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Investigation

Using JPEG quantization tables to identify imagery processed by software

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ABSTRACT

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The quantization tables used for JPEG compression can also be used to help separate images that have been processed by software from those that have not. This loose classification is sufficient to greatly reduce the number of images an examiner must consider during an investigation. As illicit imagery prosecutions depend on the authenticity of the images involved, this capability is an advantage for forensic examiners. This paper explains how quantization tables work, how they can be used for image source identification, and the implications for computer forensics.

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1. Introduction

Illicit imagery cases became more difficult to prosecute in the United States in the wake of the *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition* Supreme Court decision in 2002 ([Supreme Court of the United States, 2002](#)). In the court's opinion, the prosecution must prove that a real child was harmed by the illicit imagery in order to get a conviction. As such, forensic examiners have been increasingly asked to prove that suspected illicit imagery contains real victims and not computer generated people. On the other hand, the prosecution still only needs to introduce a handful of such images in order to secure a conviction.

One of the more compelling arguments for proving the authenticity of a pictured individual is to show that the image came from a camera and has not been edited. Although a camera could conceivably be used to capture an image of an artificial person (e.g. photographing a computer screen), such an image would hopefully be obviously identifiable.

The science of performing digital ballistics, or matching an image to the individual device that created it, would be an ideal method for finding real pictures to use in legal proceedings. Unfortunately such identifications are not easy. Instead this paper demonstrates how an examiner can match an image back to the type of device that last modified it, either hardware or software.

This paper gives a brief overview of JPEG compression and pays particular attention to the quantization tables used in that process. Those tables control how much information is lost during the compression process. The author has categorized the types of tables and the implications for digital ballistics are discussed. In particular, by eliminating those images that were most likely last processed by a computer program, the examiner is left with fewer images to consider for the remainder of the investigation.

2. JPEG compression

This paper focuses exclusively on images stored in the JPEG Interchange File Format (JFIF) ([Wallace, 1992](#)), a method for storing data compressed with the JPEG standard ([Joint Photographic Experts Group, 1991](#); [Wallace, 1991](#)). The JFIF is the most commonly used format for JPEG data. Throughout the paper, any reference to a JPEG or JPEG file refers to JFIF encoded data.

A JPEG compressed image takes up considerably less space than an uncompressed image. Whereas an uncompressed 640×480 pixel 24-bit color image would require 900 kB, a JPEG version of the same image can be compressed to

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a mere 150 kB. Converting an image into a JPEG is a six step process that, as a whole, is beyond the scope of this paper (Joint Photographic Experts Group, 1991; Wallace, 1991). First the image is converted from the RGB color space into the YCbCr space, or one based on the brightness and luminance of each pixel. Next the image is downsampled, split into blocks of 8×8 pixels, and a discrete cosine transform is applied. The next stage is quantization, where the lossy compression occurs and this paper is focused. Finally an entropy coding (lossless compression) is applied and the image is said to be JPEG compressed.

In the quantization stage, the image creation device must use a table of values known as the quantization tables. Each table has 64 values that range from 0 to 65,535.¹ A lower number means that less data will be discarded in the compression and a higher quality image should result.

Each image has between one and four quantization tables. The most commonly used quantization tables are those published by the Independent JPEG Group (IJG) in 1998 and shown in Fig. 1 (libjpeg, 1998). These tables can be scaled to a quality factor Q . The quality factor allows the image creation device to choose between larger, higher quality images and smaller, lower quality images.

The value of Q can range between 0 and 100 and is used to compute the scaling factor, S , as shown in Eq. (1). Each element i in the scaled table T_s is computed using the i th element in the base table T_b as shown in Eq. (2). All of these computations are done in integer math; there are no decimals (hence the floor function in the equation). Any value of T_s that computes to zero is set to one.

For example, we can scale the IJG standard table using $Q = 80$ by applying Eq. (2) to each element in the table. The resulting values are the scaled quantization tables and are shown in Fig. 2. Note that the numbers in this table are lower than in the standard table, indicating an image compressed with these tables will be of higher quality than ones compressed with the standard table. It should be noted that scaling with $Q = 50$ does not change the table.

$$S = (Q < 50) ? \frac{5000}{Q} : 200 - 2Q \quad (1)$$

$$T_s[i] = \left\lfloor \frac{S * T_b[i] + 50}{100} \right\rfloor \quad (2)$$

3. Related work

Using quantization tables to identify the origin of digital images is only one method of conducting digital ballistics. A good summary of other methods can be found in Sencar and Memon (2008). The idea of using JPEG quantization tables for digital ballistics was first proposed by Farid (2006). In that report he showed that the quantization tables from 204 images, one per camera at the device's highest quality setting, were for

¹ In practice these values usually between 0 and 255. Some programmers chose to represent them as 8 bit values, but to be correct 16 bit values should be used.

16	11	10	16	24	40	51	61
12	12	14	19	26	58	60	55
14	13	16	24	40	57	69	56
14	17	22	29	51	87	80	62
18	22	37	56	68	109	103	77
24	35	55	64	81	104	113	92
49	64	78	87	103	121	120	101
72	92	95	98	112	100	103	99
17	18	24	47	99	99	99	99
18	21	26	66	99	99	99	99
24	26	56	99	99	99	99	99
47	66	99	99	99	99	99	99
99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99

Fig. 1 – Standard JPEG quantization tables.

the most part different from each other. When overlaps did occur, they were generally among cameras from the same manufacturer. He also demonstrated that the tables used by the digital cameras were different from those used by Adobe Photoshop.

Chandra and Ellis (1999) did some work to determine the base quantization table used to compute the scaled tables found in an existing JPEG image, but they focused on determining an equivalence to the IJG tables, not divining the true tables used. Several papers have been written on recovering the quantization table from previously compressed images (Fan and de Queiroz, 2000, 2003; Neelamani et al., 2006) or doubly compressed images (Lukas and Fridrich, 2003). Many papers and patents have been written regarding quantization table design such as Beretta et al. (1999), Costa and Veiga (2005), Onnasch and Ploger (1994), Wang et al. (2001), and Watson (1993).

4. Classifying JPEGs

For this paper the author examined several thousand images from a wide variety of image creation devices and programs. These devices include a Motorola KRZR K1m, a Canon PowerShot 540, a FujiFilm Finepix A200, a Konica Minolta Dimage Xg,

6	4	4	6	10	16	20	24
5	5	6	8	10	23	24	22
6	5	6	10	16	23	28	22
6	7	9	12	20	35	32	25
7	9	15	22	27	44	41	31
10	14	22	26	32	42	45	37
20	26	31	35	41	48	48	40
29	37	38	39	45	40	41	40
7	7	10	19	40	40	40	40
7	8	10	26	40	40	40	40
10	10	22	40	40	40	40	40
19	26	40	40	40	40	40	40
40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40
40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40
40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40
40	40	40	40	40	40	40	40

Fig. 2 – Standard JPEG quantization tables scaled with $Q = 80$.

and a Nikon Coolpix 7900. The author also examined the images produced by a number of software programs such as libjpeg (libjpeg, 1998), Microsoft Paint, the Gimp (GIMP Team, 2007), Adobe Photoshop (Adobe Systems Incorporated, 2007), and Irfanview (Irfan, 2007). The author also studied images from the camera review web site Digital Photography Review (Askey.Net Consulting Limited, 2007).

The author immediately noted that although some devices always used the same quantization tables, the majority of them used a different set of quantization tables in each image. A further examination of the images allowed the author to classify images into categories: standard tables, extended standard tables, custom fixed tables, and custom adaptive tables.

4.1. Standard tables

Images in this category use scaled versions of the quantization tables published in International JPEG Group standard (libjpeg, 1998), shown in Fig. 1. Because many cameras and programs use these tables, there is no way to determine, based on tables alone, which program or camera created an image.

The base tables shown in Fig. 1 can be scaled using $Q = \{1, 2, \dots, 99\}$ to create 99 separate tables. Scaling with $Q = 0$ would produce grossly unusable images. Scaling with $Q = 100$ would produce a quantization table filled with all ones. Such a table would be indistinguishable from any other base table scaled with $Q = 100$.

Any image using one of the 99 tables defined above is said to be using the standard tables. It is certainly possible that another method could be used to generate one of these tables, but there is no way to distinguish that from the image alone. For example, the author found that some images from particular devices matched an IJG table but others did not. It cannot be determined if the devices are using the IJG tables for some images and not others or the devices are using another method that occasionally produces the same tables as the IJG method.

4.2. Extended standard tables

These images are a special case of the standard tables. They use scaled versions of the IJG tables, but have three tables instead of the two in the standard. The third table is a duplicate of the second. The same methodology used to identify the standard tables can be used to identify extended standard tables.

4.3. Custom fixed tables

Some programs have their own non-IJG quantization tables that do not depend on the image being processed. For example, when Adobe Photoshop saves an image as a JPEG it allows the user to select one of 12 quality settings (different settings are used when saving images "for the web"). The quality setting is used to select one of 12 sets of quantization tables (Adobe Systems Incorporated, 2007).

Some devices use their own custom base quantization table with the IJG scaling method. Regardless, these images

consider a user selected quality factor and the base quantization table. Unlike the images described in the next section, the image itself is not part of the equation.

One of the more frustrating aspects of these devices is that there is no provable method for finding the original tables or scaling method used by an image creation device. The examiner could reverse engineer the device in question, but doing so is not often practical for an illicit imagery investigation. Given an image and its quantization tables, it is possible to compute a base table, T'_b for any assumed value of Q between 1 and 99 and the IJG scaling method. The equation for doing so is shown in Eq. (3). Note that the floor operation used in generating T_s in Eq. (2) means that the values obtained for T'_b may not be equal to the true values of T_b .

$$T'_b[i] = \frac{100 * T_s[i] - 50}{S} \quad (3)$$

The examiner could check each value of T'_b by attempting to use it to scale up to current value of T_s and the values of T_s for other images made by the same image creation device. If the computed value of T'_b is too small to generate the correct value of T_s , then T'_b must be manually increased until it is sufficient to create T_s when scaled. In the event that T'_b is too large for another image, the image was not created using the IJG scaling method and must be considered as a custom adaptive image described in Section 4.4.

The problem with all of the above calculations, however, is that the examiner does not know the true value of Q used for any of the images from the device. The method described in Chandra and Ellis (1999) can be used to estimate a value for Q' , or the quality factor used to scale the IJG standard table to the closest possible value of T_s . That estimate of Q provides a good starting point, but in the end we have a system with many possible solutions. The examiner cannot determine which solution is correct.

The author constructed a program that, given an initial image, accepted a value for Q' from the user. This value was used to compute the T'_b tables. These tables were then scaled to the values of Q from 1 to 99. These tables were then compared to other images generated by the same device. After each image, the tables were adjusted to fit the current image. If the tables no longer fit all of the images, the images were re-categorized as having custom adaptive tables as described in Section 4.4. In general the program was deemed impractical as it did not identify any plausible base tables.

4.4. Custom adaptive tables

These images do not conform to the IJG standard. In addition, they may change, either in part or as a whole, between images created by the same device using the same settings. They may also have constants in the tables; values that do not change regardless of the quality setting or image being processed.

For example, the author examined 21 pictures captured with a Fuji Finepix A200 camera. Of these pictures, eight images had identical quantization tables; four pictures shared one set of tables but had differences in the other two tables. The remaining 13 images all had unique quantization tables. What struck the author as odd, however, was that for all 21 images the first value in each of the three quantization tables

Conversely, a positive response from the library means that the image was most likely last modified by a program. It could have been created by a hardware device that uses the same tables as a known software program.

It is also possible that a real picture that has been processed by a software package, for example, cropped, would get a positive response from Calvin. Such a program would most likely be recompressed with the quantization tables used by the program, not the original quantization tables that the hardware device wrote into the image.

7. Conclusion

The author has demonstrated how JPEG quantization tables can be used for digital ballistics to eliminate images that could not be used in a prosecution for illicit imagery. The methodology is not perfect, but given the large number of available images and the small number needed in court, it should be sufficient. A more elegant solution, however, would be to combine this kind of digital ballistic information with other metadata from an image. Other factors, such as the presence or absence of EXIF data, signatures of known programs, and color signatures of real skin, could reduce the examiner's workload even more. In the meantime, however, using JPEG quantization tables for digital ballistics is a big step forward for examiners and should improve their productivity and success.

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