere with the open space methods. These methods can be applied in parallel.

Figure 30 Data hidden through justification (text from *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Mark Twain)

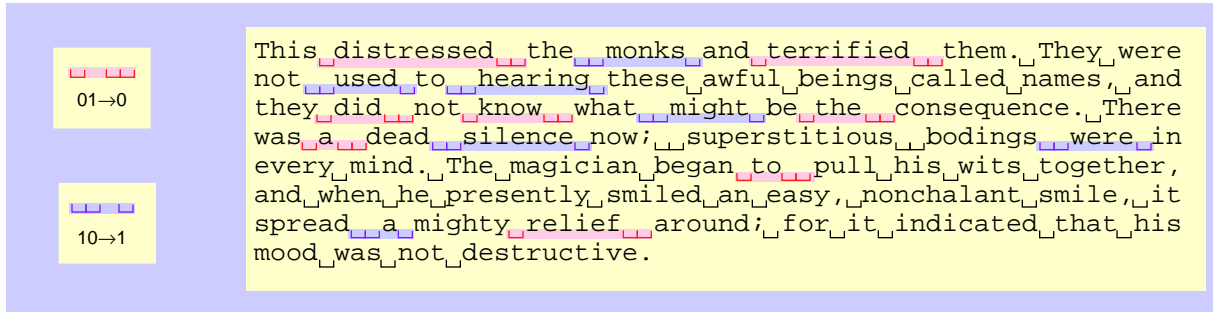


Table 3 Synonymous pairs

big	≈	large
small	≈	little
chilly	≈	cool
smart	≈	clever
spaced	≈	stretched

There are many circumstances where punctuation is ambiguous or when mispunctuation has low impact on the meaning of the text. For example, the phrases “bread, butter, and milk” and “bread, butter and milk” are both considered correct usage of commas in a list. We can exploit the fact that the choice of form is arbitrary. Alternation between forms can represent binary data, e.g., anytime the first phrase structure (characterized by a comma appearing before the “and”) occurs, a “1” is inferred, and anytime the second phrase structure is found, a “0” is inferred. Other examples include the controlled use of contractions and abbreviations. While written English affords numerous cases for the application of syntactic data hiding, these situations occur infrequently in typical prose. The expected data rate of these methods is on the order of only several bits per kilobyte of text.

Although many of the rules of punctuation are ambiguous or redundant, inconsistent use of punctuation is noticeable to even casual readers. Finally, there are cases where changing the punctuation will impact the clarity, or even meaning, of the text considerably. This method should be used with caution.

Syntactic methods include changing the diction and structure of text without significantly altering mean-

ing or tone. For example, the sentence “Before the night is over, I will have finished” could be stated “I will have finished before the night is over.” These methods are more transparent than the punctuation methods, but the opportunity to exploit them is limited.

Semantic methods. A final category of data hiding in text involves changing the words themselves. Semantic methods are similar to the syntactic method. Rather than encoding binary data by exploiting ambiguity of form, these methods assign two synonyms primary or secondary value. For example, the word “big” could be considered primary and “large” secondary. Whether a word has primary or secondary value bears no relevance to how often it will be used, but, when decoding, primary words will be read as ones, secondary words as zeros (see Table 3).

Word *webs* such as WordNet can be used to automatically generate synonym tables. Where there are many synonyms, more than one bit can be encoded per substitution. (The choice between “propensity,” “predilection,” “penchant,” and “proclivity” represents two bits of data.) Problems occur when the nuances of meaning interfere with the desire to encode data. For example, there is a problem with choice of the synonym pair “cool” and “chilly.” Calling someone “cool” has very different connotations than calling them “chilly.” The sentence “The students in line for registration are spaced-out” is also ambiguous.

Applications

Data hidden in text has a variety of applications, including copyright verification, authentication, and annotation. Making copyright information inseparable

from the text is one way for publishers to protect their products in an era of increasing electronic distribution. Annotation can be used for tamper protection. For example, if a cryptographic hash of the paper is encoded into the paper, it is a simple matter to determine whether or not the file has been changed. Verification is among the tasks that could easily be performed by a server which, in this case, would return the judgment "authentic" or "unauthentic" as appropriate.

Other uses of data hiding in text involve embedding instructions for an autonomous program in a text. For example, a mail server can be programmed to check for hidden messages when transmitting an electronic message. The message is rejected or approved depending on whether or not any hidden data are found. In this way a company running its own mail server can keep confidential documents from being inadvertently exported.

Conclusion

In this paper, several techniques are discussed as possible methods for embedding data in host text, image, and audio signals. While we have had some degree of success, all of the proposed methods have limitations. The goal of achieving protection of large amounts of embedded data against intentional attempts at removal may be unobtainable.

Automatic detection of geometric and nongeometric modifications applied to the host signal after data hiding is a key data-hiding technology. The optimum trade-offs between bit rate, robustness, and perceptibility need to be defined experimentally. The interaction between various data-hiding technologies needs to be better understood.

While compression of image and audio content continues to reduce the necessary bandwidth associated with image and audio content, the need for a better contextual description of that content is increasing. Despite its current shortcomings, data-hiding technology is important as a carrier of these descriptions.

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