A General Framework of Reversible Data Hiding with Controlled Contrast Enhancement

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Abstract: This paper proposes a two-step general framework for reversible data hiding (RDH) schemes with controllable contrast enhancement. The first step aims at preserving visual perception as much as possible on the basis of achieving high embedding capacity (EC), while the second step is used for increasing image contrast. In the second step, some peak-pairs are utilized so that the histogram of pixel values is modified to perform histogram equalization (HE), which would lead to the image contrast enhancement. However, for HE, the utilization of some peak-pairs easily leads to over-enhanced image contrast when a large number of bits are embedded. Therefore, in our proposed framework, contrast over-enhancement is avoided by controlling the degree of contrast enhancement. Since the second step can only provide a small amount of data due to controlled contrast enhancement, the first one helps to achieve a large amount of data without degrading visual quality. Any RDH method which can achieve high EC while preserve good visual quality, can be selected for the first step. In fact, Gao et al.’s method is a special case of our proposed framework. In addition, two simple and commonly-used RDH methods are also introduced to further demonstrate the generalization of our framework.

Keywords: Reversible data hiding, controlled contrast enhancement, general framework, PEE-based RDH method, IT-based RDH method.

1 Introduction

As an important research area of information security, data hiding has been studied for years as an efficient protection for multimedia carriers. Most of data hiding techniques focus on correct extraction of hidden data bits, and yet the data embedding process usually introduces permanent distortion for original carriers. However, some special applications, such as in military, legal and medical usages, permit no permanent distortion for original carriers. However, some special applications, such as in military, legal and medical usages, permit no permanent
distortion to original carriers. To this end, data hiding with reversibility, i.e., RDH, is proposed to satisfy the demand of these applications. Reversibility aims at lossless recovery of original carrier and correct extraction of hidden data.

A large amount of research has been conducted in the past few decades to develop RDH, and thus, some influential research works in the spatial domain have been proposed, including RDH based on lossless compression [Fridrich, Goljan and Du (2002); Celik, Sharma, Tekalp et al. (2005)], RDH using difference expansion (DE) [Tian (2003)], RDH using histogram shifting (HS) [Ni, Shi, Ansari et al. (2006); Xuan, Yang, Zhen et al. (2004); Li, Li, Yang et al. (2013)], RDH using prediction-error expansion (PEE) [Sachnev, Kim, Nam et al. (2009); Li, Yang and Zeng (2011); Hong, Chen and Wu (2013)], and RDH using integer-to-integer transform [Tian (2003); Alattar (2004); Wang, Li, Yang et al. (2010); Wang, Li and Yang (2010); Weng and Pan (2016)]. Besides these RDH methods in the spatial domain, the RDH ones in the encrypted domain have also been developed over years [Xiong and Qing (2018); Chen, Yin, He et al. (2018)], since the first RDH one was proposed by Zhang [Zhang (2011)]. In those traditional RDH methods, PSNR (Power Signal-to-Noise Ratio) is the most commonly used quality measure for evaluating the visual quality of watermarked images. It is well known that the embedding methods achieving high PSNR values may not lead to high visual quality. To this end, they have presented a RDH scheme with contrast enhancement to achieve high visual quality [Wu, Dugelay and Shi (2015)]. Their advantage is to utilize HE, a commonly-used contrast enhancement, to embed data into two peaks (i.e., a peak-pair) using HS. In this way, multiple peak-pairs are selected and modified to achieve both high EC and contrast enhancement. However, when more and more payload is required, Wu et al.’s method may need to select over 50 pairs for data embedding, which may result in over-enhanced contrast. In order to solve the above problem, Gao et al. proposed a RDH scheme with controlled contrast enhancement and Haar integer wavelet transform (IWT) [Gao and Shi (2015)]. Unlike Wu et al.’s method that splits a number of peak-pairs to achieve high EC and HE while ignores the degree of contrast enhancement, Gao et al.’s method controls the number of peak-pairs to avoid over-enhanced contrast. The control on the number of peak-pairs will lead to the decrease of EC. To this end, IWT is used to achieve high EC. More importantly, IWT can produce very small contrast change. In this way, Gao et al.’s method not only increases EC, but also maintains satisfactory visual quality. In fact, besides IWT, some other RDH methods can also be chosen for achieving higher EC under the same visual quality.

Our proposed framework is based on the fact that most PEE-based (or integer-transform-based (IT-based)) RDH methods make small modifications to image histogram, and especially, when the required EC is not very high, the image histogram is almost not changed before and after data embedding. Inspired by this fact, we utilize respectively two previous RDH methods which can provide enough EC (e.g., about 0.7 bpp) and maintain high image quality, to illustrate the generalization of our proposed framework. Since the data embedding process in the first step does not introduce too much changes for image histogram, the watermarked image can be used again in the second step to increase image contrast by HE. By incorporating these two steps, both EC and image contrast are improved. Specifically, in the first step, two selected RDH methods are used for providing a large part
of the payload while maintaining high visual quality. One is a simple and representative work among existing PEE-based RDH methods, i.e., the RDH method based on the Gap (gradient-adjusted prediction) [Wu and Memon (1997)] and an embedding-position-selection strategy. The other is our recent work [Weng and Pan (2016)] incorporating block selection into the integer transform proposed by Alattar [Alattar (2004)]. The second step is used for achieving contrast enhancement and embedding the rest payload. It is expected that more efficient RDH methods can be devised according to the proposed framework by carefully designing RDH methods.

2 Proposed RDH scheme

The main purpose of our proposed method is to construct a general framework of RDH with the contrast enhancement. As shown in Fig. 1, the generalization of our proposed method lies in the fact that any high-performance RDH method can be applied in our framework. Furthermore, our proposed method is still a RDH method. Usually, the essence of any RDH method is to hide data losslessly into a host image for some special applications, such as medical image processing. This is also the reason that both data hiding and contrast enhancement are needed in our framework. There are two main steps in our proposed framework. In the first step, two RDH methods (i.e., the PEE-based and IT-based methods) which are described respectively in Sections 2.1 and 2.2, are selected for achieving the required EC while maintain high visual quality. By these two methods, we want to illustrate that any RDH method which can provide enough EC (e.g., 0.7 bpp) while maintain high visual quality, can be used for our framework. HE, given in Section 2.3, is used in the second step to enhance contrast.

2.1 IT-based RDH method

The RDH method utilized in our recent work can evaluate accurately the local complexity of blocks by incorporating the mean values of blocks into the evaluation of complexity [Weng and Pan (2016)]. Since the mean values of blocks are used for evaluating the local complexity, they must be kept unaltered so as to ensure reversibility. This is the reason that the integer transform proposed by Alattar [Alattar (2004)] is utilized in our proposed work.

A test image $I$ of size $W_r \times W_c$ is split into disjoint $n$-sized image blocks: $B_1, \cdots, B_N$ in raster scan order (from top to bottom and left to right), where $n = r \times c$, $r$ and $c$ are the height and width of blocks, respectively, and $N$ is the total number of blocks, i.e.,
For the ease of description, we use the notation $B$ to denote one of $N$ blocks. All the pixels in the block $B$ are arranged into a vector $\mathbf{x} = \{x_1, \cdots, x_n\}$ according to a predefined order.

The transform proposed by Alattar is defined as follows

$$\bar{\mathbf{x}} = \left[ \frac{x_1 + x_2 + \cdots + x_n}{n} \right],$$

where $\bar{\mathbf{x}} = \left[ \frac{x_1 + x_2 + \cdots + x_n}{n} \right]$, $d_k$ is the difference value between two adjacent pixels $x_{k+1}$ and $x_k$, $k \in \{1, \cdots, n-1\}$. The inverse integer transform of Eq. (1) is defined as

$$x_i = \bar{\mathbf{x}} - \left[ \frac{(n-1) \times d_i + (n-2) \times d_2 + \cdots + d_{n-1}}{n} \right],$$

where $x_i = \bar{\mathbf{x}} - \left[ \frac{(n-1) \times d_i + (n-2) \times d_2 + \cdots + d_{n-1}}{n} \right]$, $x_2 = x_1 + d_1$, $x_3 = x_2 + d_2$, $\cdots$, $x_n = x_{n-1} + d_{n-1}$.

Each of $n-1$ difference values is modified according to Eq. (3). Specifically, if $d_k \in [-pT_h, pT_h)$, then $d_k$ is termed embeddable difference value, namely it is embedded with 1-bit watermark so that its marked value $d_k'$ is generated by Eq. (3); if $d_k \in (-\infty, -pT_h) \cup [pT_h, \infty)$, $d_k$ is shifted by $pT_h$ to obtain $d_k'$ according to Eq. (3).

$$d_k' = \begin{cases} 
2 \times d_k + b, & -pT_h \leq d_k < pT_h, \\
2 \times d_k + b, & d_k \leq -pT_h - 1, \\
2 \times d_k + b, & d_k \geq pT_h, 
\end{cases}$$

where $pT_h$ is a predefined threshold which is used to classify difference values into two groups: embeddable ($[-pT_h, pT_h]$) and shifted ($(-\infty, -pT_h) \cup [pT_h, \infty)$), and $b$ stands for 1-bit hidden data, i.e., $b \in \{0, 1\}$.

Afterwards, $d_k$ in Eq. (2) is substituted by $d_k'$ to obtain the marked pixel list $\mathbf{y} = \{y_1, \cdots, y_n\}$ (refer to Eq. (4)).
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\[ y_1 = x - \frac{(n-1) \times d'_1 + (n-2) \times d'_2 + \cdots + d'_{n-1}}{n}, \]

\[ y_2 = y_1 + d', \]

\[ y_3 = y_2 + d', \]

\[ \ldots \]

\[ y_n = y_{n-1} + d'_{n-1}. \]

### 2.1.1 Smoothness classification

In order to improve estimation accuracy of the local complexity, the average value \( \overline{x} \) of a block \( B \) together with \( r + c + 1 \) pixels in the neighborhood of \( B \) (i.e., \( x_{r+1}, \ldots, x_{r+c+1}, x_{r+1,c+1}, x_{r+1,c+1}, \ldots, x_{r+1,c} \)) constitute a set \( I_{ENP} \) and are used for evaluating the local complexity. The local complexity \( \Delta \) is calculated as the variance of set using the equation

\[ \Delta = \frac{\sum_{k=1}^{r+c+1} (x_{k+1} - \mu_{ENP})^2 + (\overline{x} - \mu_{ENP})^2 + \sum_{k=1}^{r+c+1} (x_{r+1,k} - \mu_{ENP})^2}{r+c+2}, \]

where \( \mu_{ENP} \) is the average value of set \( I_{ENP} \), and \( \nu T_h \) is a predefined threshold used for separating all the blocks into two groups: smooth (\( \Delta < \nu T_h \)) and rough (\( \Delta \geq \nu T_h \)).

### 2.1.2 Additional information

If one pixel whose marked value exceeds the range of \([0, 255]\), it is deemed as one overflow/underflow pixel, and thus needs to be excluded from data embedding. Similarly, the blocks containing overflow/underflow pixels also need to be removed from data embedding. \( O_{\nu T} \) is used to indicate a set, which is composed of the blocks with \( \Delta \geq \nu T_h \). The blocks with \( \Delta < \nu T_h \) are classified into two sets \( E_{\nu} \) and \( O_{\nu} \). Specifically, \( E_{\nu} \) contains the blocks without overflow/underflow pixels, while \( O_{\nu} \) includes the blocks with overflow/underflow pixels. Since the blocks in \( O_{\nu} \) can be easily distinguished from the ones in \( E_{\nu} \cup O_{\nu} \) by comparing \( \Delta \) with the threshold \( \nu T_h \), their locations are not needed to be recorded in a location map. Therefore, a location map is created to only differentiate the blocks in \( E_{\nu} \) from the ones in \( O_{\nu} \). Afterwards, the location map is compressed losslessly into a bitstream \( L \) by an arithmetic encoder. \( L_{SC} \) is the length of \( L \) .

Besides the bitstream \( L \), some other additional information including \( \nu T_h \) (8 bits), \( \mu T_h \) (8 bits), and block size parameters \( r \) (2 bits), \( c \) (2 bits) is helpful for blind data extraction and image restoration. Therefore, all these additional information along with the payload is needed to be inserted into the host image \( I \). The size of the additional information is supposed to be \( L_{\nu} \) bits. The maximum embeddable payload equals the available payload minus \( L_{\nu} \), i.e., \( P_M = N_{\nu p} - L_{\nu} \), where \( N_{\nu p} \) stands for the number of embeddable
differences whose values belong to the range of $[-pT_h, pT_h]$.

2.1.3 Data embedding

For better illustration, $\mathcal{P}_c$ is used to represent the to-be-embedded payload. The procedure of embedding the payload $\mathcal{P}_c$ into the host image $I$ is described below.

Step 1 Watermark embedding

if $x \in E$

\[ y \text{ is obtained using Eq. (4)}; \]

elseif $x \in O_1 \cup O_2$

\[ y = x; \]

end

Step 2 Generating the marked image $I_w$

The data embedding process is implemented in a block-wise manner. $N_i$ blocks in the host image $I$ are first modified in the raster scan order, where $N_i \ll N$. Suppose the used payload is $\mathcal{P}_c$, where $\mathcal{P}_c \ll \mathcal{P}_t$. Next, the resulted image is scanned in a pixel-wise manner according to raster scan order, the LSBs of the first $L_x$ scanned pixels are collected into a bitstream $C$, and simultaneously each empty LSB is replaced by one of the $L_x$ additional bits. Then, except for $N_i$ already-modified blocks, the remaining ones are modified according to Step 1 until the remaining payload $\mathcal{P}_c - \mathcal{P}_c$ and the bitstream $C$ are embedded into the host image $I$. Finally, a watermarked image $I_w$ is generated.

2.1.4 Image restoration and data extraction

The pixels in the marked image $I_w$ are processed one by one in raster scan order, and their LSBs are collected to form a bitstream $B$. An arithmetic decoder is used to decompress $B$ so that the location map is recovered. The location map is re-compressed by an arithmetic encoder into a bitstream whose length is $L_{SC}$. Once $L_{SC}$ is known, $pT_h$, $vT_h$, $r$ and $c$ are extracted from the bitstream $B$ according to their own lengths, respectively.

The marked image $I_w$ is separated into $r \times c$-sized non-overlapped image blocks: $B^w_1, \cdots, B^w_N$ according to raster scan order. In order to correctly extract data bits and retrieve host images, the extraction order of blocks is contrary to the embedding one of blocks, i.e., $B^w_1, \cdots, B^w_N$.

For the simplicity of description, $B^w$ is used to indicate one of $N$ marked blocks. If the neighborhood surrounding $B^w$ is composed of $(r+c+1)$ neighbors, $B^w$ is used for data extraction. It should be mentioned that the $(r+c+1)$ neighbors are either original pixels or already-extracted pixels. For each of the blocks used for data embedding, its $\Delta$ is
calculated via Eq. (5). For a block with \( \Delta \geq vT_h \), it remains unaltered, i.e., \( x = y \). For a block with \( \Delta < vT_h \), if its corresponding bit in the location map is 1, then it is skipped; if its corresponding bit is 0, then the hidden bit \( b \) is extracted according to the following formula \( b = \text{mod}(d'_k, 2) \): where \( d'_k \in [-2pT_h, 2pT_h-1] \), and the original difference value is calculated using Eq. (6).

\[
d_k = \begin{cases}
\frac{d'_k}{2}, & -2pT_h \leq d'_k \leq 2pT_h - 1, \\
d'_k + pT_h, & \text{if } d'_k \geq 2pT_h, \\
d'_k - pT_h, & \text{if } d'_k \leq -2pT_h - 1.
\end{cases}
\] (6)

2.2 PEE-based RDH method
Considering that the method in Section 2.1 is executed in a block-by-block manner, a new RDH method in a pixel-wise manner is selected so as to better illustrate the generalization of our proposed framework. This adopted method uses the Gap predictor to generate prediction. Besides, the prediction-errors located in smooth regions are priorly chosen for data embedding. For a pixel \( x \), its complexity denoted as \( \Delta \) is calculated using its context \( C_{\text{text}} \) containing 7 right and bottom neighbors as shown in Fig. 2. Specifically, \( \Delta \) is defined as the variance of the pixels in \( C_{\text{text}} \).

\[
\Delta = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i \in \{1, \ldots, 7\}} (c_i - \mu)^2}{7}},
\] (7)

where \( \mu \) is the mean value of set \( C_{\text{text}} \). A threshold \( vT_h \) is used for splitting all pixels into two groups: smooth (\( \Delta < vT_h \)) and rough (\( \Delta \geq vT_h \)).

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2:** \( x \) is the current pixel, \( C_{\text{text}} = \{c_i : i \in \{1, 2, \ldots, 7\} \} \) contains 7 right and down neighbors of \( x \)

Referring to Fig. 2, \( C_{\text{text}} \) is reused to predict \( x \) using the Gap predictor, and the prediction value \( \hat{x} \) is defined using the equation
\[ c_1, \ d_d > 80, \]
\[ \frac{c_1 + \hat{x}^*}{2}, \ d_d \in (32, 80], \]
\[ \frac{c_1 + 3\hat{x}^*}{4}, \ d_d \in (8, 32], \]
\[ \hat{x} = \hat{x}^*, \ d_d \in [-8, 8], \]
\[ \frac{c_1 + 3\hat{x}^*}{4}, \ d_d \in [-32, -8], \]
\[ \frac{c_1 + \hat{x}^*}{2}, \ d_d \in [-80, -32], \]
\[ c_1, \ d_d < -80, \]

where \( d_d = d_v - d_h, \ \hat{x}^* = \frac{(c_1 + c_2) + (c_2 - c_4)}{2}, \) and the vertical and horizontal gradients of \( x \) are estimated as \( d_v = |c_1 - c_4| + |c_2 - c_3| + |c_3 - c_7|, \) \( d_h = |c_1 - c_2| + |c_2 - c_3| + |c_3 - c_4|, \) respectively.

The corresponding prediction-error is denoted as \( e = x - \hat{x}. \) For each prediction-error \( e, \) it is expanded or shifted as

\[
\begin{align*}
e' = & \begin{cases} 
2 \times e + b, & -pT_h \leq e < pT_h, \\
e + pT_h, & e \geq pT_h, \\
e - pT_h, & e < -pT_h
\end{cases}
\end{align*}
\]

where \( e' \) is the modified prediction-error, \( pT_h \) is an integer-valued capacity-control parameter, and \( b \in \{0, 1\} \) is 1 data bit to be embedded. After data embedding, the modified pixel is \( x' = x + e'. \)

For \( x_{i,j} (i \in \{R - 1, R\}, j \in \{1, C - 1, C\}) \), it has not 7 right and bottom neighbors, and therefore, Gap predictor cannot be used for these pixels to generate prediction. Based on this reason, only \( (i \in \{1, \cdots, R - 2\}, j \in \{2, \cdots, C - 2\}) \), can be used for data embedding. The detailed data embedding procedure is described in Algorithm 1. Correspondingly, the embedded bit \( b \) is extracted and the original \( x \) is recovered according to Algorithm 2.

Like many other RDH methods, a location map \( LM \) with size \( (R - 2) \times (C - 3) \) is needed to record the locations of overflow and underflow pixels. Then, if overflow/underflow occurs, the corresponding value in \( LM \) is marked as 1 and otherwise as 0.

**Algorithm 1. Embedding.**

Input: The subimage excluding boundary pixels: \( J = \{x_{i,j} : 1 \leq i \leq R, 1 \leq j \leq C\} \), the predicted value: \( \hat{x}_{i,j} (i \in \{1, \cdots, R - 2\}, j \in \{2, \cdots, C - 2\}) \), the prediction-error: \( e_{i,j} (i \in \{1, \cdots, R - 2\}, j \in \{2, \cdots, C - 2\}) \), the complexity of \( x_{i,j} : \Delta_{i,j} (i \in \{1, \cdots, R - 2\}, j \in \{2, \cdots, C - 2\}) \), the location map: \( LM \), the to-be-embedded bit:
Algorithm 2. Extraction.

Input: The marked image: $I_w = \{x'_{i,j}: 1 \leq i \leq R, 1 \leq j \leq C\}$, the predicted value: $\hat{x}'_{i,j}(i \in \{1, \ldots, R-2\}, j \in \{2, \ldots, C-2\})$, the marked prediction-error: $e'_{i,j}(i \in \{1, \ldots, R-2\}, j \in \{2, \ldots, C-2\})$, the complexity of $x'_{i,j}$: $\Delta_{i,j}(i \in \{1, \ldots, R-2\}, j \in \{2, \ldots, C-2\})$, the location map: $LM$, two thresholds: $vT_h$ and $pT_h$.

Output: The original image: $I$, the extracted bit: $b$.

\begin{verbatim}
for $i = 1: R-2$
    for $j = 2: C-2$
        if $\Delta_{i,j} < vT_h$ \&\& $LM_{i,j} == 0$
            if $e_{i,j} < pT_h$ \&\& $e_{i,j} \geq -pT_h$
                $e'_{i,j} = 2 \times e_{i,j} + b$
            elseif $e_{i,j} \geq pT_h$
                $e'_{i,j} = e_{i,j} + pT_h$
            elseif $e_{i,j} < -pT_h$
                $e'_{i,j} = e_{i,j} - pT_h$
            end
            $x'_{i,j} = \hat{x}'_{i,j} + e'_{i,j}$
        end
    end
end
\end{verbatim}
\[ e_{i,j} = e'_{i,j} - pT_h \]

\[
\text{elseif } e'_{i,j} < -2pT_h \\
\quad e_{i,j} = e'_{i,j} + pT_h \\
\end{align*}

\[
\text{end} \\
\]
\[
x_{i,j} = \hat{x}_{i,j} + e_{i,j} \\
\text{end} \\
\text{end}
\]

### 2.3 Histogram equalization (HE)

HE is a frequently-used method for contrast enhancement. HE is achieved by carrying out repeatedly the data embedding process, and in a single process, splitting each of two peaks (i.e., one peak-pair) into two neighboring bins with similar heights. In a single data embedding process, \( P_L \) (Left) and \( P_R \) (Right) are two peak points (two highest frequencies of occurrence) in the image histogram, respectively. It should be mentioned that if there exist more than two peak points with the same occurrence frequency, then the two peaks introducing the minimum distortion are selected as \( P_L, P_R \). The data embedding is implemented by

\[
x' = \begin{cases} 
  x - 1 & \text{if } x < P_L, \\
  x - b & \text{if } x = P_L, \\
  x & \text{if } P_L < x < P_R, \\
  x + b & \text{if } x = P_R, \\
  x + 1 & \text{if } x > P_R.
\end{cases}
\] (10)

It is known that it is very difficult for a single embedding process to provide the efficient EC. In order to further increase EC, two peak points in the already-modified histogram continue to be selected for carrying data until the satisfactory contrast enhancement is achieved. In order to effectively avoid overflow/underflow problems, a location map is generated to record the locations of overflow/underflow pixels whose values exceed the range of \([0, 255]\). This map needs to be losslessly compressed into a bitstream by arithmetic encoding due to its large size. Besides the obtained bitstream, some other auxiliary information including the number of peak pairs (denoted by \( N_p \)), the size of compressed location map, and all the peak pairs, should also be embedded into the modified image \( I_w \) in the first step for blind decoding. Finally, all auxiliary information along with the required payload is embedded into \( I_w \) to obtain the final marked image \( I_{wF} \).
4 Experimental results

The proposed RDH scheme is implemented in MATLAB environment. The Lena, Baboon, Barbara, Baboon, Airplane, Goldhill and Boat images with size 512×512 are provided by the authors of paper [Wu, Dugelay and Shi (2015)]. For ease of description, Wu and Gao are short for Wu et al. and Gao et al., respectively. The image contrast enhancement is evaluated by the relative contrast error (RCE) [Gao and Wang (2013)], and the source codes of calculating RCE and Wu’s method are provided by the authors of paper [Wu, Dugelay and Shi (2015)].

Fig. 3 illustrates that the PEE-based RDH method is used for achieving different EC by setting \( pT_h \) and \( vT_h \). From Fig. 3, one can observe that when the EC is not high (e.g., 46,637 bits), the modified image histogram is very close to its original one. In the experiments, we simply set \( pT_h = 2vT_h \) instead of considering the optimal combination of \( vT_h \) and \( pT_h \). For instance, when \( pT_h = 2vT_h = 4 \), the obtained PSNR is 47.653 (dB) at an EC of 46,637 bits (refer to Fig. 3(b)). In order to obtain higher EC, we increase the value of \( pT_h = 2vT_h \) from 4 to 6 to select more prediction-errors to be used for data embedding. Thus, EC is increased from 46,637 bits to 103,681 bits. As shown in Fig. 3(c), although the image histogram has been changed slightly due to the increase of EC, the outline of the modified image histogram is still very similar to that of the original one. More importantly, the heights of bins in the image histogram are changed slightly when a large amount of data is obtained. This implies that the data embedding process leads to the change of the prediction-error histogram instead of the image histogram. In order to further increase the EC, we set \( pT_h = 2vT_h = 9 \). Experimental results also show that the obtained capacity is 155,388 bits while higher visual quality is obtained, i.e., PSNR=39.446 dB. From Figs. 3(b) to 3(d), it can be observed that RCE is very small.

(a) Image histogram before data embedding          (b) Image histogram with PSNR=47.653 (dB), EC=46,637 bits (0.17809 bpp) and RCE=0.50053
Fig. 4 shows that the embedding process makes the modifications to the image histogram when the IT-based RDH method is selected in the first step. Similarly, IT-based RDH can also achieve high EC while maintaining good visual quality, e.g., when the EC is 148,875 bits (0.56791 bpp), PSNR is 39.446 dB. Therefore, the modified image in the first step can be used again in the second step to increase the image contrast.

From Figs. 3 and 4, one can conclude that any RDH method which achieves data embedding by modifying prediction-error histogram (or difference histogram) do not make large modifications to the image histogram. In this way, high EC can be achieved while the good visual quality can be maintained.
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Figure 4: Comparisons of image histogram at different EC for Lena using the IT-based RDH method

In Fig. 5, the IT-based method and HE are utilized to achieve high EC and contrast enhancement at the same time. Referring to Fig. 5(b), we set simply $2vT_h = pT_h = 9$ in the first step to achieve an EC of 12,057 bits with PSNR=42.010 dB. Afterwards, in the second step, 10 peak-pairs are utilized to achieve contrast enhancement and an EC of 43,194 bits at the same time. After two steps, the final EC is 163,771 bits with PSNR=39.446 dB. In order to further improve EC, we set $2vT_h = pT_h = 14$ in the first step and $N_p = 15$ in the second step (refer to Fig. 5(c)). In the first step, 148,775 bits are obtained when PSNR is 39.446 dB. In the following second step, we obtain an EC of 67240 bits. Compared with Fig. 5(a), the image contrast in Figs. 5(b) and 5(c) is obviously enhanced. It also can be observed that the contrast enhancement in Fig. 5(c) is larger than that in Fig. 5(b). In the experimental process, if we simply set $pT_h = 2vT_h$, and select $N_p$ separately, the obtained embedding performance may not be optimal. Therefore, we conclude that there is still a lot of room for improvement of the embedding performance. For example, the optimal combination of $vT_h$, $pT_h$ and $N_p$ is exhaustively searched so that the visual quality are preserved as much as possible and simultaneously the EC is maximized.
Figure 5: Comparisons of visual perception and embedding capacity of marked images for Lena, Barbara and Goldhill when the IT-based RDH method is used in the first step. (a) Lena. (b) 10 pairs: 28.3417 dB, 189,410 bits, RCE=0.5298. (c) 15 pairs: 25.229 dB, 228,930 bits, RCE=0.5460. (d) Barbara. (e) 10 pairs: 29.606 dB, 124,365 bits, RCE=0.53067. (f) 16 pairs: 25.792 dB, 167,826 bits, RCE=0.54807. (g) Goldhill. (h) 10 pairs: 30.397 dB, 117,591 bits, RCE=0.52507. (i) 17 pairs: 25.412 dB, 178,137 bits, RCE=0.54728

As shown in Fig. 6, the PEE-based method is utilized to achieve high EC and contrast enhancement. In Fig. 6(b), in the first step, we select simply $2\nu T_h = p T_h = 7$ to achieve an EC of 125,630 bits with PSNR=41.547 dB. Afterwards, in the second step, 10 peak-pairs are utilized to achieve contrast enhancement and the increase of EC (i.e., 42,124 bits). Referring to Fig. 6(c), when $2\nu T_h = p T_h$ is set to 9, the obtained EC is 155,388 bits and PSNR is 39.889 dB in the first step. In the second step, 16 pairs are used to obtain an EC of 70,271 bits. From Figs. 6(b) and 6(c), the contrast is obviously enhanced.
Figure 6: Comparisons of visual perception and embedding capacity of marked images for Lena, Barbara and Goldhill when the PEE-based RDH method is used in the first step. (a) Lena. (b) 10 pairs: 28.353 dB, 228,330 bits, RCE=0.5298. (c) 15 pairs: 25.2523 dB, 244,970 bits, RCE=0.5461. (d) Barbara. (e) 10 pairs: 29.542 dB, 123,879 bits, RCE=0.53068. (f) 16 pairs: 25.679 dB, 174,076 bits, RCE=0.54859. (g) Goldhill. (h) 10 pairs: 30.247 dB, 122,461 bits, RCE=0.5253. (i) 17 pairs: 25.438 dB, 176,616 bits, RCE=0.54753

Besides Lena, we also utilize two other images, i.e., Goldhill and Barbara, to further illustrate the feasibility of our proposed framework. The reason of selecting Barbara and Goldhill is that they are used respectively in Gao et al. [Gao and Shi (2015)] and Wu et al. [Wu, Dugelay and Shi (2015)]. From Figs. 5 and 6, one can observe that two RDH methods (i.e., the IT-based and PEE-based RDH methods) provide a large part of the payload and simultaneously maintain the visual quality as much as possible. Therefore, the modified image in the first step can be used again in the second step to achieve
contrast enhancement, and meanwhile, the rest payload is obtained. After two steps, the marked image with high PSNR value and good visual quality are generated. Similarly, two RDH methods are used for Goldhill to achieve high EC and maintain good visual quality (refer to Figs. 5 and 6 for details).

The experimental comparisons between Wu’s [Wu, Dugelay and Shi (2015)] and two used RDH methods are shown in Fig. 7. Fig. 7(b) shows that when 20 peak pairs are modified for carrying data, Wu's method leads to the obvious visual distortion for Tiffany. However, two used RDH methods achieves better visual quality and larger EC compared with Wu’s method (see Figs. 7(c) and 7(d) for details). For the IT-based method, when its block size is set $2 \times 2$, the maximum embedding rate approaches to 0.75 bpp. In contrast, the PEE-based RDH method generates prediction in a pixel-by-pixel manner, so it can achieve the embedding rate of close to 1 bpp. This is the reason that with the embedding rates increased, the PEE-based method can achieve larger EC and better visual quality than the IT-based one. When multiple-embedding is utilized in the IT-based method, the embedding performance can be increased.

![Figure 7](image)

**Figure 7**: Comparisons of visual perception and embedding capacity of marked image among Wu et al.’s [Wu, Dugelay and Shi (2015)] and the IT-based RDH method for Tiffany. (a) Original image. (b) [Wu, Dugelay and Shi (2015)], 20 pairs: 22.7509 dB, 177,158 bits, RCE=0.52758. (c) PEE-based RDH method, 20 pairs: 24.309 dB, 277,453 bits. (d) IT-based RDH method, 25 pairs: 22.239 dB, 245,281 bits, RCE=0.53399
Table 1: Comparison of amounts of embedded bits and PSNR among Gao et al. [Gao and Shi (2015); Wu, Dugelay and Shi (2015)], PEE-based RDH method, and IT-based RDH method

|        | Lena       | Baboon     | Airplane    | Barbara     | Tiffany     | Boat       |
|--------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| Gao    | 214,918 bits | 173,807 bits | 353,310 bits | 161,933 bits | 267,629 bits | 221,558 bits |
| Wu     | 90,440 bits | 93,610 bits | 205,110 bits | 86,697 bits | 177,158 bits | 151,770 bits |
| IT-based | 228,930 bits | 174,018 bits | 359,575 bits | 167,826 bits | 245,281 bits | 191,425 bits |
| RDH method | 25.22 dB | 24.51 dB | 23.10 dB | 25.79 dB | 22.23 dB | 28.44 dB |
| PEE-based | 228,330 bits | 177,219 bits | 391,357 bits | 174,076 bits | 277,453 bits | 245,117 bits |
| RDH method | 28.35 dB | 24.10 dB | 23.77 dB | 25.67 dB | 24.43 dB | 27.06 dB |

Figure 8: SSIM comparisons between IT-based RDH, PEE-based RDH and Wu’s methods for Lena

Comparisons of the amount of embedded bits and PSNR values among Gao et al. [Gao and Shi (2015); Wu, Dugelay and Shi (2015)], PEE-based RDH method, and IT-based RDH method are listed in Tab. 1. Since we do not obtain the source code of Gao’s method, we cannot enumerate the PSNR value of each image at the given EC. From Tab. 1, one can observe that two used methods can achieve higher visual quality and larger EC than Wu’s and Gao’s methods. It is clear that two used methods can embed more data while keeping higher visual quality.
Table 2: Performance comparison in terms of PSNR (in dB) and embedding capacity (EC, in bpp), and RCE on Kodak image database for $N_p = 10$

| Image   | PEE-based RDH | Wu’s method |
|---------|---------------|-------------|
|         | PSNR          | Capacity    | RCE  | PSNR          | Capacity    | RCE  |
| kodim01 | 31.469        | 0.307       | 0.523 | 31.406        | 0.282       | 0.524 |
| kodim02 | 29.457        | 1.136       | 0.523 | 29.251        | 0.984       | 0.525 |
| kodim03 | 29.223        | 1.0294      | 0.526 | 29.207        | 0.354       | 0.528 |
| kodim04 | 29.237        | 0.42449     | 0.526 | 29.439        | 0.280       | 0.528 |
| kodim05 | 29.8072       | 0.13344     | 0.566 | 39.320        | 0.04216     | 0.508 |
| kodim06 | 33.3125       | 0.62665     | 0.509 | 33.997        | 0.276       | 0.510 |
| kodim07 | 29.237        | 0.475       | 0.527 | 28.648        | 0.369       | 0.528 |
| kodim08 | 32.5070       | 0.25045     | 0.514 | 29.972        | 0.142       | 0.524 |
| kodim09 | 28.935        | 0.69911     | 0.528 | 29.363        | 0.359       | 0.529 |
| kodim10 | 32.233        | 0.61071     | 0.514 | 28.535        | 0.339       | 0.529 |
| kodim11 | 29.541        | 0.839       | 0.522 | 29.696        | 0.459       | 0.544 |
| kodim12 | 29.0321       | 0.6491      | 0.526 | 28.982        | 0.402       | 0.52743|
| kodim13 | 31.3441       | 0.29504     | 0.514 | 28.967        | 0.203       | 0.52624|
| kodim14 | 29.823        | 0.359       | 0.528 | 29.412        | 0.214       | 0.52945|
| kodim15 | 30.283        | 0.585       | 0.526 | 29.764        | 0.281       | 0.529 |
| kodim16 | 28.3282       | 0.79338     | 0.507 | 29.480        | 0.246       | 0.516 |
| kodim17 | 32.6549       | 0.22099     | 0.5127| 29.929        | 0.11892     | 0.5252 |
| kodim18 | 28.9344       | 0.6651      | 0.5302| 28.974        | 0.253       | 0.532 |
| kodim19 | 30.1191       | 0.76441     | 0.5123| 27.065        | 0.672       | 0.507 |
| kodim20 | 28.9298       | 0.5496      | 0.5271| 28.982        | 0.401       | 0.528 |
| kodim21 | 29.3284       | 0.42422     | 0.5282| 29.603        | 0.283       | 0.529 |
| kodim22 | 28.9937       | 0.62547     | 0.5263| 28.977        | 0.301       | 0.526 |
| kodim23 | 32.1750       | 0.57101     | 0.5127| 29.474        | 0.212       | 0.520 |

Table 3: Performance comparison between the PEE-based RDH and Wu’s methods in terms of PSNR (in dB) and embedding capacity (EC, in bpp), and RCE on Lena for different $N_p$

| $N_p$ | PEE-based RDH | Wu’s method |
|------|---------------|-------------|
|      | PSNR          | Capacity    | RCE  | PSNR          | Capacity    | RCE  |
| 10   | 28.353        | 0.8710      | 0.5298| 28.3202       | 0.201       | 0.53257|
| 15   | 25.2523       | 0.93447     | 0.5461| 25.6981       | 0.284       | 0.54593|
| 20   | 23.038        | 1.027       | 0.5613| 24.4067       | 0.361       | 0.55602|

Another commonly-used quality measure, the SSIM index (structural similarity index), is also exploited in experiments for performance comparison. The SSIM index closer to 1 implies the similarity of two images is higher. Fig. 8 illustrates SSIM comparisons among the IT-based RDH, PEE-based RDH and Wu’s methods. From Fig. 8, it can be observed that SSIM index of IT-based RDH method (or PEE-based RDH method) is higher than that of Wu’s one at almost all ERs.

In addition, we have compared the PEE-based RDH method and Wu’s method on Kodak
image database, which is composed of 24 color images with size of 512×768 or 768×512. For convenience of comparison, all color images are transformed into the gray-scale version. Since there exist a large amount of pixel on both ends of the histogram of kodim 15, the location map recording the pixels with overflow or underflow cannot be compressed efficiently. As a result, the obtained payload is very low for both the PEE-based RDH and Wu’s methods. This is the reason that we did not illustrate the experimental results of kodim 15. From Tab. 2, one can observe that the PEE-based RDH method is superior to Wu's one for 23 images from Kodak image database.

Since we cannot obtain the source code of Gao’s method, we only provide the comparison of RCE under different \( N_p \) for three methods (i.e., the IT-based RDH, PEE-based RDH and Wu’s methods). And, two tables have been used to illustrate the comparison of RCE under different \( N_p \) among three methods for Lena. From Tabs. 3 to 4, it is observed that our proposed method can achieve better embedding performance than Wu’s one. More importantly, our RCE is almost the same as that of Wu’s method.

**Table 4:** Performance comparison between the IT-based RDH and Wu’s methods in terms of PSNR (in dB) and embedding capacity (EC, in bpp), and RCE on Lena for different \( N_p \)

| \( N_p \) | IT-based RDH | Wu’s method |
|---|---|---|
| | PSNR | Capacity | RCE | PSNR | Capacity | RCE |
| 10 | 28.3417 | 0.72256 | 0.5298 | 28.3202 | 0.201 | 0.53257 |
| 15 | 25.229 | 0.87328 | 0.5460 | 25.6981 | 0.284 | 0.54593 |
| 20 | 23.1274 | 0.94606 | 0.5610 | 24.4067 | 0.361 | 0.55602 |

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we present a general framework to construct RDH with controlled contrast enhancement. According to our framework, any RDH method which can achieve high EC while maintain satisfactory visual quality, can be used in the first step. This implies the generalization of our proposed framework. Since the first step preserves satisfactory visual quality, \( I_w \) can be used in second step to increase contrast enhancement. Experimental results also demonstrate our proposed framework can achieve a better performance compared with Wu’s and Gao’s methods. However, in the experiments, we simply set \( pT_h = 2vT_h \) and select \( N_p \) separately. In fact, under the given EC and the fixed degree of contrast enhancement, there are some combinations of \( pT_h \), \( vT_h \) and \( N_p \).

In future, our work is to search the optimal combination which can achieve the highest EC and best visual quality.

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