



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

***DYNAMIC COLOUR TEXT STEGANOGRAPHY MODEL USING RGB
CODING AND CHARACTER SPACING TO IMPROVE CAPACITY,
INVISIBILITY AND SECURITY***

REEMA AHMED ABDALLA BIN THABIT

FSKTM 2022 5



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INVISIBILITY AND SECURITY**

By

REEMA AHMED ABDALLA BIN THABIT

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

February 2022

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DEDICATION

Special for;

My beloved mother,
Fatima Saeed Bin Thabit,

the motivation father,
Ahmed Abdalla Bin Thabit,

the Supportive husband,
Hamada Ahmed Al-Sahoolee,

my lovely kids,
Ahmed, Almass and Ameer,

&

inspirational siblings,
Dr. Nawal, Dr. Walifah, Dr. Huda, Dr. Aqil & Mrs. Hanan

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

DYNAMIC COLOUR TEXT STEGANOGRAPHY MODEL USING RGB CODING AND CHARACTER SPACING TO IMPROVE CAPACITY, INVISIBILITY AND SECURITY

By

REEMA AHMED ABDALLA BIN THABIT

February 2022

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Protecting sensitive information transmitted via public channels is a significant issue faced by governments, militaries, organizations, and individuals. Steganography protects the secret information by concealing it in a transferred object such as video, audio, image, and text. Text is an ideal object for steganography as it uses low bandwidth and is commonly used. Exploit of text features such as font attributes in text steganography has been proposed, however, many existing feature-based text steganography methods suffer from low capacity, weak invisibility and poor security: low capacity is caused by embedding fewer bits per location, utilizing less usable characters, and low compression efficiency; weak invisibility is due to increased colour differences between the cover and the stego text; while poor security resulted from constant mapping and the permanent sequence selection of embedding positions for the hidden message and stego key. To overcome these problems this study proposed the Colour-spacing Text Stego (DCTS) model, which includes four new techniques: a Secret-block & Colour-spacing Matrices Generation (SCMG) technique to achieve high capacity; the Colour Spacing Normalization (CSN) technique to enhance invisibility; and proposed two techniques for two security layers, i.e. the first security layer, the Dynamic Selection of Embedding Positions (DSEP) technique, which hides the secret message and stego key in dynamic positions; and the second security layer, the Dynamic Colour Spacing Mapping (DCSM), which maps the secret message change dynamically. The results of the study found that the DCTS model produces better performance with a high capacity of 98.85% in a small used space by 5.79%, as well as increases the bits per location by 16 bits. Also, it maintains high invisibility by 5.07% when applying black or coloured cover text. With two security layers, the proposed DCTS achieves high security compared to the existing methods. To conclude, the Dynamic Colour-spacing Text Stego-model (DCTS) embeds a high secret data capacity while maintaining invisibility and security. DCTS model offers a

new perspective on feature-based text steganography to protect against visual and statistical attack issues.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**MODEL STEGANOGRAFI TEKS DINAMIK MENGGUNAKAN
PENGEKODAN RGB DAN RUANG AKSARA UNTUK MENINGKATKAN
KAPASITI, KETIDAKTERLIHATAN DAN KESELAMATAN**

Oleh

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Melindungi maklumat sensitif yang dihantar melalui saluran awam adalah isu penting yang dihadapi oleh kerajaan, tentera, organisasi dan individu. Steganografi melindungi maklumat rahsia dengan menyembunyikannya dalam objek yang dipindahkan seperti video, audio, imej dan teks. Teks ialah objek yang ideal untuk steganografi kerana ia menggunakan lebar jalur yang rendah dan biasa digunakan. Eksploitasi ciri teks seperti atribut fon dalam steganografi teks telah dicadangkan, namun banyak kaedah steganografi teks berasaskan ciri sedia ada mengalami kapasiti rendah, ketidakterlihatan lemah dan keselamatan yang lemah: kapasiti rendah disebabkan oleh pembenaman sedikit bit di setiap lokasi, menggunakan aksara yang kurang boleh digunakan, dan kecekapan pemampatan yang rendah; ketidakterlihatan yang lemah adalah disebabkan oleh peningkatan perbezaan warna antara teks pelitup dan teks stego; manakala keselamatan yang lemah terhasil daripada pemetaan berterusan dan pemilihan tetap serta urutan kedudukan benam untuk mesej tersembunyi dan kunci stego. Untuk mengatasi masalah tersebut kajian ini mencadangkan Model Stego Teks Ruang-warna (DCTS) yang merangkumi empat teknik baharu: teknik Penjanaan Matrik Blok-rahsia & Ruang-warna (SCMG) untuk mencapai kapasiti tinggi; teknik Normalisasi Ruang Warna (CSN) untuk meningkatkan ketidakterlihatan; dan mencadangkan dua Teknik untuk keselamatan dua lapisan, iaitu lapisan keselamatan pertama, teknik Pemilihan Dinamik bagi Kedudukan Pembenaman (DSEP), yang menyembunyikan mesej rahsia dan kunci stego dalam kedudukan dinamik; dan lapisan keselamatan kedua, Teknik Pemetaan Warna Ruang Dinamik (DCSM), yang memetakan mesej rahsia berubah secara dinamik. Hasil kajian mendapati model DCTS menghasilkan prestasi yang lebih baik dengan kapasiti tinggi 98.85% dalam ruang terpakai kecil sebanyak 5.79%, serta meningkatkan bit setiap lokasi sebanyak 16 bit. Selain itu, ia mengekalkan ketidakterlihatan tinggi sebanyak 5.07% apabila menggunakan teks penutup hitam atau berwarna. Dengan dua

lapisan keselamatan, DCTS mencapai keselamatan yang tinggi berbanding dengan kaedah sedia ada. Sebagai kesimpulan, model Stego Teks Ruang Warna Dinamik (DCTS) membenamkan data rahsia pada kapasiti yang tinggi sambil mengekalkan ketidakterlihatan dan keselamatan. Model DCTS menawarkan perspektif baharu tentang steganografi teks berasaskan ciri untuk melindungi dari isu serangan visual dan statistik.



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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CSN	Colour & Spacing Normalization
CSct	Colour & Spacing of Cover Text
CSst	Colour & Spacing of Stego Text
CSM	Colour & Spacing Mapping
CT	Cover Text
CSE	Colour & Spacing Extraction
Ccs	cover character size
DCTS	Dynamic Colour-spacing Text Stego
DSEP	Dynamic Selection of Embedding Positions
DCSM	Dynamic Colour & Spacing Mapping
DR	Distortion Robustness
EPst	Embedding Positions of Stego Text
EPct	Embedding of Cover Text
EPstf	First half of EPst
EPsts	Second half of EPst
LSB	Least Significant Bit
LAB	'L' (lightness), 'A' (green / magenta) and 'B' (blue / yellow)
LP	Losing Probability
LCG	Linear Congruential Generator
Nss	normal space size
RGB coding	Red Green Blue coding
Random16	Random of 16 Sequence number array
SM	Secret Message

SK	Stego Key
SB	Secret Block
SKl	stego key location in EPst
SKel	stego key embedding location in ST
SKP	Stego Key Protection
SKE	Stego Key Extraction
SBE	Secret Block Extraction



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

The rapid expansion of Internet technologies enables the flow of vast amounts of information across the public channel with risks of attacks. Under those circumstances, securing sensitive information has become a serious issue for governments, organizations, and individuals due to the risk of attack. To address this issue, researchers have proposed various methods to protect secure messages transmitted via public and private communication channels.

The two essential methods that play significant roles in information security are data encryption and data hiding. Data encryption is an aspect of cryptography applied to protect the confidentiality of a message being transmitted across private and public channels by converting it to a scribbled enciphered form. Thus, the carrier object after encryption is semantically meaningless. Meanwhile, information hiding conceals the secret message to make it unnoticed/invisible in the course of its transmission via the public (untrusted) communication channel (Din et al., 2018). Invisibility is the fundamental difference between cryptography and information hiding (Ahvanooy et al., 2019).

Information hiding can take one of two forms: watermarking or steganography. Employing watermarking to embed the secret information provides proof of ownership of the carrier object, so it is suitable for copyright protection (Cohen et al., 2018). Steganography, on the other hand, conceals the existence of secret information in the cover carrier (Artz, 2001). Steganography uses several classes of cover media (i.e., audio, video, image, text, network, and DNA).

A text is an “object” utilized by users of the public channel in their daily activities. It is an ideal cover item for data transmitted between a sender and a receiver because of its small size compared to other objects (Khosravi et al., 2019). Moreover, text steganography improves the hiding capacity by exploiting language characteristics, grammatical or orthographic, which differs from one language to another (Aljawarneh et al., 2017; Alsaadi et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2019). Nevertheless, text stenography is one of the most challenged classes of stenography because of the lack of redundant data in text files (Ditta et al., 2018). In addition, text documents have an almost identical structure, which makes changes easily visible.

Social engagements are the most frequent activities of public channel users (Müller, 2020), with 93% of users visiting social networking platforms and 98.1% of users communicating by text. These online activities, which also involve confidential information, present the need for information hiding such as text steganography. At the same time, these activities offer convenient

opportunities and advantages to hide information among the huge availability of online text. For example, social media posts, mail messages, and books in large libraries pose obstacles to eavesdroppers. This is attributed to the difficulty associated with examining, analyzing, and filtering the vast amount of text to determine which text may contain hidden information. In text steganography, the structure and feature characteristics of texts are used to hide secret information.

Text steganography applications use in various domains such as military and intelligence agencies communications (Jia-jia et al., 2018; Karthika et al., 2020; Kumar & Srinivas, 2019; Sadek et al., 2015), banking and finance (Manikandan et al., 2021; Mustafa et al., 2020; Sarkar & Karforma, 2018), (Alrikabi, 2020) , organizations and individuals.

1.2 Problem Statement

The efficiency of text steganography methods are evaluate using four criteria: capacity, invisibility/perceptuality, security and robustness. The current methods suffer from low capacity with weaknesses in invisibility and security against visual and statistical attacks (Alanazi et al., 2021; Khosravi et al., 2019; Mahato et al., 2020; Maji & Mandal, 2020).

Capacity refers to the number of hidden bits in the cover text. The best text steganography hides a large number of secret bits. Nonetheless, the existing methods still suffer from low capacity due to three issues, i.e.:

1. Low number of bits per embedding place (Ahvanooy et al., 2018a; Al-Azzawi, 2018; Al-Nofaie & Gutub, 2020; Aman et al., 2017). Existing text steganography methods hide from one to five bits per location like (Ahvanooy et al., 2018a; Alanazi et al., 2021; Alsaïdi et al., 2018; Aman et al., 2017; Khosravi et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2016a; Mahato et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2017), and others hide from eight to 12 bits in each place, such as (Al-Azzawi, 2018; Naqvi et al., 2018; Osman, 2020; Ramakrishnan et al., 2016).
2. Limited number of usable characters in the cover text (Al-Nofaie & Gutub, 2020; Alanazi et al., 2020, 2021; Ramakrishnan et al., 2016). Although the methods that utilize the font attributes are have more usable characters, they are still limited to alphabet letters only (Osman,

2020; Ramakrishnan et al., 2016) or used limited words based on the part of speech (Al-Azzawi, 2018; Banik & Bandyopadhyay, 2018).

3. Low efficiency of the compression technique which used to reduce the size of secret bits before embedding (Naqvi et al., 2018). The suggested methods in (Malik et al., 2017) applied the LZW compression technique does not produce a short length (Sadié et al., 2020; Xiang et al., 2018a).

Invisibility is related to the unseen existence of hidden messages in the cover text. The excellent text steganography method has high invisibility. However, the existing methods still suffer from weak invisibility caused by two issues:

1. The first issue in invisibility is the stego file is not identical in size to the cover file (Khosravi et al., 2019) by inserting extra characters into the stego text (Ahvanooy et al., 2018a; Alanazi et al., 2020, 2021; Aman et al., 2017; Azeem et al., 2019; Ditta et al., 2018). Hence, size differences can be detected easily by Jaro-Winkler distance (Banik & Bandyopadhyay, 2018; Thabit et al., 2021).
2. The stego text is not identical to the cover text in a colour (Azeem et al., 2019; Khairullah, 2019; Osman, 2020). In (Kumar et al., 2016a; Malik et al., 2017; Sadié et al., 2020), the stego text is generated with rich colour, while (Al-Azzawi, 2018; Osman, 2020) is black, regardless of the cover text colours.

Security points to the protection of the secret message from extraction. Two issues cause poor security against statistical attacks, i.e:

1. Selection of embedding positions and stego key position is sequentially and permanent (Ahvanooy et al., 2018a; Malik et al., 2017; Osman, 2020; Sadié et al., 2020). Although in (Osman, 2020) applies non- sequence embedding, it fails when the secret characters are upsent in the cover text. Besides, in (Al-Azzawi, 2018), the words only are relocated, then the embedding positions are still sequenced in many places.
2. Constant mapping of secret bits in the cover text (Osman, 2020; Ramakrishnan et al., 2016). Most Red, Green, Blue (RGB) coding techniques map the secret bits with pre-defined colours or decimals values as RGB coding (Al-Azzawi, 2018; Malik et al., 2017; Sadié et al., 2020). Despite (Osman, 2020) applying a dynamic mapping, it is restricted to black RGB coding limit from (0,0,0) to (15,15,15) only.
3. The third security issue is protecting the stego key from detection and extraction. Stego key, similar to a cryptography key, comes as a public or private key (Cox et al., 2007). When the key is private, it needs protection from getting it via the public channel during transmission (A. Gutub & K. Alaseri, 2020; Gutub & Alaseri, 2019; Xiong et al., 2019). The researchers in (Ahvanooy et al., 2018a; Osman, 2020; Zneit et

al., 2019), protect the key by hiding it in the cover object. However, their techniques suffer from limitations. In (Ahvanooy et al., 2018a; Zneit et al., 2019), the secret key conceals at the beginning of the cover object for each embedding. Also, in (Osman, 2020), the stego key is hidden before the last character in the cover text. Therefore, the stego key position is known and can be easily attacked by statistical steganalysis. Consequently, obtaining the stego key might extract the hidden message.

Based on what was previously discussed, this study shed light on the existing challenges of capacity, invisibility and security in text steganography methods that utilize the text features. Figure 1.1 displays the summarization of the research problem.

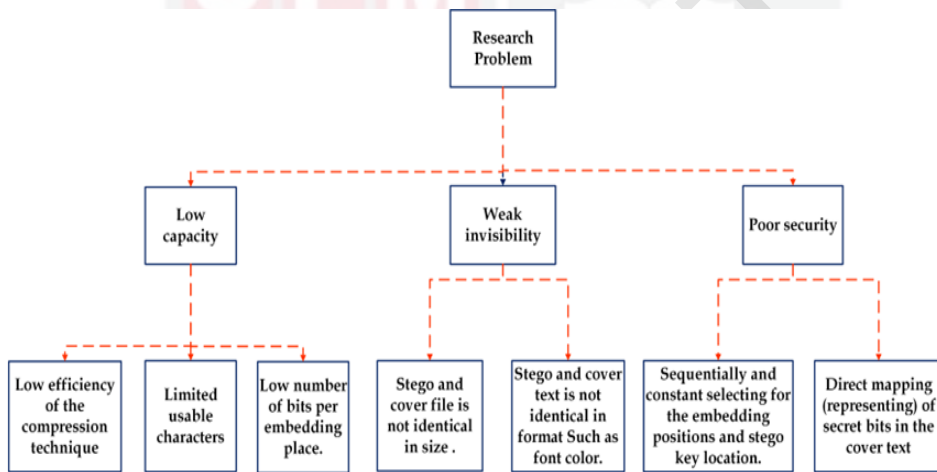


Figure 1.1 : Summarization of research problem

1.3 Research Questions

The central question in this research is concern about how to establish secure communication using text steganography with increased capacity and maintaining invisibility and security. Therefore, the research questions of this study are stated below:

1. How to increase the capacity of text steganography using the font features of text?
2. How to hide the secret message using the RGB coding and character spacing with high invisibility to resist the visual attacks?

3. How to select the embedding positions of the hidden message and stego key in the cover text to enhance security against the statistical attacks?
4. How is the secret message mapped using RGB coding and character spacing to improve the security against the statistical attacks?

1.4 Research Objectives

The main goal of this study is to propose a text stego-model by utilizing the RGB coding and the character spacing with high capacity and maintain the invisibility and security of the hidden message. Hence the objectives of this research are as the following:

1. To propose a text steganography model with high capacity by combining the RGB coding and the character spacing of cover text font.
2. To propose a colour and spacing normalization technique that improves the hidden message's invisibility by reducing the difference between the cover and stego text.
3. To propose a positions selection technique of hidden message and stego key by reordering the positions dynamically to resist the statistical attacks.
4. To propose a dynamic mapping technique of the secret message into the RGB coding and the character spacing, which is more secure against the statistical attacks.

1.5 Research Contributions

The main contribution of this study is a new model of text steganography using RGB coding and colour spacing, named Dynamic Colour-spacing Text Stego (DCTS), which achieves high capacity, enhanced invisibility and improved security. To be more specific, the contributions of this study are as the following:

1. The Secret-block & Colour-spacing Matrices Generation (SCMG) technique increases the capacity by increasing the number of bits per location to carry 16 bits. Besides, it increases the usable characters and compresses the secret message using Huffman coding.
2. The Colour and Spacing Normalization (CSN) technique, which resists hidden message detection against visual attacks by reducing the colour differences between the cover and stego text.
3. The Dynamic Selection of Embedding Positions (DSEP) technique, and Stego Key Protection technique (SKP), the first security layer, to resist the extraction of hidden message and stego key against the

statistical attacks by the non-sequence selection positions hidden message and stego key.

4. The Dynamic Colour and Spacing Mapping (DCSM) technique, the second security layer, to resist the extraction of hidden message against the statistical attacks by changing the mapping of the secret block with the RGB coding and character spacing per embedding.

Table 1.1 exhibits the connection between research problems, research objectives and the contributions of this study.

Table 1.1 : Connections among research problems, objectives and contributions

Research problem	Research objective	Contribution
Low capacity due to the fewer bits per location, the limitation in the number of useable characters, and low efficiency of the use compression technique.	To propose a text steganography model with high capacity by combining the RGB coding and the character spacing of cover text font.	Pre-embedding technique called Secret-block & Colour-spacing Matrices Generation (SGCM) to increase the capacity by reducing the secret message's length using Huffman coding, increased the number of bits per location to carry 16 bits and increased the usable characters by utilising the font attributes.
Weak invisibility against visual attack due to the increased colour difference between the cover and stego text.	To propose a colour and spacing normalization technique that improves the hidden message's invisibility by reducing the difference between the cover and stego text.	Colour and Spacing Normalization (CSN) technique, which resist the hidden message detection against visual attacks.
Poor security of hidden messages and stego key against the statistical attacks by sequentially selecting the embedding places or secret bits.	To propose a positions selection technique of hidden message and stego key by reordering the positions dynamically to resist the statistical attacks.	Dynamic Selection of Embedding Positions (DSEP) technique, and Stego Key Protection technique (SKP), the first security layer, to resist the extraction of hidden message and stego key against the statistical attacks by the non-sequence selection positions hidden message and stego key.
Weak security of hidden messages against the statistical attacks by repeating mapping of the secret block with the RGB coding and character spacing per embedding.	To propose a dynamic mapping technique of the secret message into the RGB coding and the character spacing, which is more secure against the statistical attacks.	Dynamic Colour and Spacing Mapping (DCSM) technique to protect the hidden message against the statistical attacks by changing the mapping of the secret block with the RGB coding and character spacing per embedding.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the feature-based text steganography algorithms that utilizes the RGB coding and character spacing of font text. This study aims to increase the capacity of embedded secret message and maintain invisibility and security against visual and statistical attacks.

Most of the feature-based techniques have limitations in robustness when faced with structural attacks. However, when the usage space ratio is minimized, the number of destroyed places resulting from structural attacks are reduced (Ahvanooy et al., 2018a; Al-Azzawi, 2018; Osman, 2020). Although the DCTS model does not include a new algorithm to enhance its robustness, it shows partial improvement in robustness against structural attacks, such as text format changes in some places of the stego text. The secret blocks in DCTS are hidden in fewer and non-sequential places in the stego text, limiting the possibility of destroying them using structural attacks. Therefore, the DCTS model evaluates and compares the robustness with existing works.

The text in this study is restricted to Latin script, and it also can use the text with black or colour font. The DCTS model can employ the alphabet, number, symbols to hide the secret message into text. The secret message is not limited to text format; it can be an image, video, audio.

1.7 Thesis Organization

This thesis consists of seven chapters. **Chapter 1** presents the introduction of the thesis, including the research problems, research objectives, and contributions of the research.

Chapter 2 has background information on work related to information security and steganography and then narrows down to Feature-based text steganography. The literature review also includes the basics of RGB coding and character spacing techniques in text steganography.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology and process used in the research. It describes the steps taken from the beginning till the final part of the research.

Chapter 4 introduces the proposed design of the Colour and Spacing Text Stego-model. The structure and design of the model consist of two main parts, i.e., Embedding and Extraction Procedures. Embedding Procedure includes five proposed techniques that meet the objectives of this study. Also, it describes the

implementation of the proposed Dynamic Colour-spacing Text Stego (DCTS) model and its applicability in various domains.

Chapter 5 presents the results of the analysis section will cover the dissection for the DCTS model tas based on the designed experiments in Chapter 3.

Finally, **Chapter 6** presents the conclusions of the research work carried out in this thesis. In addition, some future directions for exploration are proposed.

1.8 Summary

This chapter contains the thesis's introduction, which includes the research problems, research objectives, and research contributions. Also, it determined the scope of this study.

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