2005

Compression transparent low-level description of audio signals

Jason Lukasiak  
*University of Wollongong, jl01@ouw.edu.au*

C. McElroy  
*University of Wollongong*

E Cheng  
*University of Wollongong, ecc04@uow.edu.au*

Publication Details  
This article was originally published as: Lukasiak, J, McElroy, C & Cheng, E, Compression transparent low-level description of audio signals, IEEE International Conference on Multimedia and Expo, 6 July 2005, 422-425. Copyright IEEE 2005.
Compression transparent low-level description of audio signals

Abstract
A new low level audio descriptor that represents the psycho acoustic noise floor shape of an audio frame is proposed. Results presented indicate that the proposed descriptor is far more resilient to compression noise than any of the MPEG-7 low level audio descriptors. In fact, across a wide range of files, on average the proposed scheme fails to uniquely identify only five frames in every ten thousand. In addition, the proposed descriptor maintains a high resilience to compression noise even when decimated to use only one quarter of the values per frame to represent the noise floor. This characteristic indicates the proposed descriptor presents a truly scalable mechanism for transparently describing the characteristics of an audio frame.

Disciplines
Physical Sciences and Mathematics

Publication Details
This article was originally published as: Lukasiak, J, McElroy, C & Cheng, E, Compression transparent low-level description of audio signals, IEEE International Conference on Multimedia and Expo, 6 July 2005, 422-425. Copyright IEEE 2005.

This conference paper is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/infopapers/109
ABSTRACT

A new low level audio descriptor that represents the psycho-acoustic noise floor shape of an audio frame is proposed. Results presented indicate that the proposed descriptor is far more resilient to compression noise than any of the MPEG-7 low level audio descriptors. In fact, across a wide range of files, on average the proposed scheme fails to uniquely identify only five frames in every ten thousand. In addition, the proposed descriptor maintains a high resilience to compression noise even when decimated to use only one quarter of the values per frame to represent the noise floor. This characteristic indicates the proposed descriptor presents a truly scalable mechanism for transparently describing the characteristics of an audio frame.

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, methods for locating multimedia data in large data repositories (such as the Internet) have relied on matching textual tags that have been linked with the multimedia data at the time of storage. These textual tags, or descriptions, are usually manually generated by either the content author or a designated expert. The versatility and validity of these tags is thus directly limited by the detail and accuracy contained in the associated description. For example, it may be possible to find a particular multimedia item via the author’s name or media title. However, it is extremely unlikely that content specific features such as colour, melody or frequency structure would be identifiable using a text-based tag.

A more robust and potentially ubiquitous method for generating multimedia descriptions is via the use of algorithms that extract meaningful context or content description directly from the multimedia bit streams. This methodology is the realm of the new MPEG-7 standard [1]. The MPEG-7 standard provides a framework for describing multimedia content through a series of descriptors that are calculated directly for the multimedia content (low level descriptors) [2]. Having descriptors associated with multimedia data that describe the actual content of the data, provides the potential for powerful manipulation of content supply and consumption. The manipulation could involve finding all multimedia items in a database that have a blue background or selecting the audio segments that represent specific sources (such as dogs barking) [3, 4]. Using these descriptors for search and retrieval greatly reduces the search complexity required, when compared to searching on the raw data.

Previous work involving the MPEG-7 low level audio descriptors has indicated that when audio streams are compressed, the values generated for the MPEG-7 audio descriptors become ambiguous [5, 6, 7]. Also, it was shown in [6] that the ambiguity introduced into the descriptor values by compression has very high entropy and is not easily modeled or predicted. The ambiguity introduced, and the difficulty in modeling its effect, results in the low level audio descriptors forming very poor candidates for search and retrieval targets in practical situations [5, 6, 7]. For example, the low level descriptors produce extremely inconsistent results when employed in a simple search scheme that attempts to find a segment in an MP3 file using the low level descriptors generated from a CD [6]. The aim of this paper is to analyse the characteristics of the current MPEG-7 low level audio descriptors that cause ambiguity when compressed audio streams are used, and in turn, propose an alternative low level descriptor that exhibits transparency to audio compression.

In Section 2, the causes of inconsistency with the MPEG-7 low level audio descriptors are discussed and an alternative scheme is proposed. Section 3 compares the performance of the proposed descriptor with that of the current MPEG-7 descriptors. The major findings and conclusions are then discussed in Section 4.

2. COMPRESSION TRANSPARENT AUDIO DESCRIPTION

2.1. MPEG-7 low level audio descriptors

The research in [5, 6, 7] exploited a subset of five MPEG-7 low level audio descriptors; Audio Power (AP), Audio Waveform (AW), Audio Spectrum Envelope (ASE), Audio Spectrum Centroid (ASC) and Audio Spectral Spread (ASS). A full description of these can be found in [8]. These five descriptors were selected because they were frame-based and also provide a compact description of the underlying audio data. Subsequent to the analysis undertaken in [5, 6, 7], an additional frame-based low level descriptor was added to the MPEG-7 standard. This descriptor, the spectral flatness measure (SFM), is the basis for the audio fingerprint work detailed in [9] (this is now part of the MPEG-7 standard) and is defined as [8]:

$$SFM_b = \frac{Gm(b)}{Am(b)} \quad b = 1:B$$  (1)

where $Gm(b)$ and $Am(b)$ represent the geometric mean and arithmetic mean of the power spectral coefficients of each sub-
The proposed Psycho-Acoustic Descriptor (PAD) is based on the psycho-acoustic model presented in [10], with modifications implemented to enhance robustness and improve scalability. The model in [10] was chosen because of the compact nature with which it represents the psycho-acoustic curve; 25 values per frame are used as opposed to 256 values for methods such as [11]. For each frame of audio the PAD is calculated using steps (a)-(i) below:

a) The signal is converted to the frequency domain using an N point FFT and the power spectral coefficients for each frequency bin $f$ are calculated via:

$$P(f) = \text{Re}^2(f) + \text{Im}^2(f)$$

b) The frequency bins are then mapped to a bark scale using [12]:

$$z(f) = 13 \arctan(0.0076 f) + 3.5 \arctan\left(\frac{f}{7500}\right)$$

c) The spectrum is then divided into non-overlapped fixed bark-width bands. The number of bands is calculated as:

$$B = \text{floor}\left(\frac{\tau_{\text{max}}}{W}\right)$$

where $\tau_{\text{max}}$ is the maximum bark value from (4) and $W$ is the width of each band in barks.

d) The energy in each band is estimated using:

$$E_i = \sum_{lb}^{ub} P(z)$$

Where $lb$ and $ub$ represent the lower and upper bark band values.

e) The effect of inter-band masking is included by convolving $E_i$ with a spreading function defined as [12]:

$$SF_{\text{db}} = 15.81 + 7.5(x + .474) - 17.5 \sqrt{1 + (x + .474)^2} \text{ in dB}$$

f) The relative threshold offset in dB is calculated as [10]:

$$O_i = \alpha(14.5 + i) + (1 - \alpha)5.5$$

where $\alpha = \min\left(\frac{SF_{\text{db}}}{-60}, 1\right)$

$$SF_{\text{db}} = 10 \log_{10}\left(\frac{Gm}{Am}\right)$$

The masking threshold is calculated as [10]:

$$T_i = 10^{\log_{10}(E_i) + (O_i/10)}$$

h) The threshold is adjusted back to the bark domain by normalizing each band by the inverse of the energy gain due to the spreading function [10]. The adjusted threshold is labeled $T'_i$.

i) The adjusted threshold values are normalized (so that the curve represents unit energy) and converted to dB:

$$T_{\text{norm}}_i = \frac{T'_i}{\sum_{i=1}^{B} T'_i}$$

$$\text{PAD}_i = 10 \log_{10}(T_{\text{norm}}_i)$$

In addition to the method described in steps (a)-(i), silent frames are detected prior to PAD calculation and these are simply represented as a vector of zeros. This process removes ambiguity generated when attempting to describe the threshold of silent frames, and hence, improves the PAD’s reliability in transparently describing the characteristics of an audio frame.

The other primary modifications to the model described in [10] are the band calculation in step (c) and the normalization in step (i). Using bands of equal bark width, as opposed to the fixed critical band values of [10], allows fine grain variation of
the grouping of coefficients in the SFM. The high edge for the SFM [8] was set to 16 kHz (resulting in 24 values per frame) and 708 Hz (6 values per frame). In addition, the complexity reduction described in [8], where spectral coefficients are grouped together in the SFM calculation for bands above 1 kHz was not used. This produces the most accurate representation of the SFM descriptor for comparative purposes.

The average results for the percentage of correct frames identified by each descriptor, for each file type, are shown in Table 1. The results in Table 1 indicate that the PAD using 1 bark wide bands (PAD25) produced the most reliable results. In fact, across the range of test files the PAD failed to correctly identify just 0.04% of frames. This represents a failure of only 4 frames in every 10000 and clearly supports the hypothesis that matching the descriptors’ structure to the objective of the compression schemes should result in near transparent description.

The best performing of the MPEG-7 descriptors were the ASE and the SFM with an upper cutoff of 16 kHz (SFM24). While the error performance of these descriptors may be sufficient for some applications, they both fail at an average rate of over 1 frame in every 100. In comparison, for a 4 minute song encoded with 20ms frames, the PAD25 would on average fail identifying just 5 frames, whereas the SFM24 and ASE would fail identifying 175 and 158 frames respectively. In addition, whilst the PAD25 is consistent in performance for both instrumental and combinational files, the SFM24 and ASE both exhibit quite large discrepancies in performance across the different file types.

Comparing the performance of the PAD and SFM with only six values per frame, indicates that the PAD6 performs significantly better than SFM6. This result suggests that the PAD descriptor is truly scalable in dimension. This characteristic is important for applications where storage size or bit rate are limited (most applications of digital audio). The better performance of PAD6 when compared to SFM6 is most likely due to a combination of the descriptor’s compression transparent nature and the fact that PAD6 continues to represent the entire original files. A frame size of 20ms was used to calculate the descriptors. The descriptors were then used to locate a specific frame in the compressed file, using the descriptors generated for the target frame from uncompressed data. The searching scheme selected the frame in the compressed file that minimized the Mean Squared Error (MSE), defined as:

$$MSE = \frac{1}{r} \sum_{r=1}^{n} (x_r - \tilde{x}_r)^2$$

where $x_r$ is the descriptor from the original file, $\tilde{x}_r$ is the descriptor from the compressed file and $r$ is the dimension of the descriptor per frame. It should be noted that when the descriptors are generated from original uncompressed data, the above scheme returns the correct frame for all descriptors.

For testing purposes, the PAD was used with bandwidths of 1 bark (resulting in 25 values per frame) and 4.2 bark (6 values per frame), and the high edge for the SFM [8] was set to 16 kHz (resulting in 24 values per frame) and 708 Hz (6 values per frame). The average results for the percentage of correct frames identified by each descriptor, for each file type, are shown in Table 1. The results in Table 1 indicate that the PAD using 1 bark wide bands (PAD25) produced the most reliable results. In fact, across the range of test files the PAD failed to correctly identify just 0.04% of frames. This represents a failure of only 4 frames in every 10000 and clearly supports the hypothesis that matching the descriptors’ structure to the objective of the compression schemes should result in near transparent description.

The best performing of the MPEG-7 descriptors were the ASE and the SFM with an upper cutoff of 16 kHz (SFM24). While the error performance of these descriptors may be sufficient for some applications, they both fail at an average rate of over 1 frame in every 100. In comparison, for a 4 minute song encoded with 20ms frames, the PAD25 would on average fail identifying just 5 frames, whereas the SFM24 and ASE would fail identifying 175 and 158 frames respectively. In addition, whilst the PAD25 is consistent in performance for both instrumental and combinational files, the SFM24 and ASE both exhibit quite large discrepancies in performance across the different file types.

Comparing the performance of the PAD and SFM with only six values per frame, indicates that the PAD6 performs significantly better than SFM6. This result suggests that the PAD descriptor is truly scalable in dimension. This characteristic is important for applications where storage size or bit rate are limited (most applications of digital audio). The better performance of PAD6 when compared to SFM6 is most likely due to a combination of the descriptor’s compression transparent nature and the fact that PAD6 continues to represent the entire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PAD25</th>
<th>PAD6</th>
<th>SFM24</th>
<th>SFM6</th>
<th>ASE</th>
<th>AP</th>
<th>AW</th>
<th>ASC</th>
<th>ASS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comb</td>
<td>99.95</td>
<td>97.76</td>
<td>97.98</td>
<td>91.09</td>
<td>99.85</td>
<td>15.70</td>
<td>49.60</td>
<td>15.40</td>
<td>11.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inst</td>
<td>99.99</td>
<td>97.69</td>
<td>99.23</td>
<td>91.63</td>
<td>97.50</td>
<td>14.80</td>
<td>38.90</td>
<td>11.50</td>
<td>7.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>99.96</td>
<td>97.72</td>
<td>98.54</td>
<td>91.33</td>
<td>98.68</td>
<td>15.25</td>
<td>43.75</td>
<td>13.45</td>
<td>9.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Percentage correct frame matches

![Figure 1: Examples of the PAD (a) 1 bark wide (b) 4.2 bark wide](image)

The normalization of step (i) removes ambiguity introduced into absolute amplitude values by compression schemes and volume variations. This produces a descriptor that represents only the shape of the current frame’s psycho-acoustic curve. Also, the conversion to dB in step (i) ensures that the PAD is relatively immune to small variations in band amplitude between input file types.

3. DESCRIPTOR RESILIENCE TO COMPRESSION NOISE

To evaluate the transparency of the PAD for locating audio segments regardless of compression effects, an MP3 [12] encoder was used to compress and uncompress 90, 16-bit 44.1kHz sampled audio files. Each of the audio files was of approximately 10 seconds duration, with 50 files representing instrumental signals (inst), and 40 representing combinational signals (comb) such as pop music. The MP3 encoder was chosen as it represents the most commonly used audio encoder and is also relatively old; hence it should contribute more severe compression distortion than more modern coders such as AAC or AC3.

The subset of MPEG-7 low level audio descriptors, defined in Section 2.1, and the proposed PAD were then calculated for both the files which had been compressed/uncompressed, and the
spectrum of the audio frame, while SFM6 represents only a limited portion of the spectrum.

The PAD25, SFM24 and ASE descriptors calculated for both the uncompressed and MP3 representations of a single 20ms audio frame are shown in Figure 2. Examining Figure 2 clearly indicates that for this frame, the SFM descriptor is the most effected by compression. The significant alteration of the SFM shape with the introduction of compression noise indicates that this descriptor may be relatively ambiguous between similar audio frames. In contrast, the PAD and ASE are relatively unaffected by the compression noise. However, when comparing the PAD and ASE the y-axis scale should be considered. It is evident that the absolute error is far larger for the ASE descriptor. This large error could prove detrimental to the descriptor’s performance in the MSE search criteria used in (11).

4. CONCLUSIONS

A new low level audio descriptor is proposed. This descriptor represents the psycho-acoustic noise floor shape of an audio frame. Thorough testing indicates that the proposed descriptor is far more resilient to compression noise than any of the MPEG-7 low level audio descriptors. In addition, the proposed descriptor maintains high resilience to compression noise even when decimated to use only one quarter of the values per frame to represent the noise floor. This characteristic indicates the proposed descriptor presents a truly scalable mechanism for transparently describing the characteristics of an audio frame. The results presented support the hypotheses that developing a low level audio descriptor whose structure matches the underlying objective of the compression schemes is essential if transparency to compression is a requirement.

While the author’s acknowledge the excellent search performance reported for the audio fingerprinting method presented in [9], it is felt that using a more robust low level descriptor than the MPEG-7 SFM could only improve the repeatability and robustness of such a system.

5. REFERENCES