



The Design, Implementation, and Deployment of a System to Transparently Compress Hundreds of Petabytes of Image Files for a File-Storage Service

**Daniel Reiter Horn, Ken Elkabany, and Chris Lesniewski-Lass, *Dropbox*;
Keith Winstein, *Stanford University***

<https://www.usenix.org/conference/nsdi17/technical-sessions/presentation/horn>

**This paper is included in the Proceedings of the
14th USENIX Symposium on Networked Systems
Design and Implementation (NSDI '17).**

March 27–29, 2017 • Boston, MA, USA

ISBN 978-1-931971-37-9

**Open access to the Proceedings of the
14th USENIX Symposium on Networked
Systems Design and Implementation
is sponsored by USENIX.**

The Design, Implementation, and Deployment of a System to Transparently Compress Hundreds of Petabytes of Image Files For a File-Storage Service

Daniel Reiter Horn
Dropbox

Ken Elkabany
Dropbox

Chris Lesniewski-Laas
Dropbox

Keith Winstein
Stanford University

Abstract

We report the design, implementation, and deployment of Lepton, a fault-tolerant system that losslessly compresses JPEG images to 77% of their original size on average. Lepton replaces the lowest layer of baseline JPEG compression—a Huffman code—with a parallelized arithmetic code, so that the exact bytes of the original JPEG file can be recovered quickly. Lepton matches the compression efficiency of the best prior work, while decoding more than nine times faster and in a streaming manner. Lepton has been released as open-source software and has been deployed for a year on the Dropbox file-storage backend. As of February 2017, it had compressed more than 203 PiB of user JPEG files, saving more than 46 PiB.

1 Introduction

In the last decade, centrally hosted network filesystems have grown to serve hundreds of millions of users. These services include Amazon Cloud Drive, Box, Dropbox, Google Drive, Microsoft OneDrive, and SugarSync.

Commercially, these systems typically offer users a storage quota in exchange for a flat monthly fee, or no fee at all. Meanwhile, the cost to operate such a system increases with the amount of data actually stored. Therefore, operators benefit from anything that reduces the net amount of data they store.

These filesystems have become gargantuan. After less than ten years in operation, the Dropbox system contains roughly one exabyte ($\pm 50\%$) of data, even after applying techniques such as deduplication and zlib compression.

We report on our experience with a different technique: **format-specific transparent file compression, based on a statistical model tuned to perform well on a large corpus.**

In operating Dropbox, we observed that JPEG images [10] make up roughly 35% of the bytes stored. We suspected that most of these images were compressed inefficiently, either because they were limited to “baseline” methods that were royalty-free in the 1990s, or because they were encoded by fixed-function compression chips.

In response, we built a compression tool, called Lepton, **that replaces the lowest layer of baseline JPEG images—the lossless Huffman coding—with a custom statistical model** that we tuned to perform well across a broad corpus of JPEG images stored in Dropbox. Lepton losslessly

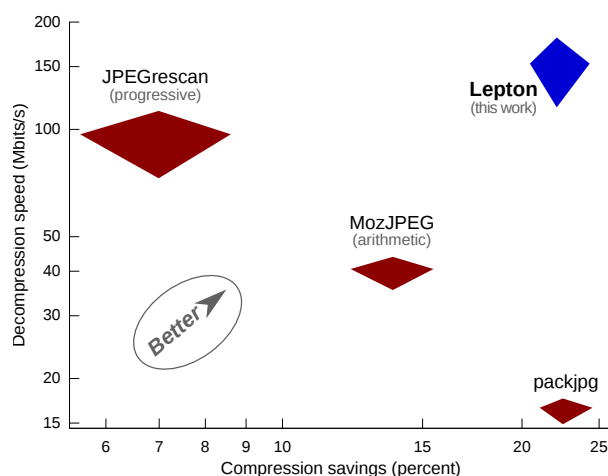


Figure 1: Compression savings and decompression speed (time-to-last-byte) of four lossless JPEG compression tools. Diamonds show 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles across 200,000 JPEGs between 100 KiB and 4 MiB (§ 4).

compresses an average JPEG image by about 23%. This is expected to save Dropbox more than 8% of its overall backend file storage. Lepton introduces new techniques that allow it to match the compression savings of prior work (PackJPG) while decoding more than nine times faster and in a streaming manner (Figure 1).

Some of the challenges in building Lepton included:

- **Round-trip transparency.** Lepton needs to **deterministically recover the exact bytes** of the original file, even for intentionally malformed files, and even after updates to the Lepton software since the file was originally compressed.
- **Distribution across independent chunks.** The Dropbox back-end stores files in independent 4-MiB chunks across many servers. **Lepton must be able to decompress any substring of a JPEG file, without access to other substrings.**
- **Low latency and streaming.** Because users are sensitive to file download latency, we must optimize decompression—from Lepton’s format back into Huffman-coded JPEG output—for both time-to-first-byte and time-to-last-byte. To achieve this, the Lepton format includes “Huffman handover words” that enable **the decoder to be multithreaded** and to start transmitting bytes soon after a request.

- **Security.** Before reading input data, Lepton enters a restricted environment where the only allowed system calls are `read`, `write`, `exit`, and `sigreturn`. Lepton must pre-spawn threads and allocate all memory before it sees any input.
- **Memory.** To preserve server resources, Lepton must work **row-by-row** on a JPEG file, instead of decoding the entire file into RAM.

We deployed Lepton in April 2016 on the production Dropbox service. Compression is applied immediately to all uploads of new JPEG files. We are gradually compressing files in existing storage and have ramped up to a rate of roughly a petabyte per day of input, consuming about 300 kilowatts continuously. As of February 2017, Lepton had been run on more than 150 billion user files, accounting for more than 203 PiB of input. It reduced their size by a total of more than 46 PiB. We have released Lepton as open-source software [1].

We report here on Lepton’s design (§ 3), evaluation (§ 4), and production deployment (§ 5), and share a number of case studies and anomalies (§ 6) encountered in operating the system at a large scale.

2 Related Work

In network filesystems and storage services, four general categories of approaches are used to compress user files.

Generic entropy compression. Many filesystems compress files using generic techniques, such as the Deflate algorithm [6], which combines LZ77 compression [23] and Huffman coding [8] and is used by software such as `zlib`, `pkzip`, and `gzip`. More recent algorithms such as LZMA [15], Brotli [3], and Zstandard [5] achieve a range of tradeoffs of compression savings and speed.

In practice, none of these algorithms achieve much compression on “already compressed” files, including JPEGs. In our evaluation on 200,000 randomly selected user JPEG images, each of these algorithms achieved savings of 1% or less (§ 4).

Lossy image compression. A second category of approach involves decoding user images and re-compressing them into a more-efficient format, at the cost of some visual fidelity. The “more-efficient format” may simply be a lower-resolution or lower-quality JPEG. The JPEG files produced by fixed-function hardware encoders in cellular-phone cameras can typically be reduced in size by 70% before users see a perceptual difference [19]. The re-compression may also use more sophisticated techniques such as WebP or single-frame H.265. With this approach, storage savings for the provider can be as high as users are willing to tolerate. However, Dropbox does not modify user files, precluding these approaches.

Format-aware pixel-exact recompression. Several tools let users re-compress JPEG files to achieve more-

efficient compression without affecting the decoded image. These tools include JPEGrescan [13] and MozJPEG [2], both based on the `jpegtran` tool written by the Independent JPEG Group [9]. The tools employ two key techniques: replacing Huffman coding with arithmetic coding (which is more efficient but was patent-encumbered when JPEG was formalized and is not part of the baseline JPEG standard), and rewriting the file in “progressive” order, which can group similar values together and result in more efficient coding. Xu et al. developed a related algorithm which uses a large number of context-dependent Huffman tables to encode JPEG images, reporting average compression savings of 15% in 30-50ms [22]. These tools preserve the exact pixels of the decoded image, but do not allow bit-exact round-trip recovery of the original file.

Format-aware, file-preserving recompression. A final set of tools can re-compress a JPEG file with round-trip recovery of the exact bytes of the original file. These include PackJPG [17, 11] and PAQ8PX [12]. These tools use different techniques, but in our evaluations, achieved roughly the same compression savings (23%) on average.

These tools use techniques unavailable in a real-time setting. For example, one of PackJPG’s compression techniques requires re-arranging all of the compressed pixel values in the file in a globally sorted order. This means that **decompression is single-threaded, requires access to the entire file, and requires decoding the image into RAM before any byte can be output**. The time-to-first-byte and time-to-last-byte are too high to satisfy the service goals for the Dropbox service. PAQ8PX is considerably slower.

Lepton was inspired by PackJPG and the algorithms developed by Lakhani [11], and Lepton uses the same JPEG-parsing routines that PackJPG uses (`uncmpjpg`). However, unlike PackJPG, Lepton only utilizes compression techniques that can be implemented without “global” operations, so that decoding can be distributed across independent chunks and multithreaded within each chunk.

3 Lepton: Design and Implementation

At its core, Lepton is a stand-alone tool that performs round-trip compression and decompression of baseline JPEG files. We have released Lepton as open-source software [1]; it builds and runs on Linux, MacOS, Windows, iOS, Android, and Emscripten (JavaScript).

In its current deployment at Dropbox, Lepton is executed directly by a back-end file server or, when a file server is under high load, execution is “outsourced” from the file server to a cluster of machines dedicated to Lepton only (§ 5.5). **Thus, compression and decompression is currently transparent to client software and does not reduce network utilization**. In the future, we may include Lepton in the client software, in order to save network bandwidth and distribute the computation load.

In contrast to related work (§ 2), Lepton was designed to **meet constraints** specific to real-time compression and decompression in a distributed network filesystem:

Distribution across independent chunks. Decompression must be able to be distributed across independent pieces. The Dropbox back-end stores files in chunks of at most 4 MiB, spread across many servers. Client software retrieves each chunk independently. Therefore, Lepton must be able to decompress any substring of a JPEG file, without access to other substrings. By contrast, the *compression* process is not subject to the same constraints, because performance does not affect user-visible latency. In practice, Lepton compresses the first chunk in a file immediately when uploaded, and compresses subsequent chunks later after assembling the whole file in one place.

Within chunks, parallel decoding and streaming. Decoding occurs when a client asks to retrieve a chunk from a network file server, typically over a consumer Internet connection. Therefore, it is not sufficient for Lepton simply to have a reasonable time-to-last-byte for decompressing a 4-MiB chunk. **The file server must start streaming bytes quickly to start filling up the client's network connection, even if the whole chunk has not yet been decompressed.**

In addition, average decoding speed must be fast enough to saturate a typical user's Internet connection (**> 100 Mbps**). In practice, this means that decoding must be **multithreaded**, including both the decoding of the Lepton-format compressed file (arithmetic code decoding) and the re-encoding of the user's Huffman-coded baseline-JPEG file. To accomplish the latter, the Lepton-format files are partitioned into segments (one for each decoding thread), and each thread's segment starts with a "Huffman handover word" to allow that thread's Huffman encoder to resume in mid-symbol at a byte boundary.

We now give an overview of JPEG compression and discuss the design of Lepton subject to these requirements.

3.1 Overview of JPEG compression

A baseline JPEG image file has two sections—**headers (including comments) and the image data itself (the "scan")**. Lepton compresses the headers with existing lossless techniques ([6]). The "scan" encodes an array of quantized coefficients, grouped into sets of 64 coefficients known as "blocks." Each coefficient represents the amplitude of a particular 8x8 basis function; to decode the JPEG itself, these basis functions are summed, weighted by each coefficient, and the resulting image is displayed. This is known as an inverse Discrete Cosine Transform.

In a baseline JPEG file, the coefficients are written using a Huffman code [8], which allows more-probable values to consume fewer bits in the output, saving space overall. The Huffman "tables," given in the header, define

the probability model that determines which coefficient values will be considered more or less probable. The more accurate the model, the smaller the resulting file.

Lepton makes two major changes to this scheme. First, it replaces the Huffman code with an arithmetic code¹, a more efficient technique that was patent-encumbered at the time the JPEG specification was published (but no longer). Second, Lepton uses **a sophisticated adaptive probability model** that we developed by testing on a large corpus of images in the wild. The goal of the model is to produce the most accurate predictions for each coefficient's value, and therefore the smallest file size.

3.2 Lepton's probability model: no sorting, but more complexity

Arithmetic probability models typically use an array of "statistic bins," each of which tracks the probability of a "one" vs. a "zero" bit given a particular prior context. The JPEG specification includes extensions for arithmetic-coded files [10], using a probability model with about 300 bins.² The PackJPG tool uses about 6,400 bins, after sorting every coefficient in the image to place correlated coefficients in the same context.

In designing Lepton, we needed to avoid global operations (such as sorting) that defeat streaming or multithreaded decoding. One key insight is that such operations can be avoided by expanding the statistical model to cover correlations across long distances in the file, without needing to sort the data. Lepton's model uses 721,564 bins, each applied in a different context.

These contexts include the type of coefficient, e.g. "DC" (the basis function that represents the average brightness or color over an 8x8 block) vs. "AC," and the index of an "AC" coefficient within a block. Each coefficient is encoded with an Exp-Golomb code [18], and statistic bins are then used to track the likelihood of a "one" bit in this encoding, given the values of already-encoded coefficients that may be correlated.

At the start of an encoding or decoding thread, the statistic bins are each initialized to a 50-50 probability of zeros vs. ones. The probabilities are then adapted as the file is decoded, with each bin counting the number of "ones" and "zeroes" encountered so far.

The bins are independent, so a "one" seen in one context will not affect the prediction made in another. **As a result, the number and arrangement of bins is important:** compression efficiency suffers from the curse of dimensionality if too many bins are used, because the coder/decoder cannot learn useful information from similar contexts.

¹Lepton implements a modified version of a VP8 [4] range coder.

²Performance is shown in Figure 1 in the diamond labeled "MozJPEG (arithmetic)." Arithmetic-coded JPEGs are not included in the widely-supported "baseline" version of the specification because they were patent-encumbered at the time the standard was published.

3.3 Details of Lepton’s probability model

We developed Lepton’s probability model empirically, based on a handful of photos that we captured with popular consumer cameras. We then froze the model and tested on randomly selected images from the Dropbox filesystem; performance on the “development” images correlated well with real-world performance (§ 4). The development images and the full probability model are included in the open-source release [1] and are detailed in Appendix A.2. We briefly summarize here.

For each 8x8 JPEG block, Lepton encodes 49 AC coefficients (7x7), 14 “edge” AC coefficients of horizontal (7x1) and vertical (1x7) variation, and 1 DC coefficient.

For the 7x7 AC coefficients, we predict the Golomb code bits by averaging the corresponding coefficients in the *above*, *left*, and *above-left* blocks. Hence, the bins for bits of C_i are indexed by $\langle i, \lfloor \log_2(|A_i| + |L_i| + \frac{1}{2}|AL_i|) \rfloor \rangle$.

For the 7x1 and 1x7 AC coefficients, we use the intuition supplied by Lakhani [11] to transform an entire column of a two-dimensional DCT into a one-dimensional DCT of an edge row. In this manner we can get pixel-adjacent 1D DCT coefficients from the bottom-most row of the *above* block and the top row of the current block. Likewise, we can use the neighboring right-most column of the *left* block to predict the left-most 1D DCT column of the current block.

To predict the DC coefficient, we assume image gradients are smooth across blocks. Linearly extrapolating the last two rows of pixels of the *above* and *left* blocks yields 16 edge pixel values. Since the DC coefficient is decoded last, we can use every AC coefficient to compute a predicted DC offset which minimizes average differences between the decoded block’s edge pixels and the edges extrapolated from neighbors. We only encode the delta between our predicted DC value and the true DC value, so close predictions yield small outputs. We achieved additional gains by indexing the statistics bins by outlier values and the variance of edge pixels, enabling Lepton’s model to adapt to non-smooth gradients.

These techniques yield significant improvements over using the same encoding for all coefficients (§ 4.3).

3.4 Decompressing independent chunks, with multi-threaded output

When a client requests a chunk from the Dropbox filesystem, the back-end file servers must run Lepton to decode the compressed chunk back into the original JPEG-format bytes. Conceptually this requires two steps: *decoding* the arithmetic-coded coefficients (using the Lepton probability model) and then *encoding* the coefficients using a Huffman code, using the Huffman probability model given in the file headers.

The first step, arithmetic decoding, can be parallelized by splitting the coefficients into independent segments,

with each segment decoded by one thread. Because the Lepton file format is under our control, we can use any number of such segments. However, adding threads decreases compression savings, because each thread’s model starts with 50-50 probabilities and adapts independently.

The second step, Huffman encoding, is more challenging. The user’s original JPEG file is not under our control and was not designed to make multithreaded encoding possible. This step can consume a considerable amount of CPU resources in the critical path and would consume a large fraction of the total latency if not parallelized. Moreover, Dropbox’s 4-MiB chunks may split the JPEG file arbitrarily, including in the middle of a Huffman-coded symbol. This presents a challenge for distributed decoding of independent chunks.

To solve this, we modified the Lepton file format to include explicit “Huffman handover words” at chunk and thread boundaries. This represents state necessary for the JPEG writer to resume in the middle of a file, including in mid-symbol. In particular, the Huffman handover words include the previous DC coefficient value (16 bits), because DC values are encoded in the JPEG specification as deltas to the previous DC value, making each chunk dependent on the previous. They also include the bit alignment or offset and partial byte to be written.

The Huffman handover words allow decoding to be parallelized both across segments within a chunk, and across chunks distributed across different file servers. Within a chunk, the Huffman handover words allow separate threads to each write their own segment of the JPEG output, which can simply be concatenated and sent to the user. The Lepton file format also includes a Huffman handover word and the original Huffman probability model at the start of each chunk, allowing chunks to be retrieved and decoded independently.

4 Performance evaluation

For our benchmarks, we collected 233,376 randomly sampled data chunks beginning with the JPEG start-of-image marker (0xFF, 0xD8) from the Dropbox store. Some of these chunks are JPEG files, some are not JPEGs, and some are the first 4 MiB of a large JPEG file. Since Lepton in production is applied on a chunk-by-chunk basis, and 85% of image storage is occupied by chunks with the JPEG start-of-image marker, this sampling gives a good approximation to the deployed system.

Lepton successfully compresses 96.4% of the sampled chunks. The remaining 3.6% of chunks (accounting for only 1.2% of bytes) were non-JPEG files, or JPEGs not supported by Lepton. Lepton detects and skips these files.

4.1 Size and speed versus other algorithms

In Figure 2 we compare Lepton’s performance against other compression algorithms built with the Intel C++

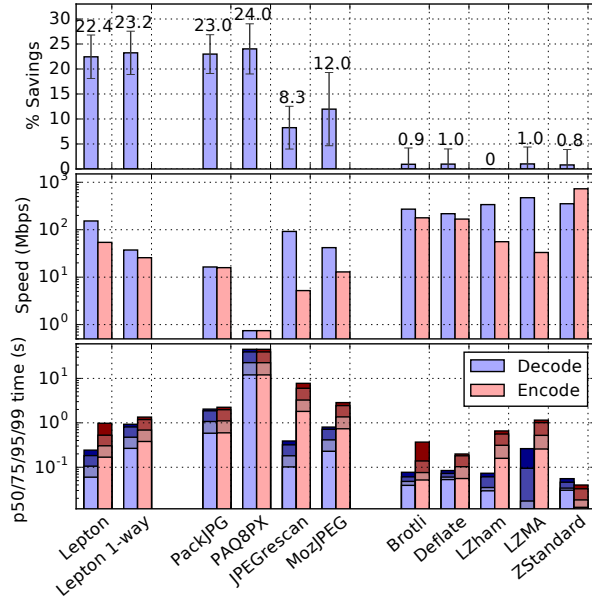


Figure 2: Compression savings and speed of codecs on the benchmark data-set (including chunks that Lepton cannot compress). Generic codecs (right) are fast, but only able to compress the JPEG header. JPEG-aware codecs (center) compress well, but are slow. Lepton (far left) is fast and compresses well.

Compiler 16.0 (icc) on a 2.6 GHz Intel Xeon E5 2650v2. We used the full benchmark data-set, including chunks that Lepton rejects as corrupt, progressive, or in the CMYK color space.

Lepton is the fastest of any format-aware compression algorithm, and it compresses about as well as the best-in-class algorithms. We also evaluated a single-threaded version of Lepton (Lepton 1-way), which we modified for maximum compression savings, by tallying statistic bins across the whole image rather than independent thread-segments. The format-aware PAQ8PX algorithm edges out single-threaded Lepton’s compression ratio by 0.8 percentage points, because it incorporates a variety of alternative compression engines that work on the 3.6% of files that Lepton rejects as corrupt. However, PAQ8PX pays a price in speed: it encodes 35 times slower and decodes 50 times slower than single-threaded Lepton.

In production, we care about utilizing our CPU, network and storage resources efficiently (§ 5.6.1), and we care about response time to users. Lepton can use 16 CPU cores to **decode at 300 Mbps by processing 2 images** concurrently. For interactive performance, we tuned Lepton to decode image chunks in under 250 ms at the 99th percentile (p99), and the median (p50) decode time is under 60 ms. This is an order of magnitude faster than PackJPG, $1.5\times$ – $4\times$ faster than JPEGGrescan and MozJPEG, and close to Deflate or Brotli. Encoding is also fast: 1 s at the 99th percentile and 170 ms in the median case, substantially better than any other algorithm that achieves appreciable compression.

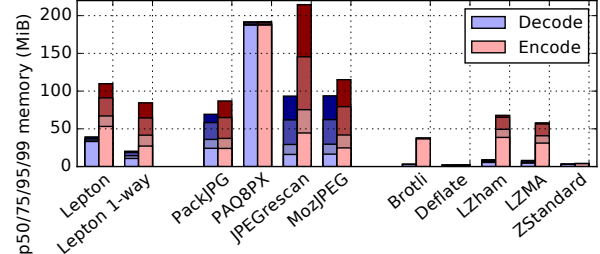


Figure 3: Max resident memory used by different algorithms.

Category	Original bytes	Compression Ratio	Bytes saved
Header	$2.3\% \pm 4.2$	$47.6\% \pm 19.8$	$1.0\% \pm 1.8$
7x7 AC	$49.7\% \pm 7.1$	$80.2\% \pm 3.2$	$9.8\% \pm 1.7$
7x1/1x7	$39.8\% \pm 4.7$	$78.7\% \pm 3.9$	$8.6\% \pm 2.2$
DC	$8.2\% \pm 2.6$	$59.9\% \pm 8.7$	$3.4\% \pm 1.6$
Total	100%	$77.3\% \pm 3.6$	$22.7\% \pm 3.6$

Figure 4: Breakdown of compression ratio (compressed size / uncompressed size) by JPEG file components.

4.2 Memory usage

Lepton shares production hosts with other, memory-hungry processes, so limiting memory usage was a significant design goal. This is particularly important for the decode path because, under memory pressure, our servers can fall back to encoding using Deflate, but we do not have that option for decoding.

Figure 3 shows the memory usage of Lepton and other algorithms on our benchmark. For decoding, single-threaded Lepton uses a hard maximum of 24 MiB to store the model and temporary buffers. Multithreaded Lepton duplicates the model for each thread, using 39 MiB at the 99th percentile. This compares favorably with other algorithms using 69–192 MiB.

Decoding can stream the output, but encoding currently retains all pixels in memory so each thread can operate on its own spatially contiguous region of pixels. Thus, the memory profile of Lepton encoding is similar to PackJPG and MozJPEG.

4.3 Compression savings by component

For the sampled chunks that Lepton successfully compresses, Figure 4 shows how each part of the file contributed to the total compression ratio, among JPEG files, of $77.3\% \pm 3.6$ (with multithreading enabled).

Lakhani-inspired edge prediction [11] contributes 1.5% of overall compression savings. Compared with baseline PackJPG [17] (which used the same predictions for all AC coefficients), it improved the compression of 7x1/1x7 AC coefficients from 82.5% to 78.7%. DC gradient prediction contributes 1.6% of overall savings, improving the compression of DC coefficients from 79.4% (using baseline PackJPG’s approach) to 59.9%.³

³By “baseline PackJPG”, we refer here to the algorithm described in the 2007 publication [17]. However, for fairness, all other performance comparisons in this paper (e.g., Figures 1, 2, 3) use the latest version

5 Deployment at Scale

To deploy Lepton at large scale, without compromising durability, we faced two key design requirements: **determinism and security**. Our threat model includes intentionally corrupt files that seek to compress or decompress improperly or cause Lepton to execute unintended or arbitrary code or otherwise consume excess resources.

With determinism, a single successful roundtrip test guarantees that the file will be recoverable later. However, it is difficult to prove highly optimized C++ code to be either deterministic or secure, even with bounds checks enabled. Undefined behavior is a core mechanism by which C++ compilers produce efficient code [21], and inline assembly may be required to produce fast inner loops, but both hinder analysis of safety and determinism. At present, safer languages (including Rust and Java) have difficulty achieving high performance in image processing without resorting to similarly unsafe mechanisms.

We wrote Lepton in C++, and we enforce security and determinism using Linux’s secure computing mode (SECCOMP). We have also cross-tested Lepton at scale using multiple different compilers.

5.1 Security with SECCOMP

When SECCOMP is activated, the kernel disallows all system calls a process may make except for read, write, exit and sigreturn. This means a program may not open new files, fork, or allocate memory. Lepton allocates a zeroed 200-MiB region of memory upfront, before reading user data, and sets up pipes to each of its threads before initiating SECCOMP. Memory is allocated from the main thread to avoid the need for thread synchronization.

5.2 Imperfect efforts to achieve deterministic C++

To help determinism, the Lepton binary is statically linked, and all heap allocations are zeroed before use. However, this setup was insufficient to detect a buffer overrun from incorrect index math in the Lepton model (§ 6.1). We had an additional fail-safe mechanism to detect nondeterminism. Before deploying any version of Lepton, we run it on over a billion randomly selected images (4 billion for the first version), and then decompress each with the same binary and additionally with a single-threaded version of the same code built with gcc using the address sanitizer and undefined-behavior checker [16]. This system detected the nondeterministic buffer overrun after just a few million images were processed and has caught some further issues since (§ 6.7).

5.3 Impact

As of Feb. 16, 2017, Lepton has encoded 203 PiB of images, reducing the size of those images by 46 PiB.

of the PackJPG software, which has various unpublished improvements over the 2007 version.

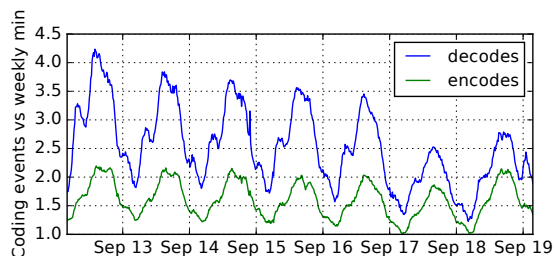


Figure 5: Weekday upload rates are similar to weekends, but weekday download rates of Lepton images are higher.

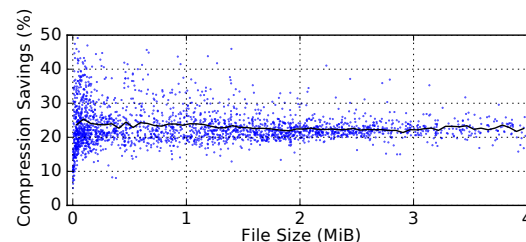


Figure 6: Compression savings on production workloads are uniform across file sizes.

The traffic has been divided between live encode traffic and a steady rate of background encoding of older images. Dropbox has decoded and served 427 billion Lepton-compressed images.

5.4 Workload

Lepton has been in production since April 14⁴, and has been on the serving path for all uploads and hundreds of billions of downloads. A typical week can be observed in Figure 5. On the weekends, users tend to produce the same number of photos but sync fewer to their clients, so the ratio of decodes to encodes approaches 1.0. On weekdays, users tend to consume significantly more photos than they produce and the ratio approaches 1.5. Over the last 6 months Dropbox has encoded images with Lepton at between 2 and 12 GiB per second.

When the Lepton encoder accepts a three-color, valid, baseline JPEG, that file compresses down to, on average, 77.31% of its original size (22.69% savings). The savings are uniform across file sizes, as illustrated in Figure 6.

Small images are able to compress well because they are configured with fewer threads than larger images and hence have a higher proportion of the image upon which to train each probability bin. The number of threads per image was selected empirically based on when the overhead of thread startup outweighed the gains of multithreading. The multithreading cutoffs can be noticed in the production performance scatter plot in Figure 7. Because Lepton is streaming, the working set is roughly fixed in size. Profiling the decoder using hardware counters confirmed that the L1 cache is rarely missed. Nearly all L1 delays are due to pipeline stalls, not cache misses.

⁴All dates are in 2016 and times are in UTC.

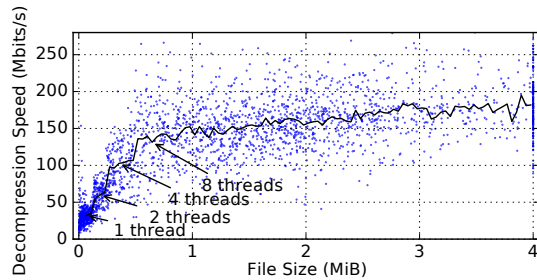


Figure 7: Decompression speed given an input file size.

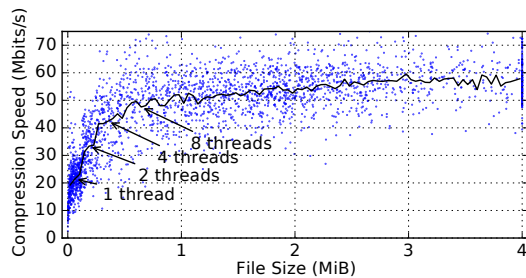


Figure 8: Compression speed given an input file size.

The compression speed, shown in Figure 8, is similar, but it is almost unaffected by the benefit of moving to 8 threads from 4. This is because at 4 threads the bottleneck shifts to the JPEG Huffman decoder, away from the arithmetic coding. This is solved in the Lepton decoder with the Huffman handover words, but the Lepton encoder must decode the original JPEG serially.

5.5 Outsourcing

Blockservers are machines that, among other tasks, respond to requests to store or retrieve data chunks, whether Lepton-compressed JPEGs or Deflate-compressed files. Load balancers, which do not inspect the type of request, randomly distribute requests across the blockserver fleet.

Each blockserver has 16 cores, which means that 2 simultaneous Lepton decodes (or encodes) can completely utilize a machine. However, blockservers are configured to handle many more than 2 simultaneous requests, because non-Lepton requests are far less resource-intensive. Therefore, a blockserver can become oversubscribed with work, negatively affecting Lepton’s performance, if it is randomly assigned 3 or more Lepton conversions at once. Without outsourcing, there are an average of 5 encodes/s during the Thursday peak. Individual blockservers will routinely get 15 encodes at once during peak, to the point where there is never a full minute where there isn’t at least one machine doing 11 parallel encodes during an hour of peak traffic, as illustrated in the Control line in Figure 9.

We mitigated this problem by allowing overloaded blockservers to “outsource” compression operations to other machines. Inspired by the power of two random choices [14], Lepton will outsource any compression operations that occur on machines that have more than three conversions happening at a time.

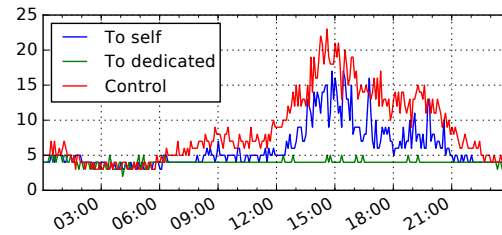


Figure 9: 99th-percentile of concurrent Lepton processes on Sept. 15 with listed outsourcing strategy and threshold=4.

Under normal operation, when the system is under low load, Lepton operates by listening on a Unix-domain socket for files. A file is read from the socket, and the (de)compressed output is written back to the socket. The file is complete once the socket is shut down for writing. When outsourcing, instead of a Unix-domain-socket connection to a local Lepton process, the blockserver instead will make a TCP connection to a machine tagged for outsourcing within the same building in the same datacenter.⁵ The overhead from switching from a Unix-domain socket to a remote TCP socket was 7.9% on average.

We have two alternative strategies for selecting machines for outsourcing. **The simpler idea was to dedicate a cluster of machines ready to serve Lepton traffic for overloaded blockservers.** This cluster is easy to provision to meet traffic demands and can be packed full of work since there are no contending processes on the machines.

Our other strategy was to mark each blockserver as an outsourcing target for other blockservers (denoted “To Self”). The intuition is that in the unlikely case of a current blockserver being overloaded, the randomly chosen outsource destination is likely to be less overloaded than the current machine at the exact contended instant.

5.5.1 Outsourcing Results

Figure 10 illustrates that outsourcing reduces the p99 by 50% at peak from 1.63 s to 1.08 s and the p95 by 25%.

The dedicated cluster reduces the p99 more than simply outsourcing directly to other, busy, blockservers, especially at peak. However, rebalancing traffic within the same cluster of blockservers has the added effect of reducing the p50 as well, since there are fewer hotspots because of the additional load balancing.

5.6 Backfill

Lepton has been configured to use spare compute capacity to gradually compress older JPEG files in storage, a process we call “backfilling.” To this end, we developed a small system called DropSpot. DropSpot monitors the

⁵Initially it seemed to make sense logistically to select an outsourcing destination simply in the same metro location as the busy blockserver. However, in measuring the pairwise conversion times, our datacenters in an East Coast U.S. location had a 50% latency increase for conversions happening in a different building or room within, and in a West Coast location, the difference could be as high as a factor of 2.

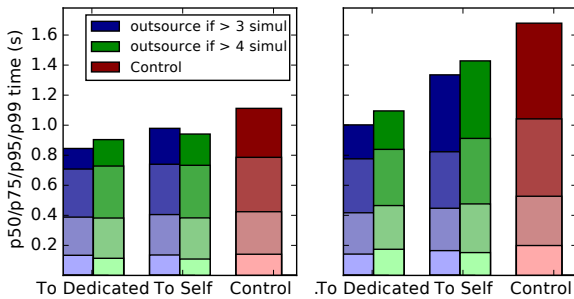


Figure 10: Percentile timings of JPEG compression near to peak traffic (left) and at peak traffic (right) with 2 outsourcing strategies when concurrent Lepton processes exceed a threshold (denoted with bar color) on the local machine.

spare capacity in each server room, and when the free machines in a room exceed a threshold, a machine is allocated for Lepton encoding. When too few machines are free, DropSpot releases some.

Wiping and reimaging the machine with the necessary software takes 2-4 hours, so a sufficiently diverse reserve of machines must be available for on-demand use. The backfill system can be run on Amazon spot instances, but our goal of 6,000 encodes per second has been attainable using spare capacity.

In July, all user accounts were added to a sharded table in a database service backed by MySQL. For a Lepton backfill worker to find images to encode, it sends a request to the metadata servers (metaservers) to request work from a randomly chosen shard. The metaserver selects the next 128 user-ids from the table in the corresponding shard. The metaserver scans the filesystem for each user, for all files with names containing the case-insensitive string “.jp” (likely jpeg or jpg). The metaserver builds a list of SHA-256 sums of each 4-MiB chunk of each matching file until it obtains up to 16,384 chunks. The metaserver returns a response with all the SHA-256 sums, the list of user ids to process, and a final, partial user with a token to resume that user. The worker then downloads each chunk and compresses it. It double-checks the result with the gcc address-sanitizer version of Lepton in both single and multithreaded mode, and uploads the compressed version back to Dropbox.

5.6.1 Cost Effectiveness

The cluster has a power footprint of 278 kW and it encodes 5,583 chunks per second (Figure 11). This means that one kWh can be traded for an average of 72,300 Lepton conversions of images sized at an average of 1.5 MB each. Thus, a kWh can save 24 GiB of storage, permanently. The power usage includes three extraneous decodes, which could be tallied as future reads, since the file is redundantly checked three times during backfill.

Imagining a depowered 5TB hard drive costing \$120 with no redundancy or checks, the savings from the extra

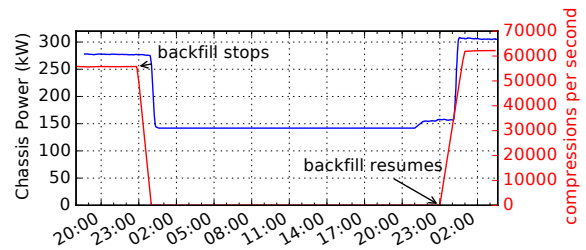


Figure 11: Overall Dropbox datacenter power usage graph on Sept. 26, 2016. During an outage, Lepton backfill was disabled. When shut off, the power usage dropped by 121 kW.

space would be worthwhile as long as a kWh costed less than \$0.58. Even in Denmark, where electricity costs about \$0.40 per kWh, Lepton would be a worthwhile investment for somewhat balanced read/write load of 3:1. Most countries offer prices between \$0.07 and \$0.12 per kWh. With cross-zone replication, erasure coding, and regular self-checks, 24 GiB of storage costs significantly more in practice. For instance, buying a year storage for 24 GiB on Amazon S3’s Infrequent Access Storage tier, as of February 2017, would cost \$3.60 each year, excluding any data read fees, making the actual savings even more clear.

To get the full 5,583 conversions per second, 964 machines are required. This means that each Intel Xeon E5 2650 v2 at 2.6 GHz can backfill 5.75 images per second. This means each server can process 181,500,000 images per year, saving 58.8 TiB of storage. At Amazon S3 Infrequent Access pricing, this would cost \$9,031 per year, justifying the savings. Additionally, the storage savings will recur, year over year, while the capital expense of the Xeon for a year will be much less than \$9,000 and will depreciate only once.

5.7 Safety Mechanisms

During the initial roll-out, after Lepton was activated for several days after April 14th, all of the several hundred TiB of compressed images had been downloaded in compressed form and decompressed twice in a row, once with a gcc, asan-enabled, Lepton and another time with the default productionized icc Lepton in multithreaded mode.

There are also alerts in place that page a member of the Lepton team if a particular chunk is unable to be decompressed. The construction of this alert required some care (§ 6.6). There is a “playbook entry” for the person on call to immediately disable Lepton.

The shutoff switch operates by placing a file with a predetermined name in /dev/shm, and the Lepton system checks for that file before compressing new chunks. Most Dropbox configuration files take between 15 and 45 minutes to fully deploy, but this mechanism allows a script to populate the file across all hosts that encode Lepton within 30 seconds.

The blockservers also never admit chunks to the stor-

age system that fail to round-trip—meaning, to decode identically to their input. Additionally, all memory pages holding compressed data in memory are protected at the OS level before the round-trip test, and an md5sum is done of the initial compressed file to be compared with the result stored on disk, so the memory contents cannot change due to a user-level bug. Corruptions in compressing will be detected immediately, and the files will be compressed using Deflate instead.

For a file that fails to round-trip, it can be difficult to distinguish between a badly formed/unsupported JPEG file versus a real program bug, but as long as the compressor and decompressor are deterministic, a small level of such failures is acceptable.

For added safety, there is an automated verification process that searches for images that succeeded in a round-trip once but then fail a subsequent round-trip test, or fail when decompressed with the address-sanitizing gcc build of Lepton. If either of those occur, a member of the Lepton team is paged and the failing data is saved. This process has currently gone through over four billion files and has caused four alerts (§ 6.7).

During roll-out of a new Lepton version it will be “qualified” using the automated process over a billion images. Additionally it must be able to decompress another billion images already compressed in the store. Currently a candidate which fails to do so also causes the Lepton team to be paged. This alert has never triggered.

For the first two weeks of ramp-up, the system was completely reversible. Every chunk uploaded with Lepton was concurrently also uploaded to a separate S3 bucket (the “safety net”) with the standard Deflate codepath. This means that in the worst case, requests could fail-over directly to the safety net until the affected files were repaired.

Before enabling Lepton, the team did a mock disaster recovery training (DRT) session where a file in a test account was intentionally corrupted and recovered from the safety net. However, we never needed to use this mechanism to recover any real user files.

We have since deleted the safety net and depend on other controls to keep Lepton safe. Our rationale for this was that uploading to a separate bucket causes a performance degradation since all images would upload in the max of latency between Dropbox datacenters and S3, plus associated transaction and storage fees. We may re-enable the safety net during future format upgrades.

Even with the safety net disabled, we believe there are adequate recovery plans in place in case of an unexpected error. Every file that has been admitted to the system with Lepton compression has also round-tripped at least once in order to be admitted. That means that a permanent corruption would expose a hypothetical nondeterminism in the system. But it also means that if the same load/perf

circumstances were recreated, the chunk would probably be decodable again with some probability, as it was decoded exactly correctly during the original round-trip check. Thus, with sufficient retries, we would expect to be able to recover the data. That said, it would be a significant problem if there were a nondeterminism in the Lepton system. After 4 billion successful determinism tests, however, we believe the risk is as small as possible.

6 Anomalies at Scale

With a year of Lepton operational experience, there have been a number of anomalies encountered and lessons learned. We share these in the hopes that they will be helpful to the academic community in giving context about challenges encountered in the practical deployment of format-specific compression tools in an exabyte-scale network filesystem.

6.1 Reversed indices, bounds checks and compilers

During the very first qualification of 1 billion files, a handful of images passed the multithreaded icc-compiled check, but those images would occasionally fail the gcc roundtrip check with a segfault. The stack trace revealed the multidimensional statistic-bin index computation was reversed. If deployed, this would have required major backwards compatibility contortions to mimic the undefined C++ behavior as compiled with icc; bins would need to be aliased for certain versions of Lepton.

In response to this discovery, the statistic bin was abstracted with a class that enforced bounds checks on accesses. Consequently, the duration of encodes and decodes are 10% higher than they could be, but bounds checks help guard against undefined behavior.

6.2 Error codes at scale

This table shows a variety of exit codes that we have observed during the first 2 months of backfill.

Success	94.069%	“Impossible”	0.006%
Progressive	3.043%	Abort signal	0.006%
Unsupported JPEG	1.535%	Timeout	0.004%
Not an image	0.801%	Chroma subsample big ..	0.003%
4 color CMYK	0.478%	AC values out of range ..	0.001%
>24 MiB mem decode ..	0.024%	Roundtrip failed	0.001%
>178 MiB mem encode ..	0.019%	OOM kill	10 ⁻⁵ %
Server shutdown	0.010%	Operator interrupt	10 ⁻⁶ %

The top 99.9864% of situations were anticipated: from graceful shutdown, to deciding not to encode JPEG files that consist entirely of a header, to unsupported Progressive and CMYK JPEGs, and chroma subsampling that was larger than the slice of framebuffer in memory.

The Lepton program binary could process these types of images, e.g., by allocating more memory, an extra model for the 4th color channel, or sufficient memory on decode to keep the progressive image resident. However, for simplicity, these features were intentionally disabled in Dropbox as they account for a small fraction of files.

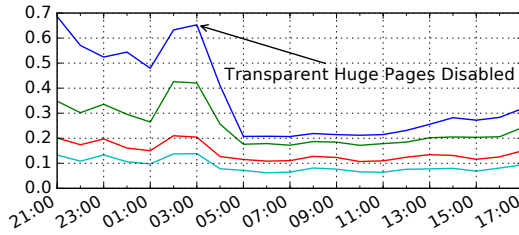


Figure 12: Hourly p99/p95/p75/p50 latency for decodes. Transparent huge pages disabled April 13 at 03:00.

Some codes were unexpected, e.g., incorrect thread protocol communication (listed as “Impossible”), or “Abort signal”, since SECCOMP disallows SIGABRT. By contrast, a small level of “Roundtrip failed” was expected, largely because of corruptions in the JPEG file (e.g., runs of zeroes written by hardware failing to sync a file) that cannot always be represented in the Lepton file format.

6.3 Poor p95 latency from Huge Pages

During the Lepton roll-out, after the qualification round, a significant fraction of machines had significantly higher average and p99 latency, and could take $2\text{--}3\times$ as long as the isolated benchmarks. It was even possible to have a decode take 30 seconds to even begin processing. The time would elapse before a single byte of input data was read. Reboots could sometimes alleviate the issue, but on the affected machines it would come back. Also, when services on the machine were halted and benchmarks run in isolation, the problem disappeared altogether and the machine performed as expected.

On affected machines, performance counters attributed 15–20% of the time to the kernel’s page-table routines.

9.79%	[kernel]	[k]	isolate_migratepages_range
4.04%	[kernel]	[k]	copy_page_range
3.16%	[kernel]	[k]	set_pfnblock_flags_mask

These kernel routines implicated transparent huge pages (THP), and each affected machine had THP enabled [Always], but most unaffected machines had them disabled. Disabling THP solved the issue (Figure 12).

Additionally, when THP is enabled, Linux continuously defragments pages in an attempt to build a full 2 MiB page of free memory for an application requesting large ranges of data. Since Lepton requests 200 MiB of space at initialization time, with no intent to use more than 24 MiB for decodes, Linux may prepare a significant number of huge pages for use, causing the process to be blocked during defragmentation. These pages are consumed without penalty over the next 10 decodes, meaning that the p95 and p99 times are disproportionately affected by the stall (compared with the median times).

6.4 Boiling the frog

Currently, the Lepton system decodes about $1.5\times$ to twice as many files as it encodes. However, during the initial roll-out, months before the backfill system, the ratio of

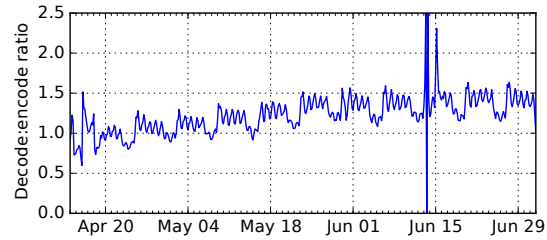


Figure 13: Lepton decode:encode ratio on the serving path.

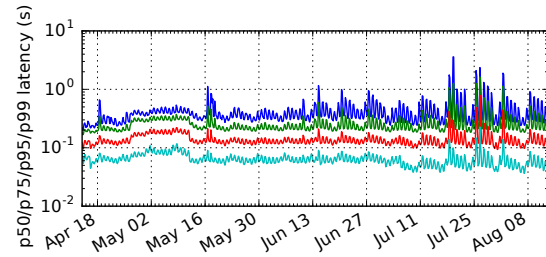


Figure 14: Decode timing percentiles, starting with the roll-out and building up over months to multi-second p99s.

decodes to encodes was much less than 1.0, since each old photo was compressed using Deflate, not Lepton, and only new photos need a Lepton decompress. This can be seen in the historical graph of the decode:encode ratio over time in Figure 13. Akin to “boiling the frog,” it was not obvious that the actual hardware requirements would be significantly higher than those needed from having reached 100% of users in the first weeks.

To react to these new requirements for decodes, we built the outsourcing system (§ 5.5). But until that system rolled out, for several months, at peak, our 99th-percentile decode time was in the seconds, as seen in Figure 14.

6.5 Dropbox camera upload degradation

Before removal of the safety net, each image would be uploaded compressed to the Dropbox store and uncompressed to the S3 safety net. During maintenance in one East-Coast datacenter, each top of rack switch required a reboot. Traffic was rerouted to another datacenter. The transition was going well, but on June 13 at 8:40:25, once most traffic had moved to the new location, S3 “put” operations began to fail sporadically from truncated uploads. The safety-net feature was writing more data to S3 from the new location than *all of the rest of Dropbox combined*, and the capacity of our S3 proxy machines was overtaxed by the safety-net mechanism.

For uploads, the availability dropped to 94% for the 9 minutes required to diagnose the situation, and camera uploads from phones were disproportionately affected, as mobile devices are a very common means for users to capture images. Availability of this service dropped to 82%, since each photograph upload required a write to the safety net. Once the situation was identified, Lepton encodes were disabled in 29 seconds, using the shutoff

switch (§ 5.7) in /dev/shm, stopping extra traffic to S3. Traffic returned to normal at 8:49:54.

An irony emerged: a system we designed as a belt-and-suspenders safety net ended up causing our users trouble, but has never helped to resolve an actual problem.

6.6 Decodes that exceed the timeout window

With thousands of servers decoding chunks, there are often unhealthy systems that are swapping, overheating, or broken. These can become stuck during a Lepton decode and time out. Because these events happen regularly, they must be investigated automatically without involving a human operator.

Instead, any decode exceeding a timeout is uploaded to an S3 queue bucket. Chunks in this queue bucket are decompressed on an isolated, healthy cluster without a timeout using the gcc-asan as well as the icc build of Lepton. If the chunk is successfully decoded 3 times in a row with each build, then the chunk is deleted from the bucket. If any of those decodes fails, a human is signaled.

6.7 Alarm pages

As of this submission, anomalies in the Lepton system have caused an on-call engineer to be paged four times.

Assert failed in sanitizing build only. The first alarm occurred just days after Lepton was activated for 0.1% of users, on April 8. When reconstructing the Huffman coded data, each thread asserts that the number of bytes produced matches the number of bytes decoded on the initial compression. A file tripped this assert in the gcc-asan build that was disabled for the icc production build, so the icc build admitted the file.

The solution was to compile Lepton with all meaningful asserts enabled and to check whether any of the existing 150 TiB of images tripped the assert. Luckily no other files triggered the assert. We deployed stricter code that will not admit such files.

Single- and multi-threaded code handled corrupt JPEGs differently. The second alarm was triggered on May 11 because of a bug in the single-threaded code. The single-threaded decoder wrote all output directly to the file descriptor, whereas in the multithreaded decoder, each thread wrote to a fixed sized memory area. When the JPEG was sufficiently corrupt, the size would be incorrectly computed, but the writes to the memory area would be truncated in multi-threaded mode, yet the direct writes to the stream would be unbounded in single-thread mode. The fix was to make sure single-threaded decodes bounded their writes to the stream as if it were a fixed memory region.

After open-source release, fuzzing found bugs in parser handling of corrupt input. The third alarm was caused by a security researcher [7], who fuzzed

the open-source release of Lepton and found bugs in the uncmjpg JPEG-parsing library that Lepton uses. The library did not validate that the Huffman table had sufficient space for the data. Uncmjpg would overwrite global memory past the array with data from the untrusted input. A similar bug existed in uncmjpg's quantization table index, which also opened up a buffer overrun. The response was to replace every raw array with a bounds-checked `std::array`, to avoid similar attacks in the future. It was unfortunate that we did not apply this philosophy after the earlier "reversed indices" incident (§ 6.1). Fortunately, the deployed system is protected with SECCOMP, preventing escalation of privileges.

Accidental deployment of incompatible old version.

The final alarm was the result of a series of operational mistakes. On Dec. 12, 2016, a new team member was deploying Lepton on some blockservers. The internal deployment tool asks the operator to specify the hash of a Lepton build to deploy. These builds have all been "qualified," meaning they successfully compressed and then decompressed a billion JPEGs with both optimized and sanitizing decoders, yielding identical results to the input.

Our historical practice has been to retain earlier "qualified" builds as eligible for deployment, so that Lepton can be rolled back if necessary. However, because Lepton's file format has evolved over time, the earliest qualified builds are not compatible with more recent versions. When features were added, an older decoder may not be able to decode a newer file. When Lepton's format was made stricter, an older encoder may produce files that are rejected by a newer decoder. At the time of such upgrades, we searched for and re-encoded JPEG files in Dropbox as necessary, but we did not remove the older software from the list of qualified builds.

Typically, our team members deployed Lepton to blockservers by specifying the hash of the most recent qualified build in the deployment tool. However, our documentation did not properly inform the new employee of this practice, and they simply left the field blank. This caused the deployment tool to use an internal default value of the hash, which had been set when Lepton was first deployed and never updated. As a result, the very first qualified version of Lepton was accidentally deployed on some blockservers.

The first warning sign was availability dropping to 99.7% for upload and download endpoints. This was due to the oldest qualified Lepton code being unable to decode some newly compressed images because of minor additions to the format. An additional alarm was triggered after other blockservers (ones that did not receive the bad configuration change) found themselves unable to decode some files that had been written by blockservers that did receive the change.

As operators were occupied trying to roll back the

configuration change, it took two hours before Lepton was disabled, during which time billions of files were uploaded. We performed a scan over all these files, decoding and then re-encoding them if necessary into the current version of the Lepton file format. Ultimately, 18 files had to be re-encoded.

This was an example of a number of procedures gone wrong. It confirms the adage: we have met the enemy and he is us. The incident has caused us to reconsider whether a “qualified” version of Lepton ought to remain eternally qualified for deployment, the behavior and user interface of the deployment tools, and our documentation and onboarding procedures for new team members.

7 Limitations and Future Work

Lepton is currently deployed on Dropbox’s back-end file servers, and is transparent to client software. In the future, we intend to move the compression and decompression to client software, which will save 23% in network bandwidth when uploading or downloading JPEG images.

Lepton is limited to JPEG-format files, which account for roughly 35% of the Dropbox filesystem. Roughly another 40% is occupied by H.264 video files, many of which are encoded by fixed-function or power-limited mobile hardware that does not use the most space-efficient lossless compression methods. We intend to explore the use of Lepton-like recompression for mobile video files.

8 Conclusion

Lepton is an open-source system that compresses JPEG images by 23% on average. It has been deployed on the production Dropbox network filesystem for a year and has so far compressed more than 150 billion user JPEG files that accounted for more than 203 PiB. Lepton was designed to be deployable on a distributed file-serving backend where substrings of a file must be decodable independently, with low time-to-first-byte and time-to-last-byte. The system demonstrates new tradeoffs between speed, compression efficiency, and deployability in the context of a large-scale distributed filesystem back-end.

In a year of production use and hundreds of billions of downloads, deployment has been relatively smooth. We have never been unable to decode a stored file. The issues we have encountered have involved human error and procedural failures, non-obvious ways in which the system created load hotspots, and difficulties in ensuring deterministic behavior from a highly optimized C++ program processing untrusted input from diverse sources. We have shared a number of deployment case studies and anomalies in the hopes that they will be helpful to the academic community in giving context about challenges encountered in the practical deployment of format-specific compression tools at a large scale.

9 Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the reviewers and NSDI program committee for their detailed comments and suggestions.

This work was funded by Dropbox. DH, KE, and CL are Dropbox employees. KW’s participation was as a paid consultant and was not part of his Stanford duties or responsibilities.

We would like to thank Jongmin Baek, Sujay Jayakar, and Mario Brito for their ideas on the Lepton approach, and Preslav Le, David Mah, James Cowling, Nipunn Koorapati, Lars Zornes, Rajat Goel, Bashar Al-Rawi, Tim Douglas, and Oleg Guba for their assistance and guidance on deploying and rolling out Lepton to Dropbox infrastructure.

This project would not have been possible without the continuous support and encouragement from Dropbox leadership including Dmitry Kotlyarov, Nahi Ojeil, Bean Anderson, Ziga Mahkovec, David Mann, Jeff Arnold, Jessica McKellar, Akhil Gupta, Aditya Agarwal, Arash Ferdowsi, and Drew Houston.

References

- [1] Lepton source repository. <http://github.com/dropbox/lepton>.
- [2] AAS, J. Introducing the ‘mozjpeg’ project, 2014. <https://blog.mozilla.org/research/2014/03/05/introducing-the-mozjpeg-project/>.
- [3] ALAKUIJALA, J., AND SZABADKA, Z. Brotli compressed data format. RFC 7932, RFC Editor, July 2016. <https://tools.ietf.org/html/rfc7932>.
- [4] BANKOSKI, J., KOLESZAR, J., QUILLIO, L., SALONEN, J., WILKINS, P., AND XU, Y. VP8 Data Format and Decoding Guide section 13.2. RFC 6386, RFC Editor, November 2011. <https://tools.ietf.org/html/rfc6386#section-13.2>.
- [5] COLLET, Y., AND TURNER, C. Smaller and faster data compression with Zstandard, 2016. <https://code.facebook.com/posts/1658392934479273/smaller-and-faster-data-compression-with-zstandard/>.
- [6] DEUTSCH, P. DEFLATE compressed data format specification version 1.3. RFC 1951, RFC Editor, May 1996. <https://tools.ietf.org/html/rfc1951>.
- [7] GRASSI, M. Some memory corruptions in lepton. <https://github.com/dropbox/lepton/issues/26>.
- [8] HUFFMAN, D. A. A method for the construction of minimum-redundancy codes. *Proceedings of the IRE* 40, 9 (1952), 1098–1101.
- [9] Independent JPEG Group. <http://www.ijg.org/>.
- [10] *Information technology — Digital compression and coding of continuous-tone still images: Requirements and guidelines*, September 1992. ITU-T Rec.

T.81 and ISO/IEC 10918-1:1994 (<https://www.w3.org/Graphics/JPEG/itu-t81.pdf>).

- [11] LAKHANI, G. DCT coefficient prediction for JPEG image coding. In *2007 IEEE International Conference on Image Processing* (San Antonio, TX, USA, Sept 2007), vol. 4, pp. IV–189 to IV–192.
- [12] MAHONEY, M. Paq: Data compression programs, 2009. <http://mattmahoney.net/dc/>.
- [13] MERRITT, L. JPEGrescan: losslessly shrink any JPEG file, 2013. <https://github.com/kud/jpegrescan>.
- [14] MITZENMACHER, M., RICHA, A. W., AND SITARAMAN, R. The power of two random choices: A survey of techniques and results. In *Handbook of Randomized Computing* (2000), Kluwer, pp. 255–312.
- [15] PAVLOV, I. LZMA SDK, 2007. <http://www.7-zip.org/sdk.html>.
- [16] SEREBRYANY, K., BRUENING, D., POTAPENKO, A., AND VYUKOV, D. AddressSanitizer: A fast address sanity checker. In *Proceedings of the 2012 USENIX Conference on Annual Technical Conference* (Boston, MA, USA, 2012), USENIX ATC’12, USENIX Association, pp. 28–28.
- [17] STIRNER, M., AND SEELMANN, G. Improved redundancy reduction for JPEG files. In *Proceedings of the 2007 Picture Coding Symposium* (Lisbon, Portugal, 2007).
- [18] TEUHOLA, J. A compression method for clustered bit-vectors. *Information processing letters* 7, 6 (1978), 308–311.
- [19] VOORMEDIA B.V. TinyJPG. <https://tinyjpg.com/>.
- [20] WALLACE, G. K. The JPEG still picture compression standard. *IEEE Transactions on Consumer Electronics* 38, 1 (1992), 34.
- [21] WANG, X., CHEN, H., CHEUNG, A., JIA, Z., ZELDOVICH, N., AND KAASHOEK, M. F. Undefined behavior: what happened to my code? In *Proceedings of the Asia-Pacific Workshop on Systems* (Seoul, Republic of Korea, 2012), ACM, p. 9.
- [22] XU, X., AICHTA, Z., GOVINDAN, R., LLOYD, W., AND ORTEGA, A. Context adaptive thresholding and entropy coding for very low complexity JPEG transcoding. In *2016 IEEE International Conference on Acoustics, Speech and Signal Processing (ICASSP)* (Shanghai, China, 2016), IEEE, pp. 1392–1396.
- [23] ZIV, J., AND LEMPEL, A. A universal algorithm for sequential data compression. *IEEE Transactions on Information Theory* 23, 3 (1977), 337–343.

A Appendix

A.1 File Format

Magic Number (0xcf, 0x84)	(2 bytes)
Version (0x01)	(1 byte)
Skip serializing header? (Y N)	(1 byte)
Number of Thread Segments	(4 bytes)
Truncated Git Revision	(12 bytes)
Output File Size	(4 bytes)
Zlib Data Size	(4 bytes)
Zlib Data	
JPEG Header Size (4 bytes)	
JPEG Header	
Pad Bit (0 0xFF)	
Per-Thread Segment Information	
Thread Segment Vertical Range	(2 bytes)
Size of Thread Segment Output	(4 bytes)
Huffman Handover Word	(2 bytes)
DC per channel	(8 bytes)
Number of RST markers	
Total Number of 8x8 JPEG Blocks per channel	
Arbitrary data to prepend to the output	
Arbitrary data to append to the output	
Interleaved Arithmetic Coding Section	
Thread Segment Id	
Length (256 4096 65536 arbitrary)	
Arithmetic coded data	
Thread Segment Id	
Length (256 4096 65536 arbitrary)	
Arithmetic coded data	
...	
May be repeated many times per thread segment	
...	

A.2 Using prior information to predict and encode DCT coefficients

Each 8x8 JPEG block has 49 2D DCT coefficients, 14 1D DCT coefficients, and one DC coefficient (§ 3.3). Lepton encodes each kind of coefficient using the same Exp-Golomb code (unary exponent, then sign bit, then residual bits) but with different methods for indexing the adaptive arithmetic code’s bins. Prior information, such as neighboring blocks, is used to predict bin indices; higher correlation between the predicted indices and the actual coefficient values yields better compression ratios.

A.2.1 Predicting the 7x7 AC coefficients

Lepton first encodes the number of non-zero coefficients in the block, $n \in \{0, \dots, 49\}$, by emitting 6 bits. Since

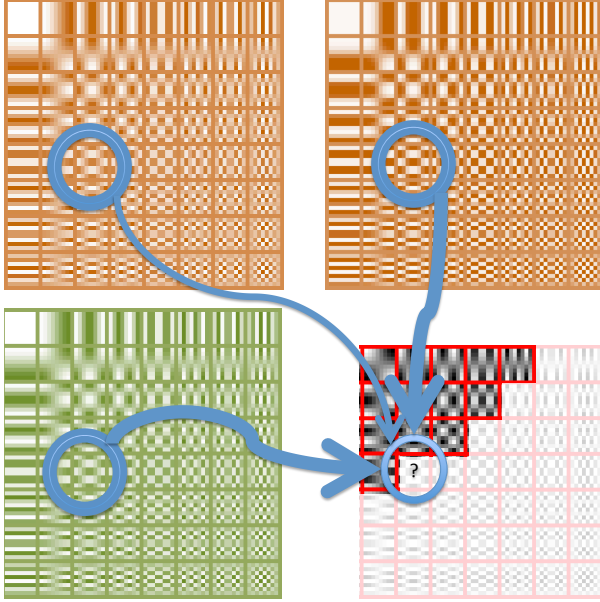


Figure 15: The neighboring coefficients at the same coordinates are averaged to predict the 7x7 coefficient.

the number of non-zero coefficients in the above and left blocks approximately predicts n , the bins are indexed by $\lfloor \log_{1.59}(\frac{n_A + n_L}{2}) \rfloor \in \{0, \dots, 9\}$. The bin for each bit is further indexed by the previously decoded bits, so that the total number of bins (for encoding n) is $10 \times (2^6 - 1)$.

The 7x7 coefficients are encoded in zigzag order [20], which yields a 0.2% compression improvement over raster-scan order. For each coefficient F , we compute a weighted average of the corresponding coefficient from the above, left, and above-left blocks (Figure 15): $\bar{F} = \frac{1}{32}(13F_A + 13F_L + 6F_{AL})$. Each coefficient is Exp-Golomb encoded using bins indexed by $(\lfloor \bar{F} \rfloor, \lfloor \log_{1.59} n \rfloor)$. Each time a non-zero coefficient is encoded, n is decremented; the block is finished when $n = 0$.

A.2.2 Predicting the 7x1 and 1x7 AC coefficients

The 7x1 and 1x7 coefficients represent image variation purely in the horizontal and vertical directions. Lepton encodes them similarly to the 7x7 coefficients, but instead of predicting each coefficient using a weighted average, we use a more sophisticated formula inspired by Lakhani [11]. When encoding the 1x7 coefficients, Lepton has already encoded the 7x7 coefficients, as well as the full block to the left of the current block. We combine this prior information with the additional assumption that the image pixel values are continuous across the block edge — i.e., that $P_L(7, y) \approx P(0, y)$.

The block's pixels are defined to be a linear combination of orthonormal DCT basis functions B :

$$P(x, y) = \sum_{u=0}^7 \sum_{v=0}^7 B(x, u) B(y, v) F_{uv}$$

Written as matrices, $P = B^T F B$ where $B^T B = 1$. The

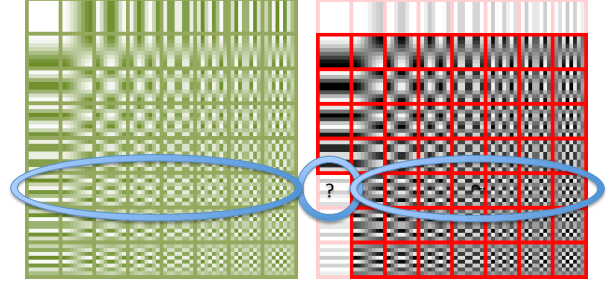


Figure 16: An entire row (or column) of coefficients may be used to predict an edge DCT coefficient.

continuity assumption can then be rewritten as:

$$\begin{aligned} e_7 B^T L B &\approx e_0 B^T F B \\ e_7 B^T L &\approx e_0 B^T F \end{aligned}$$

The left side is fully known from the block to the left, while the right side is a linear combination of the known 7x7 coefficients and the unknown 1x7 coefficients, as shown in Figure 16.

$$\sum_{u=0}^7 B_{7u} L_{uv} \approx B_{00} F_{0v} + \sum_{u=1}^7 B_{0u} F_{uv}$$

We solve for the unknowns to predict F_{0v} :

$$\bar{F}_{0v} = \frac{1}{B_{00}} \left(\sum_{u=0}^7 B_{7u} L_{uv} - \sum_{u=1}^7 B_{0u} F_{uv} \right)$$

The predicted \bar{F}_{0v} is quantized to 7 bits and concatenated with the non-zero count as the bin index for encoding the true coefficient F_{0v} .

A.2.3 Predicting the DC coefficient

With all 63 of the AC coefficients known, the last block element to be encoded is the DC coefficient. Instead of encoding this value directly, Lepton instead predicts a DC coefficient and encodes the delta (the DC error term) between the true value and the prediction. To make this prediction, Lepton first computes the 8x8 pixel block (up to the constant DC shift) from the known AC coefficients using inverse DCT.

A first-cut prediction, illustrated in Figure 17 (left), might be to compute the DC value that minimized the differences between all 16 pairs of pixels at the borders between the current 8x8 block and each of its left and above neighbors. If we average the median 8 pairs and discard the 8 outlier pairs, this technique compresses the DC values by roughly 30% versus baseline JPEG.

We can improve upon this prediction by observing that images tend to have smooth gradients; for example, the sky fades from blue to orange towards the horizon during a sunset. Lepton interpolates the pixel gradients smoothly between the last two rows of the previous block and the

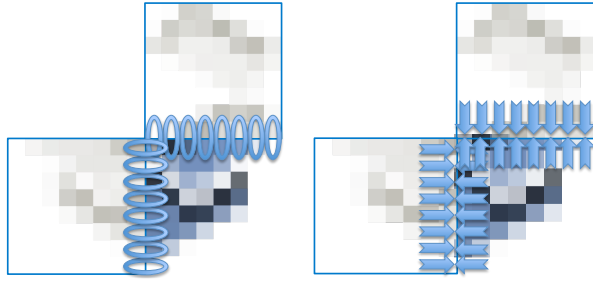


Figure 17: Left: illustrates minimizing differences between pairs of pixels by predicting the DC value for the block being decoded (shaded in blue). DC adds a constant shift to all colors in the blue 8x8 block. Right: illustrates using gradients to interpolate colors between the blue block and its neighbors.

first two rows of the current block, as illustrated in Figure 17 (right). For each border pair, we predict the DC value that would cause the two gradients to meet seamlessly. We finally encode the DC error term between the true DC coefficient and the average of all 16 predictions. Lepton estimates the DC prediction confidence by subtracting the maximum and minimum predictions (out of 16), and uses this value as the bin index when Exp-Golomb encoding the error term. The combination of these techniques yields another 10% compression improvement over the first cut: the final compression ratio is $40.1\% \pm 8.7$ better than the JPEG baseline.

A.3 Common JPEG Corruptions

In the Lepton qualification process, there were several common JPEG anomalies that would trigger roundtrip failures.

Most prevalently, JPEG files sometimes contain or end with runs of zero bytes. Likely these are caused by failures for an image editing tool or hard disk to sync pages to disk before a user depowered their machine. Many such images will successfully roundtrip with Lepton since zero describes valid DCT data.

However, RST markers foil this fortuitous behavior, since RST must be generated at regular block intervals in image space. Ironically the very markers that were designed to recover from partial corruption instead caused it for Lepton. For affected files, during these zero runs, the RST markers, beginning with a signature 0xff, would not be present. However, Lepton blindly uses the RST frequencies in the header to insert them at regular intervals irrespective of the bytes in the original file. The fix for these zero-filled files regions at the end was to add a RST count to the Lepton header, so that Lepton could cease automatically inserting RST markers after the last one was recorded in the original file.

The RST solution did not fix issues with zero runs appearing in the middle of a scan, since one count cannot describe both the start and stop of RST insertions. These corruptions manifest themselves as roundtrip failures.

A very common corruption was arbitrary data at the end of the file. There are documented cases of cameras producing a TV-ready interlaced image file in a completely different format at the end of JPEG files produced. This let old cameras display images directly to TVs. One of the authors had a series of files where two JPEGs were concatenated, the first being a thumbnail of the second. For these, the compression ratio is less, since Lepton only applies to the thumbnail, but they do roundtrip.

Likewise, the JPEG specification does not mention whether partial bytes, filled with fewer than 8 bits, must be padded with zeros or with ones. Most encoders pick a pad bit and use it throughout. Lepton stores this bit in the header.

