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The ALASKA Steganalysis Challenge: A First Step Towards Steganalysis “*Into The Wild*”

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents ins and outs of the ALASKA challenge, a steganalysis challenge built to reflect the constraints of a forensic steganalyst. We motivate and explain the main differences w.r.t. the BOSS challenge (2010), specifically the use of a ranking metric prescribing high false positive rates, the analysis of a large diversity of different image sources and the use of a collection of steganographic schemes adapted to handle color JPEGs. The core of the challenge is also described, this includes the RAW image data-set, the implementations used to generate cover images and the specificities of the embedding schemes. The very first outcomes of the challenge are then presented, and the impacts of different parameters such as demosaicking, filtering, image size, JPEG quality factors and cover-source mismatch are analyzed. Eventually, conclusions are presented, highlighting positive and negative points together with future directions for the next challenges in practical steganalysis.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **General and reference** → **Evaluation**; *Empirical studies*; • **Security and privacy**;

KEYWORDS

steganography; steganalysis; contest; forensics

ACM Reference Format:

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1 INTRODUCTION AND MOTIVATIONS

1.1 Previous challenges in IFS

International challenges in the Information Forensics and Security (IFS) community have started in 2007 with Break Our Watermarking System BOWS [30] and its second edition BOWS-2 [12] in 2008. For both contests the goal was to remove the watermark on three images while minimizing the attacking distortion. The images were gray-level images of size 512×512 . In addition, for BOWS-2, all images were Out-of-Camera JPEG which were downsampled. These two challenges were motivated by the need to evaluate both the robustness and the security of watermarking techniques, but also to provide a stimulating framework for developing new attacks based on denoising [2, 41], oracle attacks [5] or secret key estimation [2]. Those challenges also allow participating to strengthen the virtuous circle of security by increasing the knowledge on attacks and counterattacks [42].

The first challenge in Steganalysis occurred in 2010 with Break Our Steganographic System (BOSS) [1] and the goal of this challenge was to minimize the probability of error (the sum of false positives and false negatives) on a testing base of 1000 images balanced with Cover and Stego contents. All images came from RAW images after the same development pipeline, they were downsampled to 512×512 and eventually converted to gray-scale to end-up with uncompressed PGM files. Steganographic images were generated using a single embedding scheme, namely HUGO [28], with a fixed embedding rate of 0.4 Bits per Pixel (bpp). The BOSS contest enabled to benchmark the security of one of the first scheme using adaptive costs, and, above all, allow the development of new discriminative features sets [10, 17] and specific classifiers that can deal very high dimensional feature sets [27] (up to 34.671 for SRM). Note that this challenge was designed to benchmark HUGO in a worst case scenario, since the participants, following the Kerckhoffs' principle, knew everything about the image generation process, the embedding rate, as well as the steganographic scheme.

The tradition of multimedia security challenges has been pursued among the images forensics community in 2013 with the IEEE IFS-TC Image Forensics Challenge. The goal of this competition was to detect and locate image manipulations such as copy-move or splicing on images tempered by humans. Different solutions came out, among them dedicated block matching methods [6], tailored PRNU detection schemes [7] or steganalytic features [6, 31].

In 2017, another competition was organized on camera model identification [35] before being run on the popular competition website Kaggle¹. Ten different camera models were used for both

¹see: <https://www.kaggle.com/c/sp-society-camera-model-identification>

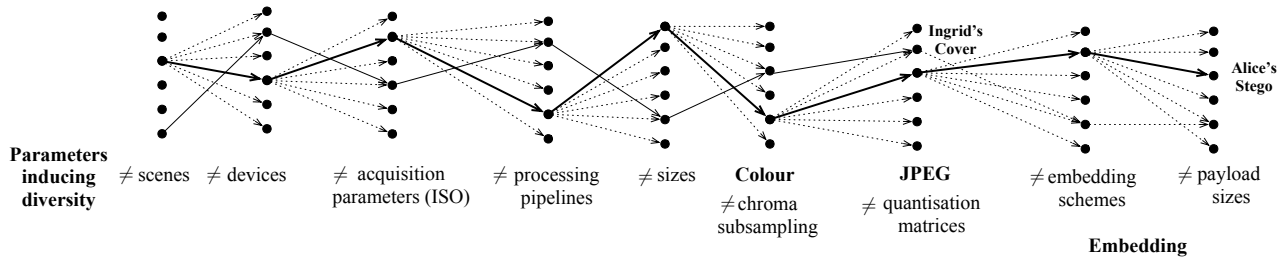


Figure 1: The prisoner’s problem as seen in the ALASKA contest: Eve, the forensics expert, has to face an exponential diversity since each selected parameter is prone to change the distribution of the cover or stego signal. One possible path is associated to one cover or stego image and Eve has to detect Alice’s images from images generated from an Innocent user (Ingrid).

training and testing phases, with different devices for each set. In this competition, the diversity was promoted by using 2 different JPEG Quality Factors (QF), different rescaling ratios, and 2 possible Gamma correction factors. The score used to rank participants was the accuracy (# of correct camera models identification / # of total images). If the outputs of this contest are at the current time still not all published, this contest has been the first to witness the use of deep learning techniques in IFS contests [8].

1.2 A new challenge dedicated to practical steganalysis

The goal of the ALASKA challenge was to stimulate the development of new hidden data detection methods dedicated to perform practical, “real-life”, steganalysis; i.e. to detect stego contents in environments which are closer to an operational forensic analyst context.

ALASKA was built from the observation that the vast of majority publications on steganalysis are not based on realistic assumptions, i.e. cannot be used directly by a forensics expert. To support this statement, we analyzed 33 publications on image steganography or steganalysis published in the last 3 editions of IH-MMSEC, and from 2016 to 2019 in IEEE-TIFS and IEEE-SPL. From this set we can derive the following statistics:

- 33% of the papers deal with JPEG steganography/steganalysis, other papers focus on sole case of uncompressed images in spatial domain),
- 84% deal with grey-level images (steganalysis in color images was studied, using recent machine-learning-based methods, for the first time in 2014 [16, 26]),
- 70% use only BOSSBase with default development settings as the reference base (CNN-based steganalysis schemes usually perform data-augmentation and tend to use other databases) while it has been recently shown [3, 13] how different processing tools may change fundamentally the results,
- 79% choose only P_E (the minimum average between false positive and false negative, assuming number of cover and stego images is the same) as the metric to compute the classification performance,
- 94% perform steganalysis on stego images generated using a fixed embedding rate,
- among the algorithms dedicated to JPEG images, 90% use a constant JPEG quality factor.

These figures show that the typical academic scenario of steganalysis is very far from realistic setups. This is due to the fact that the academic world considers steganalysis as a tool to benchmark a steganographic scheme but not as a tool to detect stego images in a realistic environment. This observation is not new: the white paper [23] already mentioned in 2013 the weaknesses of the current steganalysis schemes and their lack of generalization to more practical configurations, and reference [33] also highlights how the popularity of the BOSSBase database tends to bias the conception of steganographic or steganalysis methods by selecting parameters optimized with respect to this particular database.

We now try to list more practical requirements which stem from more realistic assumptions on the Prisoner’s problem described by Simmons in 1983 [34].

Because Alice’s main goal is to communicate sensitive information in a stealthy fashion, she needs to act casually and consequently she has to use any random image or set of images, processed using a random pipeline. Alice’s cover images consequently have high probabilities to be in color, in JPEG format, to come from an arbitrary device and to be subject to an arbitrary development pipeline.

On the other side, Eve observes transmissions or stored data and potentially has to face a great diversity among images. She has to analyze images coming from different devices, therefore subjected to different acquisition, development and processing pipelines, with different sizes and compressed using different JPEG quantization tables. On top of this, Eve also has to face a wide diversity regarding the steganography, not being aware of the potential embedding scheme, the possible payload and with largely unbalanced testing sets with more cover contents than stego (note that training sets may be balanced easily since Eve can generate stego images).

Additionally, in a vast majority of operational situations, Eve’s detector needs to generate low false positive rates since false positives trigger unnecessary investigations which are time and cost consuming hence undermining the whole detection system. In most cases it is better for Eve not to detect Alice’s communication than to have suspicions about a large number of innocent actors. The prescribed false positive rate one wish to achieve may, in an operational context, depends on the number of scrutinized images and on the consequences of making wrong accusations. One can easily see the terrible impact of having a false positive rate as low as 1% if thousands of images are inspected, generating consequently dozens of false alarms.

This scenario, similar to looking for a needle in a haystack from the Eve’s perspective, is illustrated in Figure 1. Note that this extreme diversity is more important than for content based retrieval tasks since the diversity in steganalysis does not come only from the semantic of the image, but also from the invisible components which play an important role in steganalysis. This extreme diversity has been the main motivation behind the ALASKA contest that meant to bring the participant “into the wild”, as for the forensic expert².

1.3 Main features of the ALASKA contest

Based on the observations presented in the previous section, the main motivation of the ALASKA contest is to propose an “anti-BOSS” contest, which means that this contest must be built to help the forensic steganalyst to detect stego images and not to benchmark the embedding scheme of the steganographer w.r.t. a worst case scenario as it was meant for BOSS. We also wanted to include more realistic uses of steganography and consequently we decided about the following setup³, detailed in the Section 2.

Prescribed false positive rates: Contrary to the BOSS contest which used the average of false alarm and miss detection rates as a ranking metric, we used the miss detection rate for a false positive rate of 5% here (abbreviated MD_5 for Miss Detection at 5% false alarm rate). We think that this metric, which prescribes a given false positive rate and rank steganalysis scheme according to the miss detection rate is more interesting for the forensics expert. This metric was inspired by other metrics:

- FP50 (False positive rate for a miss detection of 50%) which offers interesting statistical properties for centered and symmetric distributions of cover scores [29].
- “Accuracy at the Top” [24] which gives the accuracy detecting one stego content (or actor) among for example the 1% most suspicious contents/actors. This score used to benchmark search engines is interesting, especially when stego contents are always present in the set of contents under investigation.

In order to be able to compute the MD_5 , we asked the participants to rank their images starting with the most suspicious ones. The server computes a threshold allowing 5% of false positives and returned the miss detection rate. During the contest each submission is evaluated over a randomly selected subset of 80% of the testing set. The final results are adjusted with evaluation over the whole testing set.

Diverse color JPEGs: Because the vast majority of images are color JPEGs, we decided to generate cover and stego in the same format, we also consider embedding specific to the JPEG color domain. In order to ease implementation we used only the 4:4:4 chroma-subsampling format (no subsampling of chrominance). The JPEG are compressed using different standard quality factors.

Diverse development pipelines: In order to reflect the great diversity of the processing pipelines we used different development

pipelines using RAW images as inputs. Images also are of different sizes.

Different steganographic schemes: We used a set of different embedding schemes which are associated with different payload sizes depending of the image processing pipeline.

2 CHALLENGE SETUP

As emphasized in the introduction, the ALASKA competition was designed to bring steganography and steganalysis practices closer to real-world situations. Such a goal should be enabled with a careful design of the material provided to the competitors and, by extension, to the community. In particular, the pitfalls of the BOSSbase, with its lack of diversity on several fronts, were dully taken into account. Therefore, to motivate the community, beyond the sole ALASKA competition, and to study steganalysis “into the wild” we have designed all competition material following three fundamental pillars:

Diversity: In steganography and steganalysis, diversity of an image base is twofold. First of all, it comes from the *diversity of sources* of each image. A source, as defined in [14], is identified as a device and a set of algorithms that generates cover content [3, 13]. Consequently, the material must take into account the high diversity not only from the camera devices but also from the processing pipelines of each image. Secondly, diversity comes from the number of *different steganographic methods* employed to hide information in each image, as well as their settings, mostly the payload of hidden data.

Tunability: Every parameter of the image base should be easily changeable so the practitioner can study the effect of the variation of each parameter independently (e.g : QF, image size, processing algorithms, steganographic schemes, etc...). It should also be straightforward to add new parameters. The possibility to tune each and every parameter easily such that one can create a specific dataset for its study is fundamental for future use but may also prevent the adoption at large scale of a uniform and standard dataset.

Future-proofing: The advent of a new paradigm in steganalysis, using neural networks and deep learning for instance, requires an image database which is big enough to enable the training of such detectors. Furthermore, all softwares used to generate the image base should be readily accessible without fees, open-source to prevent sudden obsolescence and substitutable to allow easy replacement in case of better alternatives. We deeply believe that providing a very large dataset as well as tools that one can grasp easily is of crucial importance to leverage their use in future research works.

Those three pillars were implemented in practice by providing three different kinds of material:

- (1) On the one hand, a training dataset of (almost) 50 000 RAW images taken with 21 different cameras (see details in Tables 1) was made available one month before the kick-off of the competition
- (2) On the other hand, for the competition itself, a testing set of 5000 color JPEG images. Competitors had to rank this set

²The name of the competition comes from the movie “Into the Wild” that takes place in Alaska, USA.

³Note that as explained in the section 4, we noticed that our choices were not all appropriate.

of images from the most likely stego to the most cover and, based on this testing set, we were able to rank the efficiency of competitors methods.

- (3) Two scripts were also provided to allow easy conversion from RAW images to JPEG. Those scripts take care, respectively, of the image processing and of the hidden data embedding of each image in a fully automatic fashion. We would like to emphasize that those scripts were made as modular and as tunable as possible. Though the exact processing and embedding process of individual images were unknown to the competitor, the parameters used for the generation of the testing set were also provided allowing the competitor to generate a training set coming from the same sources as the testing set.

The rest of this section motivates and describes precisely each part of the material, namely the RAW image dataset, the processing pipelines of testing set and the steganographic processes that were chosen to generate the testing set.

2.1 The Raw Image Dataset

The training set provided on the ALASKA competition webpage was made of 50 000 images in RAW format (several different specific format due to the diversity of cameras). Those images were taken with 21 different cameras as summarized in Table 1. Even though such a number is still far from real word databases, such as FlickrR photo-sharing website where hundreds of different cameras can be found, special care was taken to ensure that those cameras spanned every possible sensor size. Thus, images from small, low quality sensors such as the one of an iPad (4.80×3.60 mm) can be found, up to full-frame sensors such as the one found in a Nikon D610 (35.9×24 mm). We also paid attention to include camera models that cover a wide range of technologies through various camera model manufacturers (9 different brands) as well as a large span of production years (from 2003 to 2018). Eventually, we also included Leica Monochrome as well as full-colour Sigma Foveon X3 sensors. Regarding ISO sensitivity, which as observed in our prior works [13, 14], is the main acquisition parameter that affects steganalysis, we also tried to mimic a realistic dataset with a majority of daily outdoor picture, hence with low ISO; however we have included a non-negligible part of very low ISO, with approx. 6.5% of images with ISO smaller than 100 (that only some camera allows) as well as an important ratio of 13.8% of night or indoor pictures with ISO larger than 1000, see details on the histogram from Fig. 2. Eventually, to include in the RAW image dataset a subset that could mimic the vast diversity one could find in a real practical steganalysis setup we have used the photo-sharing website *wesaturate*⁴, which allows its users to share photo in various format including raw files and uses a compliant license that allows redistribution. We have downloaded approximately 3 500 images from *wesaturate* website.

2.2 Image Processing Pipeline

The processing pipeline used in the ALASKA competition was chosen to be as diverse as possible while still producing believable images. To that end, the parameters of each tool in the processing



Figure 2: Histogram of ISO from raw images.

Camera model	#Image	year	Sensor Size (Mpixels)
Canon EOS100D	6979	2013	APS-C (18Mp)
Canon EOS20D	2254	2004	APS-C (8.25Mp)
Canon EOS500D	1773	2009	APS-C (15.1Mp)
Canon EOS60D	3487	2010	APS-C (18.1Mp)
Canon EOS700D	593	2013	APS-C (18Mp)
iPad pro-13"	1899	2015	1/3" (12Mp)
Leica M9	1722	2009	FullFrame (18.5Mp)
Leica Monochrom	217	2014	FullFrame (18Mp)
Nikon 1-AW	859	2013	1" (14.2Mp)
Nikon D5200	4921	2013	APS-C (24.1Mp)
Nikon D610	2495	2013	FullFrame (24Mp)
Nikon D7100	849	2013	APS-C (24.1Mp)
Nikon D90	387	2008	APS-C (12.3Mp)
Panasonic DMC-FZ28	1528	2008	1/2.3" (10.1Mp)
Panasonic DMC-GM1	2840	2013	4/3" (16Mp)
Pentax-K-50	2913	2013	APS-C (16.3Mp)
Samsung GalaxyS8	1847	2017	1/2.5" (12Mp)
Sigma SD10	2224	2003	Foveon X3 (3x3.5Mp)
Sigma SD1Merrill	3320	2011	APS-C, X3 (3x14.8Mp)
Sony α 6000	2667	2014	APS-C (14.3Mp)
WorldWideWeb	3525	various	various
Total	49299	-	-

Table 1: Diversity of Images sources in ALASKA raw images dataset.

pipeline are randomized: the distributions from which they are drawn is fixed and chosen to avoid aberrant looking images while providing extremely diverse image sources.

This image development and processing pipeline is depicted in Figure 3 and details in what follows:

Demosaicking: The first step in the processing pipeline is to apply demosaicking on the image. This was done using *Rawtherapee*⁵ v5.4 by selecting randomly and for each image individually, one among the four following algorithms (the probability for choosing a given algorithm is given between the brackets): AmAZE (40%), DCB (30%), IGV (15%), Nearest-neighbor or Fast interpolation (15%).

⁴see: <https://www.wesaturate.com>

⁵available at: <http://rawtherapee.com/>

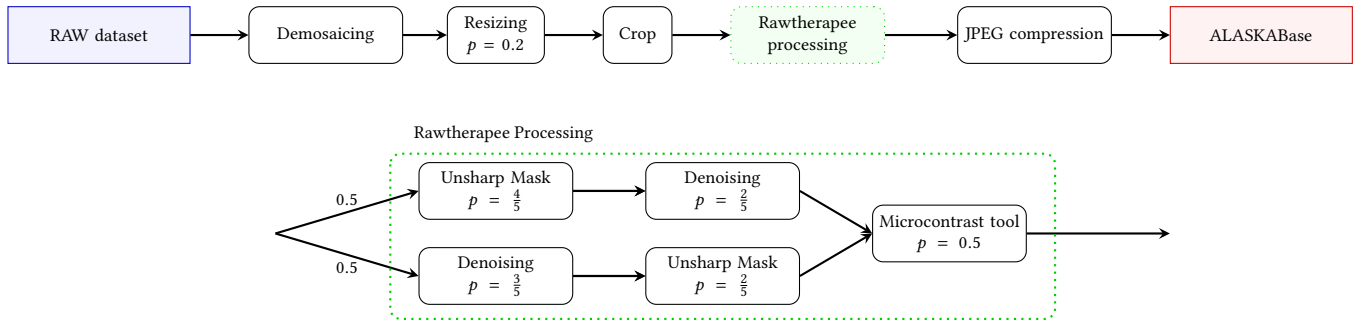


Figure 3: Processing pipeline followed for each image from the RAW database up to JPEG compression. The second figure details the different Rawtherapee processes. The p value gives the probability that a given process is applied, when it is absent, the process is always applied.

AmAZE and DCB were chosen and associated with highest probabilities because they are currently the most popular options with *Rawtherapee* users due to their extremely good results with few artifacts. IGV was the algorithm that, during our benchmarks, consistently gave images that were hard to steganalyze and the nearest neighbor interpolation was chosen as a alternative for users aiming at speed up processing time. Images were then saved as 16-bit TIFF using python’s *Pillow* library⁶.

Resizing: Following demosaicking, resizing is applied to the image with 20% probability using a 8x8 Lanczos filter. The resize factor is comprised between 60 and 130 and chosen from a gamma distribution with pdf $P(x, a = 10) = \left[100 \cdot \left[0.08 \cdot \frac{x^{a-1} \exp(-x)}{\Gamma(a)} \right] \right]$ rectified on [60, 130].

Smart Crop: As a third step, the image is cropped following the so-called “smart crop” process defined in [37]. Let us briefly recall that one of the main issue when cropping randomly an image is to avoid extracting a subpart with dummy content, typically a portion with all pixels overexposed for instance. The idea proposed in [37] is to extract a portion in which residuals has approximately the same distribution as the overall image. For ALASKA challenge, we used this “smart cropping” technique to reduce each dimension, width and height, to a random size, drawn from uniform distribution, among the four following sizes: {512, 640, 720, 1024}.

Denoising, sharpening, micro-contrast: Once cropped, the image is subjected to various images processes using *RawTherapee*, as summarized in Figure 3: Each image can be sharpened, using the well-known Unsharp Mask (USM) algorithm, and/or denoised, using Pyramid Denoising based on wavelet decomposition; eventually we may apply a micro-contrast local edge enhancement tool, that prevents introducing halo artifacts often present when using USM. Every step is selected or skipped with a fixed probability indicated in Figure 3 and, if selected, the specific parameters of each tool are drawn randomly from distributions which were chosen empirically

to get a good balance between image difficulty, diversity and believability. Those specific distributions as well as their parameters are reported in Appendix A.

JPEG compression: Eventually, each image is compressed following the JPEG standard using the *Pillow* library. To set the parameters of the JPEG compression we used a dataset of 2 691 980 JPEG images downloaded from FlickrR [40] that were compressed using one of the standard quantization tables. We noted that those images were, in more than 85% of cases, not subject to Chroma subsampling. Therefore, we have chosen not to use Chroma subsampling. However the JPEG quality factor was drawn in such a way as to match closely the empirical distribution of QF observed on the dataset downloaded from FlickrR. The probabilities of using each and every JPEG QF are presented in Appendix A.

2.3 Steganographic Embeddings

We detail now the different components related to the steganographic part: selection of the embedding methods, the choice of the payload size w.r.t. the image size, the allocation of the payload between the different color channels and the benchmark used to tune the different parameters.

Stego schemes: Bringing steganalysis closer to operational context means that the embedding methods must be very diverse, drawing as much from state-of-the-art adaptive embedding schemes as from older, weaker schemes such as naive LSB replacement. Consequently we selected four embedding schemes from the old non-adaptive nsF5 [11] to recent adaptive schemes such as UED [18] and EBS [39] including the current state-of-the-art J-UNIWARD [20].

Payload size w.r.t. image processing pipeline: In a realistic operational context, Alice and Bob want to share a given size of data; this could be transformed for the ALASKA competition to a fixed embedded size. However, this may lead to a situation in which a non-negligible fraction of the steganographic contents will be hardly detectable (for instance, strongly sharpened images using state-of-the-art embedding schemes) while, on the opposite, for other images the detection will turn out to be obvious (e.g. denoised images with non-adaptive scheme).

Therefore we adopted a strategy in which all images have more

⁶available at: <https://pillow.readthedocs.io/en/5.1.x/>

or less the same difficulty when it comes to detecting their stego content. While the principle is quite simple, this turns out to be very difficult in practice since it requires finding for each image *source* a relevant payload to achieve the targeted “steganalysis difficulty”. While models may allow to do so for spatial domain [32, 38], prior works in JPEG domain are far less developed.

To determine such a payload for all possible image sources we adopted the following methodology:

- First of all, from a subset of 10,000 images, including the raw images from testing set, we generated several variations of the same dataset, each developed in a different fashion. More specifically, we have generated all sets of different *sources* using a specific development pipeline combining: (i) 4 demosaicking algorithms (ii) 3 possible resizing factors (iii) 3 edge enhancement strengths (iv) 3 image denoising strengths and (v) 4 different JPEG quality factors, those were 100, 97, 90 and 80. See also the processing pipeline in Figure 3.
- Second, we have developed a tool that, using an improved version of secant lines, allows finding for a given set of images from the same *source* the average payload that achieves the desired difficulty ; this payload that on a given dataset matches with a prescribed steganalysis error rate is referred to as the “secure payload” in [32, 38]. Because the ALASKA competition focuses on the MD_5 criterion of detection performance, we targeted a MD_5 of 65%.

However the main shortcoming of this methodology is that the combination of all the possible developments leads to a combinatorial explosion with $4 \times 3 \times 3 \times 3 \times 4 = 432$ different images sources to generate and, with 4 embedding schemes, a total of 1728 payloads to determine. Because such a number is completely out-of-reach, we simplified the estimation by assuming that the demosaicking step has only a negligible influence. Consequently it was not considered. For further simplification we computed the payload only for a few of those cases and made a linear regression for each parameter individually.

However, because even without taking into account the demosaicking, considering all possible combinations of processings lead to 432 sources. We have not been able to determine numerically all possible payload, that matches the required MD_5 of 65%, and therefore used the available results through a simple linear regression (for each parameter individually, regardless the other parameters). Only for the JPEG quality factor we have noted that this parameter seems to be hardly modelled using a linear model and, hence, shift to a model in which this parameters has an exponential impact on the “secure payload”.

Payload size w.r.t. image size: Eventually, regarding image sizes, we have deliberately chosen to adopt a simple square root law (SRL [9, 21, 25]) which, accounts neither for the coding strategy nor for the cost associated with each pixel. Indeed, a more accurate (not-so-square-root) law, that adapts the payload as a function of images size, for adaptive embedding schemes and using advanced coding scheme [22] does seem hardly applicable in practice [15]. Obviously, see section 3.2 and more precisely Figure 11, a “naively” use of the Square Root Law leads to the result that one may expect:

the payload is underscaled for larger image sizes.

Payload repartition among color channels: Although the vast majority of digital images are color images compressed in JPEG, using three channels (Y , C_b and C_r), recent works in steganalysis focus almost exclusively on grayscale and uncompressed images (see Section 1.2). It was therefore fundamental for us to find a trade-off between moving towards a practical scenario and running a competition in line with recent developments in steganalysis.

We consequently decided to modify the classical embedding scheme by spreading the payload size between the different components. The question related to the best way to spread a payload of P bits among the channels Y , C_b and C_r for 4:4:4 sampling ratios is investigated in [36] from a practical perspective. The authors propose to tune a parameter $\beta \in [0; 1]$ that balances the payload allocated to the luminance and chrominance channels w.r.t. the practical security. For example, $\beta = 1$ implies that all the payload is conveyed by the two chrominance components and $\beta = 0$ implies that the payload is embedded in the luminance component only. More specifically, given P_Y , P_{C_b} and P_{C_r} the payload sizes for each channel, the authors of [36] propose to use the following relations: $P_Y = \gamma(1 - \beta)N_Y$, $P_{C_b} = \gamma\beta N_{C_b}/2$ and $P_{C_r} = \gamma\beta N_{C_r}/2$, where N_Y , N_{C_b} and N_{C_r} are respectively the number of non-zero AC coefficients for the Y , C_b and C_r channels and γ is a proportionality factor to ensure that $P_Y + P_{C_b} + P_{C_r}$ equals the desired overall payload. However, we made an implementation mistake (as it has been confirmed by independent works from participants [43]) by computing $P_Y = \gamma(1 - \beta)(N_Y + N_{C_b} + N_{C_r})$ and $P_{C_b} = P_{C_r} = \gamma\beta(N_Y + N_{C_b} + N_{C_r})/2$.

Note that this change tends to allocate a larger payload into chrominance channels and consequently decreases the practical security. For example, for a typical image at QF75 where $N_Y = 10000$, $N_{C_b} = 1000$, $N_{C_r} = 1000$, if we set $P = 1000$ bits, $\beta = 0.4$ we obtain $P_Y = 882$ bits and $P_{C_b} = P_{C_r} = 59$ bits using spreading presented in [36] vs $P_Y = 600$ bits and $P_{C_b} = P_{C_r} = 200$ bits for our implementation.

Practical security assessment: The payload size was evaluated empirically based on basic and fast steganalytic tests. The experiments were conducted using the DCTR (Discrete Cosine Transform Residual) [19] features set concatenated from each color channels [36] together with the low-complexity linear classifier from [4] (LCLC). This choice was based on the need to get as many payload evaluation as possible in the least amount of time.

With this approach, we were able to provide a “lower” and “upper” bounds on the detection accuracy one may get under our experimental framework. The “lower bound” corresponds to the performance one gets when naively training and testing DCTR and the LCLC directly on the material provided for the competition. We get a results of $MD_5 \approx 0.795$, that is, approximately 80% of missed detection for a false alarm rate of 5%.

The “upper bound”, on the other hand, corresponds to the best achievable results when using DCTR and the LCLC. Our hypothesis was that the best achievable results would be those obtained in the absence of any cover-source mismatch. This would amount to train one detector per source in the testing set which would have been impossible to do in the time frame leading to the competition. We

Date	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Total
Visits	688	4046	4205	4650	5452	4533	4115	2379	30068
TX (TB)	69	60	18	22	13	6	19	1	208

Table 2: Usage of the website of alaska.utt.fr per month, in terms of the number of unique daily visits and transmitted data volume (TX).

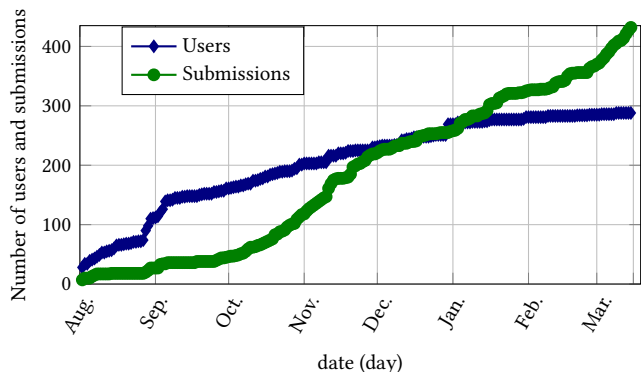


Figure 4: Evolution of the number of registered users (blue) and number of submissions (green).

thus went under the assumption that our regression and evaluation method has a reasonable accuracy meaning that the best achievable MD_5 should be close to the targeted one set to 0.65.

3 CHALLENGE RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

After having described in details the goals, the setup and the organization of the ALASKA challenge, we present in this section what happened during the contest and how the competitors performed.

3.1 Timeline and website usage

First of all, we would like to present the usage of the website alaska.utt.fr.

Table 2 presents the volume of data sent by the server (TX, in Tera Bytes) as well as the number of unique daily connections that have been recorded on the website server. Note that, for this counter, we do not only count the individuals that visits the website, but instead each and every connection to the website server. While the former case includes only visits through a website, the latter case accounts for downloads of image datasets, and also for attackers who attempt to grant access to the server (usually from a few attacks up to a few dozens a day).

Similarly, Figure 4 presents the number of registered users (in blue) as well as the number of submissions (in green). Quite unsurprisingly, this figure shows different trends between the number of users and number of submissions that perfectly matches with the observations from Table 2.

Though the final number of submissions, over 400, is quite important, we wanted to look at the number of submissions per individual. The histogram of the number of submissions per individual users is presented in Table 3. First of all, the main conclusion one may draw out of this table is that a vast majority of users (242 out of 285) did not make submission. Note that we only count here the “active”

Nb of Submissions	Nb of Users
0	244
1–5	25
6–10	6
11–15	4
16–20	2
21–25	0
26–30	3
31–35	2
36–40	0
41–45	0
46–50	2
Total	285

Table 3: Number of number submission per users.

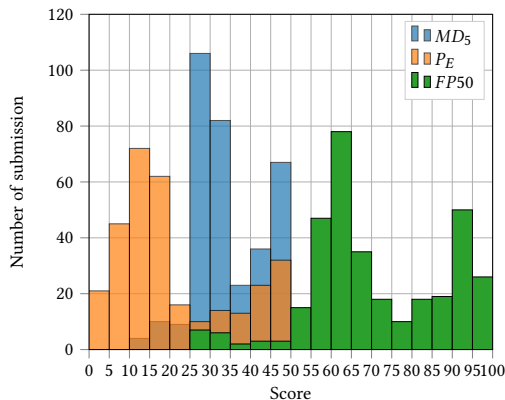


Figure 5: Number submissions as a function of performance w.r.t the three criteria used (MD_5 , P_E and $FP50$).

users whose account was validated using an email confirmation system. Two explanations may be found for this very high number of non-participating users. First of all, it is likely that many users registered only to get access to the material provided (the image datasets as well as the development scripts provided, see Section 2 for details). Another possible explanation that may be found is that some users downloaded the dataset, quickly tried to evaluate offline the performance of their detection system and, not being able to compete with the top competitors, gave up without submission any answers.

3.2 Comparison between competitors

Let us now present describe how the competitors performed. Figure 5 provides a general overview of the distribution of performances over all the submissions. Here, as reported during the competition on the website, we report the results using three distinct criteria, the usual P_E as well as the $FP50$ and the MD_5 , both presented in Section 2, the latter being the only one used to rank competitors.

The first comment one may have when observing the Figure 5 is that P_E as well as $FP50$ are not very discriminative. This can be explained, in part, because such performance metric lie in the range (0, 0.5); on the opposite the MD_5 lies in the range (0, 0.95). Note also

Competitor	MD_5	P_E	FP50
yyousfi / Binghamton Univ.	25.2% (24.37%)	14.49%	0.71%
2016130231 / Shenzhen Univ.	51.6% (50.00%)	25.50%	5.67%
3188960009 / PRC	53.8% (54.93%)	26.33%	7.66%
375790798 / PRC	54.2% (53.35%)	25.78%	7.56%

Table 4: The Hall of Fame (as of March 14th): top 5 competitors by the end of ALASKA competition. Note that those scores correspond to the best results for each criterion individually and were computed over all images while, on the opposite, the results published online through `alaska.utt.fr` were computed on a random subset and are reported in brackets for MD_5 .

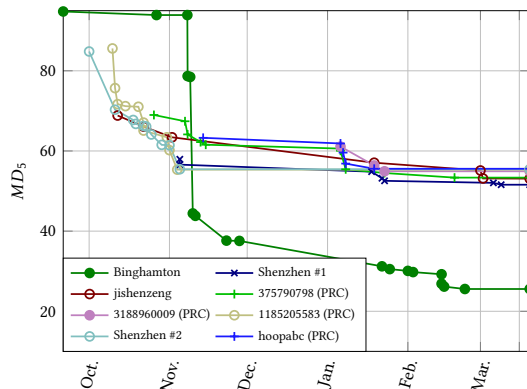


Figure 6: Evolution of the scores of the eight best competitors.

that the $FP50$ has been designed for “very reliable” detection with extremely low false alarm rate; such a criterion is therefore more relevant to distinguish detectors with false alarm rate of 10^{-6} and 10^{-4} , which does not fit quite well with the context of a competition such as ALASKA where it would require to train and test on dozens of millions of images.

Figure 5 also emphasizes the challenging aspect of moving steganalysis “into the wild” with an important fraction of detection results below the “upper” bound of 65% when using off the shelf fast features-based machine learning tools. Eventually, one can observe clearly a group of submission substantially ahead, they all come from the winning team from Binghamton University. All other competitors that went seriously into the competition has seen their performance, in terms of MD_5 plateauing between 52% and 58%. This can actually be observed for any of the three performance criteria.

We also wanted to present the evolution of the score for the top competitors in Figure 6. We picked the eight top scorers because we observed that including more users would not bring any more information while bringing more confusion by putting too many values into same graphs. From this figure, the first thing we can note is the strategy of the team from Binghamton University that starts entering the competition “seriously” once they have detection methods that largely outperform the other competitors by a margin of 15%. We can also observe a group of three competitors (from which two at least are from ShenZhen University) who were

quickly able to reach approx. a MD_5 of 55% while hardly being able to improve this score over the four remaining month of the competition. A notable exception is ShenZhen team #1, who under username “2016130231”, managed to improve its performance slowly to eventually end up at the second place. Eventually, we can also note a third group of users who started to reach the “lower” bound of 65% by November but constantly managed to improve the performance to end up with the same results as the second group of users.

3.3 Results analysis

As introduced in the previous section, it is interesting to look at the results obtained by the best competitors for different types of images. In particular, we want to uncover if some users specifically target a specific kind of covers. To this end we propose to show the results obtained by the competitors with respect to six individual features; those are (ordered as in the processing pipeline, see Figure 3), the demosaicking algorithm, the resizing factor (if used), the image processing tools (denoising and edge enhancement), the image size and the JPEG quality factor.

Impact of demosaicking: The results from the competitors for various demosaicking algorithms are reported in Fig 7 which, as the next figures 7–13, put together the results obtained by different users for the same subset of images. In Figure 7 the five set of results gathered are for each and every demosaicking algorithm. We observe that the accuracy of the detection loosely depends on the demosaicking. A notable exception to this is the IGV algorithm for which the MD_5 drops by a factor of approximately a third for all users. We also note that the “DCraw” demosaicking had been added due the presence of images shot with a Sigma full-color Feveon X3 sensor which is not supported by rawTherapee. Interestingly, the results of the competitors in this dataset are more heterogeneous, possibly because the image processed using DCraw represents a rather small fraction of the training and testing sets.

Impact of resampling: Figure 8 show the results obtained by the competitors depending on the presence or absence of resampling. For a vast majority of the competitors, one can observe that resizing has almost no impact on steganalysis performance. A notable exception, however, can be observed from the leading team whose MD_5 increases by more than 25% on resampled images. It is worth noting that resizing has been used for only one fifth of the image, see Figure 3, therefore, it is likely that the learning methods focus somehow on the vast majority of non-resampled images.

Impact of filtering: The next step of the raw file development pipeline is the image processing, namely denoising and edge enhancement, or sharpening; the results of steganalysis performance from top submissions, as a function of the “strength” of those processing tools, are given in the Figures 9 and 10.

Regarding the impact of edge enhancement, one can observe that the inserted payload is slightly too small when this processing is not used hence the higher MD_5 for all competitors. However it is striking that all competitors have performance that loosely depends on the strength of edge enhancement. A notable exception

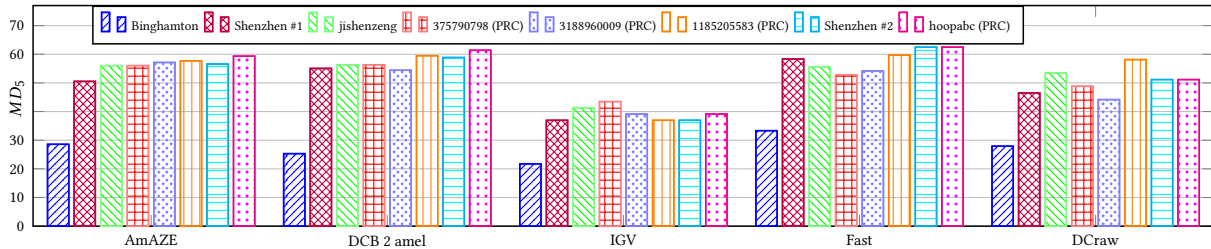


Figure 7: Detection performance, using MD_5 , as a function of Demosaicking Algorithms.

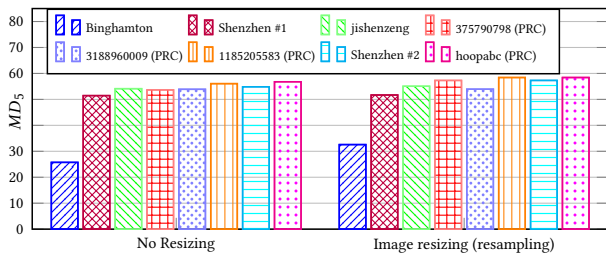


Figure 8: Users detection accuracy as a function of resizing.

to this behavior comes, once again, from the leading team from Binghamton University. Indeed their MD_5 is doubled when shifting from light to strong edge enhancement, while, on the opposite, it remains almost constant for all other competitors.

Impact of the image size: The ultimate step of the development pipeline is the choice of image size. As explained in the Section 2.3, we adopt a simple SRL (Square Root Law) under which the square root of the message length is set proportional to the number of DCT coefficients. The results presented in Figure 11 go exactly along the same direction as the previous analysis: all users achieved significantly higher missed detection rates MD_5 , for larger image sizes.

Impact of JPEG QF: Eventually, the very last step of all processing pipelines is the compression. Figure 12 show the results obtained by the competitors as a function of the JPEG Quality Factor (QF). Our evaluation of the relevant payload to ensure a constant difficulty for steganalysis did not work really well for this parameter. This is probably due to the fact that, as opposed to the other parameters of the processing pipeline, it seemed hardly possible to map the QF to the “secure” payload [32] using a linear relation, given the few results we had for this evaluation. Therefore we have picked an exponential relation from the QF to the secure payload which appears, retrospectively, rather inaccurate.

Beside the fact that the difficulty of steganalysis greatly increases with the QF, another very interesting phenomenon one can observe from Figure 12 is the notable exception to this rule from Binghamton Team. Indeed while difficulty for all user is maximal for images with the highest QF, for those images the team from Binghamton have achieved almost perfect detection, highlighted on this figure with a very low MD_5 , that is a missed detection rate of about 3% for 5% of false-alarm. In fact, over the 782 images with QF 100, this team made only 2 errors. Obviously, a novel attack has been discovered, see more detail in their paper [43].

Impact of the embedding scheme: As explained in Section 2.3, the embedding was designed to make each scheme equally

difficult. This is reflected in Figure 14 where the performance of the competitors is stable across all steganographic schemes with the notable exception of nsF5. Indeed every competitors performs the worst on nsF5 which is actually the weakest scheme used in ALASKA. While the exact reasons of this phenomenon still elude the authors, several facts about the way nsF5 was used during the competition might explain it. First of all, nsF5 embeds only in non-zero AC coefficients (nzAC). If every image of the ALASKA test set (5000 images) was embedded with nsF5, approximately 150 would not have enough nzAC for embedding with approximately 30 of them resulting in no changes in at least one the three color channels. Since the test only contained 500 stego images with only 15% of them being nsF5, such an event is still quite rare and cannot explain the huge loss in MD_5 for all competitors. More interesting, however, is the fact that nsF5 simulates embedding with optimal coding. Given that the base payload of nsf5 for the competition is already quite low at 0.04 bpp, the embedding efficiency is excellent (8.5 on average) meaning that the number of changes in the chrominance channels will always be small (in the order of hundreds). While this might not have been a problem for the rich models used for benchmarking the competition, the neural networks used by the competitors all needed curriculum training to account for small payloads. Since the payload of nsF5 was far smaller than the other schemes, its is possible that it was not taken into account as well as the others schemes during the training phase by the networks.

The return of the Cover-Source Mismatch: Apart from the processing pipeline itself, two interesting splits of competitor results according to image *sources* can be presented. Indeed, we included a small subset of 400 images that were directly output by cameras as JPEG images. The goal of this subset of images, which were absent from the training set, was to be able for us to measure easily how much each competitor methodology has the ability to be generalized to images coming from slightly different *sources*. However to avoid putting images that come from sources that largely differs from the ALASKA training set, those 400 images were jpeg decompressed and subject to same pipeline, depicted in Figure 3, with the exception of the demosaicking.

The results presented in Figure 13 show that a vast majority of competitors can hardly adapt to this CSM, with missed detection MD_5 of over 90%, and even reaching 100% for half of the competitors. Binghamton’s team also suffers from the CSM of this subset of images but to a much lesser extend.

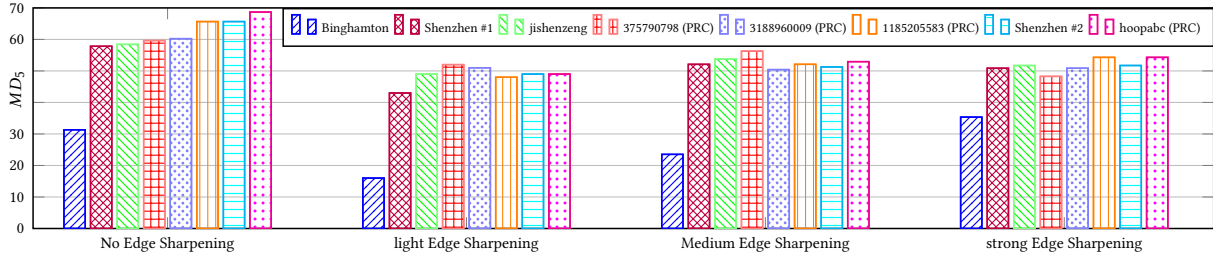


Figure 9: Detection performance, using MD_5 , as a function of Unsharp mask strength on images.

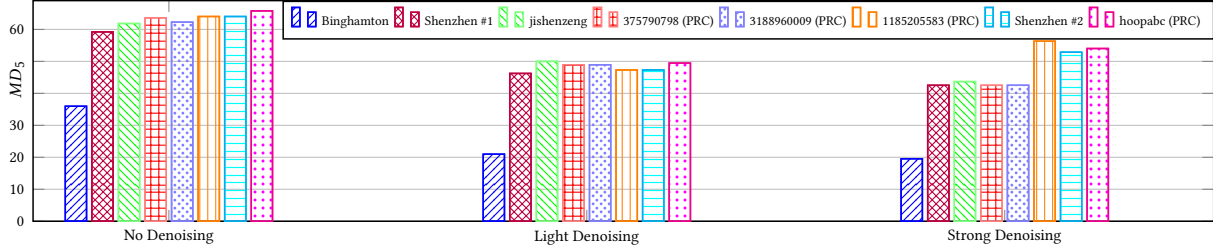


Figure 10: Detection performance, using MD_5 , as a function of images denoising.

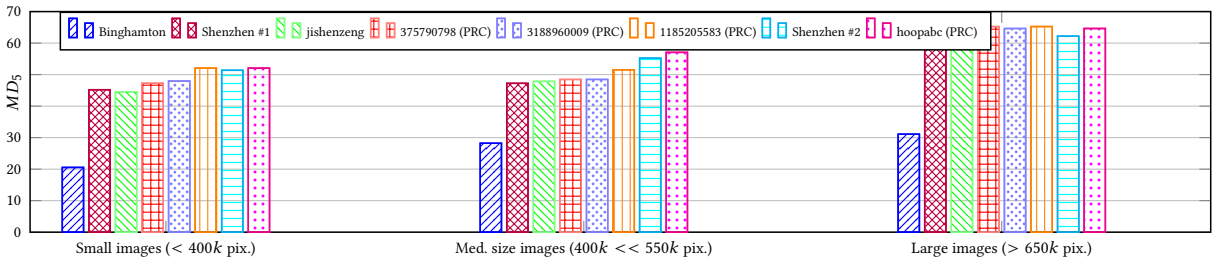


Figure 11: Detection performance, using MD_5 , as a function of images size.

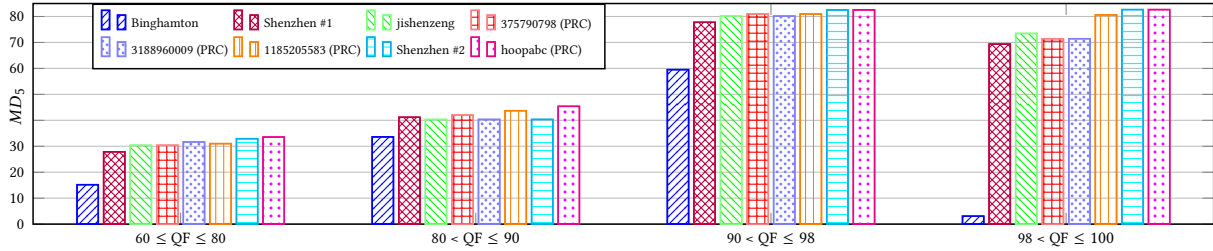


Figure 12: Detection performance, using MD_5 , as a function of jpeg QF .

4 MAIN LESSONS AND CONCLUSIONS

During this whole adventure, we had the satisfaction to notice that there were no major problems with the design of the contest, that it was neither too difficult, nor too easy. Still if we could use a time-machine, we would change at least two things:

- (1) We would fix the error we made on payload allocation in the Chroma channels (see section 2.3) in order to reduce the detectability of the whole system. The positive outcome of this mistake is to show how carefully the embedding must be done on color images.
- (2) We would also generate cover and stego images that are more realistic. As it is illustrated on Figure 15, since we cropped images, potentially exotic developments, and because our

“smart-crop” scheme was not efficient enough, a large proportion of our dataset was not representative of a typical set of images found on a social network or on a hard-drive. We could fix this problem by using important downscaling operations and minor cropping instead.

Organizing the ALASKA has been also very time consuming and put a lot of stress upon all our shoulders⁷. For instance when we realized on August 29th at 1:30 am that one of the image processes was skipped (merely because some silly guy, the second author, commented it in the script) or when after having strive to get all the materials ready for September 1st, Andreas Westfeld burnt

⁷especially on the shoulders of the first author.

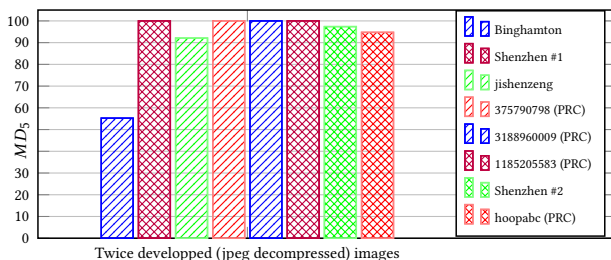


Figure 13: Detection performance, using MD_5 , for jpeg decompressed images ; note that those images have been subjected to same image processing pipeline, see Figure 3, except for the demosaicking.

instantly all our efforts to the ground by finding that stego and cover images had different timestamps⁸ ...

However, organizing ALASKA was also a lot of fun during which we have many times ask ourselves many open questions. While some very interesting research outcomes have already pop up from ALASKA competition, we are deeply convinced that the contest brought the focus on many open questions and may pave the way to even more interesting research works.

It is hard to stop such an exciting adventure, therefore we will propose soon a follow-up competition with the same idea of bringing steganalysis closer to the “real life” operational context. This follow-up competition will certainly be hosted on Kaggle in order to allow as many user as possible from different fields, with hopefully a decent cash price as well as a larger dataset of more than 75.000 raw images from more than 30 camera models that should be available for ACM IH&MMSec’19 conference. This follow-up competition should also go wild in the sense that we will try to design a more realistic yet more diverse image processing pipelines to provide the community with datasets that resemble those one can find on the Internet.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All the source codes and images datasets used to obtained the results presented will be made available on the Internet upon acceptance of the paper. The (raw) images dataset as well as the codes used for conversion to JPEG and application of several processing pipeline are already available at: <https://alaska.utt.fr>. This work has been funded in part by the French National Research Agency (ANR-18-ASTR-0009), ALASKA project: <https://alaska.utt.fr>, and by the French ANR DEFALS program (ANR-16-DEFA-0003).

We would like to thank all the individuals that help us organizing this contest. Those are mainly (but not exclusively):

- Antoine Prudhomme, for creating the website <https://alaska.utt.fr> ;
- Julien Flamant, Jean-Baptiste Gobin, Florent Pergoud, Luc Rodrigues and Emile Touron for kindly providing some of their raw images that we redistributed (with their agreement) during this challenge.

⁸Andreas Westfeld also find another attack on the submission system which originally accepted non-integer image indices

- Andreas Westfeld for striving hard to burn our effort to the ground and helping us this way to improve the “security” of the competition website.
- The computer resources department of Troyes University of Technology who helped us with all their advices and suggestions.

A RAWTHERAPEE PROCESSING DETAILS

In this appendix we detail the different processes used in the sharpening and denoising set as described in Section 2.2. In particular we explain how the parameters of each tool was chosen randomly by sampling from some fixed distribution as well as the rationale behind our choices. More information about each tool can be found in the Rawtherapee document at <http://rawpedia.rawtherapee.com>.

Three tools from Rawtherapee v5.4 were chosen as processing that tended to introduce cover-source mismatch when not taken into account :

Unsharp Mask: A well-known sharpening tool used to increase the edge contrast in images. It informally works by subtracting a blurred version of the original image from the original image.

Directionnal Pyramid Denoising: A denoising tool which uses a multi-resolution representation of the image.

Microcontrast tool: An ad-hoc algorithm in the Rawtherapee sharpening suite used to sharpen edges while not introducing any halo artifact.

Each tool is controlled by a set of parameters. During the dataset generation and for each image processed, we sample the values of each one of those parameters from distributions designed to give a good trade-off between diversity and believability of the resulting image. This means that distributions were chosen such as the extreme values of the parameters are usually avoided (but possible) while still keeping the variance of those parameters as high as possible.

A.1 Unsharp Mask

The Unsharp Mask tool (USM) is controlled by three parameters :

Radius: The Radius determines the size of the details being amplified and consequently, relates to the width of the sharpening halo. It is the radius of the Gaussian blur. The radius follows a normal distribution $\mathcal{N}(1.5, 1)$ rectified on $[0.3, 3]$

Amount: The Amount (percentage) parameter controls the strength of the sharpening. It follows a normal distribution $[\mathcal{N}(500, 200)]$ rectified on $[0, \infty[$

Threshold: The Threshold values are left at default (20, 80, 2000, 1200), threshold is a parameter to confine the sharpening to a desired space (the stronger edges), in RawTherapee, the threshold is a function of luminance, the default values specify little sharpening in the blackest tones, high sharpening at lighter tones and then less sharpening at the lightest tones.

A.2 Directionnal Pyramid Denoising

The denoising tool is controlled by two parameters (chroma denoising is set as automatic) :

Luminance: Luminance follows a gamma distribution $P(x, a = 4) = 100 \cdot 0.1 \cdot \frac{x^{a-1} \exp(-x)}{\Gamma(a)}$ rectified on $[0, 100]$ and controls the strength of the noise reduction

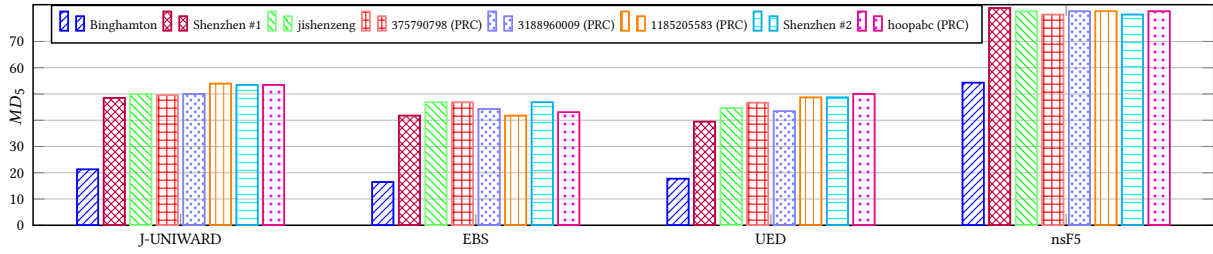


Figure 14: Detection performance, using MD_5 , as a function of the embedding scheme.

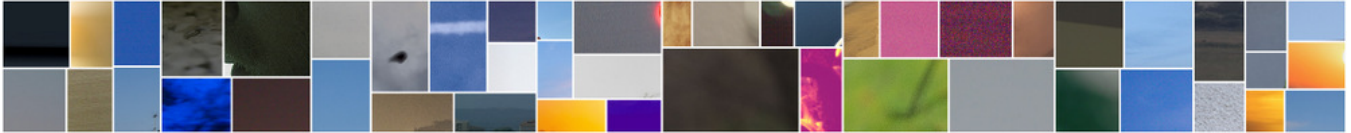


Figure 15: Montage of 50 images having very poor semantic contents picked from the first thousands images (5%).

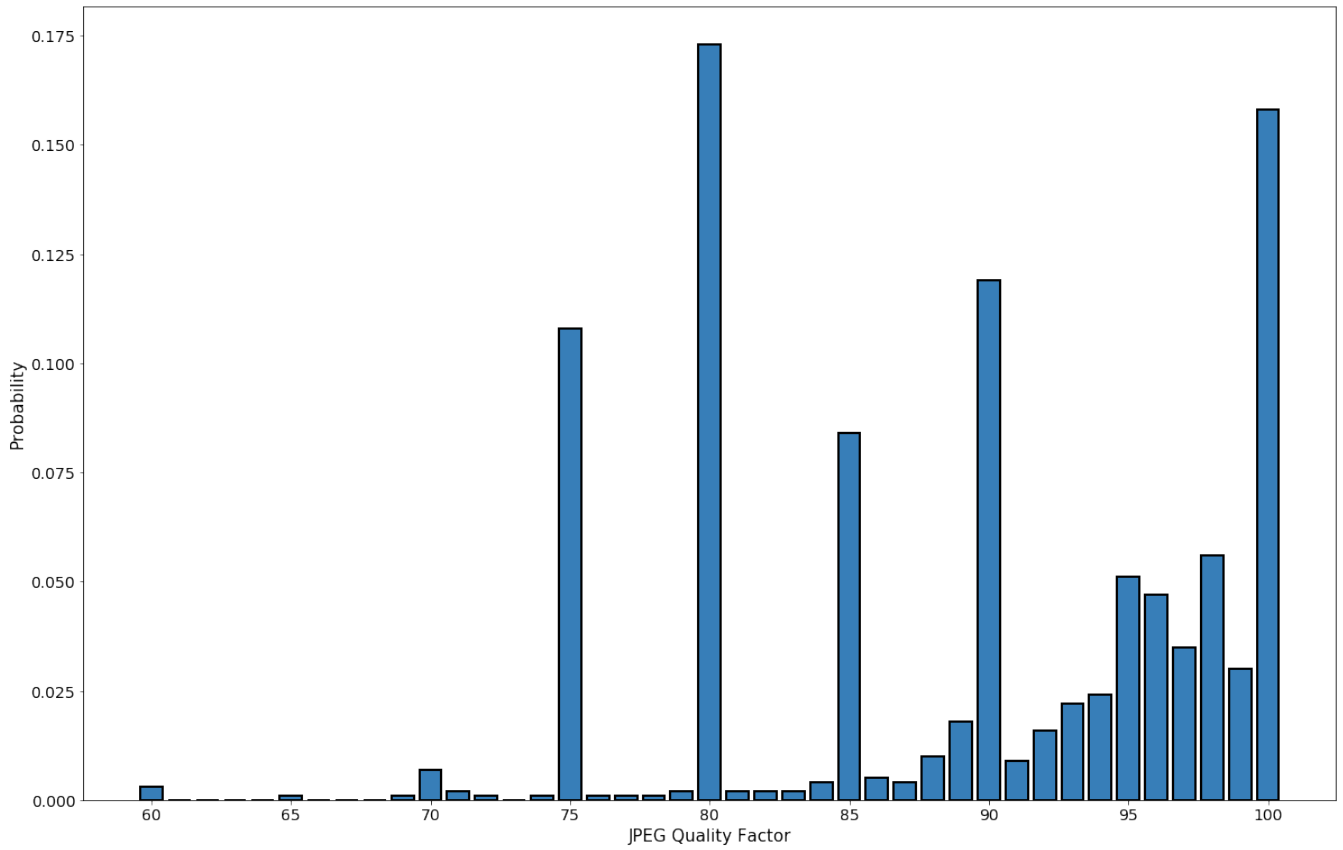


Figure 16: Repartition of the images w.r.t. JPEG QF on the FlickrR website [40] and for the Alaska testing base.

Detail: Detail follows a uniform distribution $\mathcal{U}(\{0..60\})$ and controls the restoration of the textures in the image due to excessive denoising.

Strength: Strength follows a gamma distribution $P(x, a = 1) = \left[100 \cdot 0.5 \cdot \frac{x^{a-1} \exp(-x)}{\Gamma(a)} \right]$ rectified on $[0, 100]$, it tunes strength of the sharpness applied (how many adjacent pixels will be searched for an edge)

A.3 Microcontrast tool

The microcontrast is controlled by two parameters :

Uniformity: Uniformity follows $[\mathcal{N}(30, 5)]$ rectified on $[0, \infty[$, it tunes the level of the microcontrast enhancement.

A.4 JPEG QF

As described in Section 2, we have drawn the JPEG QF from a distribution that mimics the one observed empirically on the large Flickr [40] dataset as it should reveal what one shall find in a practical operational context.

We report in Table 16 the number of images downloaded that match each and every standard QF from 50 to 100. For comparison we present the probability we have used for all QF from 60 which, for simplification purpose, has been rounded to 0 whenever it was smaller than 0.1%.

Note that we only report the numbers for downloaded images that match the JPEG standard quantization tables, which represents approximately 2.7 million images but only less than 15% of total number of downloaded images.

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