

# **VTU eNotes On Digital Image Processing**



**(Computer Science)**

# Digital Image Processing

## What Is Digital Image Processing?

An image may be defined as a two-dimensional function,  $f(x, y)$ , where  $x$  and  $y$  are spatial (plane) coordinates, and the amplitude of at any pair of coordinates  $(x, y)$  is called the intensity or gray level of the image at that point. When  $x$ ,  $y$ , and the amplitude values of  $f$  are all finite, discrete quantities, we call the image a digital image. The field of digital image processing refers to processing digital images by means of a digital computer. Note that a digital image is composed of a finite number of elements, each of which has a particular location and value. These elements are referred to as picture elements, image elements, pels, and pixels. Pixel is the term most widely used to denote the elements of a digital image.

Vision is the most advanced of our senses, so it is not surprising that images play the single most important role in human perception. However, unlike humans, who are limited to the visual band of the electromagnetic (EM) spectrum, imaging machines cover almost the entire EM spectrum, ranging from gamma to radio waves. They can operate on images generated by sources that humans are not accustomed to associating with images. These include ultra-sound, electron microscopy, and computer-generated images. Thus, digital image processing encompasses a wide and varied field of applications. There is no general agreement among authors regarding where image processing stops and other related areas, such as image analysis and computer vision, start. Sometimes a distinction is made by defining image processing as a discipline in which both the input and output of a process are images. We believe this to be a limiting and somewhat artificial boundary. For example, under this definition, even the trivial task of computing the average intensity of an image (which yields a single number) would not be considered an image processing operation. On the other hand, there are fields such as computer vision whose ultimate goal is to use computers to

emulate human vision, including learning and being able to make inferences and take actions based on visual inputs. This area itself is a branch of artificial intelligence (AI) whose objective is to emulate human intelligence. The field of AI is in its earliest stages of infancy in terms of development, with progress having been much slower than originally anticipated. The area of image analysis (also called image understanding) is in between image processing and computer vision.

There are no clear-cut boundaries in the continuum from image processing at one end to computer vision at the other. However, one useful paradigm is to consider three types of computerized processes in this continuum: low-, mid-, and high-level processes.

Low-level processes involve primitive operations such as image preprocessing to reduce noise, contrast enhancement, and image sharpening. A low-level process is characterized by the fact that both its inputs and outputs are images. Mid-level processing on images involves tasks such as segmentation (partitioning an image into regions or objects), description of those objects to reduce them to a form suitable for computer processing, and classification (recognition) of individual objects. A mid-level process is characterized by the fact that its inputs generally are images, but its outputs are attributes extracted from those images (e.g., edges, contours, and the identity of individual objects). Finally, higher-level processing involves “making sense” of an ensemble of recognized objects, as in image analysis, and, at the far end of the continuum, performing the cognitive functions normally associated with vision and, in addition, encompasses processes that extract attributes from images, up to and including the recognition of individual objects. As a simple illustration to clarify these concepts, consider the area of automated analysis of text. The processes of acquiring an image of the area containing the text, preprocessing that image, extracting (segmenting) the individual characters, describing the characters in a form suitable for computer processing, and recognizing those individual characters are in the scope of what we call digital image processing.

## Fundamental Steps in Digital Image Processing

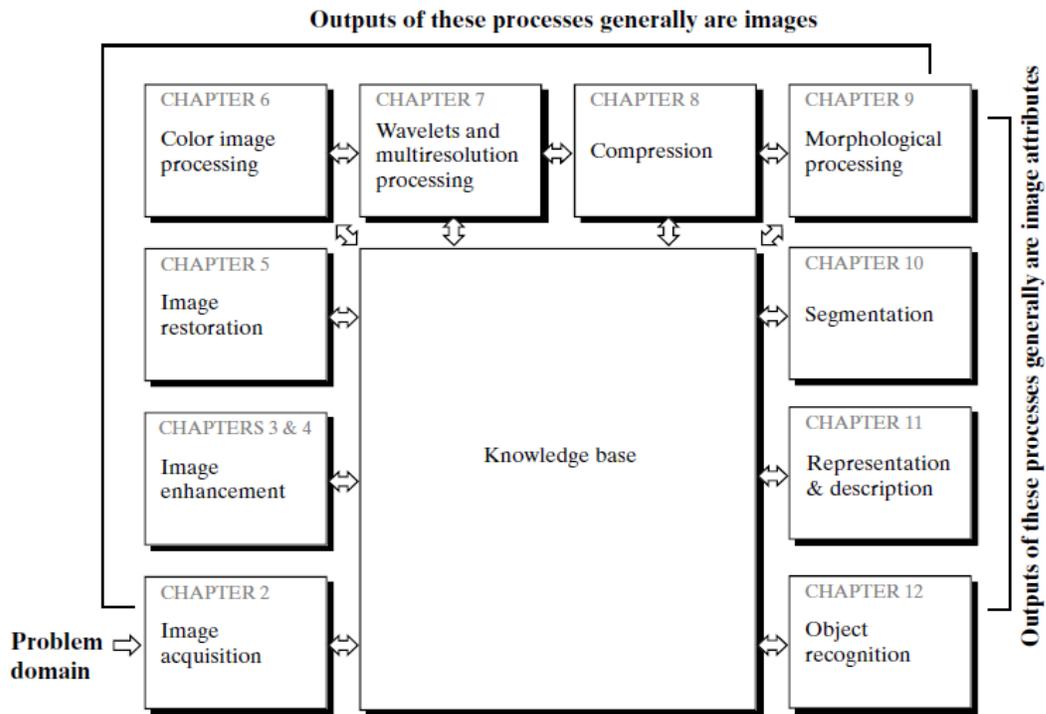


Image acquisition is the first process shown in Fig. Note that acquisition could be as simple as being given an image that is already in digital form. Generally, the image acquisition stage involves preprocessing, such as scaling. Image enhancement is among the simplest and most appealing areas of digital image processing.

Basically, the idea behind enhancement techniques is to bring out detail that is obscured, or simply to highlight certain features of interest in an image. A familiar example of enhancement is when we increase the contrast of an image because “it looks better.” It is important to keep in mind that enhancement is a very subjective area of image processing.

Image restoration is an area that also deals with improving the appearance of an image.

However, unlike enhancement, which is subjective, image restoration is objective, in the sense that restoration techniques tend to be based on mathematical or probabilistic models of

image degradation. Enhancement, on the other hand, is based on human subjective preferences regarding what constitutes a “good” enhancement result.

Color image processing is an area that has been gaining in importance because of the significant increase in the use of digital images over the Internet. Wavelets are the foundation for representing images in various degrees of resolution.

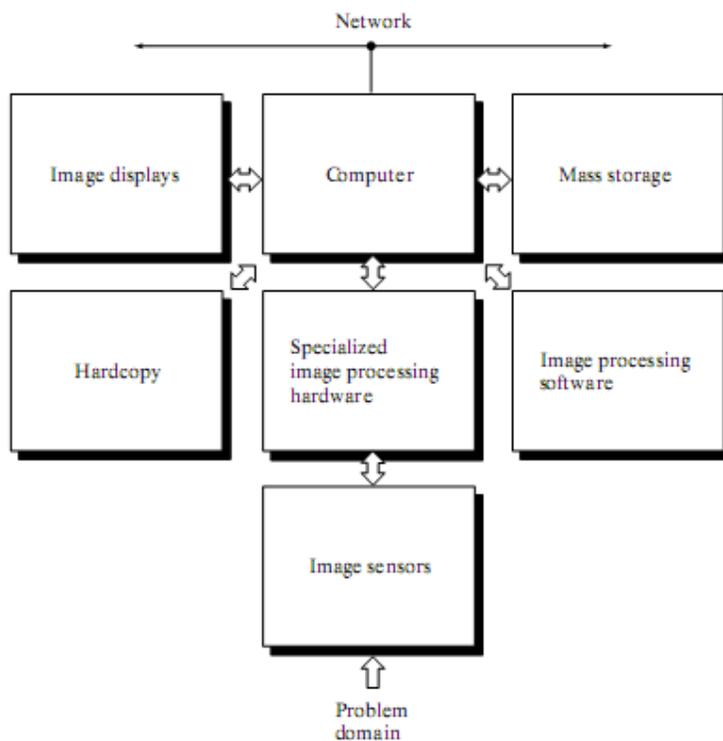
Compression, as the name implies, deals with techniques for reducing the storage required to save an image, or the bandwidth required to transmit it. Although storage technology has improved significantly over the past decade, the same cannot be said for transmission capacity.

This is true particularly in uses of the Internet, which are characterized by significant pictorial content. Image compression is familiar (perhaps inadvertently) to most users of computers in the form of image file extensions, such as the jpg file extension used in the JPEG (Joint Photographic Experts Group) image compression standard. Morphological processing deals with tools for extracting image components that are useful in the representation and description of shape.

Segmentation procedures partition an image into its constituent parts or objects. In general, autonomous segmentation is one of the most difficult tasks in digital image processing. A rugged segmentation procedure brings the process a long way toward successful solution of imaging problems that require objects to be identified individually. On the other hand, weak or erratic segmentation algorithms almost always guarantee eventual failure. In general, the more accurate the segmentation, the more likely recognition is to succeed. Representation and description almost always follow the output of a segmentation stage, which usually is raw pixel data, constituting either the boundary of a region (i.e., the set of pixels separating one image region from another) or all the points in the region itself. In either case, converting the data to a form suitable for computer processing is necessary. The first decision that must be made is whether the data should be represented as a boundary or as a complete region.

Boundary representation is appropriate when the focus is on external shape characteristics, such as corners and inflections. Regional representation is appropriate when the focus is on internal properties, such as texture or skeletal shape. In some applications, these representations complement each other. Choosing a representation is only part of the solution for transforming raw data into a form suitable for subsequent computer processing. A method must also be specified for describing the data so that features of interest are highlighted. Description, also called feature selection, deals with extracting attributes that result in some quantitative information of interest or are basic for differentiating one class of objects from another. Recognition is the process that assigns a label (e.g., “vehicle”) to an object based on its descriptors. We conclude our coverage of digital image processing with the development of methods for recognition of individual objects.

### Components of an Image Processing System



As recently as the mid-1980s, numerous models of image processing systems being sold

throughout the world were rather substantial peripheral devices that attached to equally substantial host computers. Late in the 1980s and early in the 1990s, the market shifted to imageprocessing hardware in the form of single boards designed to be compatible with industrystandard buses and to fit into engineering workstation cabinets and personal computers. In addition to lowering costs, this market shift also served as a catalyst for a significant number of new companies whose specialty is the development of software written specifically for imageprocessing.

Although large-scale image processing systems still are being sold for massive imaging applications, such as processing of satellite images, the trend continues toward miniaturizing and blending of general-purpose small computers with specialized image processing hardware. Figure shows the basic components comprising a typical general-purpose system used for digital image processing. The function of each component is discussed in the following paragraphs, starting with image sensing.

With reference to sensing, two elements are required to acquire digital images. The first is a physical device that is sensitive to the energy radiated by the object we wish to image. The second, called a digitizer, is a device for converting the output of the physical sensing device into digital form. For instance, in a digital video camera, the sensors produce an electrical output proportional to light intensity. The digitizer converts these outputs to digital data.

Specialized image processing hardware usually consists of the digitizer just mentioned, plus hardware that performs other primitive operations, such as an arithmetic logic unit (ALU), which performs arithmetic and logical operations in parallel on entire images. One example of how an ALU is used is in averaging images as quickly as they are digitized, for the purpose of noise reduction. This type of hardware sometimes is called a front-end subsystem, and its most distinguishing characteristic is speed. In other words, this unit performs functions that require fast data throughputs (e.g., digitizing and averaging video images at 30 frames) that the typical main computer cannot handle. The computer in an image processing system is a

general-purpose computer and can range from a PC to a supercomputer. In dedicated applications, some times specially designed computers are used to achieve a required level of performance, but our interest here is on general-purpose image processing systems. In these systems, almost any well-equipped PC-type machine is suitable for offline image processing tasks.

Software for image processing consists of specialized modules that perform specific tasks. A well-designed package also includes the capability for the user to write code that, as a minimum, utilizes the specialized modules. More sophisticated software packages allow the integration of those modules and general-purpose software commands from at least one computer language.

Mass storage capability is a must in image processing applications. An image of size  $1024 \times 1024$  pixels, in which the intensity of each pixel is an 8-bit quantity, requires one megabyte of storage space if the image is not compressed. When dealing with thousands, or even millions, of images, providing adequate storage in an image processing system can be a challenge. Digital storage for image processing applications falls into three principal categories: (1) short-term storage for use during processing, (2) on-line storage for relatively fast re-call, and (3) archival storage, characterized by infrequent access. Storage is measured in bytes (eight bits), Kbytes (one thousand bytes), Mbytes (one million bytes), Gbytes (meaning giga, or one billion, bytes), and Tbytes (meaning tera, or one trillion, bytes). One method of providing short-term storage is computer memory. Another is by specialized boards, called frame buffers, that store one or more images and can be accessed rapidly, usually at video rates (e.g., at 30 complete images per second). The latter method allows virtually instantaneous image zoom, as well as scroll (vertical shifts) and pan (horizontal shifts). Frame buffers usually are housed in the specialized image processing hardware unit shown in Fig. 3. Online storage generally takes the form of magnetic disks or optical-media storage. The key factor characterizing on-line storage is frequent access to the stored data.

Finally, archival storage is characterized by massive storage requirements but infrequent need for access. Magnetic tapes and optical disks housed in “jukeboxes” are the usual media for archival applications.

Image displays in use today are mainly color (preferably flat screen) TV monitors. Monitors are driven by the outputs of image and graphics display cards that are an integral part of the computer system. Seldom are there requirements for image display applications that cannot be met by display cards available commercially as part of the computer system. In some cases, it is necessary to have stereo displays, and these are implemented in the form of headgear containing two small displays embedded in goggles worn by the user.

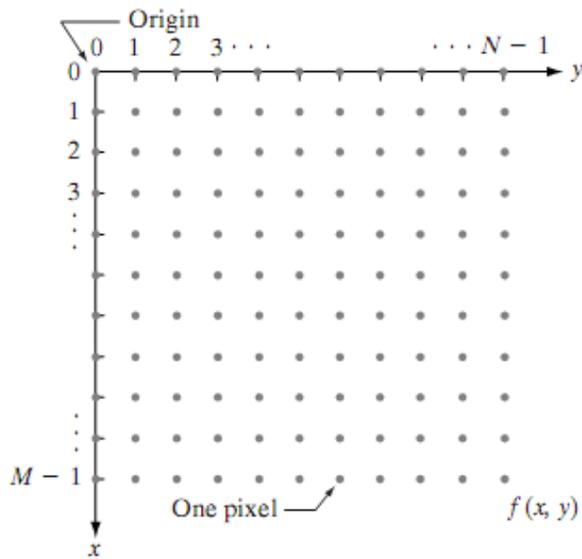
Hardcopy devices for recording images include laser printers, film cameras, heat-sensitive devices, inkjet units, and digital units, such as optical and CD-ROM disks. Film provides the highest possible resolution, but paper is the obvious medium of choice for written material.

For presentations, images are displayed on film transparencies or in a digital medium if image projection equipment is used. The latter approach is gaining acceptance as the standard for image presentations. Networking is almost a default function in any computer system in use today. Because of the large amount of data inherent in image processing applications, the key consideration in image transmission is bandwidth. In dedicated networks, this typically is not a problem, but communications with remote sites via the Internet are not always as efficient. Fortunately, this situation is improving quickly as a result of optical fibre and other broadband technologies.

## **Image representation and its properties**

We will use two principal ways to represent digital images. Assume that an image  $f(x, y)$  is sampled so that the resulting digital image has  $M$  rows and  $N$  columns. The values of the coordinates  $(x, y)$  now become discrete quantities. For notational clarity and convenience, we

shall use integer values for these discrete coordinates. Thus, the values of the coordinates at the origin are  $(x, y) = (0, 0)$ . The next coordinate values along the first row of the image are represented as  $(x, y) = (0, 1)$ . It is important to keep in mind that the notation  $(0, 1)$  is used to signify the second sample along the first row. It does not mean that these are the actual values of physical coordinates when the image was sampled. Figure shows the coordinate convention used.

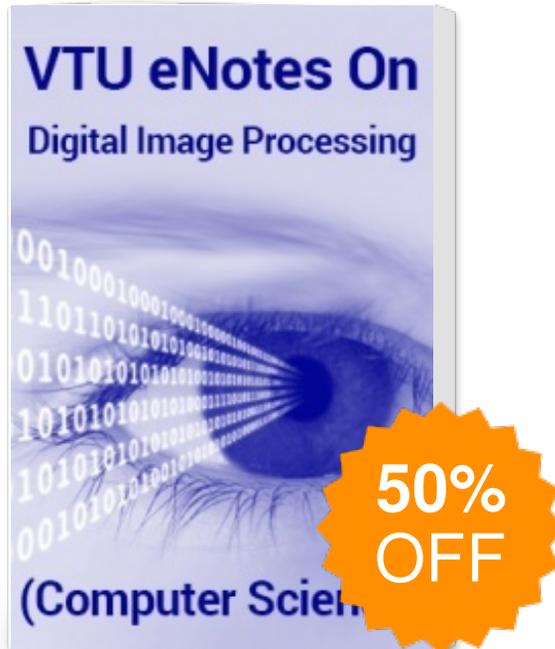


The notation introduced in the preceding paragraph allows us to write the complete  $M \times N$  digital image in the following compact matrix form:

$$f(x, y) = \begin{bmatrix} f(0, 0) & f(0, 1) & \cdots & f(0, N - 1) \\ f(1, 0) & f(1, 1) & \cdots & f(1, N - 1) \\ \vdots & \vdots & & \vdots \\ f(M - 1, 0) & f(M - 1, 1) & \cdots & f(M - 1, N - 1) \end{bmatrix}.$$

The right side of this equation is by definition a digital image. Each element of this matrix array is called an image element, picture element, pixel, or pel.

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Publisher : VTU eLearning

Author : Panel Of Experts

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