

**Masters Project Final Report December 2015**

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**Privacy and Security Implications on Wireless (Wi-Fi) Tomography**

**J R O Sirimanne**

**2015**



**Privacy and Security Implications on Wireless (Wi-Fi) Tomography**

**A dissertation submitted for the Degree of Master of  
Science in Information Security**

**J R O Sirimanne**

**University of Colombo School of Computing  
2015**



**Declaration**

The thesis is my original work and has not been submitted previously for a degree at this or any other university/institute.

To the best of my knowledge it does not contain any material published or written by another person, except as acknowledged in the text.

Students Name: J R O Sirimanne

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Signature: Date:

This is to certify that this thesis is based on the work of Mr. J R O Sirimanne under my supervision. The thesis has been prepared according to the format stipulated and is of acceptable standard.

Certified by:

Supervisor Name: Dr. Chamath Keppitiyagama

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Signature: Date:

Abstract

This research is aimed to be a proof of concept for a Privacy and Security Implications on Wireless (Wi-Fi) Tomography. Wi-Fi is a popular wireless networking technology used today which uses radio waves to transmit data. For this research Radio tomographic imaging (RTI) technologies are used to prove that the privacy can be breached just by analyzing the wireless signals receive signal strength indicator (RSSi) value. This analysis can be done by anyone who has a simple wireless card that shows the RSSi value. Hence one’s privacy can be breached even without him knowing his movements are being analyzed by an outsider.

In this I have used statistical methodologies and probability analysis to prove that there is a significant difference in RSSi when a human is obstructing the wireless signal and that difference is clearly visible in the gathered data set. By using probability we can predict the position of a person inside a room.

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Firstly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor Dr. Chamath Keppitiyagama for the continuous support for my research, for his patience, motivation, and immense knowledge. His guidance helped me in all the time of research and writing of this thesis.

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# List of Abbreviations

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| GPS | Global Positioning System |
| RADAR | Radio Detection and Ranging Systems |
| RFID | Radio Frequency Identification |
| MRI | Magnetic Resonance Imaging |
| RSSI | Receive Signal Strength Indicator |
| RTI | Radio Tomographic Imaging |
| MAC | Media Access Control |
| dBm | decibel-milliwatt |
| WLAN | Wireless Local Area Network |
| LOS | Line of Sight |
|  |  |

Table - List of Abbreviations

Chapter 1

# Introduction

At present day a very large portion of the communication is done using radio waves. These waves use electromagnetism to generate and propagate through space at the speed of light. There are many military and general purpose applications of radio waves that are used for tracking humans, objects and even gestures.

Some of these technologies are Global positioning System (GPS), Sonars, Radio Detection and Ranging Systems (RADAR). From these GPS can accurately show your position anywhere on earth. High grade GPS systems can have an accuracy level of up to 4 meters. Sonars and RADAR can track both moving and stationary objects. Without RADAR modern travel systems like air travel will be unthinkable. Most of these technologies are first developed for military purpose and then generalized for public use.

RFID or Radio Frequency Identification is another immerging technology that uses radio waves to track goods and merchandize. RFID uses a tag which has a circuit that transmits data via radio waves and this data can be read from a RFID reader to identify tagged goods. Apart from that it is also being used for access control since RFID tags are small and they can be easily added to access control cards.

X-Ray is the most popular imaging technology used in medical applications. X-Rays are also electromagnetic waves which uses its penetration power for imaging. Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) is a revolutionary imaging technology that is used in medical field applications. MRI uses a magnetic field and pulses of radio wave energy to make pictures of organs and structures inside the body.

All these technologies use special transmitters and receivers to archive their task. While these are very effective and efficient technologies, the cost factor of implementing such a system is a huge challenge.

The word tomography is derived from the Greek word *tomos* which means sections or sectioning and the process of tomography involves the generation of narrow sections through an object. Tomography is also one of the emerging technologies in this area which is used to localize passive objects or in other words objects which does not carry any tracking devices inside an area of interest. Because of that Radio tomographic imaging (RTI) is also called “device free localization” [14] “passive localization” [15], or “sensor less sensing” [16].

Wi-Fi is the popular wireless networking technology that uses radio waves to provide wireless high-speed Internet and network connections. Wi-Fi connections support millions of people in homes, businesses, and public locations around the world supporting them to be connected at every possible time. According to statistics there is a huge growth in Wi-Fi enabled devices and Wi-Fi hotspots within past few years and it is expected to grow more and more. There is a possibility to track people movements by observing just the signal strength of these Wi-Fi networks.

## Hardware Devices

For this study an ordinary wireless access point and a Laptop with wireless (Wi-Fi) interface that is capable of publishing signal strengths in decibel (dB) values will be used as hardware devices. By this I’m trying to generalize this study and match it maximum to a real world scenario.

## Wireless access point

In computer networking, a wireless access point (AP) is a device that allows wireless devices to connect to a wired network using Wi-Fi, or related standards. The AP usually connects to a router (via a wired network) as a standalone device, but it can also be an integral component of the router itself. [8].

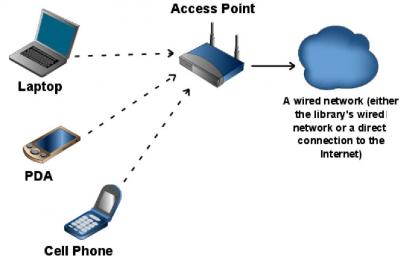


Figure - Wireless Access point Simplest usage

*(Source: http://www.techsoupforlibraries.org/files/images/wireless\_network.img\_assist\_custom.jpg)*

For this study I used a D-Link Wireless N300 ADSL Modem Router (Model Number DSL-2750U) which is a very common wireless access point used in Sri Lanka. The DSL-2750U Wireless N ADSL2+ Wi-Fi Router connects a group of users to the Internet, allowing multiple computers at home or the office to share an integrated high-speed ADSL2/2+ interface. It provides high-performance 802.11n wireless access for wireless networked computers, 4 built-in Ethernet ports, firewall protection, and QoS for smooth and secure download/upload of photos, files, music, video, and e-mail over the Internet. [9]



Figure - DSL-2750U Wireless N ADSL2+ Wi-Fi Router

*(Source: http://115.124.123.225/new/products/DSL-2750u/DSL-2750u.png)*

## Signal Strength Capturing device

Captured received signal strength indicator (RSSI) values are the main input data for this study. As mentioned earlier [10] hardware manufacturers are not oblige to provide RSSI value. So when we choose a computer/laptop to capture the RSSI values the wireless card should advertise the RSSI value. Here for the data capturing we have used a general purpose Dell Laptop (model no: Dell Inspiron 14R (N4010) Laptop) with DW1501 Wireless-N Wlan Half-Mini Card which is again a very common device in Sri Lanka market. This wireless card supports IEEE 802.11b/g/n single band mode in 2.4GHz mode. [12]



Figure - Dell 14R n4010 General Purpose laptop

(*http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-jPEiZYrgbc8/VAx1\_-yiOtI/AAAAAAAAAF0/DGvRA2iAIRw/s1600/dell-inspiron-14r-disassembly.png*)



Figure - Dell Wireless DW1501 Mini Card

(*Source: http://www.wireless-driver.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/DellWireless1501802.11bgMiniCard.jpg*)

## Motivation

There are many security implementations to preserve privacy of a person when connected and using the network. Research shows when an object moves inside a wireless area that objects causes the received signal strength indicator (RSSI) to be dropped. By tracking these drops we can map the path and movements of the object. Apart from providing internet and network access Wi-Fi is used in sensor networks to transfer data gathered from sensors. These sensor networks power and enable modern concepts like smart homes, smart power, smart cities, Internet of things etc. With all these usage of Wi-Fi increases rapidly and in a small area there can be many Wi-Fi networks. Issue with this is by using wireless tomography technologies we can track movements of people unknowing to them that someone is tracking them.

Currently there are no security implementations to safeguard people for above type of privacy breaches and many are unaware about the security issues related to available tomographic techniques.

## Aims and Objectives

Wireless internet is a very common method of providing Internet and networking facilities to people and devices. With such common used technology it should be safe to use. In this research, I will design, test and evaluate diffident real world scenarios of wireless implementations to determine and prove the effects to wireless signal strength when a human is present and find the scenarios that are vulnerable to privacy breaches.

## Research Question

With this study I’m searching to answer two questions that arise with above mentioned problems.

1. Is there a significant amount of wireless signal strength drop when there is a human inside the line of sight of the wireless access point and data gathering computer?
2. How accurately we can identify human presence by observing received signal strength indicator (RSSI) values.

## Scope and Limitations

This study will be carried out using the indoor scenarios and does not consider about outdoor scenarios. Also this will be a study to prove the concept of object tracking and localization based on the RSSi value of the Wi-Fi signal using general purpose devices. Tracking and localization only consider about the changes in RSSi value when the signal is obstructed by an object. This will not consider the other factors like environmental variations, Wi-Fi signal overlaps due to other transmitting devices and radio wave noise. Also this object and data gathering device is in line-of-sight with the transmitting base station.

Chapter 2

# Literature Review

Wi-Fi uses radio waves to create networks and transmit data. Radio waves are electromagnetic waves. Electromagnetic waves have a large range of frequency starting from as low as 3 kHz and ranging up to 300 GHz. From this vast range Wi-Fi uses 2.4GHz band to do the communications. Electromagnetic waves can be affected by many reasons when they are traveling through space.

* Signal Frequency
* Transmission medium
* Objects encountered

These reasons will result in reflection (the wave partially bounces of an object), refraction (change of direction when passing from one medium to another), absorption (loss of energy when an object is hit), diffraction (when waves are bend and spread around an obstacle), scattering (wave bounces off in multiple directions) and polarization (orientation of the oscillations of the waves can change upon interaction) of the signal.

## Definitions

## Decibel

The decibel (dB) is a logarithmic unit that expresses the ratio of two values of a physical quantity, often power or intensity. One of these quantities is often a reference value and in this case the decibel expresses the absolute level of the physical quantity. The number of decibels is ten times the logarithm to base 10 of the ratio of two power quantities or of the ratio of the squares of two field amplitude quantities. One decibel is one tenth of one bel, named in honor of Alexander Graham Bell; however, the bel is seldom used. The definition of the decibel is based on the measurement of power in telephony of the early 20th century in the Bell System in the United States. Today, the unit is used for a wide variety of measurements in science and engineering, most prominently in acoustics, electronics, and control theory. In electronics, the gains of amplifiers, attenuation of signals, and signal-to-noise ratios are often expressed in decibels. The decibel confers a number of advantages, such as the ability to conveniently represent very large or small numbers, and the ability to carry out multiplication of ratios by simple addition and subtraction. By contrast, use of the decibel complicates operations of addition and subtraction. [7]

## Received Signal Strength Indicator (RSSI)

In telecommunications, received signal strength indicator (RSSI) is a measurement of the power present in a received radio signal. RSSI is usually invisible to a user of a receiving device. However, because signal strength can vary greatly and impact functionality in wireless networking, IEEE 802.11 devices often make the measure available to users. In an IEEE 802.11 system, RSSI is the relative received signal strength in a wireless environment, in arbitrary units. RSSI is an indication of the power level being received by the antenna. Therefore, the higher the RSSI number, the stronger the signal.

There is no standardized relationship of any particular physical parameter to the RSSI reading. The 802.11 standard does not define any relationship between RSSI value and power level in mW or dBm. Vendors and chipset makers provide their own accuracy, granularity, and range for the actual power (measured as mW or dBm) and their range of RSSI values (from 0 to RSSI\_Max). One subtlety of the 802.11 RSSI metric comes from how it is sampled, RSSI is acquired during only the preamble stage of receiving an 802.11 frame, not over the full frame. [10]

## Privacy

Privacy has many meanings. The most general is freedom from interference or intrusion, the right "to be let alone," a formulation cited by Louis Brandeis and Samuel Warren in their groundbreaking 1890 paper on privacy. [4] This recognizes that each person has a sphere of existence and activity that properly belongs to that individual alone, where he or she should be free of constraint, coercion, and even uninvited observation. As we would say today, each of us needs our own "space." Most would recognize the protected sphere to include personal opinions, personal communications, and how one behaves behind closed doors, at least as long as these do not lead to any significant threats to society. Many would also include behavior within the family and other intimate relationships in that sphere. [3]

## Wi-Fi

Wi-Fi (or WiFi) is a local area wireless computer networking technology that allows electronic devices to network, mainly using the 2.4 gigahertz (12 cm) UHF and 5 gigahertz (6 cm) SHF ISM radio bands. [5] Wi-Fi standards are defined by IEEE 802.11 standard. IEEE 802.11 is a set of media access control (MAC) and physical layer (PHY) specifications for implementing wireless local area network (WLAN) computer communication in the 2.4, 3.6, 5, and 60 GHz frequency bands. They are created and maintained by the IEEE LAN/MAN Standards Committee (IEEE 802). The base version of the standard was released in 1997, and has had subsequent amendments. The standard and amendments provide the basis for wireless network products using the Wi-Fi brand. While each amendment is officially revoked when it is incorporated in the latest version of the standard, the corporate world tends to market to the revisions because they concisely denote capabilities of their products. As a result, in the market place, each revision tends to become its own standard. [6]



Figure - Wi-Fi logo

*(Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/32/Wi-Fi\_Logo.svg/2000px-Wi-Fi\_Logo.svg.png)*

## Software Defined Radio

Software-defined radio (SDR) is a radio communication system where components that have been typically implemented in hardware such as mixers, filters, amplifiers, modulators/demodulators, detectors, etc. are instead implemented by means of software on a personal computer. These SDR devices are relatively expensive but they have wide range of applications when comes to tracking. SDR’s can be used to track a single human, track multiple humans and gesture decoding. Researchers in MIT have done extensive work on tracking using SDR devices. They have shown the ability to detect humans behind walls [17], and then they have shown the possibility of 3D tracking of the position of a human body [18]. The SDR device which they have used is made of USRP N210. Another mid-range device capable of these type of works is HackRF.

## Radio Tomographic Imaging

Tomography refers to imaging by sections or sectioning, through the use of any kind of penetrating wave. Radio tomographic imaging (RTI) is an emerging application which offers a new way to image passive objects in buildings and outdoor environments using received signal strength indicator (RSSI). [1]



Figure - An illustration of an RTI network. Each node broadcasts to the others, creating many projections that can be used to reconstruct an image of objects inside the network area. [2]

*(Source: http://span.ece.utah.edu/uploads/RTINetwork.png)*

## Related Work

## RADAR: An In-Building RF-based User Location and Tracking System. [13]

Paramvir Bahl and Venkata N. Padmanabhan have done research on tracking indoor objects using WIFI signal strength way back in year 2000. They have done this by using 3 base stations and 1 mobile node in an indoor test environment. Each base station and the mobile host was equipped with a Digital RoamAbout network interface card (NIC), based on Lucent’s popular WaveLAN RF LAN technology. The network operates in the 2.4 GHz band. It has a raw data rate of 2 Mbps and a one-way delay of 1-2 ms. The range of the network, as specified in [Roa96], is 200 m, 50 m, and 25 m, respectively, for open, semi-open, and closed office environments. This classification is based on the type and density of obstructions between the transmitter and the receiver. Their test bed environment would be classified as being open along the hallways where the base stations are located and closed elsewhere. The base stations provide overlapping coverage in portions of the floor, and together cover the entire floor. They have used several data analytic methods to evaluate the accuracy of the user location.

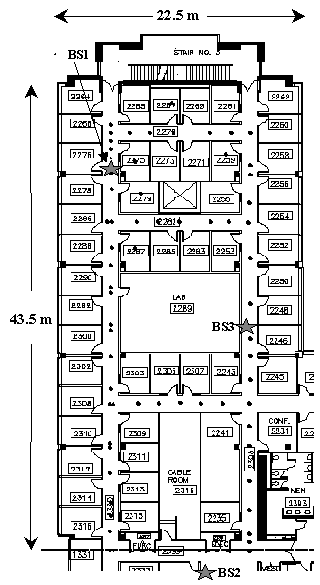


Figure - Map of the floor where the experiments were conducted. The black dots denote locations were empirical signal strength information was collected. The large stars show the locations of the 3 base stations. The orientation is North (up) and East (right).

Chapter 3

# Design and Implementation

In the design stage, scenarios are developed to answer research questions and in the implementation stage developed scenarios are used for gathering test data.

## Scenarios

Data gathering is a key step in this research and scenarios are used to simulate real world examples. Then based on the data we do the analysis and determine the results of the project. First of all there are two main sets of scenario designs; one without a human subject and one with the human subject obstructing the LOS view of the wireless access point and data gathering computer for a period of time. Reason to do is RSSi is not a constant value all the time as shown in the graph below.

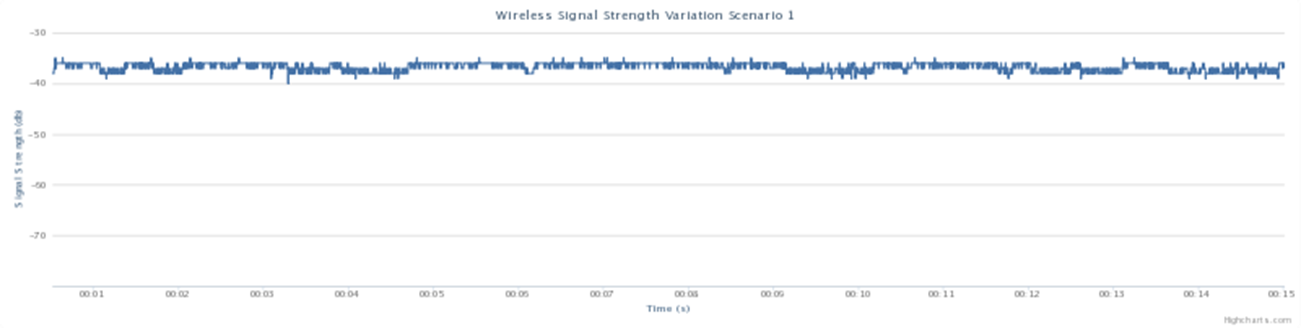


Figure - Wireless signal strength variation with time

In the initial design face primary scenarios are developed to answer first research question(Is there a significant amount of wireless signal strength drop when there is a human inside the line of sight of the wireless access point and data gathering computer?). After initial stages more advanced scenarios are tested in hope to localize and track the passion of the human subject.

For initial scenarios there are three variables

1. Data gathering computer
2. Wireless access point
3. Person

## Scenario Diagrams

In these diagrams we have used symbols to represent objects below table describes the symbols.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Symbol | Resemblance |
|  | Wireless access point |
|  | Data gathering computer |
|  | Human |

Table - Symbols and resemblance

Scenarios are broken into three sets based on the position of the wireless access point. For an individual set in the initial stage wireless access point will remain stationary and data gathering computer will be the variable.

## Scenarios Set 1

In the scenario set one wireless access point is stationary in the middle of the room and data gathering computers position is changed around the access point.

Scenario 1

Scenario 2

Scenario 3

Scenario 4

Scenario 5

Scenario 6

Scenario 7

Scenario 8

## Scenarios Set 2

In the scenario set two wireless access point is stationary in the corner of the room and data gathering computers position is changed around the access point.

Scenario 9

Scenario 10

Scenario 11

Scenario 12

## Scenarios Set 3

In the scenario set three wireless access point is stationary in the middle corner of the room and data gathering computers position is changed around the access point.

Scenario 13

Scenario 14

Scenario 15

Scenario 16

## Scenarios Set 4

For the scenario set four we introduce a human as an obstructing object (human between the Wireless access point and Data gathering computer). From above scenarios I have randomly selected Scenario 12 for this test. Here the position of Wireless access point and Data gathering computer is constant and human position is changed in line-of-sight of the Wireless access point and Data gathering computer. Human subject will stay on three different positions when gathering the data.

Scenario 12.1

Scenario 12.2

Scenario 12.3

## Implementation

For this study setting up the designed scenario and gathering data is done in the implementation stage. Received Signal Strength is the value we are interested and it is gather as data. This is done using a python script (Please refer to appendix A) running on data gathering computer. Setup of the test bed environment is an ordinary household room with the dimensions length of 14 feet and a width 13 feet 10 inches, diagonal length of 19 feet and 8 inches. For the first three sets of scenarios data is gathered with line of sight by a wireless access point and the data gathering computer. These sets will act as control scenarios in the analysis stage to show the distribution when there is not human present in the room.



Laptop



Wireless Access Point

Figure Data gathering for first three scenario sets

For the fourth set of scenario we place a human subject between the wireless access point and the data gathering computer with line of sight to both devices hence obstructing the direct line of sight of both devices.



Laptop



Wireless Access Point

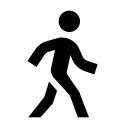


Figure Data Gathering with human subject obstructing the line of sight path

Below figures show the arrangement inside the room with and without a human. Notice in the latter figure human is completely obstructing the line of sight of the wireless access point to the data gathering computer



Figure - Data gathering without obstacles



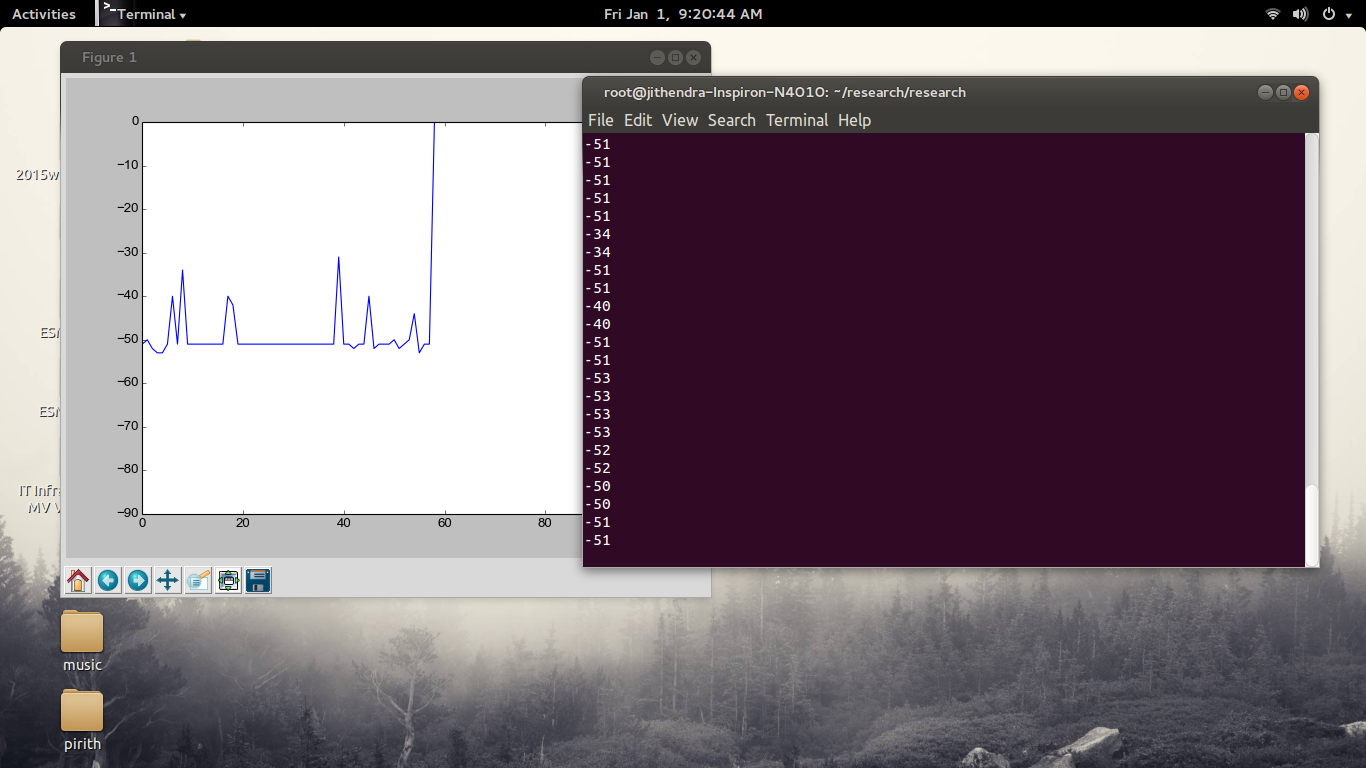
Figure - Data gathering with human obstructing the line of sight

As mentioned earlier data is gathering is done for a time period. For this study we are gathering the RSSI for 15 minutes for each scenario. Then these data is saved to a text file for future analysis. Python script and Linux I/O redirection is used for data gathering by taking the value from wireless card of the data gathering computer and saves the value roughly about 6 times a second. Root permission or super user privileges are needed by the script in order to extract the required data from the wireless card. That means RSSI value is taken every 0.166 ms or the sampling rate of 6 for my research.

Running the script

#python wifi\_plot.py >> sc1.txt

Below screenshots shows the running stage of the script while gathering data and visualizing data in real-time.



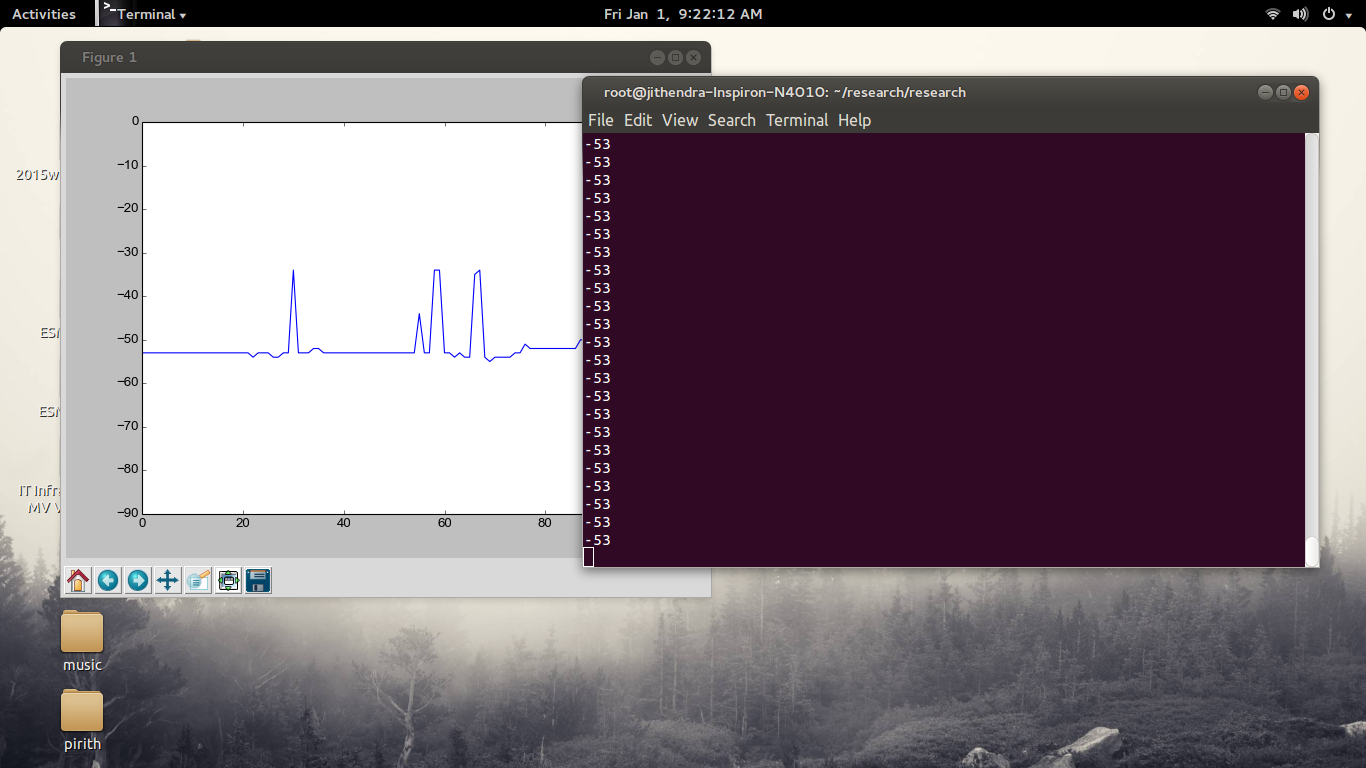


Figure - Running stage of the data gathering script

Chapter 4

# Analyzing and Evaluation

Chapter 5

Conclusion and Future Work

To be continued

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

## Data Gathering Code

Data gathering code is developed by Mr. Asanka P. Sayakkara of UCSC. (Source: http://recolog.blogspot.com/2015/03/plotting-wifi-signal-strength-variation.html)

import matplotlib.pyplot as plt

import time

import random

from collections import deque

import numpy as np

import os

def read\_wifi():

while True:

f=os.popen('sudo iwconfig wlan0 | grep -e "Signal level"')

line = f.read()

splitted\_line = line.split()

level = splitted\_line[3].split('=')

print level[1]

val = level[1]

yield val

time.sleep(0.1)

a1 = deque([0]\*100)

ax = plt.axes(xlim=(0, 100), ylim=(0, 10))

d = read\_wifi()

line, = plt.plot(a1)

plt.ion()

plt.ylim([-90,0])

plt.show()

for i in range(0,10000):

a1.appendleft(next(d))

datatoplot = a1.pop()

line.set\_ydata(a1)

plt.draw()

print a1[0]

i += 1

time.sleep(0.1)

plt.pause(0.0001)

## Appendix B

## Gathered Data

All gathered data is available at github repository which can be accesses using this URL. https://github.com/jithendra89/research/