

# Enabling Ambient Backscatter Using Low-Cost Software Defined Radio

Maximilian Stiefel  
Master Programme Embedded Systems  
Uppsala University  
maximilian.stiefel.8233@student.uu.se

Elmar van Rijnsouw  
Master Programme Embedded Systems  
Uppsala University  
elmar.vanrijnsouw.9818@student.uu.se

Carlos Pérez-Penichet  
Uppsala University  
carlos.penichet@it.uu.se

Ambuj Varshney  
Uppsala University  
ambuj.varshney@it.uu.se

Christian Rohner  
Uppsala University  
christian.rohner@it.uu.se

Thiemo Voigt  
Uppsala University  
and SICS Swedish ICT  
thiemo@sics.se

**Abstract**—Backscatter communication is attractive for energy-constrained devices due to its very low power requirements. Ambient backscatter takes this aspect to the limit by leveraging existing radio frequency signals for the purpose of communication without the need for generating energy expensive carrier signal. In this paper we investigate the use of ambient television broadcast signals for communication. As opposed to state-of-the-art restricted to operations under conditions of strong signal strength, we demonstrate a low cost software defined radio as receiver enables operations even in conditions when ambient signals are weak in strength. We build the system using low-cost off-the-shelf microcontroller, and RTLSDR software-defined radio receiver. We also conduct survey of signal strength of TV broadcast in a mid-sized Swedish city, and observe that our system can operate in most parts of the city.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Backscatter enables wireless communication at orders of magnitude lower energy cost than traditional radios. A backscatter transmitter operates by either reflecting or absorbing existing wireless signals, which only incurs in very low power consumption in the order of  $\mu\text{W}$ s [1]. As a consequence backscatter communication is emerging as the mechanism of choice to network battery-free devices. Over the past few years significant progress has been made to make backscatter communication practical for Internet of Things (IoT) devices. Early backscatter systems, like RFID, required a dedicated device to generate the necessary carrier to be backscattered. State-of-the-art systems, however, reflect ambient WiFi or television signals [1] instead, which does away with the need for dedicated infrastructure.

Recent ambient backscatter systems demonstrate tag-to-tag communication by leveraging TV signals both as a source of carrier and energy. For example, Liu et al. presents a proof-of-concept system that reflects ambient TV signals and enables tag-to-tag communication up to a few feet. Parks et al. further improve the communication range to tens of feet by using analog coding [2]. While these systems can enable many applications, they are also restricted to operate only in environments where TV signals are fairly strong (approx  $-30\text{ dBm}$ ) due to the low sensitivity of the receiver used in

these tags. On the other hand, TV signals are known to vary greatly in strength [3] over space time making existing systems very restricted in their coverage.

On the other hand, Software Defined Radios (SDRs) are powerful devices that have significant processing abilities, and also offer relatively high receive sensitivity levels. The high sensitivity levels of the SDRs compared to the typical ambient backscatter receiver tag could significantly help improve the communication range and coverage when receiving ambient backscatter transmissions. More importantly, SDRs offer incomparable flexibility due to their ability to be re-programmed. This flexibility offers the opportunity for ample experimentation which is welcomed in this sort of emerging technology.

In this paper we explore the following questions: Can we create an SDR based receiver for ambient backscatter transmissions? Can we leverage the relatively high sensitivity of such a receiver to improve range and coverage of ambient backscatter systems? Can we provide a flexible and low-cost experimentation platform for ambient backscatter research?

**Contributions.** The contributions of this work are twofold:

- We perform a survey of the signal strength of TV broadcast signals.
- We build a low-cost SDR-based receiver capable of receiving data encoded in backscatterer TV signals.

## II. BACKGROUND

In this background section we introduce the necessary knowledge about software defined radios and the used hardware, the *RTL-SDR*.

### A. Software Defined Radio

Traditionally basic radio components like mixers or filters have been realized in hardware. Nowadays as soon as one works in the baseband frequency the computational resources of a personal computer are sufficient to realize these components with signal processing done in software.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Carlos: We need to expand on this introduction to SDR, assuming we need it and not just assume everyone knows what that is.

### B. RTL2832U

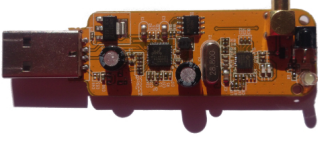


Fig. 1: RTL-SDR hardware with the DVB-T I/Q demodulator *Raetlek RTL2832U* (left IC) and the tuner with integrated LNA *Rafael Micro R820T/2* (right IC).

The *Realtek RTL2832U* is a terrestrial digital video broadcast (DVB-T) demodulator IC, which is the main part of a wide range of USB-based DVB-T receiver dongles. One prominent feature of this chip is that it allows to retrieve the raw I/Q samples via USB. This is originally intended for the chip to work as a simple DAB/FM software receiver. Ham radio enthusiasts have combined their efforts to create a software driver (the *librtlsdr*, cf. [4]) that allows DVB-T dongles based on the *RTL2832* to be converted into low-cost wideband SDR receivers. The cost of traditional SDRs has been in the range of a few hundred to thousands of USD. Albeit much less powerful than a typical SDR, a *RTL2832U*-based DVB-T receiver can be bought with antenna for less than 10 USD. A RTL-SDR does not only consist of the *RTL2832U*. The second essential component is the tuner, which allows the user to select the received frequency and outputs that signal at an intermediate frequency (IF). The IF can then be fed into the demodulator for digitalization. In the case of the used hardware this tuner is a *Rafael Micro R820T/2* which offers a tuning range from 42 to 1002 MHz [5]. It subsumes a low-noise amplifier (LNA) and filters. It presents a low noise figure of 3.5 dB and features 65 dBc of image rejection. Figure 3, shows a photograph of the RTL-SDR used in our work.

### C. Quadrature Demodulation

The received signal can be interpreted as

$$s_{IF}(t) = I(t) \cdot \cos(\omega_0 t) + Q(t) \cdot \sin(\omega_0 t) \quad (1)$$

This is multiplied with a cosine (and a sine as well) from a local oscillator.

$$s_{IF}(t) \cdot s_L(t) = I(t) \cdot \cos(\omega_0 t) \cdot \cos(\omega_0 t) + Q(t) \cdot \sin(\omega_0 t) \cdot \cos(\omega_0 t) \quad (2)$$

With  $2 \cos(a) \cos(b) = \cos(a - b) + \cos(a + b)$  and  $2 \sin(a) \cos(b) = \sin(a + b) + \sin(a - b)$  follows

$$2 \cdot s_{IF}(t) \cdot s_L(t) = I(t) \cdot [1 + \cos(2\omega_0 t)] + Q(t) \cdot [\sin(2\omega_0 t) + \sin(0)]. \quad (3)$$

One can see, that the interesting in-phase part (I) in this case is represented by a DC value after mixing. With a low-pass filter this DC value can be separated from the undesired rest.

An analogous procedure is done with the quadrature part (Q) when mixing with a sine.<sup>2</sup>

## III. DESIGN

### A. Transmitter

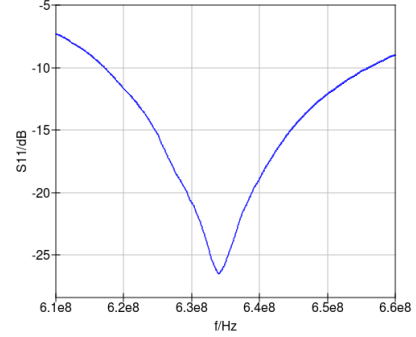


Fig. 2: Input reflection coefficient  $\Gamma_{in}$  also known as  $S_{11}$  of the self-made backscattering ground-plane antenna.

A backscattering antenna is the most important part of backscatter transmitter. Our antenna is optimized for usage with the television signal, which has its center frequency at 626 MHz. It is a ground plane antenna, which has been built up on a large unetched PCB plate. This rectangular PCB, with dimensions of 200 mm x 300 mm, is covered with a copper layer on one side and left blank on the other. A hole in the middle of the PCB serves for connecting a wire to a 50  $\Omega$  micro strip transmission line. The wire, which acts as the vertical antenna element and has a length of 350 mm (roughly 0.73  $\lambda$ ), is soldered to the transmission line. The transmission line has been calculated for 626 MHz using an FR4 substrate with a thickness of 1.6 mm. According to micro strip line theory the length of the line changes the phase and the width of the line changes the impedance (cf. Chapter 3 in [6]). The design equations given in [6] are implemented in various programs e.g. KiCAD, which has been used for solving the design equations. The given parameters lead to a micro strip line width of 3 mm. An open-stub, attached directly at the juncture where the vertical antenna element is attached to the transmission line, is used for fine tuning of the input impedance. The stub length has been adjusted manually (shortened) while measuring the reflection coefficient with a vector network analyzer (VNA). Open-stub matching is discussed in Chapter 5 in [6]. Furthermore the resonance frequency has been tuned by cutting the vertical antenna element piece by piece while measuring with the VNA until  $S_{11}$  had the minimum close to the desired frequency (Figure 2<sup>3</sup>). In the plot one can also see, that the antenna is quite narrowband<sup>4</sup>. For backscattering this is not necessarily a disadvantage, since everything that is within the operating frequency of the antenna

<sup>2</sup>Carlos: We need to explain this more clearly and possibly more concisely.

<sup>3</sup>Carlos: Can we replace all these figures by PDFs?

<sup>4</sup>Carlos: We should report something like the 3dB bandwidth rather than saying something non-specific like this

is backscattered. With our narrowband antenna the undesired backscattering of out-of-band signals is reduced. With our approach we were able to achieve an input impedance at 634 MHz of  $Z_{in} = (52.2 + j4.3)\Omega$ . At 626 MHz  $S_{11}$  is still approximately -17 dB.

Besides the antenna, the transmitter consists of an *MSP430* MCU, that sends data to the receiver. This transmitter controls an RF switch through an I/O pin. The switch can alternate the impedance connected to the antenna between matched (50  $\Omega$ ) and open. The software now steers this switch with a two 2 MHz rectangular timer signal to transmit a data 1 and is just leaves it open to transmit a data 0. Therefore the result is a frequency shift<sup>5</sup> of the television signal by 2 MHz for a 1 and no shift for a 0. Hence a classical binary amplitude shift keying is the implemented modulation technique.

### B. Receiver

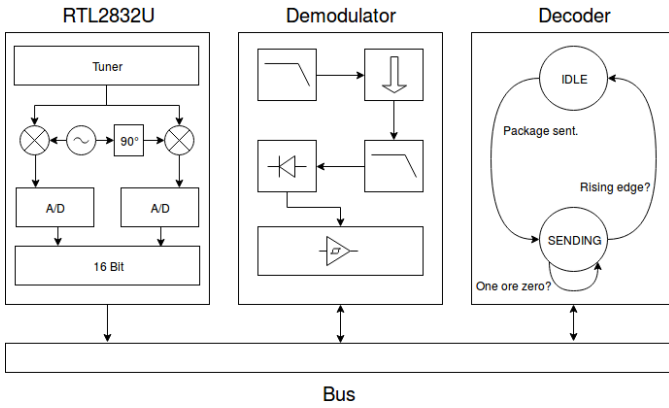


Fig. 3: Receiver architecture from a system point of view. Signal flow is from left to right.

C++ has been used to implement the receiver. We provide the code publicly available under <https://github.com/s3xm3x/backscatterBASKReceiver>. In figure 3 we show the architecture of the receiver from an abstract point of view. A highly sophisticated bus system has been developed to exchange data between the different components of the system. The signal flow is from the left to the right. *Librtlsdr* (cf. [4]), which is based on *libusb*, is used to transfer the data from the TV stick into our program. As described in section II-B, the RTL2832 mixes down the high frequency to a intermediate frequency (both values are software adjustable). Subsequently the data is mixed with sine and cosine, low-pass filtered and finally transferred to the digital domain. This data is available as two 8-bit values. It is a well-known fact, that this technique, which is commonly known as I/Q demodulation, results in a decomposition of the signal into in-phase and quadrature components which are generally represented as real and imaginary parts respectively. With this two values, the

phase and absolute value of the data can be determined for every sample. And can be seen as:

$$I + jQ = \text{abs}(I, Q) \cdot e^{j \times \text{ang}(I, Q)} \quad (4)$$

So the first block, which is entitled RTL2832U, provides the interface to the TV dongle. This block is represented as one object. It can set the frequency  $f_{\text{tuned}}$ , where the receiver is listening. Also it can set the sampling frequency  $f_{\text{samp}}$  and the analog gain of the tuner. The raw samples are pushed to the bus. The demodulator block is responsible for converting the sampled signals into ones and zeroes. Therefore the real and imaginary values first have to be deinterleaved out of the sample message. Now they are represented as integer values between 0 and 255 (8 bit). So one converts them to floats, whereas 127.5 equals 0. After that the values have to be downsampled. Usually we were sampling with 250 kHz. This is still much more than we need assuming an Additive White Gaussian Noise (AWGN) channel with a  $S/N = 10 \text{ dB}$  (cf. equation 5). So we decided to reduce the sampling frequency to 25 kHz.

$$C = B \cdot \log_2\left(1 + \frac{S}{N}\right) = 25 \text{ kHz} \cdot \log_2(11) \approx 86.5 \text{ kbit/s} \quad (5)$$

To do this it is important to use an anti-aliasing filter, as the Shannon-Nyquist theorem has to be satisfied:

$$f_{\text{samp}} \geq 2 \cdot f_a \quad (6)$$

$f_a$  is the highest frequency in the signal. A FIR filter naively implemented with floats has been used to achieve this. 10 kHz is the cut-off frequency of the first filter. All filters have been constructed with the internal filter design tool of GNU radio. After downsampling another filter is used to suppress noise. This filter has a cut-off frequency of 3 kHz. The last demodulation step is to rectify the signal (cf. equation 7) and decide with a software-defined Schmitt trigger whether a sample is a 1 or a 0.

$$\text{abs}(I, Q) = \sqrt{I^2 + Q^2} \quad (7)$$

These samples are broadcast on the bus. A registered listener receives the processed samples. This registered listener is the decoder, which is represented as an object as well. After the decoder received the samples it decides when a frame is sent or when the channel is idle. On the basis of a defined threshold the decoder determines whether a certain sample pattern of ones and zeros is a 1 bit or a 0 bit. The baudrate and the sampling rate lead to a certain bit duration. For example a sample rate  $f_{\text{sampling}}$  of 25 kHz combined with a baudrate of 1 kbit/s leads to 25 samples/bit. The decoder also includes a function to correlate the received bitstream with an expected pattern. Hence it is able to determine the bit error ratio (BER). Furthermore the code we have written so far subsumes a simulator to simulate ideal data coming out of the demodulator to test the algorithms behind the decoder. Also a simulator for the RTL2832U has been written to replay recorded samples, which facilitates debugging as well. Another handy utility, which has been written in Octave, is a tool (an oscilloscope) to

<sup>5</sup>Carlos: We need to explain this in the background

look at the data, which is written into files by the demodulator. An example of a recorded data stream with 25 kS/s can be seen in figure 4.

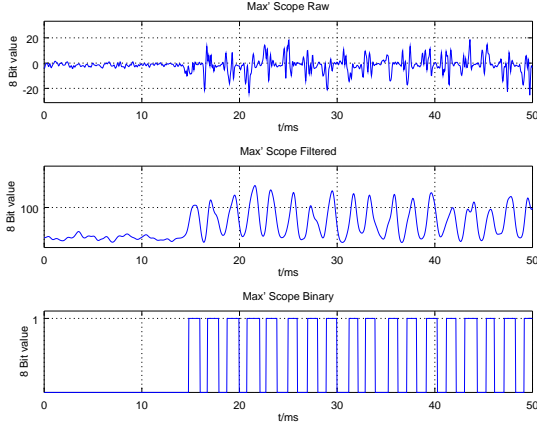


Fig. 4: Start of a transmission of 101010.. with 1 kbit/s with idle state before. Data from the Octave oscilloscope. Amplitude is quite low with an average of 12 % of the maximum, which is 127.5. This is due to a low signal strength.

#### IV. EVALUATION

In this section we present our evaluation results. The *RTL-SDR*, combined with intelligent signal processing in *Octave*, are the main tools we have employed.

##### A. Signal Strength Variation in Space

We have used the textitRTL-SDR to observe the space variations of the signal strength. *Octave* scripts have been written to aid in this purpose. These scripts are available online under <https://github.com/s3xm3x/RTLSDRspecAn>. The scripts perform a frequency sweep through the desired band. The obtained samples are then transferred from the time domain to the frequency domain using an FFT.

Because the RTL-SDR has a maximum sampling rate of 1.8 MSPs, we are limited to a maximum simultaneous acquisition band of 900 kHz. Because of this, we sample the desired frequency band at 900 kHz intervals and stitch these bands together to form the overall frequency sweep. This approach

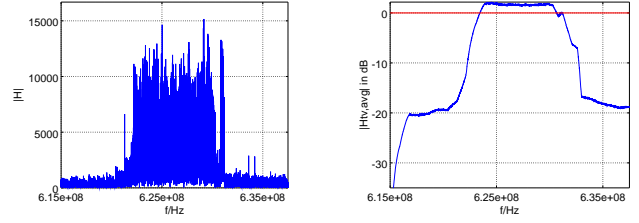


Fig. 5: Spectrum of the TV signal. Right: Raw spectrum of the TV signal with  $f_{\text{center}} = 626$  Mhz. Left: Smoothed spectrum, normalized to maximum average measured in decibel with average shown as red line.

is valid only because we are not interested in real-time data. With this approach we are able to scan a 20 MHz band in roughly two minutes.<sup>6</sup>

During the scanning process the gain is set to 40.2 dB. To get the signal strength we simply take the average over a 10 MHz band around the center frequency of the desired TV signal. This approach can be justified by the fact, that DVB-T is specified up to 10 MHz bandwidth. And the local TV signal provider is to its own statements using DVB-T 2. The signal  $|H|$  is calculated as follows.

$$|H| = \left| \sum_{n=0}^N \text{FFT}(\Re\{s_{\text{band},n}(t)\}) \right| \quad (8)$$

Where  $N$  is the total number of FFT bins accumulated over the entire frequency sweep<sup>7</sup>. The FFT is only carried out over the real values, which are received from the *RTL-SDR*.  $s_{\text{band},n}(t)$  is the signal in the time domain of one band. There are as many samples taken in one band as needed for an FFT of size 2048. No window is used when stitching individual scans together. One can see, the effects of this a little bit, when taking a closer look at the plotted data. Rising and falling edges at the beginning of each band are visible. To get  $|H_{\text{tv},\text{avg}}|$  one has to normalize everything and calculate the power. Before doing that a simple smoothing algorithm (FIR) is applied on  $|H|$ .

$$|H_{\text{tv},\text{avg}}| = 20 \cdot \log(|H|) - 20 \cdot \log(|H_0|) \quad (9)$$

where  $|H_0|$  is a normalization value measured at a certain point in space.

##### B. Signal Strength Variation over Time

##### C. Communication Performance

We tested the communication with different data rates from 1 bit/s up to 1 kbit/s. As one can see in figure 4 the signal

<sup>6</sup>Carlos: Please confirm these things.

<sup>7</sup>Carlos: Please confirm I got this right

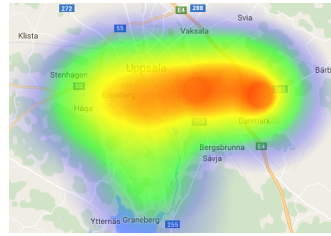
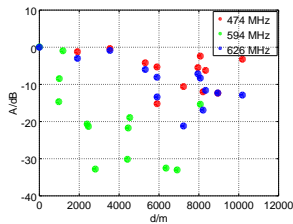


Fig. 6: Signal strength fading against distance relative to the spot where the maximum signal strength has been captured (TV towers). 474 MHz and 626 MHz belong to a tower in Uppsala, Vedyxa and 594 MHz belongs to a tower in Uppsala, Rickomberga. Distances have been calculated with the Haversine formula.

strength is really low after backscattering. This leads to the problem, that the signal has a really bad quality. This related to the fact, that not all bits of the A/D converter are used. Hence a lot of quantization noise is introduced. In other words more gain is needed. The transmission shown in figure 4 was carried out with the maximum gain of 50 dB, which is available with the in II-B described tuner. So we got to the limits of the *RTL-SDR* at that point. We were able to achieve a range indoors with 1 bit/s of a couple of meters, but when we use a higher bitrate we can only communicate over a range of a couple of decimeter and still have a bit error ratio of approximately 40 %. The communication experiment was also carried out outside closer to the tower. We could not figure out any improvements going closer to the tower.

## V. DISCUSSION

We are aware of the fact, that our communication system has to be improved until it is able to be used in allday technology. These are aspects, where fine tuning is necessary to enhance the performance:

- Antennas: Different backscattering antennas have to be tried out to find the one with the best results. The question is mainly to which frequency the antenna has to be tuned (e.g. to the center of the TV signal or more to the edge of it). Moreover the standard *RTL-SDR* antenna including the coaxial cable are of quite low quality. The antenna is e.g. to short.
- Receiver: Some fine tuning can be made when it comes to the filter coefficients of the different filters.
- Frame: The frame structure can be optimized to be able to correct errors (e.g. Hamming code).

To come to a conclusion one can say, that we were able

- to show, that spectrum scanning over a huge band with sweeping is possible using the *RTL-SDR*.

- to provide a heat map of tv signals in a mid-sized swedish city as well as the tools to create it.
- to show for the first time, that backscatter communication is possible with the *RTL-SDR*.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to thank...

## REFERENCES

- [1] V. Liu, A. Parks, V. Talla, S. Gollakota, D. Wetherall, and J. R. Smith, "Ambient Backscatter: Wireless Communication out of Thin Air," in *Proceedings of the ACM SIGCOMM 2013 Conference on SIGCOMM*, ser. SIGCOMM '13. New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2013, pp. 39–50. [Online]. Available: <http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/2486001.2486015>
- [2] A. N. Parks, A. Liu, S. Gollakota, and J. R. Smith, "Turbocharging Ambient Backscatter Communication," in *Proceedings of the 2014 ACM Conference on SIGCOMM*, ser. SIGCOMM '14. New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2014, pp. 619–630. [Online]. Available: <http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/2619239.2626312>
- [3] A. Wang, V. Iyer, V. Talla, J. Smith, and S. Gollakota, "FM Backscatter: Enabling Connected Cities and Smart Fabrics," 2017.
- [4] "steve-m/librtlsdr." [Online]. Available: <https://github.com/steve-m/librtlsdr>
- [5] Rafael Micro, "High Performance Low Power Advanced Digital TV Silicon Tuner. R820t, Rev 1.2." [Online]. Available: <http://www.rafaelmicro.com/product/view/21>
- [6] D. M. Pozar, *Microwave Engineering*, 4th ed. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, Nov. 2011.